

Challenges and Strategies of Female Leadership in Faith-Based Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Keywords:
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Adaptive;
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The landscape of women's leadership within Islamic educational institutions, particularly in the Muhammadiyah community, continues to be shaped by complex challenges rooted in prevailing social norms, cultural expectations, and institutional frameworks that often exhibit gender biases. This context frequently hinders the full realization of female leaders' potential and their contributions to organizational development. This qualitative study, focusing on the leadership of female rectors at Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Universities (PTMA), aimed to thoroughly investigate the specific obstacles encountered by these women leaders and to delineate the strategic approaches they employ to effectively navigate and overcome such impediments. Employing an empirical qualitative methodology, data were meticulously gathered through in-depth interviews with prominent women leaders in selected PTMA, complemented by a comprehensive analysis of relevant institutional policies and regulatory documents. The research findings reveal that despite the persistent presence of structural and patriarchal barriers, these female leaders adeptly adopt adaptive leadership strategies. These strategies encompass the crucial strengthening of social networks, fostering highly participatory decision-making processes, and driving significant managerial innovation within their respective institutions. Crucially, these insights underscore the profound significance of women's leadership in Islamic higher education, demonstrating their capacity not only to confront adversity but also to instigate transformative changes in institutional management and substantially enhance educational quality. The implications suggest a robust model for leadership development that integrates adaptive and inclusive practices within faith-based educational settings.

Abstrak

Kata kunci:
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Kepemimpinan perempuan dalam institusi pendidikan Islam, khususnya di lingkungan Muhammadiyah, masih menghadapi beragam tantangan yang bersumber dari norma sosial, budaya, dan kebijakan institusional yang cenderung bias gender. Konteks ini seringkali menghambat realisasi penuh potensi pemimpin perempuan serta kontribusi mereka terhadap pengembangan organisasi. Studi kualitatif ini, yang berfokus pada kepemimpinan rektor perempuan di Perguruan Tinggi Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah (PTMA), bertujuan untuk menyelidiki secara mendalam hambatan spesifik yang dihadapi oleh para pemimpin perempuan ini dan merumuskan pendekatan strategis yang mereka gunakan untuk mengatasi rintangan tersebut secara efektif. Dengan menggunakan metodologi kualitatif empiris, data dikumpulkan secara cermat melalui wawancara mendalam dengan para pemimpin perempuan terkemuka di PTMA terpilih, dilengkapi dengan analisis komprehensif terhadap kebijakan institusional dan dokumen regulasi yang relevan. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun terdapat hambatan struktural dan patriarkal yang persisten, para pemimpin perempuan ini secara adaptif mengadopsi strategi kepemimpinan adaptif. Strategi-strategi ini mencakup penguatan jaringan sosial yang krusial, mendorong proses pengambilan keputusan yang sangat partisipatif, dan memicu inovasi manajerial yang signifikan di dalam institusi masing-masing. Yang terpenting, wawasan ini menggarisbawahi signifikansi mendalam kepemimpinan perempuan dalam pendidikan tinggi Islam, menunjukkan kapasitas mereka tidak hanya untuk menghadapi kesulitan tetapi juga untuk menginisiasi

perubahan transformatif dalam manajemen institusional dan secara substansial meningkatkan kualitas pendidikan. Implikasi dari penelitian ini menyarankan sebuah model pengembangan kepemimpinan yang kuat, yang mengintegrasikan praktik adaptif dan inklusif dalam lingkungan pendidikan berbasis nilai.

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INTRODUCTION

The evolving landscape of global education necessitates a deeper understanding of leadership dynamics, particularly within unique institutional contexts such as Islamic educational institutions (Purbonuswanto et al., 2024). Women's leadership in these settings presents a critical area of inquiry, as it not only contributes to the development of scientific knowledge but also holds significant implications for practical applications and more nuanced policymaking (Ghafar et al., 2025; Muktamar, 2022; Mustikamah et al., 2025; Prahara et al., 2026). A comprehensive grasp of the challenges and strategies employed by female leaders is essential to enrich existing insights and foster more equitable and effective governance structures, thereby addressing a significant issue in both academic and practical realms (Hadiati et al., 2025; Maharromiyati et al., 2024; Salamah et al., 2024).

While extant literature extensively explores leadership in various educational domains, a discernible gap persists, particularly concerning qualitative investigations into the specific experiences of women leaders within Muhammadiyah educational institutions (Suwandi et al., 2024) (Hidayat et al., 2025). Many previous studies have often overlooked the intricate interplay of social norms, cultural expectations, and institutional policies that uniquely shape their leadership journeys (Rafika & Maksum, 2024) (Arista et al., 2023; Dhamayanti et al., 2024; Fansori et al., 2024; Purbonuswanto et al., 2024; Ula & Ali, 2025). Consequently, this study endeavors to bridge these qualitative voids, offering fresh perspectives that have not been thoroughly examined in the current academic discourse and contributing new insights to the existing body of knowledge.

The primary objective of this research is to provide a more holistic understanding of the leadership phenomenon among female rectors in Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah Universities (PTMA). By delving into their experiences, this study aims to complement prior scholarly works and introduce novel insights into the adaptive strategies these leaders employ. This comprehensive understanding is crucial for enriching insights and supporting more accurate policymaking within faith-based educational institutions.

This investigation posits that despite encountering persistent structural and patriarchal barriers, female leaders in these institutions are capable of adopting highly effective adaptive leadership strategies. These strategies are hypothesized to include strengthening social networks, fostering participatory approaches, and driving managerial innovation, ultimately leading to positive transformations in institutional management and educational quality. This research will test these propositions using relevant qualitative data and methods to provide empirical evidence that supports or challenges existing assumptions in the literature regarding women's leadership in such contexts.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a phenomenological method to explore the lived experiences and leadership strategies of women in Islamic educational institutions. The research focuses on understanding how female leaders interpret and give meaning to their leadership roles within their institutional and socio-religious contexts. Fieldwork was conducted to collect in-depth data from women actively engaged in leading Islamic educational institutions within the Muhammadiyah community.

This study focuses on the strategic role of female rectors in strengthening the quality of higher education within Muhammadiyah and 'Aisyiyah institutions (PTMA), specifically based on Islamic and Muhammadiyah values (AIK). To this end, the study was conducted at three selected PTMA: Muhammadiyah PKU Surakarta University (UMPKU Surakarta), 'Aisyiyah University Surakarta (AISKA Surakarta), and Muhammadiyah University Magelang (UNIMMA).

Data collection was conducted through source triangulation, including primary data from in-depth interviews with the Rector as key informant, supported by Vice Rector I (Academic Affairs), Vice Rector II/III (Human Resources/General Affairs), and the Head of the Quality Assurance Institute (LPM). In addition, secondary data were obtained from direct observation of the implementation of academic and leadership activities, as well as a review of institutional documents such as the vision and mission, Strategic Plan (Renstra), Quality Manual, and Accreditation Report.

Interviews were conducted with female leaders in Islamic educational institutions to understand the challenges and strategies they employ. Participatory observation was conducted to directly observe how they practice leadership on a daily basis. Document analysis was used to examine institutional policies related to women's leadership roles.

The research instrument used was a semi-structured interview guide to ensure flexibility in exploring relevant issues. Furthermore, field notes and interview recordings were analyzed to support data validity. Data analysis techniques included data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). The collected data were categorized based on emerging key themes, analyzed descriptively, and linked to theories of leadership and gender in Islamic education. Data validity was strengthened by triangulation of sources and methods to ensure consistency of research findings (Fauzi et al., 2022).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Leadership of the Rector of Universitas Muhammadiyah PKU Surakarta

Rector of Universitas Muhammadiyah PKU Surakarta (UM PKU) views this assignment as a leadership mandate grounded in gratitude and a commitment to serve through education, cultivating intentions as a field of charity that demands integrity and sincerity. His leadership vision is to transform UM PKU into a superior, adaptive, and relevant holistic health-based university that meets the needs of Generation Z, producing graduates who are not only academically competent but also possess character and empathy.

To realize this vision, the implemented strategy focuses on strengthening governance through system digitalization and data integration, developing a curriculum responsive to industry needs, building a collaborative culture, and transforming the institution's branding to be more modern and humanistic. The main challenges faced include changes in mindset and internal work culture, as well as intense competition in

the external university environment, which are addressed through persuasive communication, accelerating digitalization, and strengthening external partnerships. The leadership style implemented is transformative, which he defines as a space to glorify the values of empathy, collaboration, and wise assertiveness, avoiding domination. As a leader in the Persyarikatan institution, he emphasizes the importance of being a *uswatun hasanah* (exemplary role model) through consistency, professionalism, and service, as well as ensuring that Islamic values, such as the principles of good deeds and Muhammadiyah renewal, become the framework for thinking in every strategic decision and quality policy.

In efforts to improve quality, the main focus is placed on the curriculum and learning process as the foundation of graduate competency, which is strengthened by the establishment of the P1 Professional Certification Institute (LSP P1) to guarantee national competency standards. Concrete strategies to increase graduate competitiveness include strengthening the link and match of the curriculum with industry, optimizing BNSP certification through LSP P1, as well as strengthening soft skills and expanding recruitment networks, which collectively aim to transform UM PKU's image into a pioneering university for modern, holistic health and nationally competitive.

Leadership of the Rector of Universitas Muhammadiyah Magelang (UNIMMA)

An in-depth interview with the Rector of UNIMMA reveals a transformational leadership style focused on efficiency and fundamental organizational restructuring. While serving as Vice Rector II for Finance, he led rapid changes, particularly in the modernization of the financial and asset systems, marked by the implementation of an online budgeting system and the centralization of procurement management.

Efficiency measures were also implemented through reaffirming the core duties and functions of human resources (HR) and eliminating non-essential honoraria, which were then allocated to increase permanent HR salaries and increase student quotas during the pandemic. Furthermore, he also implemented strategic policies to eliminate unofficial levies at the faculty level and establish a Single Tuition Fee/*Uang Kuliah Tunggal* (UKT) based on study program needs. Entering his first term as Rector, the leadership focus shifted to building a synergistic organizational climate aligned with the university's vision and mission, which was realized through the appointment of new structural officials with similar commitments.

The main challenges faced include resistance to organizational climate change, a seniority gap between senior and junior staff—which is seen as a difference between wisdom in the practice of *Al Islam* and *ke-Muhammadiyah* (AIK) versus intelligence without wisdom—and limited human resources that trigger a cadre crisis. To overcome external challenges in the form of competition with state universities in Magelang, the branding strategy implemented includes the construction of monumental infrastructure such as a 12-story building, the establishment of a Faculty of Medicine, and plans to build a hospital.

Meanwhile, in the aspect of HR management, he emphasized the importance of careful recruitment from the beginning, using psychological tests as a tool for determining staff placement decisions, and implementing individual treatment strategies (by person) based on assessment results, demonstrating a readiness to take risks for the advancement of the institution.

Female's Leadership Styles in PTMA

Research findings show that women's leadership at Universitas Muhammadiyah PKU Surakarta (UMPKU Surakarta, Universitas Aisyiyah Surakarta (AISKA Surakarta), and Universitas Muhammadiyah Magelang (UNIMMA) has consistent characteristics, namely a combination of transformational and participatory styles based on Islamic values, morality, and the empowerment of the entire academic community. At UMPKU Surakarta, the leadership style of Weni Hastuti, Ph.D., stands out as transformational, visionary, and participatory with a strong emphasis on accelerating innovation and an Islamic culture of quality. The strong drive to bring about major changes, starting from the transformation of the institution from a College of Health Sciences (STIKes) to a university, is clear evidence of this transformational approach.

As confirmed by Vice Rector II, Munayya Fitriyya, M.Kes., M.Keb., the Rector's leadership is characterized by visionary thinking and motivation so that the entire team is able to "run" fast and full of innovation, considering the relatively new status of UMPKU and the need to be known to the public. In addition, the involvement of all units in strategic decision-making, both in the development of academic quality, human resources, and administration, strengthens the participatory aspect, where the Rector serves as a source of inspiration and energy for change that encourages collective responsibility for quality.

Meanwhile, at AISKA, Rector Riyani Wulandari, S.Kep., Ns, M.Kep, displays a transformational and participatory leadership style that is deeply rooted in Islamic values, viewing office not as prestige, but as a mandate and moral responsibility that must be accounted for. Her transformational aspect is evident in her ability to create a quality and competitive university, while her participation is realized through the involvement of all elements of the academic community in every strategic decision-making, emphasizing open communication, collective discussion, and togetherness. She emphasized that effective leadership is one that is able to foster collective awareness of quality, not merely giving orders, because "Office is a mandate, not prestige." Thus, the leadership style of this female rector can be concluded as Islamic transformational leadership that emphasizes exemplary behavior, empathy, and empowerment.

An analysis of the leadership characteristics of female rectors at *Perguruan Tinggi Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah* (PTMA) shows a convergence in leadership models rooted in spiritual values and oriented toward transformative results. At UMPKU Surakarta, Weni Hastuti, Ph.D., stands out as a visionary and innovative leader, with a focus on developing the university toward a national level.

His leadership is grounded in religious principles and integrity, with every policy based on Islamic values and the principle of trustworthiness, firmly rejecting any form of manipulation in the quality assurance process. His firm, disciplined, and performance-oriented characteristics are manifested through the establishment of high standards and systematic evaluation through the *Audit Mutu Internal* (AMI). Furthermore, he also acts as a motivator and empowerer, providing moral support and development opportunities for staff, and demonstrating a responsive and empathetic attitude by providing motivation and rewards when work burnout is detected.

Meanwhile, the leadership of Riyani Wulandari, S.Kep., Ns, M.Kep., at AISKA, is characterized by a focus on trust and spiritual accountability as the primary foundation of policy. She is both visionary and reflective, drawing on her past experiences as a lecturer to formulate a transformation of the university system. Her empathetic and cadre-building character is embodied in her view of staff as assets that must be empowered to achieve optimal contribution.

Furthermore, he demonstrated resilience and positive thinking, viewing every challenge as an opportunity to demonstrate the institution's capacity. In terms of quality, he was highly disciplined, firm, and honest, emphasizing valid processes, accurate data, and tangible results, while strongly rejecting attempts to merely promote image. Overall, all of these rectors demonstrated leadership that combined decisiveness, discipline, and performance orientation with spiritual values, empathy, and human resource empowerment.

Implementation of Leadership in Strengthening Quality at Universitas Muhammadiyah PKU Surakarta

The implementation of Weni Hastuti, S. Ph.D., leadership in strengthening quality at UM PKU is carried out comprehensively, covering academic, non-academic, human resources, and work culture aspects. The main strategy focuses on Strengthening the Academic and Non-Academic Quality Assurance System, where the Quality Assurance Institute/*Lembaga Penjaminan Mutu* (LPM) is designated as the coordinating center, and all bureaus are required to implement the PPEPP cycle (Planning, Implementation, Evaluation, Control, and Improvement) in accordance with applicable regulations.

Quality standards are consistently applied to the learning, research, and community service processes, while annual internal quality audits ensure transparency of finances, infrastructure, and the implementation of HR activities. Efforts to Improve Accreditation and Academic Quality have shown tangible results, where the Rector's drive to achieve Excellent accreditation has resulted in one study program with an Excellent predicate and three study programs with a Very Good predicate by 2025, with a target of Excellent Higher Education Institutional Accreditation (AIPT) in 2027.

In terms of Human Resources and Lecturer Development, the Chancellor provides significant support for further study, both domestically and internationally, and encourages lecturers to actively participate in research grants and community service. The principle emphasized is that "every lecturer and staff member must continue to grow and learn," which is realized through the provision of awards and opportunities for further study based on performance.

Strengthening Work Culture and Motivation is carried out through the initiation of coaching activities, scientific recreation (*rikkhlah*), and spiritual training, aimed at instilling the values of sincerity, discipline, and commitment to quality. Personal and contextual motivation is provided to maintain team productivity, emphasizing that quality strengthening is a collective movement supported by continuously growing human resources.

The aspect of improving graduate competency is also an integral part of this implementation. The university's strategy for improving graduate competency centers on the implementation of an Outcome-Based Education (OBE) curriculum, which specifically directs each study program to produce graduates with competencies relevant to job market needs. To strengthen graduate competitiveness, the university has developed a Professional Certification Institute (LSP P1) licensed by the National Professional Certification Agency (BNSP), ensuring students obtain additional competency certification before completing their studies.

The success of this approach is reflected in the high 98% pass rate for the National Competency Test (UKOM), a strong indicator of the high academic quality and professional preparedness of graduates. Therefore, the focus on the OBE curriculum and

professional certification is a key pillar in ensuring that graduates possess not only academic knowledge but also proven and nationally recognized practical skills.

The Strategic Role of Leadership in Strengthening Quality at Universitas Aisyiyah, Surakarta

Riyani Wulandari, S.Kep., Ns, M.Kep., as a Rector in strengthening the quality of higher education at Universitas Aisyiyah Surakarta (AISKA), demonstrated her leadership role through a series of comprehensive strategic steps. One fundamental step was Institutional Transformation, leading the transformation from a College of Health Sciences (STIKes) to a university. This process was not merely an administrative change, but rather a paradigm shift toward a modern institution grounded in Islamic values and sustainable quality, requiring a restructuring of the institution's vision, mission, management system, and work culture.

In line with that, he prioritized Strengthening Quality Culture through the implementation of a robust Internal Quality Assurance System (SPMI), based on the PPEPP cycle (Planning, Implementation, Evaluation, Control, and Improvement). This effort aims to unify the perception of the entire academic community that quality is a shared awareness, not just the responsibility of the Quality Assurance Institute (LPM). The strategic focus is also directed at Human Resource Development, which includes increasing the number of lecturers with doctoral degrees, encouraging the acceleration of lecturer certification and functional positions, as well as professional and spiritual training for education personnel.

In addition, his leadership pays great attention to the Improvement of Accreditation and Competency Testing, which is proven by the success of maintaining and improving the accreditation of study programs, as well as the initiative to establish a Competency Testing Center on campus with a target of 100% passing the National Competency Test (UKOM).

Another crucial aspect emphasized was honest and transparent quality enforcement. He firmly rejected manipulative practices in quality assessment, such as borrowing lecturers or fabricating accreditation documentation, with the philosophy that true quality grows from a real process, not the result of administrative manipulation. He emphasized, "Quality is not just about accreditation numbers, but the integrity of the process. We must not cheat with data." This philosophy serves as the moral foundation for every quality improvement policy at AISKA.

Leadership Challenges and Strategies in Strengthening Quality in PTMA

Female Rectors at UM PKU Surakarta, AISKA, and UNIMMA face similar challenges, particularly those related to the institutional transition phase and human resource development (HRD), but with focused handling strategies. At UM PKU, the main challenges include the transition period from a College of Health Sciences (STIKES) to a university, limited doctoral-qualified HR, the target of achieving superior accreditation in a short time, and tight competition with other universities.

To address this, the leadership strategy focuses on empowering and involving all bureaus in quality planning to foster a sense of ownership, supported by a humanistic and spiritual approach that instills the awareness that work is an act of worship and a trust. Furthermore, integrated monitoring and evaluation are implemented through annual Internal Quality Audits (AMI) for continuous improvement, as well as collaboration and strengthening of external networks for research, certification, and competency development.

Meanwhile, AISKA faces challenges in the form of limited young human resources with minimal managerial experience, difficulties in adapting after the change in form from STIKes to a university, skeptical views from external parties regarding the capabilities of the new institution, and initial resistance to changes in organizational culture towards a quality and target basis.

The leadership strategy at AISKA to overcome these challenges includes a spiritual and moral approach to instill quality awareness as a religious mandate, human resource development and assistance through training and mentoring, persuasive and participatory communication that prioritizes open dialogue, exemplary behavior and consistency in integrity and discipline, and all rectors demonstrate similarity in integrating spiritual and moral values as the main foundation of their leadership strategy in facing structural and cultural challenges for the sake of strengthening sustainable quality.

Leadership Challenges in Strengthening the Quality of Higher Education

Female Rectors at *Perguruan Tinggi Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah* (PTMA) face a similar set of challenges in strengthening institutional quality, particularly those related to institutional transformation, human resource development, and organizational culture change. This context is highly relevant, who stated that leadership effectiveness is largely determined by the leader's ability to manage change and overcome resistance that arises within the organization (Pospisil, 2023).

Given that all institutions, both UM PKU and AISKA, are undergoing structural and cultural transformation, robust change management is crucial. Specifically, UMPKU faces key challenges, including its institutional transition from a College of Health Sciences (STIKES) to a university, a limited number of doctoral-qualified human resources, and pressure to achieve superior accreditation within a short timeframe.

Meanwhile, the challenges faced by AISKA center on limited human resources, with many staff and lecturers still relatively young with limited managerial experience. Furthermore, the adaptation process following the transformation from a STIKes to a university requires a time-consuming adjustment to work systems and culture. External challenges also arise in the form of external skepticism regarding the new institution's ability to compete with more established universities, coupled with internal resistance that arises when changing old work habits to a quality- and target-based work culture. Overall, the challenges faced by these leaders underscore the need for a resilient and adaptive leadership strategy to drive cultural and structural change to achieve higher quality standards.

This study confirms that women's leadership within Muhammadiyah and 'Aisyiyah Higher Education Institutions (PTMA) embodies a transformational-spiritual leadership model that extends beyond conventional managerial effectiveness. The findings reveal that the integration of managerial assertiveness with deeply internalized Islamic values—such as trustworthiness, worship-based accountability, and exemplary conduct—creates a distinctive leadership pattern capable of strengthening institutional quality in a sustainable manner. This model demonstrates that leadership effectiveness in Islamic higher education is not solely determined by administrative competence or strategic planning, but also by moral credibility and ethical consistency. The incorporation of spiritual-religious values functions as a catalytic force in overcoming cultural resistance, fostering collective commitment, and transforming quality assurance initiatives into a shared moral movement. Consequently, women's leadership in PTMA contributes theoretically to the development of a contextualized transformational

leadership framework in which institutional excellence progresses alongside the cultivation of character, integrity, and human resource development.

Table 1: Transformational–Spiritual Leadership Model in PTMA

Core Dimension	Operational Characteristics	Institutional Mechanism	Observed Impact
Managerial-Strategic Dimension	Visionary direction, assertive decision-making, performance orientation	Strengthening of governance structures and Internal Quality Assurance System (SPMI)	Improved academic standards, structured quality control, accreditation advancement
Spiritual-Ethical Foundation	Emphasis on trustworthiness (amanah), worship-based accountability, empathy, and exemplary conduct (uswatun hasanah)	Moral framing of policies, integration of Islamic values into institutional culture	Increased organizational trust, reduced resistance, strengthened ethical climate
Adaptive-Transformational Strategy	Persuasive communication, coaching-based supervision, collaborative engagement	Participatory reform processes and human resource mentoring	Collective commitment to reform and sustainable HR development
Cultural Integration Function	Alignment between institutional vision and Islamic identity	Embedding values in daily academic practices and leadership routines	Transformation of quality improvement into a collective moral movement

The table illustrates the structural components of the transformational–spiritual leadership model identified in this study. The first dimension highlights the managerial-strategic capacity of female leaders, demonstrating how visionary and assertive governance is translated into systematic quality assurance mechanisms. This confirms that spiritual leadership does not replace managerial rigor but rather operates alongside it. The second dimension emphasizes the spiritual-ethical foundation that differentiates this model from mainstream transformational leadership theory. The internalization of Islamic values serves not merely as symbolic rhetoric but as an operational principle guiding transparency, accountability, and interpersonal engagement. This ethical anchoring strengthens institutional legitimacy and nurtures trust within the academic community. The third dimension reflects the adaptive strategies employed to manage institutional transition and limited human resources. Through coaching-oriented supervision and persuasive communication, leaders cultivate participatory ownership of reform, thereby ensuring that quality enhancement initiatives are not perceived as coercive administrative mandates.

Finally, the cultural integration function demonstrates how the convergence of managerial competence and spiritual values reshapes institutional culture. Quality development becomes inseparable from character formation, reinforcing the argument that effectiveness in value-based educational institutions requires both structural governance and moral authority. Together, these interconnected dimensions visualize the study's central contribution: a contextualized transformational-spiritual leadership framework in which institutional quality advancement progresses simultaneously with the ethical and spiritual strengthening of human resources.

DISCUSSION

This research reveals that women holding leadership positions in Islamic educational institutions within Muhammadiyah face various structural and social challenges. Based on interviews, the main challenges include limited access to strategic positions, cultural resistance to female leadership, and institutional policies that do not fully support women's participation in decision-making.

Women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions is influenced by various internal and external factors, including the strategies implemented, and the resulting impact. Women's leadership depends not only on individual qualities but is also influenced by external factors. Internal factors such as personal competence, academic experience, and managerial skills help women navigate challenges in the workplace (Siswadi et al., 2025). Meanwhile, institutional policies, organizational culture, and community and family support are external factors that can strengthen or hinder women's leadership roles.

In facing challenges, female leaders implement several key strategies, including: first, strengthening personal capacity: improving leadership skills through training and continuing education. Second, a participatory approach: involving various parties in decision-making to create inclusive leadership. Third, social and professional networks: leveraging relationships with academics, religious leaders, and stakeholders to strengthen their leadership positions. Fourth, utilizing technology: using digital platforms for administration and improving teaching effectiveness (Ahadiyah et al., 2024; Musrifah et al., 2024). Fifth, empowering human resources and collaboration: developing the potential of work teams and collaborating with various elements within Islamic educational institutions.

The implementation of effective strategies has a positive impact on Islamic educational institutions, including: first, Managerial and Curriculum Innovation: female leaders are able to create innovations in management systems and curriculum development based on the needs of the times. Second, improving the Quality of Education: through a more inclusive and innovative approach, the quality of education in institutions led by women has experienced a significant increase. Third, strengthening the Role of Women in Institutions: by proving the effectiveness of their leadership, women are increasingly recognized as competent leaders. Fourth, Gender Policy Transformation: there are changes in institutional policies to better support the role of women in leadership.

Female leaders who implement adaptive leadership strategies have been shown to bring about positive change in Islamic educational institutions. One impact is improved educational quality through more innovative teaching methods and more efficient management (Huda, 2024).

Adaptive leadership is a leadership approach that emphasizes flexibility, the ability to respond to change, and managing uncertainty within an organization (Arisqa & Anas, 2025; Fitriani, 2023; Wiyanto & Taluwara, 2024). Adaptive leaders are able to recognize challenges that cannot be addressed with traditional approaches and adapt their leadership strategies to suit evolving conditions (Schnitzler, 2020). This concept is rooted in the idea that change is a constant element in various aspects of life, so leaders must possess the skills to manage complexity and direct organizations to remain relevant and productive amidst environmental change (Shelar et al., 2023).

Conceptually, adaptive leadership requires leaders to develop a dynamic mindset, empower team members, and create innovative solutions to emerging challenges (Abukalusa & Oosthuizen, 2023). Adaptive leaders focus not only on solving short-term problems but also on building individual and organizational capacity to become more resilient in facing future challenges (Naim, 2024). Therefore, this leadership theory emphasizes the importance of continuous learning, openness to new perspectives, and decision-making based on data and empirical experience.

Adaptive leadership can be classified into several types, depending on the organizational context and environment. The first type is learning-oriented adaptive leadership, where leaders encourage experimentation and innovation to find solutions to complex problems. The second type is relationship-based leadership, which emphasizes team member involvement in the decision-making process, creating a collaborative and supportive work environment. (Lubis & Kusumawati, 2026; Nöthel et al., 2023).

Furthermore, there is adaptive leadership, which focuses on managing change, where leaders act as change agents, motivating individuals and organizations to transform (Pujiyanto et al., 2023). The final type is leadership that prioritizes organizational resilience, namely the ability to maintain optimal performance despite significant external challenges (Nebiyu & Kassahun, 2021; Permadi et al., 2026). All of these leadership types share similarities in flexibility, innovation, and the ability to navigate uncertainty.

In education, adaptive leadership is a crucial aspect in facing various challenges such as curriculum changes, technological developments, and social and cultural dynamics. Principals, rectors, and other educational leaders must be able to adapt learning policies and strategies to meet the needs of the times. One form of adaptive leadership implementation in education is the adoption of technology-based learning methods, where leaders support digital transformation to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

Furthermore, adaptive leadership in education is also evident in the management of educators and students. Adaptive leaders understand that each teacher and student is unique, so the approach implemented must be flexible and not rigid. By creating an inclusive environment and providing ongoing training for educators, educational institutions can better adapt to the demands of the times.

One concrete example of adaptive leadership in education is when schools and universities had to switch to online learning due to the global pandemic. Educational leaders had to quickly adapt learning policies, provide digital platforms, and ensure that all parties involved had access to the resources necessary to maintain the educational process. This swift response to change reflects a key characteristic of adaptive leadership.

Additionally, several schools and universities have implemented project-based learning programs that enable students to learn independently and collaboratively to solve real-world challenges. By prioritizing critical thinking and problem-solving skills,

this model helps students develop better adaptability to changes in the workplace and society at large.

The positive impacts of implementing adaptive leadership in education are significant. First, educational institutions become better prepared to face various challenges, both internal and external. With a culture of innovation and openness to change, educational organizations can be more flexible in developing teaching and management strategies.

Second, adaptive leadership increases the engagement and motivation of educators and students. When leaders foster open communication and a supportive environment, individuals within the organization feel more valued and a sense of ownership of the institution. This results in improved teaching quality and better learning outcomes.

Third, the application of adaptive leadership in education contributes to the development of more resilient student character and readiness to face future changes. By providing opportunities for students to learn through direct experience and a problem-solving approach, the education system can produce individuals who are more proactive and innovative in responding to life's challenges.

The results of this study comprehensively highlight the effectiveness of a transformational and Islamic-based female leadership model in the context of strengthening the quality of *Perguruan Tinggi Muhammadiyah* and *Aisyiyah* (PTMA). The leadership characteristics of rectors, both at UM PKU Surakarta, AISKA, UNIMMA show a convergence in figures who are visionary, firm, disciplined, and have integrity, but are uniquely enriched with religious, empathetic, and human resource empowerment dimensions. This transformational leadership is realized through a strong push to make structural changes, such as the change in institutional form from a College of Health Sciences (STIKes) to a university, which is a fundamental step in expanding the reach and competitiveness of the institution.

The implementation of this leadership focuses on enforcing a robust Internal Quality Assurance System (SPMI). Across all universities, the PPEPP cycle (Planning, Implementation, Evaluation, Control, and Improvement) serves as the primary framework, with the *Lembaga Penjaminan Mutu* (LPM) as the central coordinator. However, the core of this implementation is the instillation of a culture of quality as a collective consciousness, not merely an administrative responsibility. This is reinforced by the AISKA Rector's philosophy, which firmly rejects manipulative practices in quality assessment, emphasizing that true quality lies in the integrity of the process and not simply in accreditation scores. This focus on honest quality aligns with UMPKU success in achieving Excellent and Very Good accreditation status in several study programs, as well as the high pass rate of the National Competency Test (UKOM) reaching 98%, supported by the development of a Professional Certification Institute (LSP P1) licensed by the National Standardization Agency (BNSP).

Despite having a clear vision, all leaders face similar significant challenges, particularly related to the institutional transition phase, limited human resources (HR) with doctoral qualifications or managerial experience, and resistance to organizational cultural change. These challenges underscore the relevance of findings regarding the importance of leaders' abilities to manage change and overcome resistance (Rustiyonno et al., 2024). To address these challenges, the leadership strategies implemented are adaptive and holistic.

The Rector consistently employs a spiritual and moral approach, instilling the awareness that work in higher education is a form of worship and a trust. This strategy is complemented by intensive human resource development and mentoring, persuasive and participatory communication to build mutual understanding, and exemplary leadership development and training to ensure the institution's sustainability. By combining strict quality standards with a humanistic and spiritual approach, this leadership model has proven effective in driving institutional transformation and strengthening sustainable quality within PTMA.

The leadership context of these PTMA can also be analyzed in depth through the lens of Adaptive Leadership theory. The challenges faced, such as the institutional transition from a STIKes to a university, the limited availability of highly qualified Human Resources (HR), and resistance to organizational cultural change, are classic examples of adaptive challenges that require changes in values, beliefs, and roles, not simply technical solutions (Sinaga et al., 2024). In this regard, the rectors' actions in encouraging the involvement of all bureaus, prioritizing persuasive communication, and instilling a moral awareness that quality is a mandate explicitly reflect the principles of Adaptive Leadership (Suprihatin et al., 2024). They successfully identified adaptive tasks (cultural and mindset changes), managed stress by providing spiritual support and coaching, and returned the work to the right parties (empowering the entire academic community) to solve problems. Thus, the effectiveness of their leadership in strengthening quality lies not only in their transformational style but also in their ability to lead a deep and sustainable process of institutional adaptation.

Furthermore, these findings contribute significantly to the literature on transformational leadership by introducing a distinctive spiritual-religious dimension within the context of PTMA. This leadership model, which combines managerial assertiveness with Islamic values, such as emphasizing trustworthiness, worship, and role models, demonstrates that leadership effectiveness relies not only on technical competence but also on moral and ethical strength. The integration of these values serves as a catalyst for overcoming cultural resistance and motivating the academic community, transforming the task of strengthening quality from a mere professional obligation to a collective moral movement. Thus, women's leadership in PTMA offers a transformational-spiritual leadership model relevant to values-based educational institutions, where institutional quality development goes hand in hand with the development of character and integrity of human resources.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that women's leadership within Muhammadiyah and 'Aisyiyah higher education institutions operates through a transformational-spiritual model that exerts a stronger institutional impact than commonly assumed in patriarchal academic environments. The cases of Universitas PKU Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Universitas Aisyiyah Surakarta, and Universitas Muhammadiyah Magelang reveal that female rectors were not merely symbolic leaders navigating structural constraints, but strategic actors who successfully integrated visionary governance, managerial firmness, and performance orientation with deeply internalized Islamic ethical values such as trustworthiness, integrity, worship-based accountability, empathy, and exemplary conduct. This synthesis reshaped quality assurance practices, strengthened the implementation of the Internal Quality Assurance System, and fostered sustainable human resource development. Rather than reinforcing the conventional assumption that gender poses a structural limitation to leadership effectiveness, the findings indicate that

value-based adaptive strategies, particularly persuasive communication, coaching-oriented supervision, and moral framing of institutional reform, can transform quality improvement from a technical mandate into a shared ethical commitment.

Scientifically, this research advances the discourse on leadership in Islamic higher education by refining the concept of transformational leadership through the integration of a spiritual-ethical dimension rooted in Islamic institutional culture. It enriches existing scholarship by demonstrating that transformational leadership in faith-based universities cannot be adequately understood without accounting for the interplay between managerial rationality and religious-moral legitimacy. The proposed transformational-spiritual leadership model contributes a contextualized analytical framework for examining value-driven governance in Islamic educational institutions, thereby extending prevailing leadership theories that have largely been developed in secular organizational settings.

Nevertheless, this study is bounded by several limitations. The empirical scope is confined to three institutions within the PTMA network, which restricts broader generalization across diverse Islamic higher education contexts. Variations related to institutional history, organizational maturity, gender dynamics, and demographic characteristics were not exhaustively examined. The qualitative design also limits the measurement of long-term institutional performance outcomes in quantitative terms. Future research should therefore involve a wider comparative sample, including institutions led by male rectors, to critically assess the significance of gender in shaping value-based transformational leadership. Longitudinal and mixed-method approaches are recommended to evaluate the sustained academic and non-academic impact of the transformational-spiritual leadership model and to further test its applicability across different institutional and cultural settings.

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