



WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: LEADERSHIP STYLES, CHALLENGES, AND ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES OF A FEMALE MADRASAH PRINCIPAL

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34125/jmp.v11i2.2246>

Sections Info

Article history:

Submitted: 27 January 2026

Final Revised: 11 February 2026

Accepted: 16 March 2026

Published: 30 April 2026

Keywords:

Women's Leadership

Islamic Educational Leadership

Madrasah Principal

Leadership Styles

Leadership Strategies



ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions by examining leadership styles, challenges, and strategies employed by a female madrasah principal at MTs Negeri 4 Kota Jambi. This research adopts a qualitative approach using a case study design, with data collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. The study reflects the growing recognition of women's roles in educational leadership, particularly within contexts that have traditionally been dominated by men. The findings reveal that the principal applies participatory, transformational, and relational leadership styles that foster collaboration, open communication, and improved teacher performance. These leadership approaches contribute to the development of a supportive and productive organizational environment. Despite these contributions, the principal faces several challenges, including gender stereotypes, socio-cultural expectations, and institutional constraints such as limited resources and administrative demands. These challenges require not only managerial skills but also adaptability in navigating complex organizational dynamics. To address these challenges, the principal employs adaptive strategies that emphasize professionalism, competence, effective communication, and value-based leadership grounded in Islamic principles. These strategies strengthen her leadership effectiveness and reinforce her legitimacy within the institution.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kepemimpinan perempuan dalam lembaga pendidikan Islam dengan mengkaji gaya kepemimpinan, tantangan, serta strategi yang diterapkan oleh kepala madrasah perempuan di MTs Negeri 4 Kota Jambi. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus, di mana data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Kajian ini mencerminkan semakin meningkatnya pengakuan terhadap peran perempuan dalam kepemimpinan pendidikan, khususnya dalam konteks yang selama ini didominasi oleh laki-laki. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepala madrasah menerapkan gaya kepemimpinan partisipatif, transformasional, dan relasional yang mendorong kolaborasi, komunikasi terbuka, serta peningkatan kinerja tenaga pendidik. Pendekatan kepemimpinan ini berkontribusi dalam menciptakan lingkungan organisasi yang kondusif dan produktif. Meskipun demikian, kepala madrasah menghadapi berbagai tantangan, seperti stereotip gender, tuntutan sosial-budaya, serta keterbatasan institusional yang mencakup sumber daya dan beban administratif. Tantangan ini menuntut tidak hanya kemampuan manajerial, tetapi juga kemampuan adaptasi dalam menghadapi dinamika organisasi yang kompleks. Untuk mengatasi tantangan tersebut, kepala madrasah menerapkan strategi adaptif yang menekankan profesionalisme, kompetensi, komunikasi efektif, serta kepemimpinan berbasis nilai-nilai Islam.

Kata kunci: *kepemimpinan Perempuan, kepemimpinan pendidikan Islam, kepala madrasah, gaya kepemimpinan, strategi kepemimpinan*

INTRODUCTION

Leadership in education plays a crucial role in shaping the direction, quality, and sustainability of an institution. Within the context of Islamic education, the role of a madrasah principal goes beyond administrative duties, as it also involves fostering organizational culture, embedding Islamic values, and improving overall educational outcomes. In line with contemporary developments, the presence of women in leadership positions has increasingly attracted scholarly attention, particularly in environments that have traditionally been dominated by men (Muhsin, 2023).

In a broader global context, discussions on gender and leadership have evolved significantly, emphasizing equality, inclusivity, and the recognition of women's contributions across various sectors, including education. The growing acknowledgment of women's leadership capabilities reflects a shift away from traditional patriarchal perspectives toward more balanced and merit-based leadership paradigms. This transformation is particularly important in educational institutions, where leadership directly influences not only organizational performance but also the formation of values, attitudes, and future generations (Harris et al., 2024).

In recent years, women's participation in educational leadership has grown significantly. Research indicates that female leaders tend to adopt participatory and relational approaches, which contribute to a more inclusive and collaborative organizational climate (Kunaepi et al., 2024). These leadership styles are often characterized by empathy, effective communication, and shared decision-making processes. In addition, women's leadership is frequently associated with transformational practices that encourage innovation, adaptability, and institutional progress (Yaqin & Sholihah, 2025). Such approaches are increasingly seen as relevant in addressing the complex and dynamic challenges faced by modern educational institutions.

Furthermore, the integration of women into leadership roles has been linked to improvements in institutional governance and teacher performance. Studies highlight that female leaders often prioritize professional development, foster supportive work environments, and encourage active engagement among staff members (Siswadi et al., 2025). This suggests that women's leadership is not only symbolically important in promoting gender equality but also functionally significant in enhancing organizational effectiveness and educational quality.

However, the advancement of women into leadership roles in Islamic educational institutions is not without challenges. Socio-cultural norms, traditional expectations, and persistent gender stereotypes continue to influence how female leadership is perceived and exercised (Zahra & Marhumah, 2024). In many cases, leadership is still culturally associated with masculine traits, which may lead to biases against women in decision-making positions. Female leaders frequently face the dual burden of fulfilling professional responsibilities while navigating socially constructed gender roles (Ningsih, 2026). This indicates that women's leadership involves not only managerial competence but also the ability to negotiate and adapt to complex social realities.

In addition to cultural challenges, institutional factors may also affect the effectiveness of female leadership. Organizational structures, policy frameworks, and leadership support systems can either facilitate or hinder the ability of women to lead effectively (Rahman, 2024). In some cases, limited access to leadership training and professional networks further constrains their opportunities for growth and influence. These conditions highlight the importance of examining leadership not only from an individual perspective but also from a

systemic and institutional standpoint.

Furthermore, studies focusing on female leadership in madrasahs, particularly at the Tsanawiyah (*junior secondary*) level, remain relatively limited and often lack contextual depth. Many existing works tend to generalize findings without adequately considering the unique socio-cultural and institutional characteristics of each educational setting (Banin, 2025). This gap highlights the need for more context-specific research that explores how female principals enact leadership, address challenges, and implement strategies within their respective institutions.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions by examining leadership styles, challenges, and strategies employed by the female principal at MTs Negeri 4 Kota Jambi. This research is expected to contribute to the broader discourse on educational leadership while also offering practical insights into developing more inclusive and adaptive leadership practices in Islamic education (Huda & others, 2025).

Moreover, women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions offers an important perspective on how managerial effectiveness can be combined with ethical and spiritual dimensions of leadership. Unlike leadership models that focus solely on technical administration, leadership within madrasahs often requires the ability to integrate professional management with moral guidance and community trust. Female leaders who are able to balance these dimensions may strengthen institutional legitimacy while fostering a more humane and value-oriented educational environment (Bush, 2020).

Another relevant aspect concerns the changing expectations of educational leadership in the contemporary era. School leaders are now required not only to manage routine administration, but also to respond to rapid social change, technological development, and increasing demands for accountability. In this regard, leadership approaches that emphasize collaboration, flexibility, and empathy have become increasingly important. These qualities are frequently associated with women's leadership practices and may provide strategic advantages in navigating institutional transformation (Harris & Jones, 2020).

In addition, female leadership in Islamic schools can serve as a meaningful example for students regarding gender equality and social participation. The visibility of women in decision-making positions may challenge traditional assumptions about leadership roles and inspire students to develop broader perspectives on capability, responsibility, and public contribution. This symbolic dimension is especially significant in educational institutions, where leadership functions not only administratively but also pedagogically through role modeling (Lahmar, 2024).

The relevance of studying women's leadership is also connected to the broader agenda of educational reform. Many educational systems continue to seek leadership models that are responsive, inclusive, and capable of building sustainable institutional progress. Understanding how female principals manage organizational relationships, motivate staff, and solve institutional problems can provide valuable lessons for leadership development programs and policy design (Tan, 2014).

Furthermore, the madrasah context presents distinctive characteristics that make leadership studies particularly important. As institutions that combine general education with religious learning, madrasahs operate within multiple expectations from government, communities, parents, and religious stakeholders. Consequently, principals must demonstrate strategic competence while maintaining cultural sensitivity and religious legitimacy. Examining how female leaders navigate these expectations can enrich the discussion of educational leadership

in plural and value-based settings (Yin, 2024).

Despite increasing scholarly interest, empirical studies on women's leadership in Islamic junior secondary schools remain insufficient, particularly in regional contexts outside major metropolitan areas. Leadership experiences in local institutions may differ significantly due to variations in community culture, organizational resources, and stakeholder expectations. Therefore, research situated in specific local contexts such as Kota Jambi is necessary to provide more grounded and nuanced insights (Watterston & Ehrich, 2024).

Finally, this study is expected to expand the understanding of leadership diversity in Islamic education by demonstrating that effective leadership is shaped not by gender alone, but by competence, adaptability, ethical commitment, and contextual awareness. Through a closer examination of the experiences of a female madrasah principal, this research seeks to contribute to more balanced perspectives on leadership and to encourage wider opportunities for women in educational governance.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of women's leadership within the context of Islamic educational institutions. A qualitative design is considered appropriate as it allows the researcher to explore complex social phenomena, particularly those related to leadership practices, experiences, and perceptions, in a natural setting (Creswell, 2023). This approach emphasizes meaning, interpretation, and context, which are essential in examining how leadership is enacted by a female principal in a madrasah environment.

The research was conducted at MTs Negeri 4 Kota Jambi, selected purposively due to its relevance to the research focus, particularly the presence of a female principal leading the institution. This site provides a meaningful context for examining leadership dynamics within an Islamic educational setting. The participants of this study consisted of the madrasah principal, teachers, and administrative staff who were directly involved in the organizational processes. They were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that the data obtained were rich, relevant, and aligned with the objectives of the study (Patton, 2022).

Data were collected through multiple techniques, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted to capture participants' perspectives and experiences regarding leadership practices. Observation was carried out to understand real interactions, behaviors, and leadership implementation in daily activities. Meanwhile, document analysis was used to support and validate findings through institutional records, policies, and related documents (Yin, 2023). The use of multiple data collection methods aims to enhance the credibility and depth of the research findings.

To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the data, this study applied triangulation techniques, including source triangulation and method triangulation (Denzin, 2022). By comparing information obtained from different participants and methods, the researcher was able to cross-check data consistency and minimize potential bias. In addition, member checking was conducted by confirming the findings with participants to ensure the accuracy of interpretations.

Data analysis was carried out using an interactive model, which involves three main steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2024). Data reduction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data obtained from the field. Data display involves organizing information in a structured manner to facilitate interpretation, while conclusion drawing is the process of identifying patterns, meanings, and key findings

from the data. This analytical process was conducted continuously throughout the research to ensure that the findings were grounded in the data.

The researcher also maintained reflexivity throughout the research process by recognizing personal assumptions and ensuring that interpretations remained closely connected to participants' actual experiences. Reflexive practice is important in qualitative inquiry because the researcher serves as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. By continuously evaluating subjective perspectives, the researcher sought to preserve objectivity while still acknowledging the interpretive nature of qualitative research. This process contributed to producing more balanced and credible findings (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

Furthermore, the study employed prolonged engagement in the field to build trust with participants and gain a deeper understanding of the institutional environment. Spending sufficient time in the research setting enabled the researcher to observe recurring patterns, daily routines, and informal interactions that may not emerge during formal interviews. This prolonged engagement also strengthened rapport with participants, allowing them to share experiences more openly and honestly (Lincoln & Guba, 2022).

An audit trail was also maintained to document each stage of the research process, including data collection procedures, coding decisions, analytical memos, and interpretation development. The availability of systematic documentation enhances the dependability of the study by allowing the research process to be traced and reviewed. It also demonstrates transparency in how conclusions were reached from the collected data (Nowell et al., 2023).

In analyzing the data, the researcher used thematic coding to identify recurring concepts and categories related to women's leadership practices, institutional challenges, and adaptive strategies. Initial codes were generated from interview transcripts, field notes, and documents, then grouped into broader themes based on conceptual similarity. This thematic approach enabled the researcher to organize complex qualitative data into meaningful patterns that directly addressed the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any stage of the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing personal identities and protecting sensitive information. These measures were taken to ensure respect, trust, and ethical responsibility in the research process (American Psychological Association, 2023).

Finally, the qualitative case study design used in this research allows for contextualized understanding rather than broad generalization. The findings are therefore intended to provide analytical insights into women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions, particularly within the madrasah context, while also offering reference points for future studies in similar settings. Through this approach, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on gender and educational leadership in culturally specific environments (Yin, 2024).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Leadership Style of the Female Madrasah Principal

The findings reveal that the female principal at MTs Negeri 4 Kota Jambi predominantly adopts a participatory and transformational leadership style. This is reflected in her approach to decision-making, which actively involves teachers and staff in discussions and institutional planning. Rather than relying on hierarchical authority, she emphasizes collaboration, open communication, and mutual respect within the organization (Kunaepi et al., 2024).

This leadership approach fosters a sense of ownership among staff members, encouraging them to contribute ideas and actively participate in institutional development. Such findings align with previous studies suggesting that women leaders tend to prioritize relational and inclusive leadership practices, which positively influence organizational climate and teamwork (Siswadi et al., 2025). Furthermore, the principal demonstrates transformational characteristics by motivating teachers, supporting professional development, and promoting continuous improvement within the madrasah (Yaqin & Sholihah, 2025).

The presence of empathy and effective interpersonal communication also emerges as a key aspect of her leadership. These qualities help build trust and strengthen relationships between the principal and staff, ultimately contributing to a more harmonious and productive work environment. This supports the argument that women's leadership often integrates emotional intelligence as a strategic component in organizational management (Zahra & Marhumah, 2024).

2. Challenges in Women's Leadership

Despite these positive contributions, the study also identifies several challenges faced by the female principal. One of the primary challenges relates to socio-cultural perceptions regarding gender roles. In certain situations, leadership is still implicitly associated with masculine characteristics, which may lead to skepticism toward female authority (Ningsih, 2026).

Additionally, the principal experiences the challenge of balancing professional responsibilities with societal expectations related to gender roles. This dual burden requires not only managerial competence but also strong adaptability and resilience (Harris et al., 2024). The findings indicate that such challenges are not always explicit but can manifest subtly through attitudes, expectations, and institutional culture.

Another challenge concerns institutional dynamics, including limited resources and administrative demands, which require strategic decision-making. These challenges highlight that leadership effectiveness is influenced not only by individual capabilities but also by structural and organizational conditions (El Achi et al., 2025).

3. Leadership Strategies and Adaptation

In responding to these challenges, the female principal employs several adaptive strategies. One key strategy is strengthening communication and building collaborative relationships with all stakeholders, including teachers, staff, and the broader school community. By fostering openness and transparency, she is able to minimize resistance and build trust within the institution (Huda & others, 2025).

Another important strategy involves emphasizing professionalism and competence as the foundation of leadership. The principal demonstrates her capability through consistent performance, strategic planning, and the ability to solve problems effectively. This approach helps to challenge gender-based assumptions and reinforces her legitimacy as a leader (Cele & Maphalala, 2025).

Moreover, the principal integrates value-based leadership by embedding Islamic principles such as responsibility, fairness, and integrity into her leadership practices. This not only strengthens her moral authority but also aligns leadership practices with the cultural and religious context of the institution (Alfaridli & others, 2024).

Overall, the findings indicate that women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions is characterized by a combination of relational, transformational, and adaptive approaches. While female leaders face socio-cultural and institutional challenges, they are able to navigate these complexities through effective communication, professional competence, and value-based leadership.

These results reinforce the notion that women's leadership should not be viewed merely through the lens of gender, but rather as a dynamic and context-dependent process that contributes significantly to organizational effectiveness and educational development.

The findings of this study can be further illustrated through a conceptual framework that summarizes the relationships between leadership styles, challenges, adaptive strategies, and their resulting outcomes. This framework highlights how the female principal navigates complex socio-cultural and institutional dynamics through specific leadership approaches and strategic actions. By structuring these elements into a coherent model, the figure provides a clearer understanding of how women's leadership operates within Islamic educational institutions.

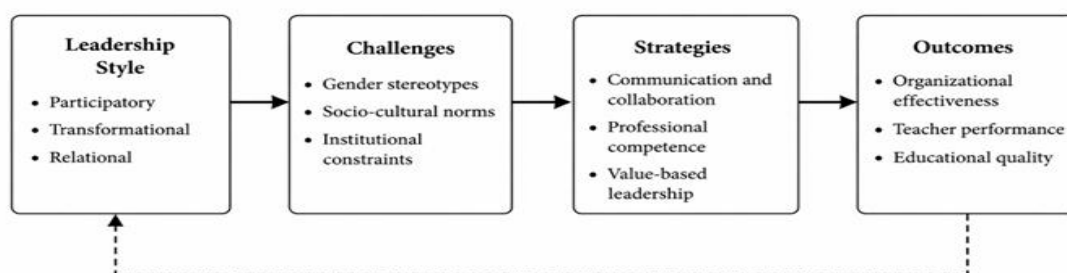


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions, illustrating the relationships between leadership styles, challenges, adaptive strategies, and organizational outcomes.

The findings also indicate that participatory leadership contributes to stronger institutional cohesion. When teachers and staff are actively involved in discussions and decision-making processes, they tend to develop a greater sense of responsibility toward achieving organizational goals. This collective engagement not only improves internal communication but also encourages a more democratic working environment in which ideas and feedback are valued. Such conditions are particularly important in educational institutions where teamwork and shared commitment are essential for sustaining quality improvement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

In addition, transformational elements of leadership were reflected in the principal's ability to inspire innovation and encourage continuous learning among teachers. Through motivation, supervision, and professional guidance, the principal created opportunities for staff to enhance pedagogical competence and adapt to changing educational demands. This suggests that effective leadership in madrasahs requires not only administrative capability but also the capacity to empower human resources and promote professional growth (Hallinger, 2020).

Another notable finding concerns the relational dimension of leadership, where emotional intelligence and interpersonal sensitivity played a significant role. The principal's empathetic communication style enabled her to build trust, reduce tension, and maintain constructive relationships among staff members. In organizational settings, such relational competence often becomes a key factor in preventing conflict and strengthening institutional harmony. This demonstrates that leadership effectiveness is closely connected to the ability to manage human relationships as well as formal structures (Goleman et al., 2013).

Regarding challenges, the findings reveal that gender-related barriers may operate in subtle rather than explicit forms. Skepticism toward women's authority can emerge through doubts

about decision-making capacity, resistance to policy changes, or the expectation that leadership should conform to masculine norms. These indirect forms of bias may be more difficult to address because they are embedded within everyday attitudes and organizational culture. Consequently, female leaders are often required to demonstrate stronger performance standards in order to gain equal recognition (Eagly & Carli, 2021).

The study also shows that institutional constraints, such as limited facilities, financial restrictions, and administrative complexity, significantly shape leadership practices. In many cases, leadership success depends not only on the principal's personal competence but also on the availability of structural support and organizational resources. This finding reinforces the view that educational leadership should be understood as an interaction between individual agency and institutional conditions (Bush, 2020).

Furthermore, adaptive leadership strategies were evident in the principal's capacity to balance firmness with collaboration. While maintaining authority in strategic matters, she simultaneously encouraged dialogue and participation among staff members. This balance between decisiveness and inclusiveness allowed leadership decisions to be accepted more effectively while preserving organizational stability. Such flexibility is increasingly recognized as an essential characteristic of successful leaders in complex educational environments (Heifetz et al., 2021).

The integration of Islamic values into leadership practices also emerged as a significant source of legitimacy. Principles such as fairness, trustworthiness, and collective responsibility strengthened the moral foundation of leadership while aligning managerial decisions with the identity of the institution. In the context of madrasah education, value-based leadership may enhance both organizational discipline and community confidence in the institution (Begley, 1999).

Finally, these findings suggest that women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions should be understood through a multidimensional perspective that combines competence, relational skills, adaptive strategies, and ethical commitment. Rather than being limited by gender assumptions, female leadership demonstrates considerable potential to advance institutional development, organizational resilience, and educational quality when supported by inclusive environments and effective governance systems (Watterston & Ehrich, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions, particularly at MTs Negeri 4 Kota Jambi, is characterized by a combination of participatory, transformational, and relational leadership styles. These approaches enable the female principal to foster collaboration, build trust, and enhance institutional performance. The findings also reveal that, despite facing socio-cultural and institutional challenges-such as gender stereotypes and structural constraints-the principal demonstrates strong adaptability through effective communication, professional competence, and value-based leadership practices.

Furthermore, this study highlights that women's leadership should not be understood merely from a gender perspective, but rather as a dynamic and context-dependent process that significantly contributes to organizational effectiveness and educational quality. The ability of female leaders to integrate relational and strategic approaches positions them as key agents in advancing Islamic educational institutions.

In terms of implications, this study suggests that educational stakeholders should provide greater support for women's leadership by creating inclusive environments, strengthening

professional development opportunities, and reducing gender-based biases within institutional structures. Future research is recommended to explore women's leadership in diverse educational contexts using broader methodological approaches in order to enrich the understanding of leadership dynamics in Islamic education.

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