

The Meaning of Women's Leadership in Collectivistic Culture at Islamic Higher Education Institutions: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract: The representation of women in academic leadership positions in Islamic universities is still limited despite its strategic role. This study explores the meaning of women's leadership in the context of Islamic collectivist culture and the mechanisms of social legitimacy construction that they construct. This study uses a qualitative method with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. Three informants were selected based on the criteria of ≥ 1 year of office experience; Data were collected through in-depth interviews (60–90 minutes), field observations, and activity documentation. The analysis was carried out using the IPA step and assisted by NVivo 15 for the visualization of the theme. Data validity is strengthened through member checking, peer debriefing, and data triangulation. The results of the analysis identified four main themes: (1) leadership as a moral-spiritual mandate; (2) leadership as social negotiation in a collectivist culture; (3) leadership as a space for self-actualization (intellectual, social, spiritual); and (4) the construction of social legitimacy formed through the integration of three pillars: professional competence, moral integrity, and relational wisdom. The legitimacy of women leaders in Islamic higher education is multidimensional and built gradually formal credentials open early access, moral exemplars strengthen social acceptance, and relational wisdom nurtures long-term legitimacy. Universities need to develop career development policies that combine improving academic competence and relational/spiritual capacity and creating an organizational culture that values exemplarity.

Keywords: women's leadership; social legitimacy; collectivist culture; Islamic higher education; IPA.

Introduction

Women occupying positions of academic leadership in Islamic higher education face complex challenges arising from the overlap between collectivistic cultural norms, religious values, and the demands of academic professionalism (Kassim et al., 2025). Despite global and national trends encouraging the improvement of gender equality, the representation of women in strategic positions such as head of study programs, deans, or vice chancellors is still very limited and disproportionate in many Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia (Abidin

et al., 2023). This shows an imbalance that reflects strong structural and cultural barriers, such as gender stereotypes, patriarchal bias, and conservative religious interpretations. Various empirical studies show that patriarchal cultural factors and gender-biased interpretations of traditional religious norms are the main obstacles to women's access and leadership effectiveness. For example, a study on women's representation in higher management in Islamic higher education identified barriers such as gender stereotypes, cultural biases, and religious interpretations that placed women in subordinate positions (Abidin et

al., 2023). At the level of local Islamic organizations, the perception that leadership is the domain of men also weakens the social legitimacy received by women leaders (Siwiyanti et al., 2025).

However, other studies have shown that the legitimacy of women leaders can be formed if they are able to demonstrate a combination of professional competence, strong ethical and moral attitudes, and adaptation skills to applicable social norms and religious values. For example, research at Nahdlatul Ulama religious universities emphasizes the importance of competence, cooperative nature, patience, and a track record of leadership in building social recognition for women leaders (Isnaini, 2021). Gender leadership theory asserts that the legitimacy of female leaders does not solely depend on technical abilities or professionalism, but also on their ability to negotiate multiple identities and social norms in the midst of collectivist culture and religion (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hofstede et al., 2010). Social legitimacy in this context is understood as the collective recognition and acceptance of women's leadership authority built through a process of continuous social interaction, which involves an evaluation of professional competence, moral integrity, and conformity with the cultural and religious values embraced by the academic community.

However, there are several research gaps that need to be addressed. First, there is still a lack of in-depth phenomenological studies on the experiences of women leaders in Islamic universities, especially regarding the way they understand and build social legitimacy in an environment that combines collectivist norms and religious values. Second, literature tends to pay less attention to middle leadership positions such as the head and secretary of the study program, even though this position is very strategic in academic decision-making and becomes a meeting point between faculty policies, deans, and lecturers. Third, studies that link social legitimacy to practical strategies of women leaders in dealing with identity conflicts, cultural norms, and religious expectations are also very limited. Fourth, there has been no research that systematically maps the mechanism of constructing the social legitimacy of women leaders through the spiritual, social, and self-actualization dimensions in an integrated manner.

Taking these gaps into account, this research is directed to answer the main question: How do women leaders in Islamic universities interpret their leadership in the context of collectivist culture and Islamic values? How is social legitimacy constructed through day-to-day leadership practices? And what strategies are used to negotiate cultural norms, religious expectations, and the demands of academic professionalism? The focus of the research includes middle leaders, particularly the chair and secretary of the study program, which represents a critical point in the academic hierarchy where structural pressures and social expectations meet directly. It is hoped that the results of this study can: (1) enrich the study of gender leadership theory in the context of Islamic higher education by integrating the perspective of Role Congruity Theory and the collectivistic leadership framework; (2) produce a conceptual model of the construction of social legitimacy of values-based women's leadership; and (3) provide practical insights for Islamic universities in formulating and implementing academic career development policies that are more inclusive and responsive to gender issues.

Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method to deeply understand the subjective experiences of women leaders in the social and cultural context of Islamic higher education (Smith et al., 2009). The research subject is a woman who serves as the chair and secretary of the study program in Islamic higher education with the criteria of having served for at least one year and being active in academic decision-making. The number of informants was determined as many as three people following the principle of information power in phenomenological research (Malterud et al., 2016).

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting 60–90 minutes per informant and supported by field observations, and documentation of activities to strengthen the validity of the data. Data were analyzed using the IPA steps consisting of an in-depth reading of the

entrusted to God.” (Informant B) “As a woman, I know a lot of people are observing. So I have to be able to be an example, both in work ethics, speech, and how to solve problems.” (Informant C)

This narrative phenomenologically illustrates the awareness that leadership authority is closely related to the value of trust (*amanah*). Islamic spirituality is the main foundation in leadership legitimacy, where women leaders see themselves as servants as well as guardians of organizational morality. Observations show that all informants consistently include spiritual reflection and Islamic ethical values as part of their leadership vision.

Leadership as Social Negotiation in a Collectivist Culture

The second theme reveals the complex dynamics of women's leadership during a collectivist culture. In an organizational culture that upholds group loyalty, social harmony, and moral hierarchy,

women leaders face a dilemma between enforcing formal authority and maintaining harmonious social relationships. The informants revealed:

“Being a female leader is not only about carrying out formal duties but also having to be smart in adjusting to the expectations of the community and colleagues who sometimes still view women leaders with skepticism.” (Informant C) “Many decisions cannot be made alone. I must consult with all parties so as not to create a dominating impression.” (Informant B) “There was an incident when I had to reprimand a lecturer. Finally, I invited the lecturer to talk one-on-one, I first asked the obstacles faced and then expressed my hopes as the head of the study program.” (Informant A)

From an in-depth analysis of narratives and observations, this study identifies five main strategies of social negotiation used by informants shown in table 1.

Table 1. Social Negotiation Strategies by Women Leaders in Islamic Higher Education

Negotiation	Description
Collaborative and Facilitative Approach	Positioning themselves as facilitators who invite other parties to collaborate, not as commanders or absolute authorities
Persuasive and Personal Communication	Use warm communication and personal persuasion to build relationships of trust and emotional closeness Responsive and caring for students' needs and complaints
Building a Network	Build strong networks and relationships to gain support, access resources, and confront limiting gender stereotypes
Value-Based Negotiation	Emphasizing shared values and mutually beneficial goals, to be able to produce effective and sustainable agreements
Use of Emotional Intelligence	Managing one's own emotions and those of others, making conflict management easier, and improving empathy skills
Legitimacy through Cultural and Spiritual Values	Refers to cultural or spiritual values to strengthen the position and legitimacy of the negotiated decision

Table 1 presents five key strategies used by women leaders in Islamic higher education to negotiate formal authority and maintain social harmony in a collectivist work environment. This

strategy reflects high adaptive ability, empathy, and emotional intelligence.

Leadership as a Space for Self-Actualization in Islamic Values

The third theme shows that leadership is also an arena for self-actualization and the professional existence of Muslim women. The informants considered that the leadership role provided an opportunity to demonstrate managerial, intellectual, and spiritual abilities in a balanced manner. However, self-actualization here is not understood as an expression of ego or individualism, but rather as a form of social contribution and worship. The informants stated:

“Leadership makes me discover my potential that has been hidden. I learned to lead by heart, not just by

rules. I also learned that women can be assertive without being rude.” (Informant C) “Being a leader made me realize that the role of women is not limited to religion but rather glorified through responsibility. Islam has never forbidden women to lead.” (Informant A) “I used to think that I would just be an ordinary lecturer, teaching, going home. But when I was given the mandate to be the secretary of the study program, I felt more alive. There are new challenges, there are opportunities to make real changes for students.” (Informant B)

From an in-depth analysis of the narrative, this study identified three self-actualizations of the informants, which are shown in table 2.

Table 2. Dimensions of Self-Actualization of Women Leaders in Islamic Higher Education

Actualization Dimensions	Description
Intellectual Actualization Professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leadership opens space for women to develop managerial, strategic, and analytical competencies that were previously unchanneled. Leadership positions require women to step out of their comfort zone as teachers and into more complex strategic decision-making - This intellectual actualization not only impacts individuals but also creates an effect on the academic community. Informants reported that their learning experience was transferred to other lecturers and students.
Social Actualization – Contributive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Feeling deep satisfaction from their abilities has a positive impact on students, lecturers, and institutions. This social actualization is rooted in the value of solemn (service) in Islam which places devotion to others as the highest form of worship.
Spiritual Actualization – Existential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leadership is seen as a spiritual way to get closer to God through devotion and service. This spiritual actualization represents a transformation from ritualistic worship (<i>ta’abbudi</i>) to a more holistic social worship (<i>ta’aqquli</i>).

Table 2 illustrates the three main dimensions of self-actualization of women leaders in the context of Islamic higher education, namely intellectual-professional, social-contributive, and spiritual-existential. These three dimensions show that leadership is a place for self-development that is oriented towards values and devotion.

The Construction of Social Legitimacy through the Integration of Competence, Morality, and Relational Wisdom

The fourth theme is a synthesis of the previous three themes and directly answers research questions about how social legitimacy is constructed. Cross-case analysis shows that the social legitimacy of women's leadership in Islamic higher education is not monolithic but rather is built through a gradual process that integrates three main pillars: professional competence, moral-spiritual integrity, and relational wisdom as shown in figure 2.

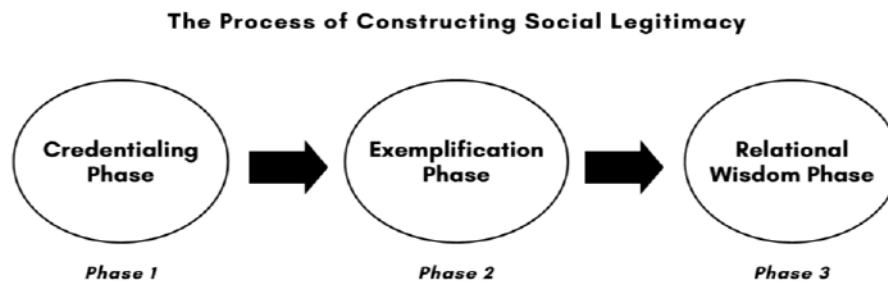


Figure 2. The Construction Phase of Social Legitimacy of Women’s Leadership

Figure 2 shows the three phases of social legitimacy development which are described in more detail in the form of pillars in Figure 3. First, Initial Legitimacy through Formal Credentialing Phase. In the initial phase, legitimacy is gained through recognition of academic qualifications and professional experience. All informants have a doctorate, a good publishing track record, and a minimum of five years of teaching experience before being appointed. The second phase, Moral Legitimacy through Exemplification Phase. Once

appointed, informants face a period of social testing during which colleagues, superiors, and subordinates observe their daily behavior. At this stage, moral example is key. The third phase is the Relational Wisdom Phase. At the mature stage, legitimacy is strengthened through the ability to manage social dynamics wisely, resolve conflicts, mediate differences, and maintain harmony without sacrificing principles.

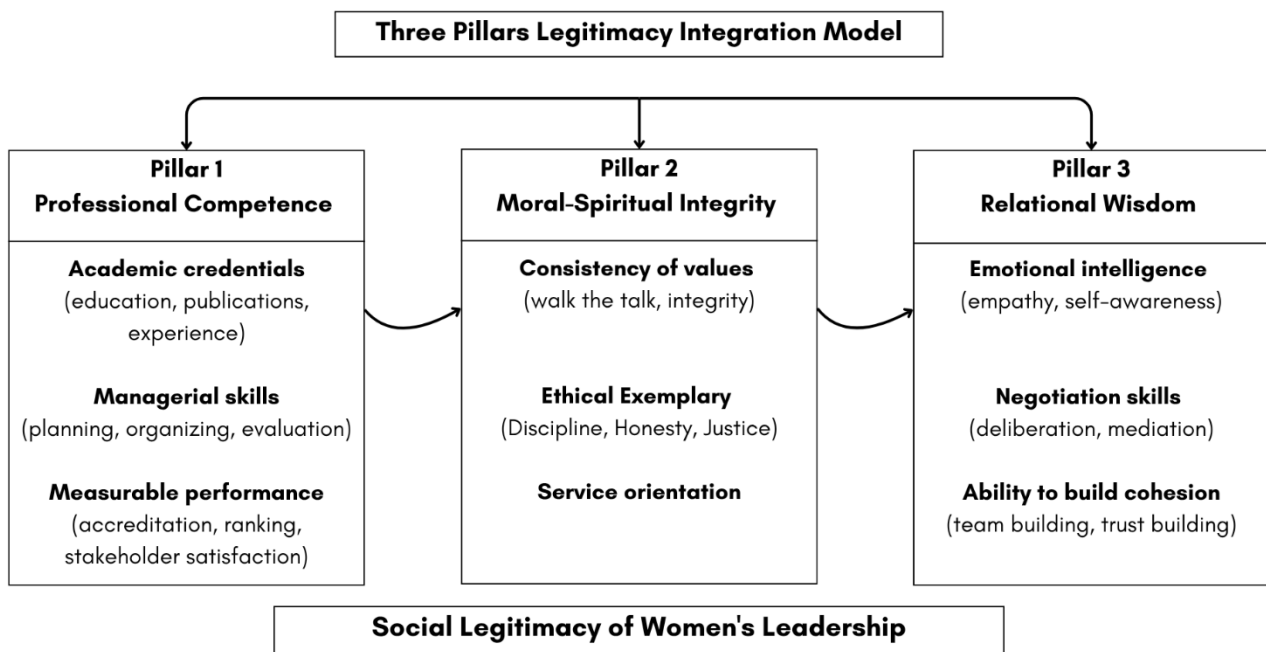


Figure 3. Integrative Pillars of Social Legitimacy: Competence – Morality – Relational Wisdom

Figure 3 shows that sustainable social legitimacy is only realized when these three pillars are synergistically integrated. If they rely solely on professional competence without moral integrity, women leaders will be seen as “technocrats without a soul”. If they only rely on morality without competence, they will be considered “good but ineffective”. If they rely solely on relational wisdom without the other two pillars, they will be considered “populist without substance”.

Discussions

Leadership as a Moral-Spiritual Mandate in the Islamic Context

The finding that informants understood leadership as a moral-spiritual mandate shows the unique dimension of women's leadership in Islamic higher education. In the context of collectivistic culture, this spiritual orientation is important because society judges a leader not only based on the results

of his performance, but also through the moral example shown daily. These findings are in line with research by Abd Aziz et al. (2024) which shows the significant influence of spiritual leadership on lecturer performance. In addition, the results of the study by Supriyanto & Ekowati (2020) state that spiritual leadership is able to increase positive attitudes, loyalty, and goal orientation in an organization.

In the Islamic framework, this concept is rooted in the values of trust (*amanah*) and *ihsan* where a leader manages the organization not for personal gain, but as a form of social service to Allah and humanity (Beekun & Badawi, 1999). Furthermore, research by Lahmar (2024) confirms that Muslim women tend to show a spiritual and trustworthy leadership orientation, with a focus on the values of integrity, continuous learning, and service-focused leadership. This spiritual value is not just a symbol, but an instrument that mediates social legitimacy in the Islamic higher education environment. In practice, informants describe that spirituality-based leadership demands a balance between administrative firmness and moral gentleness. Example, patience, and respect are the main strategies for managing conflicts and maintaining social harmony.

Thus, these findings show that women's leadership in Islamic higher education is built on moral-spiritual legitimacy, where power is not a means of domination, but an instrument of devotion and example. This spiritual dimension becomes the basic capital that opens the door to social acceptance before professional competence is assessed.

Social Negotiation in a Collectivist Culture: Adaptive Strategies of Women Leaders

The findings on social negotiation strategies reflect the process of social negotiation, which is an adaptive strategy used by women leaders to navigate social expectations and gender biases inherent in collectivist structures. They prioritize a persuasive, empathetic, and dialogical approach to build consensus. This strategy does not show weakness, but high social and emotional intelligence. In collectivist leadership theory (Hofstede, 2011; House et al., 2004), effective leadership in a collectivist society is leadership that

is able to maintain social harmony and create a sense of togetherness. Therefore, women's leadership styles that are communicative and relational are precisely in accordance with this cultural fit.

Research by Triguero-Sánchez et al. (2022) also supports this: female leaders in collectivist organizations are more effective because they prioritize empathy, rules, common goals, participation, and relational commitment over hierarchical control. This increases the loyalty of subordinates and creates a cohesive work atmosphere. In the context of Islamic higher education, the social negotiation of women leaders is also related to the symbolic patriarchal aspect, which is the view that the ideal leadership position is still associated with the male figure. To address this, the informants used a strategy of dual legitimacy, namely: (1) professional legitimacy through superior performance and academic achievement, and (2) social legitimacy through religious and empathetic personalities.

Women's leadership in this context is convergent: combining collectivist values (deliberation, harmony, empathy) with a professional character (discipline, objective, strategic). This is in line with the theory of Role Congruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002), which states that women leaders often face role conflicts when their leadership style is considered incompatible with gender stereotypes. However, in this case, women have succeeded in creating a new form of leadership that is relational yet authoritative, in line with social and religious values. Thus, these findings confirm that women's leadership in Islamic higher education is the result of a complex process of social negotiation—not a resistance to patriarchy, but a reconstruction of harmony between values, gender, and power. These negotiations require greater emotional and social energy than male leaders but result in stronger team cohesion and more sustained legitimacy.

Self-Actualization in an Islamic Perspective: Professional, Social, and Spiritual Integration

Findings on self-actualization show that Muslim women's leadership is not only about professional achievement, but also about social service and spiritual depth. Research by Nugroho (2024) on

women's spiritual leadership shows that self-actualization is never separate from social responsibility and spiritual responsibility. Personal happiness is understood as a by-product of devotion to God and others, not as a primary goal. Furthermore, research by Afrasibi & Fattahi (2017) confirms that in an Islamic perspective, self-actualization is achieved when individuals manage to integrate the roles of *caliph* (leader) and *'abd* (servant), two complementary identities. In contrast to humanistic psychology which views self-actualization as the achievement of individual strength and creativity, Islam places actualization as perfection that depends on Divine revelation and closeness to Allah as the source of all existence.

In the perspective of *authentic leadership theory* (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), authentic leadership arises from the consistency between values, beliefs, and actions. The informants described their leadership as authentic because it is in line with Islamic values that emphasize justice, compassion, and responsibility. Furthermore, Meza-Mejia et al.'s (2023) research shows that women's leadership in higher education has transformed from a competitive and robust model to transformational leadership consisting of five categories: vision and goal-setting, accountability, exemplary, drive, and empowerment. Women who successfully overcome obstacles in their academic trajectories can reconcile their personal and professional lives through social support from family, partners, and collegia.

In the context of this study, the spiritual orientation and religious values held by the informants strengthened the dimension of exemplary and empowerment in their leadership, while also building the self-awareness and social empathy that are the foundations of authentic leadership. In this context, the self-actualization of Muslim women actually reinforces collectivist values, because personal success is seen as the collective success of the academic community. Thus, women's leadership is a means to create *shared meaning*, a common meaning between leaders and the academic community rooted in Islamic values. This theme expands the global discourse on *feminist leadership*, as it shows that women's self-actualization in the Islamic context is not about challenging men, but rather about restoring moral and social balance in the academic space.

The Construction Model of Social Legitimacy: Three-Pillar Integration

The findings on the construction of social legitimacy enrich the theory of social legitimacy in leadership by showing that in the context of Islamic collectivism, legitimacy is multidimensional and relational, not just transactional. In contrast to the Western individualistic context where legitimacy is more based on achievement and competence (Tyler, 2006), in this context legitimacy is based on trust built through continuous social interaction. This study also confirms the theory of Role Congruity by Eagly & Karau (2002) but with contextual modifications: women leaders in Islamic higher education do not experience extreme role incongruity because they manage to integrate feminine roles (care, empathy) with leadership roles (authority, competence) within the framework of inclusive Islamic values.

Furthermore, these findings are in line with the concept of *legitimate authority* in Islamic leadership by Beekun & Badawi (1999) who emphasize that authority in Islam does not come from position alone, but from a combination of competence (*kafa'ah*), moral integrity (*amanah*), and community acceptance (*bai'ah*). Successful women leaders are those who understand and implement these three principles in a balanced manner. The three-pillar model found in the study—professional competence, moral-spiritual integrity, and relational wisdom—suggests that social legitimacy is built gradually and dynamically. Formal credentials open early access, moral exemplary strengthens social acceptance, and relational wisdom nurtures long-term legitimacy. These three pillars must be synergistically integrated to produce sustainable and effective legitimacy.

These findings have significant theoretical implications, as they suggest that gender leadership theory needs to consider cultural and religious contexts more deeply. The legitimacy model developed in this study can be a conceptual framework for understanding women's leadership in the context of Islamic higher education and other collectivist organizations.

Conclusions

Women's leadership in Islamic higher education is defined as a leadership practice that integrates three main dimensions: (1) a moral-spiritual mandate that places leadership as a form of religious devotion; (2) social negotiation in a collectivist culture that demands relational strategies, persuasion, and alliances; and (3) self-actualization that combines professional development, social contribution, and spiritual depth. From the phenomenological analysis of the three informants (IPA), a model of social legitimacy construction emerges that is gradual and multidimensional starting from formal credentials, strengthened through moral example, and maintained through relational wisdom so that legitimacy does not only depend on technical competence, but on the synergy of competence, morality, and relational intelligence.

This study has limitations that need to be noted: the number of informants (n=3) following the principle of information power so that it provides depth requires caution when generalizing the findings to a broader context; The focus on middle leaders (chairs/secretaries of study programs) limits the scope to the experience of faculty or rectorate level leaders; and contextual data are cultural-local so transferability must be tested in different settings. The practical implications demand an academic career policy oriented towards the recognition of women's credentials, emotional intelligence/negotiation training, and the strengthening of an organizational culture that values spiritual moral exemplars. For further research, it is recommended to expand the sample (multi-location), combine longitudinal or mixed-methods to track the dynamics of legitimacy over time, and test the three-pillar model of legitimacy quantitatively to measure the relative effect of each pillar on organizational outcomes (e.g., staff satisfaction, academic performance, retention).

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