



**REDEFINING LEADERSHIP FRAMES:
Understanding the Frames of Female Leaders in
Indonesian Islamic Higher Education Institutions**

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Abstract: This study aims to uncover the leadership frames of women in Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions (HEIs). Drawing on in-depth interviews with eleven women leaders serving as rectors and deans, the study employs a theory-driven thematic analysis to explore leadership meaning-making through the leadership frames framework developed by Deal and Bolman (1984). The findings show that women leaders employ structural, human resource, political, and symbolic/religious frames in fluid, interconnected ways rather than as discrete leadership orientations. Structural authority is exercised as an ethical stewardship oriented toward organizational responsibility and reform, while relational practices associated with the human resource frame, such as trust, care, and nurturing, function as strategic mechanisms for sustaining organizational cohesion and legitimacy. Contrary to assumptions that women avoid organizational politics, participants demonstrate strong political consciousness, engaging in negotiation and alliance-building to secure representation, amplify women's voices, and advance gender equity. This study highlights the limitations of the symbolic leadership framework in non-Western, religiously embedded contexts. Participants view leadership as *amānah* (divine trust), worship, and sacred responsibility, framing religious belief as a moral framework that shapes accountability, decision-making, and ethical use of power in leadership. This study emphasizes women's leadership narratives in Muslim-majority higher education, broadening leadership theory beyond Western models. It offers a culturally responsive and decolonial perspective by defining power as relational, ethical, political, and spiritually grounded.

Keywords: female leadership, Islamic higher education institutions (HEIs), leadership frames, religious frame

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Introduction

FEMALE LEADERSHIP in higher education institutions has become a global concern for researchers. Studies from various settings worldwide illustrate the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, driven by persistent barriers. The barriers, such as gendered power, organizational structure, and male domination at senior levels of leadership, remain a concern globally, such as in Australia,¹ Taiwan,² India, the United States,³ and Indonesia.⁴ In Indonesian Islamic HEIs, even though several women have reached senior leadership roles,⁵ the proportion remains very low compared to their male counterparts. Previous studies have highlighted that female leaders demonstrate effective leadership attributes and led in a compelling style under contemporary conditions⁶. Female leaders are believed to bring a unique constellation of leadership-related traits, attributes, and

¹ T. Fitzgerald, *Women Leaders in Higher Education: Shattering the Myths* (Routledge, 2014).

² P. Chen and H.-C. Hsieh, "Women's Academic Leadership under Competing Higher Education Policies in Taiwan," *Compare* 49, no. 5 (2019): 759–76, doi:10.1080/03057925.2018.1454826.

³ K. W. Lamm et al., "Leadership Development Programming in Higher Education: An Exploration of Perceptions of Transformational Leadership across Gender and Role Types," *Tertiary Education and Management* 27, no. 4 (2021): 297–312, doi:10.1007/s11233-021-09076-2.

⁴ S. N. Hidayah and E. Munastiwi, "Pemimpin Akademik Atau Manajerial? Aspirasi, Harapan Dan Tantangan Perempuan Untuk Menjadi Pemimpin Di Lembaga Pendidikan Tinggi Islam," *PALASTREN Jurnal Studi Gender* 12, no. 2 (2019): 455–86, doi:10.21043/palastren.v12i2.5628; N. Kholis, "Barriers to Women Career Advancement in Indonesian Academia" (1st Yogyakarta International Conference on Educational Management/Administration and Pedagogy (YICEMAP), Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 2017), <https://www.atlantispress.com/proceedings/yicemap-17/25880101>.

⁵ Z. Abidin et al., "Why Does Women's Underrepresentation Transpire in the Leadership of Indonesian State Islamic Universities?," *Al-Tanzim: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 3 (2023): 878–92, doi:10.33650/al-tanzim.v7i3.5914.

⁶ A. Eagly and M. Johannesen-Schmidt, "The Leadership Styles of Women and Men," *Journal of Social Issues* 57, no. 4 (2001): 781–97, doi:10.1111/0022-4537.00241;

behaviors to the workplace that may provide advantages to their organizations⁷.

Studies suggest that there may be differences in leadership characteristics between men and women. Female leadership is associated with characteristics traditionally labeled as 'feminine' such as caring, concern for others, and collaboration,⁸ whereas male leadership is associated with assertiveness, decisiveness, rationality, strength, courage, vision, and power. However, only those 'maleness' characteristics have been traditionally linked and attributed as characteristics of leaders.⁹ On the other hand, more current research found that female quality provides advantages for women leaders.¹⁰ If this is the case, women should have gained advantages from their feminine characteristics, yet why females continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions remains.

In 2007, Guidry enquired about a similar question. Using Deal and Bolman's leadership frames, she argues that previous research on leadership in higher education institutions indicates that leaders most frequently use the human resource frame.¹¹ While the human resource frame aligns well with characteristics associated with females, such as caring, concern for others, and collaboration, Guidry questions the underrepresentation of females at all levels of leadership in higher education. She inquired whether this was due to their reliance on a single frame. Or whether it was due to

⁷ L. R. Offermann and K. Foley, "Is There a Female Leadership Advantage?," in *Organizational Behavior (Social Issues)*, 2020, doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190224851.013.61.

⁸ J. B. Rosener, "Ways Women Lead," *Harvard Business Review* 68 (1990): 119–25.

⁹ Rosener, "Ways Women Lead."

¹⁰ Tanya Iletto Diaz, "Uniquely Feminine Traits of Successful Female Leaders," *Globis Insight* (<https://globisinsights.com/career-skills/communication/successful-female-leaders/>), 2024, <https://globisinsights.com/career-skills/communication/successful-female-leaders/>; Kevin Kruse, "New Research: Women More Effective Than Men In All Leadership Measures," *Forbes*, March 31, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kevinkruse/2023/03/31/new-research-women-more-effective-than-men-in-all-leadership-measures/>.

¹¹ R. Birnbaum, *How Academic Leadership Works: Understanding Success and Failure in the College Presidency* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1992).

their tendency to operate primarily within a caring, human resource-oriented leadership, capacity or more because of the glass ceiling. Using the LOI-Self (Leadership Orientation Instruments-Self) developed in 1984, she investigated the frames of female leaders who have successfully reached deanship positions in higher education.¹² She found that the most frequent frame used by female deans is the human resource frame, followed by a small portion of those who showed no primary frame and symbolic, structural, and political frames. The finding seemed to support the theory that leadership has a “female advantage” because women possess important leadership characteristics of caring and collaboration, as reflected in human resource frames.¹³ The human resource leadership frames, however, could not be linked to measuring leadership effectiveness. It is more about depicting the dimension of management as a leader because human resources and structural frames constitute management, while political and symbolic frames constitute leadership.¹⁴ Thus, this study aims to investigate what frames are used by female leaders in Indonesian higher education institution contexts.

In the Indonesian context, some scholars have briefly addressed female leaders’ views of their own leadership. One study identified the notion of *amānah* (trust) from God and the people as central to how female leaders understand their roles. The concept of *amānah* is argued to foster a sense of self-efficacy and affirm self-enhancement, offering a positive self-perception in relation to their structural position within the organization.¹⁵ Meanwhile, another study suggests that perceiving leadership as *amānah* presents an alternative discourse of academic career and university leadership that challenges the dominant neoliberal framework of meritocracy. The notion of *amānah* and female leaders’ view of the university community as a family have

¹² Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Modern Approaches to Understanding and Managing Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984).

¹³ J. B. Rosener, “*Ways Women Lead.*”

¹⁴ Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Modern Approaches to Understanding and Managing Organizations*.

¹⁵ Maria Jacinta Arquisola, “Role of Higher Education Academic Leaders in Indonesia,” Doctor of Philosophy (Deakin University, 2016).

enabled and fostered a sense of trust, nurture, harmony, relationality, and spirituality among university leadership.¹⁶

These findings call for a more comprehensive investigation of how female leaders view leadership. Identifying the leadership lenses is essential, as it provides a cognitive understanding not only of female leadership frames but also of the views of leadership that might influence their leadership style and approaches. Only one study has used the frames theory to investigate female leadership in a non-Western context, examining the leadership frames of female leaders in Asia.¹⁷ The study suggests considering context when using leadership frames, particularly in non-Western contexts. Following this notion, because leadership is context-bound, this study aims to explore how female leaders in Indonesian Islamic HEIs view their leadership roles within the frames category. Investigating perspectives from non-Western realities is crucial to providing alternative ways to redefine leadership, as leadership norms are often understood through Eurocentric models and theories.

Using Bolman and Deal's leadership frames as a lens for viewing the data, this study further shows the category's flaws, as it fails to capture leadership frames driven by religious values in the Indonesian context of a Muslim-majority society. This study identifies a potentially different frame used by the female leaders in viewing their leadership roles that cannot be explained using the existing frames, such as the view of leadership as *amānah* (trust) from people and God, and their view of the organization as a field to serve God (*'ibādah*) through serving the organization and its people. Building on that finding, this study aims to redefine leadership by drawing on the experiences and

16 T. W. Mulya and Z. Sakhiyya, "'Leadership Is a Sacred Matter': Women Leaders Contesting and Contextualising Neoliberal Meritocracy in the Indonesian Academia," *Gender and Education*, 2020, 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2020.1802407>.

¹⁷ Im, Eun-Ok, Hsiu-Hung Wang, Hsiu-Min Tsai, Reiko Sakashita, Eui Geum Oh, Chia Chin Lin, Wipada Kunaviktikul, Jillian Inouye, Lian-Hua Huang, and Marion E. Broome. "The Refined Middle-Range Theory on Women's Leadership in Asian Culture." *J Transcult Nurs* 31, no. 6 (2020): 539–46. doi:10.1177/1043659620919163.

perspectives of female leaders in the context of Indonesian Islamic HEIs.

This study holds significant value in expanding the discourse on leadership by exploring how female leaders in Indonesian Islamic HEIs conceptualize their roles through culturally and religiously grounded lenses. By applying Bolman and Deal's leadership frames, the research not only affirms the relevance of structural, human resource, political, and symbolic categories but also reveals limitations in Western-centric models in fully capturing leadership dynamics in non-Western contexts. Specifically, the emergence of a religious/spiritual frame—where leadership is seen as *amānah* (trust) and *'ibādah* (worship)—provides a unique and contextually rich perspective that challenges the adequacy of existing frameworks. The findings contribute to both theoretical and practical understandings by advocating for a broader, more inclusive model of leadership that integrates spirituality and religious accountability, which are often central to leadership identity in Muslim-majority societies.

Following this introduction, the paper is organized into five sections. First, the four leadership frames proposed by Deal and Bolman are discussed. Second, we provide a section about research on female leadership in a non-Western context. Third, contextual information about higher education in Indonesia will be provided, followed by the methods used in this study. Then, we discuss the findings and provide concluding remarks.

Four Leadership Frames of Deal and Bolman

This study uses the four leadership frames to understand the lenses that female leaders use to view their leadership.¹⁸ The choice of this framework is based on the consideration that many studies have examined the nature of leadership in general and specifically explored the characteristics of female leadership.¹⁹ However, it has

¹⁸ Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Modern Approaches to Understanding and Managing Organizations*.

¹⁹ H. S. Astin and C. Leland, *Women of Influence, Women of Vision: A Cross-Generational Study of Leaders and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991); Estela Mara Bensimon, "A Feminist Reinterpretation of Presidents' Definitions of

been argued that many leadership studies have suffered from several theoretical and/or methodological flaws.²⁰ Deal and Bolman have been credited with presenting a viable and comprehensive organizational theory to assist leaders in better understanding leadership.²¹

The leadership frames are structural, human resource, political, and symbolic.²² According to Bolman and Deal, frames are crucial to understanding leadership because they reveal what leaders think and how they will behave, shaping their approach to navigating complexity and confusion in modern higher education institutions.

Leadership frames refer to the ideas and assumptions leaders use to understand and negotiate, or make sense of, a situation in their organizations. The frames are identified through the choices of actions and policies, how they make decisions, or how leaders perceive their followers and employees in executing their leadership roles²³. According to Bolman and Deal, frames are synonymous with perspectives, orientations, and lenses. They use four different metaphors to illustrate the frames leaders use to view their organizations: a machine for the structural frame, a family for the human resource frame, a jungle for the political frame, and a temple or a theatre for the symbolic frame.

First, the structural leadership frame sees an institution as a hierarchical system with a predetermined chain of command, rules, procedures, and processes. Leaders within the structural frame focus on achieving goals, obtaining results, and ensuring that the organizational structure effectively accomplishes tasks. This frame views the organization as a machine. Second, the

Leadership," *Peabody Journal of Education* 66, no. 3 (1989): 143–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01619568909538653>.

²⁰ R. Birnbaum, *How Academic Leadership Works: Understanding Success and Failure in the College Presidency*

²¹ Tessie Chambliss Guidry, "Women Deans' Perceptions of Their Leadership Styles: A Study Based on Bolman and Deal's Four Frame Theory" (Ed.D., East Carolina University, 2007), 304764714, ProQuest One Academic.

²² Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Modern Approaches to Understanding and Managing Organizations*.

²³ Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*. 6th ed. Jossey-Bass, 2017.

human resources leadership frame views the organization as a family. It centers around needs, skills, emotions, relationships, loyalty, and commitment. The leadership approach in this frame aims to align the needs of both employees and the organization to achieve desired outcomes. The strategy for creating change involves collective action, and leaders invest time and effort to motivate and support staff in achieving their goals.

Third, the political leadership frame is derived from political science, which looks at leadership in terms of advocacy and political savvy. This frame focuses on power, competition, and politics and sees the organization as an arena of contest. The leaders in this frame try to advance their agenda by building coalitions, bargaining, negotiating, and influencing. This frame views the organization as a jungle. Fourth, the symbolic leadership frame is based on anthropology and institutional theory. Its central concept lies in culture, metaphor, ceremony, ritual, stories, and heroes. Leadership in this frame is imagined as inspiration to guide the proceedings toward the organizational vision. The leaders' job in this frame is to act as catalysts or facilitators in building and maintaining a culture based on shared meanings. This frame symbolizes a temple or a theatre. For Bolman and Deal, the use of political and symbolic frames is leadership, and the use of structural and human resource frames constitutes management.

The Study

To understand how female leaders view their leadership, we conducted a series of interviews with 11 women in senior administrative leadership positions. The interviews were semi-structured. We asked the participants to tell stories about their experiences as senior leaders in their institutions, how they view their leadership, and the approach they used to solve organizational problems. The interviews lasted 1.5 to 2 hours per participant, and some participants required multiple interviews to ensure data richness.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom for safety during the COVID-19 pandemic and to save time for the busy participants and the research team. Eleven women in senior leadership positions (rectors and deans) with over 10 years of experience in

higher education were interviewed between October 2020 and February 2021. Participants were purposefully selected from diverse regions of Indonesia, including Java, Sumatra, Aceh, and West Nusa Tenggara, and were drawn from state Islamic higher education institutions for practical reasons. The sample size prioritized information-rich cases over representativeness, aligning with the qualitative research design. Participants were selected for their direct leadership experience and insights, enabling a nuanced exploration of leadership frameworks and gendered experiences.

Table 1. The Participants' Profile

No	Pseudonym	Leadership Position	Type of Institution
1	Professor Ez	Rector	Institute
2	Professor SM	Rector	Institute
3	Professor AL	Rector	University
4	Professor NK	Rector	University
5	Associate Professor Iny	Rector	College
6	Associate Professor SM	Dean	University
7	Associate Professor ED	Dean	University
8	Professor SS	Dean	University
9	Professor EM	Dean	University
10	Associate Professor AI	Dean	Institute
11	Associate Professor Lbn	Dean	University

Source: Created by the researchers

Data saturation was reached when subsequent interviews no longer generated new themes or substantive variations in meaning, but instead reinforced existing patterns identified in earlier interviews. This was observed during the later stages of data collection, where recurring interpretations of leadership, organizational responsibility, and religious meaning-making became consistent across participants.

The data were transcribed verbatim, translated into English by the first author, and anonymized using initials. The analysis involved a two-phase process using NVivo for qualitative data management and theory-driven thematic analysis. In the first phase, NVivo helped organize the data, with initial coding identifying leadership frames based on a predetermined framework. This resulted in preliminary codes related to structural, human resources, political, and symbolic frames. The symbolic frame was merged with a religious category due to the data's strong religious orientation, prompting further exploration of whether religious meaning-making could be subsumed under the symbolic frame or needed separate consideration. An example of the NVivo codebook is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. NVivo Codebook on Frame Categories

<u>Names</u>	<u>Files</u>	<u>References</u>
Human resources frames	11	46
Political frames	4	15
Religious/Symbolic frames	6	15
Structural frames	11	54

Source: Created by the researchers

In the second phase, a theory-driven thematic analysis²⁴ was conducted to deepen the interpretation of participants' leadership meaning-making. The researchers moved iteratively between coded extracts, full interview transcripts, and relevant literature to refine categories into analytically meaningful themes. This back-and-forth process enabled the development of key leadership concepts grounded in both empirical data and theoretical frameworks. Ongoing discussions within the research team supported theme refinement and analytic coherence. The complete thematic development process is summarized in Table 3.

²⁴ Boyatzis, R. E. *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development*. Sage Publications, Inc., 1998.

Table 3. Thematic Analysis

Initial Code	Themes/ Categories	Concepts
Dedication to the organization - Wanting to contribute with their experiences and capabilities - Feeling responsible to take action for the advancement of the organization - Taking a more active role in developing the organization	Focusing on organizational development	Structural Frame
Attaining Organisational Goals - Upholding structural hierarchy - Delegation and role distribution - Focusing on goals	Hierarchical authority, role distribution and focus on goals attainment	Structural Frame
Decision making and centralizad policy - Discussion and Consultation - Complying with the regulations and centralised centralized policy from MORA	Decision making approach and centralized policy	Structural Frame
Empowering staff - Enhancing trust and positive thinking - Improving staff working performance and work ethics - Giving staff a second chance	Empowering staff	Human Resources Frame
Regarding the members of the organization as a family - Emphasising harmonious relationship - Using a psychological approach - Touching staff personal awareness - Understanding staff difficulties	Viewing staff and students as big family	Human Resource Frame
Emphasising soft aspects of motherhood - Nurturing and caring - Encouraging staff to progress and develop - Listening to staff's needs and ideas - Showing respect	Motherhood Approach	Human Resource Frame

Initial Code	Themes/ Categories	Concepts
<p>Gaining Power for women empowerment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gaining power through administrative leadership position - Making the women's voices to be heard - Promoting equality and justice for women - Women should participate in decision-making - Representing other women by being in leadership positions - Proving women's capability - Sharing ideas to broader audiences - Creating new system 	<p>Emphasis on gaining power through their leadership for gender equity</p>	<p>Political frame</p>
<p>Building alliances and support through <i>Silat al-rahim</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enhancing friendship and strengthening relationships - Gathering supports - Embracing rivals to work together 	<p>Building alliances and support</p>	<p>Political Frame</p>
<p>Negotiation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Actively involved in the decision-making of the institution - Negotiating to be involved in the dynamic of organizational politic - Being smart leaders and politically savvy 	<p>Negotiation and politics</p>	<p>Political Frame</p>
<p>Devotion for God through leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Viewing leadership as <i>amanah</i> (trust) and responsibility from God - Doing leadership with all necessary effort - The responsibility from leadership posts will be asked in hereafter - Believe in the power of prayers to help in solving problems 	<p>Viewing leadership as <i>amanah</i> (trust) dan sacred business</p>	<p>Symbolic Frame/ Religious Frame</p>

Initial Code	Themes/ Categories	Concepts
Using symbols and belief in leadership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Believing that leadership is part of worship and service to God, people and the country - Symbolising the organisation as field of worship - Using the concept of <i>'abd</i> (servant) and <i>khalifah</i> (leader) to understand their roles as leaders 	Leadership as service and worship	Symbolic Frame/religious

Source: Created by the researchers

To enhance the reliability of our findings, we used analytical triangulation through continuous data engagement and team discussions. We documented our analytical decisions with reflexive memos and regularly checked the consistency of codes, themes, and excerpts to ensure credibility and transparency.

The researchers acknowledged their positionality throughout the study. The first author's background in Indonesian Islamic higher education facilitated access to participants and comprehension of their narratives, necessitating ongoing reflexivity to reduce bias. They ensured their interpretations were grounded in participants' accounts rather than in their own assumptions.

Leadership Frames of Indonesian Female Leaders in Indonesian State Islamic Higher Education Institutions

This study identified four frames of Indonesian female leaders: structural, human resources, political, and symbolic or religious. In reference to the earlier-developed categories of frames, some frames revealed specific leadership views held by women, influenced to varying degrees by their sociocultural context and religious beliefs.²⁵ Using the structural leadership frame, female leaders view leadership for organizational goals, the political frame to promote gender equity and justice, the human resource frame to view the organization as a family for staff empowerment,

²⁵ Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*.

and the symbolic/religious frame to view the leadership as *Amānah* (trust), worship, and service. The summary of Indonesian female leadership frames is depicted in Figure 1. Human resources and structural frames are categorized as management aspects, while political and symbolic frames are associated with leadership.²⁶ The leaders in the study demonstrate they are both leaders and managers. The NVivo coding showed that the structural and human resource frames were the most frequent lenses used by female leaders; this might be interpreted as the management side of female leadership being more obvious. On the other hand, the data also revealed political and symbolic/religious frames that highlighted the leadership characteristics of the female leader. The thematic mapping is presented in Table 4.

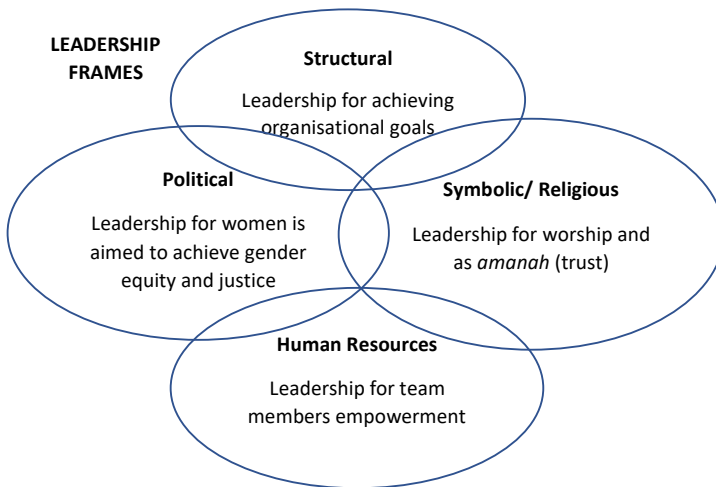


Figure 1. Leadership Frames of Female Leaders in Indonesian Islamic HEIs (Source: Created by the researchers)

Table 4. Thematic Mapping Table

Leadership Frame	Subthemes	No. of Participants	No. of References (NVivo)
Structural	Organizational development; hierarchy	11/11	54

²⁶ Bolman and Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*.

Human Resource	Trust; family; empowerment	11/11	46
Political	Power; negotiation; <i>Ṣilat al-rahīm</i>	6/11	15
Religious / Symbolic	<i>Amānah</i> ; worship; service	8/11	15

Source: Created by the researchers

Structural Leadership Frame: Organizational Responsibility, Hierarchy, and Strategic Governance

The structural leadership frame emphasizes formal roles, organizational goals, hierarchical authority, policies, and accountability mechanisms. Within this frame, leadership is exercised through clearly defined responsibilities, strategic planning, and adherence to institutional structures. In the context of Indonesian State Islamic higher education institutions, the structural frame is particularly salient due to their status as government-affiliated organizations, where compliance with regulations, bureaucratic procedures, and institutional accountability are central to leadership practice.

Analysis of the interview data indicates that women leaders draw on the structural frame not merely as an administrative necessity, but as a means of advancing organizational reform and ensuring institutional sustainability. Two interrelated subthemes characterize this frame: dedication to organizational development and the enactment of hierarchical authority for collective coherence.

Dedication to Organizational Development

Participants frequently described leadership as a responsibility to actively contribute to organizational progress and transformation. Accepting leadership roles was narrated not as a pursuit of status, but as a response to institutional need. Professor NK, for example, framed her decision to accept the rectorship as a moral responsibility to revitalize an institution that had experienced stagnation following its transition to university status. She articulated leadership as purposeful intervention, oriented toward long-term organizational improvement.

Central to this orientation was a commitment to merit-based governance. Professor NK's emphasis on quality, loyalty, and integrity as non-negotiable criteria for leadership appointments reflects an understanding of structural power as a mechanism for ethical regulation rather than personal control. Analytically, this demonstrates how structural authority is legitimized through moral rationality, aligning bureaucratic leadership with ethical accountability.

Similarly, Professor Ez's narrative highlights how structural leadership is mobilized to initiate institutional transformation. Her acceptance of the rectorship was framed as a collective commitment to shared goals, underscoring that structural authority is meaningful when exercised in service of organizational vision rather than individual ambition. These accounts suggest that, for women leaders, structural leadership is deeply intertwined with responsibility, reform, and institutional stewardship.

The View of Hierarchical Organizational Structure

The second subtheme concerns participants' views on hierarchy and delegation within organizational structures. While hierarchy was acknowledged as essential for maintaining order and unity of direction, it was not portrayed as rigid or authoritarian. Instead, hierarchy was understood as a coordinating mechanism that enables alignment, clarity of roles, and effective decision-making.

Associate Professor Lbn emphasized that hierarchical authority is necessary to ensure coherence and prevent organizational fragmentation. Her narrative underscores a structural logic in which authority serves collective stability rather than domination. She said:

"No matter how great the Department Head is, they will never go beyond the authority of the Vice Dean [...] this hierarchical authority needs to be enacted; we had to have one vision. ... If the members of the structure within those hierarchies do not walk with one voice, one vision, and one command, the organization will not be able to advance appropriately."

Participants underscored the importance of delegation in hierarchical systems. Professor SS distinguished between strategic

leadership and technical implementation, positioning herself as a leader who empowers vice deans and the Head of Study Program to achieve institutional goals.

“I will seek strategic issues so that it (the institutions) develops and is prosperous. Strategic expansions are my area, and the technical implementations are the areas for vice deans and heads of study programs.”

This approach reflects an understanding of structural leadership as both directive and enabling. Authority is exercised not through micromanagement but through strategic oversight and trust in delegated roles. Conceptually, this challenges simplistic interpretations of structural leadership as purely top-down; instead, it reveals a hybrid model in which hierarchy and empowerment coexist.

Human Resource Frame: Relational Authority, Trust, and Nurturing Leadership

The human resource leadership frame conceptualizes organizations as social systems centered on human needs, relationships, emotions, and mutual commitment.²⁷ In this context, leadership revolves around empathy, trust-building, empowerment, and individual well-being. The interview data indicate that Indonesian female leaders use this approach to foster loyalty, enhance performance, and ensure organizational cohesion. Rather than seeing relational leadership as informal, participants view it as a strategic means of exercising authority. Two key subthemes emerge: building trust through positive engagement and creating a familial community within the organization.

Enhancing Trust and Positive Relational Engagement

Participants emphasized trust as a vital leadership resource, viewing it as an active practice rather than passive goodwill. Professor NK described her leadership style as psychologically oriented, aiming to recognize staff challenges and respond with empathy. Her consistent presence during accreditation processes

²⁷ Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*.

demonstrated solidarity and reinforced trust through action instead of authority.

Associate Professor ED and Professor EM emphasized that fostering staff engagement through trust and positive reinforcement significantly improved confidence, work ethic, and performance. Associate Professor ED shared an example involving a new staff member who had transferred from another position and faced rejection from colleagues due to negative perceptions. Contrary to their views, Associate Professor ED chose to give him a second chance, believing that while people may make mistakes, they also have potential when given trust and opportunity. "He turned out to be diligent, his work was excellent, and nothing matched the negative assumptions," she noted.

Similarly, Professor EM shared that upon her appointment as dean of a new faculty, she encountered a staff member rumored to have acted dishonestly for personal gain. Choosing not to be influenced by the accusations, she continued to place trust in him and assigned him responsibilities. Over time, she observed that he performed his duties effectively and proved to be a reliable team member. Professor EM said:

"I trusted him; that helped him to maximize his potential and made him comfortable working with me [...] He certainly could do his job well. I have worked with him for four months. He felt comfortable working with me because I have never shown, even one word or a flash in my heart, that I would have negative thoughts about him, that I would be disappointed by his conduct, that the faculty's goals would not be met. I called this *qalb al-salim* (peaceful soul). And you know? Wow, he did it. He finalized [many works] and showed improvement in only four months."

Professor EM noted that her colleagues were also impressed by the staff member's transformation. They recognized that such a change would not have been possible without the trust and positive reinforcement she had extended. She emphasized that, as a leader, her role is to build others' capacity and enhance their work ethic through trust and encouragement. This narrative reframes leadership from disciplinary control to moral cultivation, positioning trust as a performative mechanism that legitimates authority.

Constructing the Organization as a Familial Community

A second defining feature of the human resource frame is the construction of the institution as a familial space. Participants frequently used familial metaphors to describe their relationships with staff, lecturers, students, and support workers. Associate professor AI and Associate professor SM, for example, positioned themselves as heads of an extended family, framing leadership as caretaking rather than command. Associate Professor SM's daily practice of sharing food with security and cleaning staff symbolizes an ethic of inclusion and recognition that transcends formal organizational roles. Similarly, Associate Professor AI said, "All elements in the faculty were like a family; they are my family, and they are like my children, my team."

Extending on the familial concept, Associate Professor SM linked it with the concept of *Amānah*, where she gained as the head of the organizational family: "I perceive this faculty as my family (because) I was given *amānah* (trust) as the head of the family." She recognized all the faculty staff as her big family and her children.

In another story, Professor AL illustrated her care for students during the first outbreak of COVID-19. She worked with a philanthropic organization at her institution to open a soup kitchen for stranded students across campus. The philanthropic organization identified 250 stranded students in their boarding houses, unable to return home to their families due to the lockdown; some were sick. She helped them with logistics and medicines and sent the sick to the hospital.

Conceptually, the human resource frame in this study reframes leadership authority as relational legitimacy. Authority is earned through presence, care, and attentiveness, rather than imposed through formal position alone. This challenges dominant leadership models that separate emotional labor from effective governance and highlights how women leaders transform relational practices into organizational strength.

Political Frame: Power, Negotiation, and Gendered Contestation

The political leadership frame conceptualizes organizations as arenas of power, negotiation, competing interests, and strategic alliance-building. Within this frame, leadership is understood not as neutral coordination but as active engagement with conflict, representation, and influence. Analysis of the interview data indicates that Indonesian female leaders deliberately mobilize the political frame to navigate gendered power relations and to advance equity and justice within higher education institutions. Three interrelated subthemes characterize the political frame: gaining power through positional leadership, building alliances through relational negotiation (*ṣilat al-raḥīm*), and developing political acuity through strategic negotiation.

Gaining Power Through Positional Leadership

Participants articulated a clear awareness that occupying formal leadership positions was necessary to make women's voices visible and influential within institutional decision-making processes. Power, in this sense, was not pursued for personal authority but as a strategic resource to challenge gender bias and enable representation.

Professor EM explicitly framed women's presence in leadership as ideological and symbolic, emphasizing that representation itself constitutes a form of power that disrupts male-dominated norms. She stated, "The representation of women in leadership posts is the key." She believed that gender representation in leadership roles is required to promote equality and justice for women, enabling them to gain equal access in every aspect of life. "For me, female representation in a leadership position is number one. [...] it is ideological." That fervor was what encouraged her to become a leader. Professor EM added, "Because, within the woman's self, she bears a symbol and ideology; for me, it is a must; there must be a woman's presence physically." Professor EM emphasized the need for women to have a strong voice and to seize leadership. She said, "Women should aim and make a strong effort to grasp leadership (power)."

Similarly, Associate Professor ED and Associate Professor AI highlighted how women's intellectual capacity alone was

insufficient to secure influence in organizational politics. Despite their academic credentials, women's ideas were often marginalized unless they were accompanied by formal authority. Associate Professor AI's narrative illustrates how structural position enables political leverage, allowing women leaders to legitimize and amplify perspectives that would otherwise go unheard.

In her experience, Associate Professor AI found that, many times, the ideas of women, even when they are professors or have academic excellence, were not heard. So, she argues that women should be in a structural position to channel those unheard voices. She said, "Even some capable women's voices were not heard, but with my power (as a female dean), I can contribute to justifying their reasons and ideas." She believed that her presence at the decision-making table made her more flexible in communicating women's voices to senior leaders and decision-makers. These accounts reveal how women leaders re-signify positional power as a tool for collective advocacy rather than individual dominance.

Aligning Support and Şilat al-rahīm (Maintaining Ties)

A distinctive feature of the political frame in this context is the use of *şilat al-rahīm*—a culturally and religiously embedded practice of maintaining social ties—as a strategic means of alliance-building. Participants described engaging in informal visits, personal communication, and acts of respect to cultivate support and legitimacy. Professor EM's visits to former deans exemplify how cultural norms of respect and relational continuity are mobilized to stabilize leadership transitions and secure moral endorsement. She narrated:

"I started my first day in the deanship by conducting *şilat al-rahīm* with previous deans. Most of them were retired and probably had no power over the university anymore. Yet, in my cultural background, where I was raised, respect for older people and *şilat al-rahīm* were very important. I visited each of the previous deans' houses. I could not hold back my tears, feeling touched to see them, realizing that the faculty owed a lot to them; they laid the foundations for the faculty. Because of them, the university has gained respect. They were happy to be visited and remembered, since none of the previous deans had ever come to see them. They discussed their time in leadership and shared stories about the university's development. They also

expressed their support and prayed for me. Inside my heart, I promised to continue the good efforts they have started.”

Similarly, Professor AL visited other candidates for the rectorship and asked them to help her by becoming vice-rectors. She believed that embracing them and aligning their support was essential because she knew those candidates had at least shown their interest in developing the university. She stated, “This personal approach and *silaturrahim* were hardly conducted by other previous male rectors. This is the women's way of enacting leadership.” In addition, she also conducted *silaturrahim* with the senior professors who had already retired. She asked them to become adjunct lecturers to acknowledge their past contributions to the university's development. She said, “They are my teachers; they laid down the base for the big name of this university.”

These practices demonstrate a political strategy that privileges relational diplomacy over confrontation. Conceptually, this challenges Western notions of organizational politics as adversarial, highlighting instead a culturally situated form of political engagement rooted in respect, reciprocity, and relational ethics.

Negotiation

The third subtheme centers on negotiation as an essential leadership competency. Participants rejected the notion that political engagement is inherently negative, instead framing negotiation as a necessary practice for survival and effectiveness within institutional power structures. Professor EM emphasized that women who remain outside political processes risk marginalization and reinforce gender inequities. Professor EM said:

“Women should be there; yes, they have to negotiate. Negotiation is not negative because if women stay outside of the mainstream (of the political dynamic), they will remain marginal. Political life within the campus spins very fast. To promote equality and gender justice, women must participate actively and be involved in the middle of the stream.”

Professor Ez highlighted the need for female leaders to understand campus politics to thrive in their roles. She pointed out that biases against women in leadership persist, leading many to underestimate their capabilities. She shared an experience of

senior male leaders being expelled due to political intrigue, warning, “If we are not smart enough, our positions could lead to our expulsion.” She recalled a highly accomplished former rector who was removed from campus despite his success. “If this can happen to senior male leaders, female leaders may face even greater challenges.”

The political frame sees leadership as a negotiation of power and legitimacy. Indonesian female leaders embrace politics, redefining it through ethical intentions and gender-conscious advocacy. This approach positions political engagement as key to leadership and advancing equity in higher education.

Symbolic or Religious Frame?

While the symbolic frame in leadership theory emphasizes meaning-making through rituals, stories, and cultural symbols²⁸, this study's findings suggest that the leadership narratives of Indonesian female leaders extend beyond symbolism into a distinctly religious–spiritual frame. In this frame, leadership is understood not merely as an inspirational or cultural practice, but as a divinely grounded moral responsibility that shapes how power, authority, and accountability are enacted.

In the interviews, many participants mentioned religious concepts like *amānah* (trust), *‘ibādah* (worship), prayer, and divine accountability, highlighting their significance across various leadership contexts. These ideas shaped their views on decision-making, responsibility, and the ethical use of power, indicating that the religious framework serves as a fundamental moral guide rather than a peripheral element.

Leadership as Amānah and Sacred Responsibility

Participants described leadership as an *amānah*, or divine trust, seeing it as a sacred obligation rather than a personal achievement. Professor NK noted that viewing leadership this way heightened

²⁸ Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*.

her sense of responsibility and accountability regarding ethics and long-term consequences. She said:

“When I view this position as *amānah*, I perceive it as a big responsibility. If I do not do it with my best effort, later, in the hereafter, I will be asked about it.”

Similarly, Associate Professor Lbn emphasized that accepting leadership meant accepting its risks and burdens as part of a divine mandate. This understanding reframes power not as entitlement or control, but as moral obligation. This challenges conventional leadership theories that locate accountability primarily within institutional hierarchies by positioning accountability as ultimately transcendent and spiritual.

Notably, references to *amānah*, worship, and divine accountability were articulated by nearly all participants, cutting across structural, human resource, and political narratives. This suggests that the religious frame operates not as a discrete category but as an overarching moral logic that informs how leadership power is understood and enacted.

Leadership as Service and Worship

Closely connected to the concept of *amānah* is the understanding of leadership as *‘ibādah* (worship). Participants described their institutions as *ladang ‘ibādah* (fields of worship), where leadership practices—decision-making, service, and care—were imbued with spiritual meaning. Professor SS and Associate Professor Lbn articulated that their leadership roles constituted acts of worship when performed with sincerity and dedication.

Professor EM further elaborated this perspective by drawing on Islamic concepts of *‘abd* (servant) and *caliph* (leader), emphasizing that leadership authority must be balanced with servanthood. She stated:

“Even though I am a dean, I never position myself as an elite group, above other employees’ level.”

This narrative positions leadership as fundamentally relational and ethical, where authority is legitimized through humility and service rather than hierarchy. Conceptually, this reframes leadership power as moral stewardship rather than dominance.

Spiritual Practices and the Exercise of Power

Spiritual practices, particularly prayer, were described as central resources that enabled leaders to navigate challenges and sustain their leadership roles. Associate Professor AI, for instance, attributed her endurance and clarity in leadership to daily prayer, viewing divine guidance as the primary source of strength and knowledge. Importantly, these practices were not symbolic rituals detached from action, but were directly linked to decision-making, resilience, and ethical judgment.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the religious-spiritual frame is not only prominent but cross-cutting, informing how women leaders engage with structural authority, human relations, and political negotiation. Rather than existing as a separate symbolic layer, religious meaning-making provides the ethical foundation through which leadership power is understood, justified, and enacted in Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions.

Discussion

The findings indicate that participants drew on all four leadership frames identified by Bolman and Deal—structural, human resource, political, and symbolic/religious. Rather than deploying these frames as discrete or mutually exclusive categories, participants mobilized them fluidly, reflecting the complex organizational, cultural, and religious contexts in which leadership is enacted. Notably, the findings suggest a stronger orientation toward human resource, political, and religious frames, indicating that leadership in this context is deeply relational, ethically grounded, and politically conscious.

The presence of the structural frame reflects the institutional realities of government-operated higher education, where hierarchy, regulation, and accountability are unavoidable. This aligns with existing research suggesting that leadership in government-operated and formal institutions,²⁹ particularly in

²⁹ Adisorn Juntrasook, "'You Do Not Have to Be the Boss to Be a Leader': Contested Meanings of Leadership in Higher Education," *Higher Education*

Asian contexts, tends to be shaped by hierarchical structures and status-based leadership roles.³⁰ The data challenge the view of structural leadership as purely bureaucratic. Women leaders defined structural authority as a moral obligation linked to organizational reform. Their power was validated not only by position but also by ethical standards such as integrity, competence, and commitment to institutional advancement.

The human resource frame emerged as a central mode through which women leaders exercised authority and sustained organizational cohesion. Participants' emphasis on trust, harmony, and familial relationships resonates with collectivist cultural values prevalent in Indonesian society.³¹ This finding resonates with studies showing that Indonesian culture emphasizes the leader–team member relationship based on morals and collectivist values, such as family responsibility.³² Rather than functioning merely as a cultural disposition, relational leadership operated as a strategic form of power. By cultivating trust and emotional connection, leaders aligned individual motivation with institutional goals, thereby enhancing performance and resilience. This finding extends existing leadership literature by positioning relational and nurturing practices not as “soft” alternatives to leadership, but as deliberate mechanisms through which authority is exercised and legitimized.

Research & Development 33, no. 1 (January 2014): 19–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.864610>.

³⁰ Im, Eun-Ok, Hsiu-Hung Wang, Hsiu-Min Tsai, Reiko Sakashita, Eui Geum Oh, Chia Chin Lin, Wipada Kunaviktikul, Jillian Inouye, Lian-Hua Huang, and Marion E. Broome. “The Refined Middle-Range Theory on Women’s Leadership in Asian Culture.” *J Transcult Nurs* 31, no. 6 (2020): 539–46. doi:10.1177/1043659620919163.

³¹ Irawanto, D. W. “An Analysis Of National Culture and Leadership Practices In Indonesia.” *Journal of Diversity Management* 4, no. 2 (2009): 41–48. doi:10.19030/jdm.v4i2.4957; Irawanto, D. W., P. L. Ramsey, and J. C. Ryan. “Challenge of Leading in Javanese Culture.” *Asian Ethnicity*, 2011. doi:10.1080/14631369.2011.571829.

³² G. Hofstede and G. J. Hofstede, *Culture and Organizations—Software of the Mind: Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival. 2nd Edition* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005).

The political frame further complicates dominant narratives of women's leadership, which portray them as reluctant or disengaged from organizational politics. Contrary to previous studies that highlight women's lower ambition to pursue senior organizational positions and their tendency to opt out of leadership,³³ this study found that Indonesian female leaders used political frames in their leadership. The participants strongly asserted the necessity of political engagement, negotiation, building alliances, and holding leadership positions. These findings also contradict the finding that female leaders in the Asian nursing field perceived politics negatively.³⁴ Although the findings of this study may fall under the political frame, the political aims of the female leaders are notably distinct. Their pursuit of power was driven by a strong commitment to ensuring gender representation, promoting gender equality and justice, and amplifying women's voices in decision-making processes. Taking leadership positions was seen as an expression of women's agency.³⁵ Furthermore, the voices reflected in the findings align with the view that women's presence in leadership is essential to transcending the gender-binary leadership divide, enabling them to 'take power' and lead in ways they perceive as effective, thereby addressing complex gender relations in leadership.³⁶ This finding reinforces the view of women's leadership as an expression of

³³ Lynne E. Devnew et al., "Women's Leadership Aspirations," in *Handbook of Research on Gender and Leadership*, ed. Susan R. Madsen (UK and USA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017); Ruth Sealy and Charlotte Harman, "Women's Leadership Ambition in Early Careers," in *Handbook of Research on Gender and Leadership*, ed. Susan R. Madsen (UK and USA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017).

³⁴ Im, Eun-Ok, Hsiu-Hung Wang, Hsiu-Min Tsai, Reiko Sakashita, Eui Geum Oh, Chia Chin Lin, Wipada Kunaviktikul, Jillian Inouye, Lian-Hua Huang, and Marion E. Broome. "The Refined Middle-Range Theory on Women's Leadership in Asian Culture." *J Transcult Nurs* 31, no. 6 (2020): 539–46. doi:10.1177/1043659620919163.

³⁵ T. Fitzgerald, "Mapping the Terrain of Leadership: Gender and Leadership in Higher Education," *Irish Educational Studies* 39, no. 2 (2020): 221–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2020.1729222>.

³⁶ Jane O'Dea, "Hazardous Manoeuvres: Thoughts on Being a Female University Dean," *Irish Educational Studies* 39, no. 2 (April 2020): 205–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2019.1698444>.

agency, while also highlighting the necessity of political participation to disrupt entrenched gender norms in leadership.

The most significant theoretical contribution of this study lies in its interrogation of the symbolic leadership frame. While some elements of participants' narratives align with symbolic leadership—such as metaphors of service and collective meaning-making—the data reveal a depth of religious engagement that exceeds the symbolic frame's conceptual boundaries. The participants' view of leadership as *Amānah* (trust) and of the organization as "*ladang 'ibādah*" (field of worship) is evidence. Other studies in the Indonesian context also found that the view of leadership as *Amānah*, combined with the leader's view of the university as a family, has enabled the leaders to activate a sense of trust, harmony, nurture, and rationality and improve their spirituality³⁷. Participants did not treat religious rituals and beliefs as symbolic tools for inspiration or cohesion; rather, leadership was understood as *amānah* (trust), a sacred responsibility, and an act of worship. Religious practice functioned as an ethical compass, a source of accountability, and a means of sustaining leadership through divine connection, particularly through prayer.

These findings reveal a limitation in applying the symbolic frame to non-Western religious contexts. While this frame views rituals as tools for meaning-making, participants describe religious practices as expressions of lived spirituality with significant ontological and moral implications. This underscores the need to broaden leadership frameworks to encompass contexts in which religion is central to leadership identity and practice. Consequently, this study fosters a more culturally responsive understanding of leadership in Muslim-majority and non-Western higher education settings.

³⁷ T. W. Mulya and Z. Sakhiyya, "'Leadership Is a Sacred Matter': Women Leaders Contesting and Contextualising Neoliberal Meritocracy in the Indonesian Academia," *Gender and Education*, 2020, 1–16, doi:10.1080/09540253.2020.1802407

Conclusion

This study explores how women leaders in Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions understand and practice leadership, power, and authority. Using qualitative data and the leadership frames framework, it reveals that these leaders employ structural, human resource, political, and religious frames adaptively. This approach challenges rigid models of leadership that prioritize hierarchy and individual authority. The findings show that structural leadership can be ethical and relational. The women leaders justified their authority through moral responsibility and a commitment to reform, viewing hierarchy as stewardship rather than domination. The human resource frame emerged as essential for exercising power, building trust, and fostering organizational resilience through relational practices. These women are not reluctant political actors; they actively engage in negotiation and alliance-building to enhance representation and promote gender equity. Leadership is thus understood as shaped by gendered organizational realities. The study critiques the symbolic leadership frame in non-Western and religious contexts, highlighting that leadership encompasses *amānah* (trust), worship, and sacred responsibility, which influence decision-making and power dynamics. Overall, it calls for expanding leadership frameworks to include religious contexts and emphasizes women's narratives in a Muslim-majority, non-Western higher education setting, advocating for a relational, ethical, and spiritually grounded understanding of leadership.

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