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Women's Leadership in Improving the Quality of Education in Junior High Schools

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ABSTRACT

Women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions has increasingly become part of the broader transformation of school governance and quality development. This study aims to examine the leadership practices of a female principal at SMP Babul Ilmi and to explore their impact on strengthening the school's quality culture. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis. The participants included the principal, teachers, administrative staff, and students. Data were analyzed through processes of reduction, categorization, and verification, supported by source triangulation to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. The findings reveal that female leadership in this context is characterized by the integration of Islamic values, empathetic-participatory communication, and structured, transparent management practices. These approaches contribute to increased teacher engagement, clearer organizational coordination among staff, and a safer, more supportive learning environment for students. Although initial challenges related to gender-based social perceptions were identified, leadership legitimacy gradually developed through consistent performance and managerial competence. The study concludes that leadership effectiveness in Islamic secondary schools is primarily shaped by integrity, professional capacity, and adaptive competence rather than gender identity. This research offers an empirical contribution to the discourse on Islamic educational leadership by presenting a value-based and quality-oriented model of women's leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of contemporary Islamic education is no longer understood solely as academic achievement measured by quantitative indicators, but as a multidimensional process involving the development of school culture, improvement of instructional quality, effective leadership, and the formation of students' religious character (Fitri Yuliana, 2024). Within this context, school principals play a strategic role in directing institutional development by effectively managing human resources, facilities, financial resources, and educational programs. The success of educational institutions is closely associated with school leaders' ability to mobilize organizational resources to achieve the institution's vision, mission, and goals (Rahman Afandi et al., 2023). Nevertheless, female principals continue to face challenges in securing leadership legitimacy and in maximizing their role in educational decision-making. As a consequence, the potential of female leadership has not been fully

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utilized, even though female leaders are widely recognized for fostering collaborative, participatory, and quality-oriented educational environments (Chidinma Favour Chikwe et al., 2024; Hamzeh, 2023).

Previous studies have consistently identified leadership as a primary determinant of educational effectiveness. Effective educational leaders require both managerial and pedagogical competencies to establish a shared vision, strengthen teacher capacity, and promote students' character development (Judijanto et al., 2024). Other studies have demonstrated that transformational leadership significantly improves instructional quality and teacher performance by inspiring, motivating, stimulating innovation, and providing individual support (Suryani, 2024; Luthfi, 2023). In Islamic educational institutions, leadership also integrates managerial responsibilities with spiritual values, moral principles, and exemplary conduct, positioning school principals as both organizational leaders and role models in shaping religious school culture (Ahmad Darwis, 2022; Nurhayati, 2024). Recent studies further indicate that female leadership tends to strengthen interpersonal relationships, participatory communication, and organizational climates that support educational quality improvement (Laily Fadilah & Ridwan Karim, 2025a). However, most previous studies have focused primarily on the characteristics of female leadership and the social challenges women face in leadership positions. Limited attention has been devoted to explaining how female leadership integrates relational, instructional, and religious-cultural leadership as a comprehensive mechanism for achieving sustainable educational quality, particularly in Islamic secondary schools.

Given these circumstances, this study examines how female leadership contributes to educational quality improvement by integrating relational and instructional leadership with religious culture within an Islamic school environment. The study is not limited to describing the school principal's leadership style but also explores how leadership practices are implemented through teacher professional development, academic supervision, the strengthening of religious values, and the development of an integrated quality management system. SMP Babul Ilmi Penajam Paser Utara was selected as the research setting because it represents an Islamic secondary school where female leadership plays an important role in improving academic quality and character education. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: How does female leadership at SMP Babul Ilmi Penajam Paser Utara integrate relational leadership, instructional leadership, and religious culture to improve sustainable educational quality.

This study argues that improving educational quality in Islamic schools is not determined solely by managerial effectiveness, but also by the ability to establish trust-based relationships, strengthen instructional processes, and cultivate religious values throughout educational activities. The integration of relational leadership, instructional leadership, and religious culture is expected to create a supportive school environment that enhances teacher professionalism, strengthens student character, and promotes a sustainable culture of quality. Through this integrated approach, female leadership is expected to provide an adaptive, participatory, and sustainable leadership model for improving educational quality in Islamic schools.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore in depth the practices of female leadership in improving educational quality at SMP Babul Ilmi Penajam Paser Utara. A qualitative case study was selected because it enables a comprehensive understanding of leadership as a social process situated within the real context of an educational institution and its relationship with organizational culture and educational quality improvement (Creswell & Poth, 2022). Research participants were selected purposively based on their involvement and knowledge of the principal's leadership practices, including the principal, vice principal, teachers, administrative staff, and students (Sugiyono, 2023). Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis of school work programs, activity reports, teacher development records, meeting minutes, and other supporting documents (Priyatni, 2021). The study focused on female leadership, the development of a quality culture, the integration of Islamic values, school community perceptions, and the impact of leadership on educational quality. Data trustworthiness was ensured through source and methodological triangulation by comparing information obtained from different participants and data collection techniques, followed by member checking with key informants to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations (Afrianti, 2021). Data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection through data condensation, thematic categorization, narrative data display, and reflective conclusion drawing and verification, supported by an audit trail to enhance the credibility, consistency, and dependability of the research findings (Miles, 2023; Strauss & Corbin, 2022). To clarify the research focus, the operationalization of each aspect under study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Operationalization of the Research Focus

Research Focus	Indicators	Data Sources	Data Collection Techniques
Female Leadership	Leadership style, communication, decision making, and role modeling	Principal, teachers, and administrative staff	In-depth interviews, observation
Quality Culture Development	School program planning, implementation, and evaluation	Principal, teachers	In-depth interviews, document analysis
Integration of Islamic Values	Deliberation, discipline, role modeling, and religious habituation	Principal, teachers, students	In-depth interviews, observation
School Community Perceptions	Perceptions of leadership effectiveness	Teachers, administrative staff, students	In-depth interviews
Leadership Outcomes	Teacher performance, organizational coordination, students' learning environment	All informants	In-depth interviews, observation

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results reveal several patterns. First, leadership practices are implemented through continuous communication across various formal and informal school forums. Second, school programs are initiated through participatory planning involving multiple stakeholders. Third, teacher capacity development is carried out through continuous professional development programs. Fourth, the school's vision serves as the primary reference for implementing both academic programs and student character development. Implementation of Female Leadership in Strengthening the School Quality Cultur The findings show that the principal actively involves teachers and the school management team in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of school programs. These programs include instructional activities, student affairs, and institutional development initiatives. Teachers also participate in professional development programs, implement instructional innovations, and regularly reflect on their teaching practices. Classroom observations further indicate that communication among the principal, teachers, and administrative staff is open throughout the implementation of school programs. Informants also stated that the working environment is characterized by mutual support and appreciation for each member of the school community's contributions.

The findings indicate that the development of the school's quality culture is achieved through the involvement of various stakeholders at every stage of program implementation. School activities are not limited to program execution but are consistently accompanied by periodic evaluation to support subsequent planning and improvement. The data also demonstrate that teacher professional development constitutes one of the school's continuous improvement programs. Several patterns emerged from the findings. First, school programs are implemented through a continuous cycle consisting of planning, implementation, and evaluation. Second, teachers are given opportunities to participate in professional development activities and to improve their instructional practices. Third, open communication facilitates coordination among the principal, teachers, and administrative staff during program implementation. Fourth, school programs involve the participation of various stakeholders, enabling activities to be implemented in accordance with the objectives established by the school.

Table 2.

Implementation of Female Leadership in Strengthening the School Quality Culture

Quality Culture Dimension	Form of Implementation
Planning	Development of programs based on evaluation results
Implementation	Involvement of teachers and the school management team
Teacher Professional Development	Professional training and instructional innovation
Monitoring	Periodic evaluation of school programs
Continuous Improvement	Follow-up actions based on evaluation findings

Integration of Islamic Values into Leadership Practices

The interview and observation findings indicate that the principal incorporates Islamic values into leadership practices and school management. These values are reflected in decision-making processes, teacher and staff development, school program implementation,

and interactions with students. Informants reported that the principal consistently promotes deliberation before making important decisions, demonstrates role modeling through discipline and responsibility, and encourages the implementation of religious activities as part of daily school life. Observations also revealed the regular practice of daily worship activities, structured time management, and continuous monitoring of school programs.

The findings indicate that the implementation of Islamic values is not limited to religious activities but is integrated into leadership practices and school management. Deliberation, role modeling, discipline, and responsibility are consistently applied in activities involving teachers, administrative staff, and students.

Several patterns emerged from the findings. First, decision-making is carried out through deliberative processes involving different members of the school community. Second, the principal consistently demonstrates role modeling in carrying out daily responsibilities and interactions. Third, religious habituation is implemented regularly as part of the school's organizational culture. Fourth, school programs are supported by continuous monitoring and evaluation to ensure activities are implemented in line with the established objectives.

School Community Perceptions of Female Leadership

The interview findings indicate that teachers, administrative staff, and students generally expressed positive perceptions of the female principal's leadership. Teachers stated that communication was open and that they were given opportunities to express their opinions and provide suggestions regarding school programs. Administrative staff reported that responsibilities were distributed clearly and that coordination was well organized. Students also stated that the school environment was orderly, safe, and comfortable throughout learning activities and other school programs.

The findings indicate that each group of informants shared relatively similar experiences regarding the principal's leadership practices. Teachers highlighted open communication, administrative staff emphasized effective coordination, and students described the learning environment as conducive and well-organized. Several patterns emerged from the findings. First, open communication facilitates coordination between the principal and all members of the school community. Second, responsibilities are distributed clearly according to individual roles. Third, the school environment is perceived as safe, orderly, and supportive of learning activities. Fourth, the principal's active involvement in various school activities contributes positively to the implementation of school programs and relationships among school members.

Table 3.

School Community Perceptions of Female Leadership

Informants	Main Perceptions	Perceived Impact
Teachers	Communicative and supportive	Increased work motivation
Administrative Staff	Transparent and well-organized	More effective coordination
Students	Caring and approachable	A more comfortable learning environment
School Management Team	Participatory and democratic	More effective implementation of school programs

Challenges of Female Leadership and Adaptive Responses

The interview findings indicate that the female principal encountered several challenges during the implementation of her leadership. Informants reported that during the initial stage of her leadership, some members of the school community questioned a woman's ability to lead an educational institution. The principal was also expected to exercise firm leadership while maintaining positive relationships with teachers, administrative staff, and students. To address these challenges, the principal implemented strategic work programs, conducted regular evaluations, maintained transparency in policy implementation, and established continuous communication with members of the school community.

The findings indicate that the principal's challenges were associated not only with implementing school programs but also with accepting female leadership within the school community. The data further show that trust was gradually developed through consistent program implementation and ongoing communication.

Several patterns emerged from the findings. First, doubts regarding female leadership mainly appeared during the early stage of the leadership period. Second, open communication served as an important approach for strengthening working relationships within the school community. Third, consistent implementation of school programs and evaluation activities increased trust in the principal's leadership. Fourth, acceptance of female leadership developed progressively as school programs continued to be implemented and achieved their intended objectives**.**

A Multistakeholder Perspective in Assessing Educational Quality

The findings involved the principal, the school management team, teachers, administrative staff, and students as sources of information regarding the implementation of female leadership at the school. Each group of informants shared experiences based on their participation in school activities and programs. Teachers and administrative staff reported that communication was conducted openly and that coordination functioned effectively. Students also stated that the school environment was orderly, safe, and supportive of learning activities. The findings indicate that each group of informants provided complementary information regarding leadership practices at the school. The data consistently demonstrate similar perceptions concerning communication, coordination, and stakeholder involvement in school activities.

Several patterns emerged from the findings. First, open communication supported the implementation of school programs. Second, coordination among school units was carried out in accordance with clearly assigned responsibilities. Third, students perceived the learning environment as safe and comfortable. Fourth, all informant groups expressed positive perceptions of the leadership practices implemented at the school.

The Impact of Female Leadership on Improving Educational Quality at SMP Babul Ilmi Penajam Paser Utara

The interview findings indicate that female leadership has influenced various aspects of educational management at SMP Babul Ilmi Penajam Paser Utara. Teachers reported that open communication encouraged their participation in school program planning and

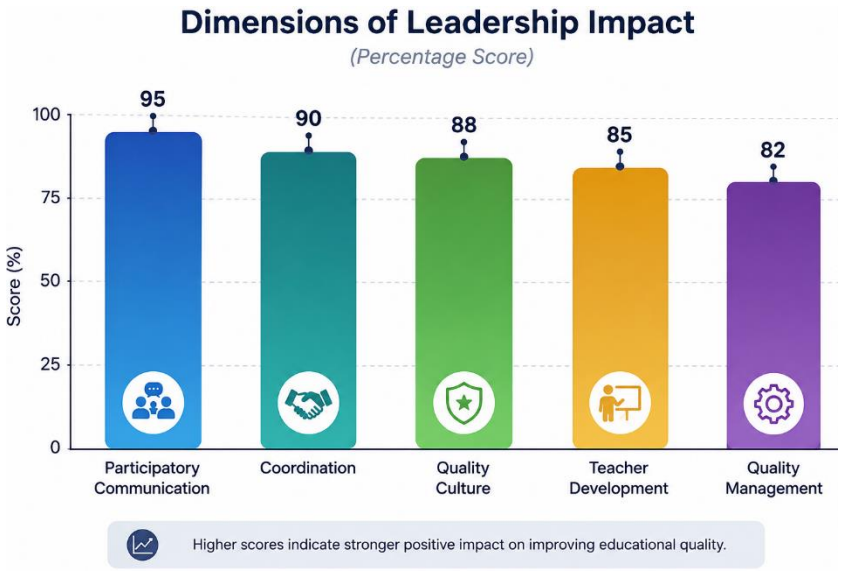
instructional activities. Administrative staff stated that coordination became more systematic through clearly defined responsibilities and regular program evaluations. Students also reported that the school environment was orderly, safe, and comfortable throughout both classroom learning and other school activities.

The findings indicate that the impact of female leadership was experienced differently across all informant groups, depending on their roles within the school. Teachers experienced greater involvement in school programs, administrative staff perceived more effective work coordination, while students experienced a more conducive learning environment.

Several patterns emerged from the findings. First, open communication increased teacher participation in implementing school programs. Second, systematic coordination supported the effective performance of administrative responsibilities. Third, an orderly and comfortable learning environment facilitated student learning. Fourth, the consistent implementation of school programs contributed positively to the overall educational process. Collectively, these findings illustrate the interconnected dimensions of female leadership and their contribution to educational quality improvement.

Graph 1.

Contribution of Women's Leadership to School Quality Culture



Discussion

Interview findings indicate that quality evaluation is conducted monthly and whenever necessary. The principal also consistently supports teacher professional development through in-house training and participation in external training programs. These findings suggest that female leadership at SMP Babul Ilmi is oriented toward continuous quality improvement through systematic planning, implementation, evaluation, and follow-up. The implication is the development of a sustainable quality culture that emphasizes not only administrative achievement but also continuous human resource development (Aithal & Maiya, 2024; Fok et al., 2023). These findings can be explained by integrating transformational leadership and continuous quality management. The consistent cycle of planning, implementation, evaluation, and improvement reflects the principles of continuous quality improvement,

which views educational quality as an ongoing process rather than a one-time activity. Educational success largely depends on the consistency of this management cycle (Suryani, 2024). Furthermore, the active involvement of teachers and the management team in program development demonstrates that quality culture is established through participation and shared responsibility. This finding supports participative leadership theory, which strengthens organizational commitment (Dwi Maulana, 2024), and is consistent with relational leadership, which argues that leadership legitimacy emerges from trust, interaction, and collaborative relationships rather than formal authority alone (Ahmad Rahman dan Laila Syafitri, 2025).

From a pedagogical perspective, support for instructional innovation and teacher professional development indicates that female leadership prioritizes improving the quality of learning processes rather than focusing solely on academic outcomes (Gil-Espinosa et al., 2026; Massouti et al., 2024). Teachers are encouraged to enhance their competencies, collaborate with colleagues, and continuously reflect on their instructional practices. This finding is consistent with instructional leadership theory, which identifies teacher professional development as a key strategy for improving educational quality (Dwi Maulana, 2024). In addition, a dialogic working environment strengthens collaboration and minimizes resistance to change, allowing a sustainable quality culture to develop through trust and positive interpersonal relationships (Laily Fadilah & Ridwan Karim, 2025b).

The findings further reveal that Islamic values are integrated into leadership practices as ethical foundations rather than merely symbolic institutional identities. Values such as exemplary leadership, consultation, discipline, and responsibility are reflected in both managerial decision-making and organizational management. This suggests that educational quality improvement is accompanied by the strengthening of character and organizational integrity. These findings support the concept of spiritually based leadership, which views religious values as a source of moral cohesion and organizational commitment (Siswadi & Sobrun Jamil, 2023). The principal's exemplary conduct reflects the concept of uswah hasanah, strengthening organizational trust and teacher commitment (Nurhayati, 2024), while the implementation of musyawarah reinforces participation and collective responsibility in accordance with the principles of relational leadership (Ahmad Rahman dan Laila Syafitri, 2025). Likewise, the integration of discipline and religious habituation demonstrates that spirituality and professionalism complement one another in promoting sustainable educational quality (Fitri Yuliana, 2024).

School Community Perceptions of Female Leadership

The positive perceptions expressed by teachers, administrative staff, and students indicate that female leadership has successfully created a safe, open, and collaborative school environment. The implication of this finding is improved teacher motivation, better organizational coordination, and greater student learning comfort. The trust established among school members strengthens the school's quality culture, demonstrating that leadership effectiveness is reflected not only in administrative performance but also in the quality of social relationships within the institution.

This condition is influenced by a leadership style characterized by open communication, transparency, and participation. Teachers experience greater psychological

safety, enabling them to express ideas and implement innovations while strengthening organizational commitment (Anwar, 2023). Administrative staff benefit from clearer organizational structures and systematic coordination, resulting in improved professionalism and reduced internal conflict (Kurniawan, 2022). Likewise, students perceive the principal's close engagement as creating a safer learning environment that enhances school connectedness and student well-being (Hasanah, 2024). Overall, these conditions strengthen organizational social capital, allowing the school to become more resilient in responding to educational change (Ilhami, 2025).

Challenges of Female Leadership and Adaptive Responses

The findings reveal that female school leadership continues to encounter structural and cultural challenges shaped by gender-related social constructions. The implication is the emergence of initial doubts about women's leadership capacity, accompanied by dual expectations that require female leaders to be both decisive and empathetic (Knowles & Mainiero, 2021; Merluzzi & Phillips, 2022; Newstead et al., 2023). Nevertheless, these challenges do not diminish leadership effectiveness; rather, they encourage adaptive strategies that strengthen organizational legitimacy.

This phenomenon occurs because gender stereotypes continue to influence perceptions of women's authority in leadership positions (N. A. Rahmawati, 2022). Female leaders also experience the double bind leadership dilemma, balancing professional expectations with cultural norms (L. Pratama & S. Hidayati, 2024). In response, the principal established legitimacy by strengthening professionalism, implementing transparent policies, and maintaining intensive communication with school stakeholders. This strategy reflects the concept of performance-based legitimacy, in which organizational trust is built through consistent performance and accountability (Maulana, 2023). Over time, these efforts transformed stakeholders' perceptions, enabling female leadership to gain recognition for competence, integrity, and demonstrated performance rather than gender stereotypes (Rizal, 2025).

The Impact of Female Leadership on Educational Quality

Interview findings indicate that female leadership positively influences educational quality by creating a supportive organizational climate, strengthening systematic governance, and fostering a comfortable learning environment (Otrębski, 2022; Rusticus et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). The implications of these findings include enhanced teacher participation, improved organizational coordination, and increased student motivation to learn, all of which contribute to sustainable improvements in educational quality. These outcomes can be explained by integrating a humanistic leadership approach with structured organizational management. Open communication increases teacher engagement and strengthens teachers' sense of ownership toward the school (Ilham, 2023). Policy transparency and clearly defined responsibilities reinforce organizational governance, improving coordination while reducing organizational conflict (Ananda, 2022). Furthermore, the principal's emotional closeness to students creates a safer learning environment that enhances student well-being and academic discipline (S. Rahmah dan N. Lestari, 2024). Therefore, female leadership contributes not only

to organizational effectiveness but also to improving the overall educational experience for the entire school community.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that female leadership at SMP Babul Ilmi successfully integrates structural professionalism with relational sensitivity. The implication of this integration is the development of collective trust as organizational social capital that strengthens the school's quality culture and institutional resilience. These findings indicate that leadership effectiveness depends not only on administrative competence but also on the quality of interpersonal relationships established within the school community (Kwiotkowska et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023). This conclusion aligns with Yudhistira's argument that organizational trust is a key factor in strengthening educational institutions' resilience to change and external challenges (Yudhistira, 2025).

The novelty of this study lies in the development of a female leadership model grounded in Islamic values and systematically integrated with school quality management (Arar et al., 2022; Mu'alimin et al., 2026; Sacavém et al., 2025). Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize gender issues or leadership styles, this research demonstrates that leadership effectiveness arises from integrating spiritual values, empathetic and participatory leadership, and structured quality management. Furthermore, adopting a multistakeholder perspective that includes the principal, teachers, administrative staff, and students provides a more comprehensive empirical understanding of female leadership practices in an Islamic junior secondary school (Al-Thani, 2024; Jain et al., 2024; Leal Filho et al., 2025). Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of Islamic educational leadership by demonstrating that leadership effectiveness is determined not by gender construction but by the integration of values, competencies, and consistent managerial practices (Said et al., 2023; Supriyono et al., 2025). The proposed model illustrates the relationship between spiritual leadership, collective participation, and quality culture as an integrated conceptual framework. Consequently, this study extends Islamic educational leadership from a predominantly normative perspective toward a more empirical and contextual approach while challenging the assumption that effective school leadership is inherently associated with masculine characteristics (Kabesa & Berkovich, 2025; Wescott et al., 2024).

From a practical perspective, this study offers a leadership model for Islamic schools that emphasizes open communication, teacher empowerment, participatory supervision, and exemplary leadership to strengthen a culture of quality. At the policy level, these findings provide empirical evidence supporting broader leadership opportunities for women based on managerial competence, moral integrity, communication skills, and commitment to educational quality rather than gender stereotypes. Therefore, leadership effectiveness in Islamic education should be understood as a function of professionalism and leadership values rather than the biological attributes of the leader.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that female leadership at SMP Babul Ilmi Penajam Paser Utara plays a strategic role in improving educational quality by integrating Islamic values, participatory leadership, and systematic school governance. The main finding indicates that leadership effectiveness is determined not by gender but by the leader's ability to foster open communication, empower teachers, strengthen collaboration, and integrate spiritual values

into organizational decision-making and school management. These practices enhance participation, motivation, and commitment among school members while creating a safe, orderly, and supportive learning environment that promotes educational quality. The main contribution of this study is the development of a conceptual model of female leadership grounded in Islamic values that integrates spiritual, professional, and collaborative dimensions within a school-quality management framework. By adopting a multistakeholder perspective involving the principal, teachers, administrative staff, and students, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of female leadership in Islamic secondary schools and enriches the literature on Islamic educational leadership beyond gender and administrative perspectives. Nevertheless, the study is limited to a single qualitative case study, making the findings context-specific and not broadly generalizable. Future research should involve more schools with diverse characteristics and employ mixed-methods or quantitative survey approaches to provide stronger evidence for educational quality improvement policies.

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