What We Can Change is Ourselves: Experiences of Women Leaders in Religious-Based Higher Education Organizations

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Abstract

The number of women leaders in Indonesia is considered low, even among other countries in ASEAN. Increasing the number of women participation in the areas that have been dominated by men is often seen as a useful strategy to increase the number of women leaders. This solution was based on the pipeline metaphor which assumed that the numbers of women's participation are equal to the numbers of women leaders in the future. Unfortunately, this solution will usually reduce the complexity of women progress toward leadership into a single narration that women are lack of leadership skills. This research aims to explore the experiences of women leaders in religious-based higher education organizations. A descriptive phenomenological was used to illustrate the dynamics of women leaders' subjective interactions. Findings show that women are dedicated leaders, they evaluate their leadership and have religious values to guide them in their leadership process. In addition, organizational culture based on religious values and the expected gender roles can help women in their path toward leadership. This study implies that researchers

need to be aware of gender biases in constructing leadership and create a model of women's leadership which acknowledges and overcomes those gender biases.

Keywords: Women Leadership, Descriptive Phenomenological, Organizational Culture, Religious Values, Gender Roles

A. Introduction

Education services (Kemen PPPA, 2020) is a field that incorporates quite lots of female labor (7.95%) compared to male labor (3.14%). The percentage of male lecturers recorded in Higher Education Statistics (Setditjen Dikti, 2020) is 56% compared to female lecturers (43%). Furthermore, the percentage of public universities in Indonesia is 2.66% while private universities are 66.27%. The authors have not found official or complete data from the Ministry of Education and Culture regarding the percentage of male and female leaders in higher education institutions. However, news reports (medcom. id, 2021; news. detik. com, 2021) state that the number of female rectors ranges from 9-12 people. This shows that equality in higher education has yet to be matched by equal participation of women in the education policymakers at the ministerial level.

One study by iPrice (Mustikasari, 2021) shows that women's position in the Ecommerce industry's management ranks at 31% in Indonesia. Furthermore, 36% of women occupy positions as head of a division, while only 21% occupy positions as directors and president directors in Ecommerce management. Indonesia is even further behind (31%) compared to the Philippines, which ranks first (55%) in the participation of women in e-commerce management in ASEAN countries. All this data indicates the "glass ceiling" phenomenon faced by women. The "glass ceiling" refers to the barriers preventing women from occupying the highest positions in an organization. The top leadership

positions look and feel attainable for women, but they will hit a "glass ceiling" that separates them from men.

The lack of female leaders can be explained by the pipeline metaphor (Sinclair, 2005). The metaphor talks about how an increase in female workers in a predominated male industry will be followed by an increase in female leaders. Policies formulated using this metaphorical principle could cause other problems for women's leadership. Fulfilling the 30% quota for women legislators is an example of a policy with the pipeline principle. Research findings on the lack of participation of women legislators are stuck in the cliché of improving women's ability in politics to be similar to men (Astuti, 2013; Nimrah, 2015; Murdyastuti & Yuniati, 2016). The problems of women legislators are simplified to be only related to women's competence without providing solutions to other fundamental problems, such as the costs that women must incur to enter the legislative candidate market. The cost of conducting a political campaign is very important in maintaining the position of women as party candidates. The estimated cost can range from 300 million to 6 billion rupiah (Ferdiana, Susanti, & Lestari, 2013; Supadiyanto, 2015). Indonesia's deep-rooted patriarchal culture and religious beliefs often limit women's access to economic resources. In the end, the problem of women leaders is not as simple as increasing the number of women's participation without exploring the complexity of the intersubjective world of women leaders.

Some research findings on women's leadership focus on explaining women's leadership characteristics or styles (Andajani, Hadiwirawan, & Sokang, 2016; Carbajal, 2018) which are expected to combine masculine (agentic) with feminine (communal) styles. On the other hand, leaders are expected to have good emotional management, which is more aligned with masculine characteristics. Research findings also show that female leaders receive more gender stereotypes (Brescoll, 2016) and are expected to continue performing gender roles in their

leadership (Kapasi, Sang, & Sitko, 2016; Sadikin & Hadiwirawan, 2020). Meriko & Hadiwirawan's (2019) research found that one of the keys that makes women leaders feel psychological well-being is competence in managing the role demands of the domestic and public spheres owned by women. It is not surprising that the image of a superwoman who is skilled in managing not only the public domain but also the private domain (family) has become the standard criterion for women leaders (Andajani, Hadiwirawan, & Sokang, 2016). Other studies have also found that one factor hindering women's leadership is gender roles that provide a double burden for women leaders (Hidayah & Munastiwi, 2019; Seruya et al, 2021). Therefore, the experiences of women leaders in the field will be a rich study to understand the complexity of the problems faced by women in conducting their leadership.

This research explores women's experiences as leaders in Jakarta's private religious-based higher education organizations. The reason for choosing this organization is that women hold 40% of the 90 available leadership positions. Furthermore, 5% of the women also hold more than one leadership position. This research uses a phenomenological approach that can describe how women leaders give meaning to their experiences (La Kahija, 2017). By exploring experiences using a phenomenological approach, researchers can understand the intersubjective world experienced by women leaders directly. The research question in this study is "How are the experiences of women leaders in higher education organizations?".

The approach used in this study is a qualitative approach using descriptive phenomenological method based on guidelines by La Kahija (2017). The phenomenological approach helps researchers to understand, describe, and give meaning to the core of individual experiences (La Kahija, 2017). This approach suits the research needs to understand the experiences of women leaders.

Data collection was conducted through two interviews with each duration ranging from 60-100 minutes. The interview process was conducted using Zoom as the media. A phenomenological interview guide was developed to explore participants' experiences as leaders. The semi-structured guide aimed to encourage and direct participants to describe their experiences. (La Kahija, 2017). This study also collected the data on the participants' leadership journey since they were at school. In addition, data on family and cultural backgrounds were also asked to understand participants' subjective experiences. The data can help the researcher understand the participants' subjective thinking, feeling, and acting process. This study has five main questions: questions about the participants' daily activities, leadership journey to their current position, self-image as a leader, people's views on their leadership, and how their position affects their relationships with others. During the interview, the researcher also probes the participants' answers to deepen the information obtained. The cue questions were like; can you tell me more about it? Or what were you feeling/ thinking at the time?

There were eight transcripts of data that were collected and put into verbatim transcripts. After the transcripts were completed, the data analysis process was conducted based on the data analysis guidelines for descriptive phenomenological methods by La Kahija (2017). The head and research assistants conducted the data analysis process. Research assistants in this study are Psychology students who have graduated from the Qualitative Research Methods course. Researchers and research assistants independently conduct the analysis process in the first and second stages of the descriptive phenomenological analysis guide. Then, the research team met regularly for stages three to six to triangulate research data.

This study involved four female participants who held leadership positions in the organizational structure. The criterion

for leaders is that they have occupied the leadership position for at least one year. Specific criteria used at the faculty/product level are represented by the name of the position, such as dean, vice dean, or head of department. Participants who had not served in a leadership position for one year were not included as a criterion to ensure participants had sufficient experience as leaders. The full participant data can be seen in the table below:

Table 1. Participants' Profile

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Educational background	Marital status	Position/ title	Length of service
Fay	31	Psychology	Married with 1 child	Head of a unit	1.5 years
Nura	36	Accounting	Married with 2 children	University-level leaders	1.5 years
Terra	29	Accounting	Not married	Head of a unit	3 years
Nea	51	Management	Married with 2 children	Faculty-level leaders	5 years

B. Discussion

The findings in this study gave rise to several main themes that represent the experiences of women leaders in faith-based higher education organizations. The themes are it cannot be a no, being dedicated, grief, self-evaluation, and having a grip. The following is a discussion of each theme.

1. **It cannot be a no: "I have no other choice; I don't have anywhere else to go."**

The process that the participants went through to occupy the position of leader was an experience full of indecision, trapped, and forced to occupy this position in the organization. For them, being placed as a leader was no longer an offer or a request but a certainty that had to be conducted. Most participants saw that these feelings arise because the organization did not properly prepare for leadership regeneration. One of the obstacles is that some leaders have yet to realize their responsibility to develop their subordinate's potential. More often than not, leaders will think that this function is the duty and responsibility of the Human Resources unit,

Yes, if the leaders realize that they also have an HR function – that HR is not about the unit, even though the development [of their subordinate] is the responsibility of all leaders. For example, if some [leaders] have realized that, we will have many leaders, even so there are also those who have not [realized it]. I do not see it happening, [leaders] have not realized it yet (Fay, II, 99).

The organization still does not have a system for regenerating potential leaders, without the organization often has difficulty finding candidates. A regeneration system will allow candidates to adapt to the organizational culture, work approach, job description, boundaries, and authority of the leader position. This regeneration process was lacking during the participant pathway to become leaders in their current positions,

the staffs are young, because there is no one above us, we are not yet ready. However, those above us are not prepared for that, so [...] So [the regeneration process] not prepared, so we feel like we are being

picked early and expected to be ready to be leaders. There is a feeling like that (Fay, II, 101)

As a result, participants struggled to accept this inevitable position. They tried to find the justification for why they were chosen as leaders, such as they keep thinking that their educational background was the main factor in their selection, seeking confirmation of their performance from their superiors, and even reflecting on their experiences in previous units or positions. This shows that the participants went through the stage of doubting their potential and ability as leaders because they were not prepared beforehand. The participants then had to convince themselves that they had no choice other than to accept the leadership position.

2. **Being dedicated: "We finally tried to accommodate them, one by one."**

The participants perceived that their organizations were unique and distinctive compared to other educational organizations. They felt the organization was committed to help and assist them in the leadership process. In addition, they feel the organization's culture and values are more inclined to the human and family oriented. Thus, it is common for participants to modify the existing systems so that they can facilitate individual needs,

Sometimes I need to consider the [individual] good intentions, not just only follow the rules […] So, it should become our custom, because we have our own uniqueness. (Nura, I, 61-65)

The participants understand the effective leadership style is the one that shows sensitivity and concern for subordinates. This type of nurturing and uniting style of

leadership is in accordance with the needs in the work field. The participants' work ethic and attitudes were influenced by their educational background. In turn, the ethics and attitudes will influence their practice of leadership. When they entered the work field, the participants gained new insight into becoming effective leaders, hence they even changed their leadership style. The participants realized the importance of building relationships and personal approaches rather than focusing only on achieving targets and being professional,

[...] quite a lot of [my] characters have changed, which shapes my character -who used to only think about targets and how it can be achieved- into a leader that primarily concern on how we can work together as a solid, loyal and happy team (Terra, II, 385)

As a leader, participants understand that problems outside of work can interfere with the mood of the subordinates in doing their work. Thus, they cannot just simply demand a professional work attitude and expect their subordinates to continue working under pressure. This is why participants understand that close relationships with their subordinates are the basis of the organization to get the work done. Participants are willing to take the time to listen, understand, monitor, assist, and mentor their subordinates. They see this approach as worth the result, such as their subordinates' honesty, commitment, and loyalty, even though they know it is quite tiring, dizzying, and time-consuming. The participants' dedication to their position as leaders is seen when they are willing to sacrifice their thoughts, energy, and time to align with the culture and values of their work organization.

3. Grief: "Especially the higher up, the lonelier it must feel, she (the leader, -red) must feel alone"

The participants' dedication to conducting their work was accompanied by a dilemma between their identity as leaders and mothers. The condition and situation of their children are taken into consideration before deciding to take a position, especially because they must be willing to sacrifice time with their children to take care of work,

However, when I was offered ... a new one, I also thought, I just had a baby, the leader will be busy until the night and what about the baby. Will it be like the last time? I had the same situation when I was studying and just had my first baby (Nura, II, 35-36).

The dilemma experienced by the participants when serving as a leader and being a mother can lead to deep emotional turmoil. On the one hand, they have decided to be committed to their work. Yet, they also feel discouraged with themselves when this dedication make them unable to take care of their children,

Well, I just realized when suddenly it was announced that my child was not able to pass his grade. Imagine, I was shocked. Then, I remember I was very overwhelmed and emotional so I cried in front of the principal. (Nea, I, 20)

The sorrow of being dedicated for the participants who chose the leadership position is reflected through their guilt and sense of indebtedness for not being able to attend to their children's growing process optimally. Nevertheless, the participants were determined to maintain a professional attitude because they had taken on the responsibility of being a leader. Sometimes the participants' determination on being a leader need to be paid by sacrificing other things, such as pursuing

their academic career path. In addition, behind the role and responsibility of a leader, there is an inevitable psychological burden that the participants need to bear. A sense of loneliness and solitude as a leader can arise because participants feel that there is no one who can understand and be the confidant for them to share their struggles,

When I became a leader and higher up, the lonelier it got, it felt like I had no friends. Lonely. Really. There were times when I was alone in my position. Even though I can share my problems, there is no one who can actually understand my position. It is lonely. So, from there... I recently thought about the loneliness of a leader. (Fay, II, 107-109)

Another interesting thing experienced by the participants in this study was when they served as leaders for the first time. In the leadership position at the academic department, the participants dealt with senior lecturers, even those who used to be their teachers. The participants had to position themselves as leaders who serve the needs and become caregivers for senior lecturers rather than acting as superiors. Likewise, in the position of leader in the structural department, the participants felt they needed more experience than their senior colleagues who were rich in experience and knowledge. However, the participants perceived collaborating with seniors as a process that shaped them as leaders.

4. **Self-evaluation: "Because you see, we cannot change people. What we can change is ourselves, that is all."**

Some participants occupied the middle management position in the organizational structure. It means they had subordinates to lead and also leaders to whom they had to report their performance. The

experience of being a leader in the middle makes participants learn to determine the limits and risks of their decisions. One example is that the participants must learn to convey the superior's request before it is delivered to their subordinates. As leaders, participants understand the limits of their subordinates' abilities while also understanding what their superiors want,

There are challenges, for sure, because our challenge as middle management is that we know what are the strength and weakness that our team has as well as what the leader wants. How do we combine that? Well, that is a challenging job. (Terra, II, 316)

This experience in the middle management position made the participants realize that leaders do not have to know and do not have to be able to decide on everything. Leaders are also prone to making mistakes. This understanding made the participants willing to support their superiors by providing more accurate field data. They also assisted and directed their subordinates so that they could work on their superiors' requests, even though it was time-consuming. Based on their experience as middle leaders, the participants could reflect on their shortcomings, such as toughness, assertiveness, and gentleness. As leaders, the participants felt the urgency to be tough and assertive to both subordinates and superiors,

I tend to say yes to all the challenges given by my leader […] They (subordinates, red-) said-, the sentence that often repeats is "Miss, do not say yes to everything, everything that is requested, do not just say 'Yes' all the time. Nonetheless, it is hard for me to control it. (Terra, II, 8-12)

In addition, what is important for participants in the middle management position is gentleness, they desire to learn to convey their opinions so as not to offend

others. Thus, a lesson learned that is insightful for the participants is interpersonal skills, so they can interact with a variety of people. This skill includes the ability to clearly communicate the workflow from the top, middle, to the bottom and a balance in conveying good things and things that still need to be improved to subordinates. Other lessons such as managing conflict, managing other people's input, and managing themselves were obtained by the participants in conducting their leadership,

Well, after I learned about self-management, I learn to let it go. Because you see, we cannot change people, what we can change is ourselves, that is all. That is what I - what I understood since then, yes. (Nea, II, 76)

5. **Have a grip: "I invite them to discuss (lecturers, red-), to be open, oh that for me is God's grace"**

The most prominent finding from the participants is that religious values give color to their concept of leadership. The participants saw their position as a mandate and trust given by God, and felt God's presence which encourage them to conduct their work sincerely. Relationship with God is very important for the participants, they feel God's grace and ask for God's wisdom as a guide in conducting leadership,

To be a leader, one must ask for God's intervention on everything [...] That is the definition of wisdom that I-, I understand. So, if we ask God to intervene, everything we do is beyond what we could think of. Because God knows what we need, God will know what we need and give us what we ask for. That is what I hold on to. (Terra, II, 441-442)

Religious value serves as a form to maintain integrity and become guidance for participants to conduct the mandate of leadership. As leaders, participants are also driven by a sense of care and responsibility, such as

the need to become wiser so that their decisions will not harm many people. The participants obtained many of these values from their role models, most of whom were also women. The participants learned about sincerity, empathy, willingness to listen, being objective in making decisions, and being willing to empower and humanize people. The concept of leadership also surfaced in the participants' discussions with fellow female leaders. It is not surprising that the participants also had a desire to be role model for those around them. The participants saw that the motivation to be a role model would ensure they acted correctly and reflected their values in their behavior. The awareness of being a role model was followed by the desire to assist and mentor,

because honestly if I go to them, I say, "Think of me as a sister", "I am the one who is mentoring" (Nura, II, 192).

An interesting finding in this study was the participants were in leadership positions because of direct appointments from superiors that could not be refused. The participants in this study needed to convince themselves because they did not know the reasons behind their placement as leaders. In the end, the participants could not have the opportunity to resist or voice their objections. This finding is similar to other studies that found women rarely develop aspirations to occupy and pursue leadership positions. In reality, women become leaders because they are promoted, offered, and even appointed directly by superiors or organizations, including in higher education organizations (Kristiyanti et al, 2016; Carbajal, 2018; Yeh, 2018; Hidayah & Munastiwi, 2019). The participants also revealed the lack of leadership regeneration in their organization, so they were unprepared to become

leaders. As a result, participants develop their leadership based on direct experience in the field and look for role models where they can discuss and exchange ideas when facing problems. Yeh's research (2018) states that the lack of mentoring causes women leaders to learn leadership skills independently. It has become a common norm in the workplace. Several studies consistently state that the inhibiting factor for women becoming leaders is the lack of mentoring process (Kristiyanti et al, 2016; Hidayah & Munastiwi, 2019; Seruya et al, 2021).

The alignment of organizational culture and values with the expected feminine leadership style allowed participants to occupy leadership positions. The participants considered that their organization had a human-oriented culture, so they considered a leadership style that was sensitive, caring, nurturing, and assisting subordinates as an effective style in their organization. In religious-based higher education organizations, religious values also took part in shaping the transformational leadership styles, especially in female leaders (Fiebig & Christopher, 2018; Yeh, 2018). Research by Longman et al (2018) found that the factor that makes female leaders willing to continue their leadership period is because they feel their individual values align with values in the organization. On the other hand, female leaders who are unwilling to continue their positions find it difficult to align the image of the ideal woman desired by the organization with the value of womanhood they believe in. Thus, aligning the values believed by women leaders with the values and culture in the organization is one factor that supports women to achieve and maintain leadership positions.

The findings of this study revealed that the participants evaluated their lack of competence as leaders.

Participants with a masculine leadership style felt they could not build soft and empathetic communication. In contrast, participants with a feminine leadership style rated themselves as lacking toughness and assertiveness. Several studies on women's leadership consistently show that women are faced with a duality of leadership styles rooted in gender role stereotypes (Andajani, Hadiwirawan, Sokang 2016; Brescoll, 2016; Kristiyanti et al, 2016; Rosette, et al, 2016; Carbajal, 2018; Mate et al, 2019; Medina-Vicent, 2020). Nowadays, leadership research has recognized that traditional feminine leadership styles are more effective than it was twenty years ago. As such, women leaders are still asked to stay true to their feminine gender roles while also being required to add their capacities to reflect more of the traditional values of male gender roles. These demands can create a double standard for female leaders compared to male leaders (Medina-Vincent, 2020).

The gender-biased leadership construct also had an emotional impact on the participants. Participants in this study showed high dedication in doing their tasks as leaders, especially within the framework of feminine leadership styles that require an individualized approach. In addition, intersectional narratives related to the participants' roles were also found in themes of grief, such as guilt for children and the importance of the role of husband and family support. The relevance of husband and family support in women leaders is a consistent finding in several women's leadership studies (Andajani, Hadiwirawan, Sokang 2016; Kristiyanti et al, 2016; Longman et al, 2018; Hidayah & Munastiwi, 2019; Mate et al, 2019; Sutanto & Aveline, 2021). Thus, women leaders still carry the double burden in their leadership and are expected to be highly driven and resilient to

successfully balance the demands of the role of leader and wife-mother.

The themes in the research findings provide more thorough and in-depth data about women leaders' experiences in the field. These findings can describe intersubjective interactions between women leaders and workplace organizations, such as organizational culture, placement as a leader, difficulties experienced, etc. This kind of narrative could not be found in the results of Sutanto & Aveline's (2021) research on women's leadership in the textile industry. It states that company policy does not look at age, marital status, or length of service to get the opportunity to become a leader. Women's confidence, skill level, and work experience are the important elements that influence leadership opportunities. This kind of quantitative analysis reduces the complexity of gender roles in women's leadership to a series of discrete and unrelated demographic data. Whereas, gender inequality of women leaders in Indonesia is real. The findings of Andajani, Hadiwirawan & Sokang (2016) show the image of 'superwoman' which is pinned on women leaders. To be perceived as good leaders, they need to perform well in their work as leaders as well as their competence in caring for their husband and children. This double standard of assessments determines the quality of women's leadership. Thus, these stories of reality that women's leaders experience need to be raised as voices to be heard. In that way, the narrative about women's leadership is not being represented as if it is already reaching the stage of equal opportunities to become leaders with men.

One of the interesting things in this finding is the alignment between organizational culture and women's gender roles, which participants consider

as an effective and needed leadership style. Several studies have illustrated the intersection at the individual and institutional levels to form a model of women's leadership that stems from awareness of gender bias (Longman et al., 2018; Dzubinski et al., 2019). The lack of awareness of gender bias entails being added to the women's leadership literature in Indonesia, which mostly focuses only on effective women's leadership styles (Mangunsong, 2009; Kristiyanti et al, 2016; Nizomi, 2019; Mustikasari, Pardiman & Hufron, 2020). Research on women's leadership in Indonesia requires to start mapping the obstacles and problems faced by women leaders in a higher scope than only in the individual scope.

C. Conclusion

This study aims to recount the experiences of women leaders in faith-based higher education organizations. The findings show that many women leaders exhibit feminine leadership styles aligned with the organizational culture and social roles expected by the organization. The women leaders in this study still show the image of 'superwoman' and demand themselves to be professional and resilient to challenges, obstacles, and psychological burdens as a consequence of the 'double burden' of the role of leader and the gender role of women. The limitation of this study is that it only focuses on one religious-based higher education organization. However, this study can explore the factors of organizational values and culture and the uniqueness of the organizational structure perceived by the research participants. Research on women's leadership needs to move away from awareness of gender-biased leadership constructs and form a model of women's leadership that can be sensitive and overcome the problems of gender roles. Therefore, research

on women's leadership in Indonesia must add intersectional studies at the macro level, such as organizational policies and national gender mainstreaming policies.

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