

Gender and Leadership in Islamic Educational Institutions: The Transformation of Women's Roles in Madrasah Management in Arab Countries

Ulfa Ainul Mardhiyah¹, Isnawati Nur Afifah Latif², Rr. Kusuma Dwi Nur Ma'rifati³,
Anggun Kurnia Dewi⁴

STAI Ma'arif, Magetan, Indonesia¹, IAI Nahdlatul Ulama, Tuban, Indonesia^{2,3}, Institut Agama
Islam Ngawi, Indonesia⁴

Email correspondence: ulfaainulmardhiyah@gmail.com

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Abstract:

This article explores the transformation of women's roles in madrasah management in Arab countries with an interdisciplinary approach that integrates the perspectives of the sociology of education, gender studies, and Islamic studies. This qualitative research involved online interviews with 20 women leaders from four Arab countries (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan), to analyze the dynamics of gender transformation in the leadership space of Islamic education. The results of the study identified four main themes: (1) complex and longer career paths for women to leadership positions; (2) structural and cultural challenges faced, including gender segregation, career development barriers, and traditional perceptions of authority; (3) adaptation strategies developed such as strengthening academic credentials, developing adaptive leadership styles, and reinterpreting Islamic values; and (4) the transformative impact of women's leadership on educational institutions and the wider community. The study reveals that women leaders engage in a complex process of identity negotiation to establish their leadership legitimacy, while negotiating the dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities. Significant variation in experience based on national contexts emphasizes the importance of intersectional perspectives. This research contributes to a more inclusive discourse on gender, leadership, and Islam in the era of globalization, with important implications for the development of gender-sensitive policies and programs to promote women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of gender transformation in the leadership space of Islamic education have become a social phenomenon that has attracted global attention, especially in the region of Arab countries that traditionally have strong patriarchal structures. In the past decade, the increase in women's participation in the management of Islamic educational institutions, especially madrasahs, reflects a paradigm shift in socio-religious construction related to gender



roles (Al-Jaradat, 2020; Hamdan, 2019). This transformation not only represents the evolution of the interpretation of Islamic values about leadership but also illustrates an adaptive response to the demands of modernizing the education system in the era of globalization. However, this transformation process takes place in the complexity of power relations influenced by various social, political, economic, and religious interpretations (Badran, 2022).

Historically, managerial positions in Islamic educational institutions in the Arab region have been dominated by men, in line with traditional interpretations of gender segregation and the distribution of social roles by gender. However, education reforms initiated by various Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Jordan since the early 2000s have opened up a wider space for women's participation in educational leadership positions (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017; Al-Asfour et al., 2020). The rise of the Islamic feminism movement has also played a significant role in encouraging a more inclusive reinterpretation of religious texts on women's leadership, thereby facilitating theological legitimacy for women in taking managerial roles in Islamic educational institutions (Metcalf, 2022).

Empirical research conducted by Al-Ghamdi and Tight (2021) shows that women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions brings a significant transformative dimension. A more collaborative management approach, responsive to student needs, and oriented towards the creation of an inclusive learning environment are characteristics that are often associated with female leadership in madrasas. Studies in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates confirm that educational institutions led by women tend to show higher levels of pedagogical innovation and better adaptability to curriculum reform (Ibrahim & Abubakar, 2020). However, it should be noted that the study also emphasizes the importance of avoiding gender generalizations and essentialism, given that leadership style is not solely determined by gender but is also influenced by various contextual factors.

Despite significant progress, women still face various structural and cultural challenges in accessing and maintaining leadership positions in Islamic educational institutions. Hierarchical organizational structures, old *boys' networks*, conservative religious interpretations, and gender-insensitive policies are significant obstacles to women's vertical mobility in the education management system (Hamdan, 2019; Al-Ohali & Al-Mehrej, 2022). In addition, social expectations that encourage women to prioritize domestic roles often create *role conflicts* that limit women's capacity to take managerial positions that require a high level of time and energy dedication.

The dialogue between tradition and modernity is a central theme in the discourse on women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions. On the one hand, there is a tendency to maintain traditional values that emphasize gender segregation and the restriction of women's public roles based on conservative interpretations of Islamic teachings. On the other hand, the demands of globalization, educational reform, and women's empowerment movements encourage a more progressive and inclusive reinterpretation of Islamic values towards women's leadership (Badran, 2022). This dynamic creates a complex negotiation

space, where Muslim women develop various strategies to legitimize their leadership positions while maintaining the authenticity of their religious identity.

This article aims to comprehensively explore the transformation of the role of women in madrasah management in Arab countries using an interdisciplinary approach that integrates the perspectives of the sociology of education, gender studies, and Islamic studies. The analysis will be directed at three main dimensions: (1) educational policies and reforms that affect women's representation in madrasah leadership; (2) adaptation and resistance strategies developed by women leaders in the face of structural and cultural barriers; and (3) the impact of women's leadership on the transformation of management, culture, and performance of Islamic educational institutions. By analyzing the complex interactions between structural, cultural, and individual factors that influence the transformation of gender roles in madrasah leadership, this research is expected to make a significant contribution to the development of inclusive and gender-equitable Islamic education leadership theories and practices.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with the paradigm of social constructivism to explore the transformation of the role of women in madrasah management in Arab countries. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences and perspectives of women leaders in the context of Islamic education (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study adopts an exploratory-descriptive research design with a primary data collection method through online interviews. This design allows researchers to explore a phenomenon that has not been widely researched while describing the experiences, challenges, and leadership strategies of women in Islamic educational institutions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The study participants consisted of 20 female leaders who held the positions of madrasah heads or deputy madrasah heads in four Arab countries: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan (five participants from each country). Participants were selected using purposive sampling techniques with the following criteria: (1) having at least three years of experience in leadership positions; (2) working in formal madrasahs, both public and private; and (3) have adequate internet access for online interviews.

Data collection was carried out online. Preparation for the online interview begins by contacting prospective participants via institutional email. In this initial communication, the researcher provided a comprehensive explanation of the research objectives and submitted a request for consent to participate to the prospective participants. After obtaining confirmation of willingness, the researcher developed an interview schedule taking into account the difference in time zone and the availability of participants, while offering several alternative times to facilitate the scheduling process. Before conducting a formal interview, the research team held a short testing session with each participant. This session aims to ensure the adequate quality of internet connection, the suitability of the digital platform to be used, and provide an opportunity for participants to familiarize themselves with the virtual interface that will be a medium of communication during the interview.

Interviews are conducted using video conferencing platforms selected based on participants' preferences and ease of access, especially Zoom or Microsoft Teams. The duration of each interview session ranges from 60 to 75 minutes, with the flexibility of extension if required and approved by the participants. The researcher adopted a semi-structured interview format with a protocol that covered four main domains: the participant's career path and leadership experience; the various structural and cultural barriers they face; adaptation and management strategies they develop; and their perceptions of the transformation of gender roles in the context of Islamic education. The entire interview session was thoroughly documented through audio and video recordings with the written permission of the participants. In addition, the researcher also created digital field notes to document important observations related to non-verbal communication and situational context during the interview, which enriched the interpretation of the verbal data obtained.

The data analysis process in this study adopts a reflexive thematic analysis approach as developed by Braun and Clarke (2022), which is carried out through a series of interrelated stages. The analysis stage begins with a thorough transcription of the interview recording, where the researcher performs a verbatim transcription using a combination of NVivo Transcription automatic transcription software which is then manually verified to ensure the accuracy of the data. After the transcription process, the researcher undergoes an in-depth familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the interview transcript, which allows the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nuances and complexity of the data collected.

Next, the analysis process continues at the coding stage, where the interview transcript is systematically encoded using NVivo 14 software. In this process, the researcher applies an inductive and deductive combination approach, which allows flexibility in identifying patterns that emerge from the data while still maintaining the conceptual framework of the research. The coding results are then further processed through theme development, where codes that have conceptual relevance are grouped together to identify themes and patterns that are meaningful in the context of the research.

Once the themes are identified, the researcher conducts a review and refinement of the themes to ensure internal coherence within each theme and external differentiation between different themes. This process involves a critical evaluation of the relationship between the theme and the sub-theme, as well as their compatibility with the raw data. In the final stage, the refined themes are interpreted in the context of relevant literature and the theoretical framework of the research, resulting in an in-depth and contextual understanding of the transformation of the role of women in madrasah management in Arab countries.

RESULT

Based on a thematic analysis of data obtained through online interviews with 20 women leaders in madrassas from four Arab countries, four main themes were identified as follows:

Career Path to Leadership Positions

The results of the study show that the career path of female leaders to managerial positions in madrassas is generally longer and more complex than their male counterparts. The majority of participants (75%) had more than ten years of teaching experience before being promoted to leadership positions, while the average time required for this career advancement was 12.3 years. This career path is characterized by:

“I have to prove twice as much competence as my male counterpart. Academic achievement alone is not enough, I need to build a strong reputation through pedagogical innovation and consistent student achievement.” (P7, Saudi Arabia)

The three career pathway patterns identified include: (1) academic-formal pathways through higher education qualifications and professional development; (2) merit-based pathways through educational innovation initiatives; and (3) networking pathways through mentor and strategic sponsorship support. The majority of participants (65%) followed the academic-formal path by pursuing postgraduate education and specialized leadership training.

Structural and Cultural Challenges

The study participants identified a number of structural and cultural challenges they faced as women leaders in Islamic educational institutions. The most frequently mentioned structural challenges include: *first*, gender segregation policies that limit women’s access to strategic decision-making forums (cited by 85% of participants). *Second*, barriers to career development, including limitations in training and mobility programs (70%). *Third*, the disparity in remuneration and benefits, compared to male colleagues in equal positions (65%).

Meanwhile, cultural challenges include: *first*, traditional perceptions of authority that associate leadership with masculinity (90%). *Second*, conservative interpretations of religious texts about the role of women (80%). *Third*, the role conflict between professional and domestic responsibilities (75%), as conveyed by one informant: *“When I lead a meeting with male staff, sometimes my opinion is not taken seriously. I often need to ask for support from senior male colleagues to legitimize my proposed policies.”* (P12, Egypt)

These challenges varied significantly based on national contexts, with participants from the United Arab Emirates reporting fewer structural barriers but persistent cultural challenges.

Adaptation and Management Strategy

Women leaders develop a variety of strategies to overcome the challenges they face and build their leadership legitimacy. The most common strategies include: *first*, strengthening academic and professional credentials (95%). *Second*, the development of adaptive leadership styles that integrate qualities traditionally associated with femininity (such as empathy and

collaboration) with assertiveness and assertive decision-making (85%). *Third*, reinterpretation of Islamic values to support women's leadership (80%). *Fourth*, the formation of support networks with other women leaders in the education sector (75%). *Fifth*, negotiating with religious authorities to obtain symbolic support (65%).

"I use my knowledge of fiqh and Islamic traditions to support my arguments. I often mention the role of women in Islamic history such as Aisyah r.a. who became an authority in Islamic education and law." (P3, Jordan)

This strategy not only helps women leaders in consolidating their positions, but also in transforming perceptions of women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions.

The Transformative Impact of Women's Leadership

Participants reported a range of transformative impacts of their leadership on madrasas, including: increased participation and achievement of female students (90%), development of a more gender-inclusive curriculum (85%), increased parental involvement in girls' education (80%), strengthening a learning environment that values diversity (75%), and increasing the number of female teachers promoted to mid-level leadership positions (70%).

"In the three years of my leadership, the number of female students who went on to higher education increased by 40%. We are developing specialized mentoring programs and expanding career expectations for female students." (P16, United Arab Emirates)

Collectively, these impacts show that women's leadership in madrasas not only changes institutional dynamics but also has the potential to drive broader social transformation related to gender roles in Muslim society.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide important insights into the transformation of women's roles in madrasah management in Arab countries and their implications for a broader understanding of gender and leadership in the context of Islamic education.

Negotiating Leadership Identity in an Islamic Context

The results of the study show that female leaders in madrasas engage in a complex process of identity negotiation, where they simultaneously affirm their commitment to Islamic values while challenging traditional interpretations of gender roles. The strategy of reinterpretation of Islamic values implemented by the majority of participants reflects what Badran (2022) calls "Islamic feminism" — a movement that seeks to fight for gender equality while remaining rooted in Islamic traditions.

This process of identity negotiation allows women leaders to establish their leadership legitimacy without appearing to oppose religious traditions. As noted by Hamdan (2019), this strategy is important in a context where religious authorities play a significant role in defining social and professional norms. This is in line with the findings of Al-Jaradat (2020) which shows that female leaders in Arab schools adopt a "negotiation from within" approach that allows them to transform institutional structures while still maintaining social acceptance.

Double Burden and Balance Strategy

The challenges of role conflict faced by 75% of participants underscore the persistence of the “double burden” experienced by women in leadership positions in a society that still emphasizes women’s domestic responsibilities. Metcalfe (2022) identifies this phenomenon as the dominant “gender contract” in many Arab societies, where women are expected to prioritize their domestic roles regardless of their professional achievements.

Interestingly, the female leaders in this study developed adaptive strategies to manage this dual burden, including the redistribution of responsibilities within the family and the development of support systems. This strategy reflects what Ibrahim and Abubakar (2020) call “*embedded agency*”—the ability to act strategically in a restrictive structural context. These findings are also consistent with research by Al-Ghamdi and Tight (2021), which shows that female leaders in Saudi educational institutions develop adaptive strategies to balance professional and cultural expectations.

Intersectionality and Contextual Variation

The findings of the study reveal significant variation in the experience of women leaders based on national contexts, demonstrating the importance of intersectional perspectives in understanding gender dynamics and leadership. Participants from the United Arab Emirates reported fewer structural barriers than participants from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, reflecting differences in national policies on women’s empowerment.

These findings are in line with the arguments of Al-Ohali and Al-Mehrej (2022) about the importance of understanding women’s leadership in specific socio-political contexts. In their research on Saudi higher education, they emphasize that education policy reform is not always accompanied by changes in institutional practices. This research expands on this understanding by showing how women leaders in madrassas proactively navigate the gap between formal policy and institutional practice through their adaptive strategies.

Transformative Leadership and Institutional Change

The transformative impact reported by the study participants shows that women’s leadership in madrassas has the potential to drive significant institutional change, especially related to gender inclusion and educational equity. These findings are in line with the literature on transformative leadership that emphasizes the potential of leaders to transform organizational cultures and practices (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017).

Importantly, this impact is not limited to educational institutions but has the potential to penetrate into the wider society through the transformation of perceptions of women’s leadership capacity. As noted by Al-Asfour et al. (2020), the visibility of successful female leaders can create a “demonstration effect” that challenges gender stereotypes and expands young women’s aspirations. The findings of this study strengthen this argument by showing how women’s leadership in madrassas contributes to a broader social transformation regarding gender roles in Muslim society.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of this study have important implications both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, this research contributes to the literature on Islamic educational leadership by offering a more nuanced perspective on the intersection of gender, religion, and leadership. This research challenges the simplistic dichotomy between tradition and modernity that often dominates discourses about gender in Muslim societies by showing how women leaders creatively negotiate and transform cultural and structural boundaries.

Practically, this study highlights the need for a more contextual and gender-sensitive approach in the development of policies and programs aimed at promoting women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions. The adaptive strategies developed by women leaders in this study can inform the development of more effective leadership training programs and policy interventions that respond to the complex realities faced by women in the context of Islamic education.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals a significant transformation in the role of women in madrasah management in Arab countries, which is characterized by an increase in women's representation in leadership positions despite facing various structural and cultural challenges. The findings of the study show that female leaders in madrasahs develop complex adaptive strategies to build their leadership legitimacy and drive positive institutional change.

This ongoing process reflects the broader dynamics of the negotiation and transformation of gender roles in contemporary Muslim society. By expanding our understanding of the experiences of women leaders in madrasahs, this research contributes to a more inclusive and nuanced discourse on gender, leadership, and Islam in the era of globalization.

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