



A Holistic Model of Female Leadership in Islamic Boarding Schools: Integrating Transformational, Spiritual, and Nurturing Dimensions

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61987/jemr.v5i4.1813>

ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Female Leadership;
Islamic Education;
Transformational
Leadership

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This study aims to examine the leadership model and educational contributions of a female leader in Islamic education. Given the limited scholarly attention to women's leadership in Islamic boarding schools, the research focuses on understanding how leadership practices influence educational quality and student character development. This research employed a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, and were analyzed using an interpretive framework to identify leadership patterns and their educational impacts. The findings reveal that the leader's approach integrates transformational, spiritual, and nurturing leadership dimensions. This model enables the effective combination of institutional management with personalized guidance for students. Policies promoting financial independence, daily discipline, and character formation demonstrate the ability to harmonize traditional Islamic values with contemporary educational demands. As a result, students develop stronger moral integrity, resilience, responsibility, and self-reliance. The study implies that a holistic and contextual leadership model can strengthen the role of Islamic educational institutions in fostering inclusive, future-oriented, and civilization-building education. It also highlights the strategic contribution of female leadership in advancing educational innovation while preserving religious and cultural values.

Article History:

Received: March 2026; Revised: April 2026; Accepted: May 2026

Please cite this article in APA style as:

Himsyah, U. Z. A., Aulia, M. A. (2026). A Holistic Model of Female Leadership in Islamic Boarding Schools: Integrating Transformational, Spiritual, and Nurturing Dimensions. *Journal of Educational Management Research*, 5(4),4071-4082.

INTRODUCTION

Women's leadership has become an increasingly important issue in contemporary society as gender equality continues to gain recognition across various sectors (Hamdanah et al., 2025; Salim et al., 2025). Historically, women were frequently confined to domestic roles and associated with traditional stereotypes that limited their participation in public decision-making processes

(Hanafi et al., 2021; Karim et al., 2022). However, social transformation, educational advancement, and greater awareness of human rights have gradually shifted these perceptions. Women are now actively contributing to politics, economics, governance, and education, demonstrating their capacity to lead and influence social change. Statistical data released in May 2024 show that 3,979,920 women occupy strategic positions throughout Indonesia, indicating substantial progress in female participation in leadership and development processes (Arar et al., 2022). This trend reflects the growing acceptance of women as agents of change capable of contributing to institutional development and social progress. Therefore, investigating women's leadership is important not only for understanding gender dynamics but also for identifying leadership models that can strengthen educational and social institutions in contemporary society.

Despite the increasing visibility of women in public leadership, significant challenges remain regarding their acceptance and recognition as leaders. Leadership positions in many institutions continue to be dominated by men due to cultural traditions, patriarchal values, and social assumptions that associate leadership with masculine characteristics. Women are often perceived as having limitations in physical, emotional, and social capacities, which are incorrectly interpreted as obstacles to effective leadership. Such perceptions create structural barriers that reduce opportunities for women to participate in decision-making processes and institutional management. In educational settings, particularly within Islamic institutions, these assumptions often influence the distribution of authority and leadership responsibilities. Consequently, women frequently encounter greater scrutiny and resistance when assuming leadership roles. This persistent inequality demonstrates that the issue of women's leadership extends beyond representation and involves broader questions concerning social justice, institutional effectiveness, and the recognition of women's capabilities within diverse cultural and religious contexts.

The dynamics of women's leadership are particularly evident in Islamic boarding schools, which have historically played a significant role in shaping religious knowledge, moral values, and community development in Indonesia. Traditionally, pesantren leadership has been associated with male religious figures who function as founders, caregivers, and decision-makers within educational institutions (Wardiana et al., 2024). However, social transformation and educational modernization have created opportunities for women to assume more strategic roles within pesantren environments. Women are increasingly involved not only in managing female students but also in formulating educational policies, overseeing institutional development, and introducing innovative approaches to learning and character formation (Ezzani et al., 2021).

These developments illustrate a changing reality in which women contribute substantially to the sustainability and advancement of Islamic educational institutions. Nevertheless, the visibility of female leadership in pesantren remains relatively underexplored in academic discourse, particularly concerning how women negotiate traditional religious values while responding to contemporary educational challenges and organizational demands (Bahri & Najiburrahman, 2024).

Previous studies have provided valuable insights into women's leadership within educational institutions (Bashori et al., 2022). Research conducted by Rahman, Hesti, and Surahman Susilo demonstrates that female educational leaders tend to adopt transformational leadership styles characterized by charisma, inclusiveness, and collaborative decision-making (Zulhadi & Afdal, 2025). Their studies reveal that women leaders frequently emphasize communication, consensus-building, active participation, and empowerment among teachers, students, parents, and community members. Female leaders are also found to prioritize interpersonal relationships and organizational commitment while encouraging stakeholders to pursue collective goals. These findings suggest that women possess distinctive leadership characteristics that contribute positively to educational effectiveness and institutional development. Furthermore, studies on gender perspectives emphasize that leadership capabilities should not be determined by biological differences but rather by competencies, experiences, and social interactions (Sukatin & Safitri, 2025). Such evidence challenges traditional assumptions regarding women's inability to lead and highlights the importance of recognizing diverse leadership approaches within educational contexts.

Although previous research has enriched the understanding of women's leadership in education, several important gaps remain. Existing studies predominantly focus on formal educational institutions such as schools and universities, while leadership practices within Islamic boarding schools receive comparatively less attention. Furthermore, studies discussing female leadership in pesantren often concentrate on issues of gender equality, social legitimacy, and cultural resistance rather than examining specific leadership models and their practical contributions to educational development. Research on "Women's Leadership in the Development of Islamic Boarding School Educational Institutions" highlights how female leaders frequently encounter challenges arising from patriarchal interpretations and inherited traditions that prioritize male authority. Nevertheless, the study also indicates that women leaders possess qualities compatible with pesantren values, including nurturing behavior, exemplary conduct, and strong commitment to affective education (Fatmawati et al., 2024). However, limited empirical evidence exists regarding

how these leadership characteristics are translated into institutional strategies, curriculum development, organizational management, and student character formation within contemporary Islamic educational environments.

This study offers a novel perspective by examining female leadership through a comprehensive exploration of leadership practices, educational strategies, and institutional transformation within an Islamic boarding school context. Rather than focusing solely on gender issues or leadership legitimacy, the research investigates how female leadership operates in practice and contributes directly to educational development. The study emphasizes the integration of traditional Islamic values with modern educational demands through leadership approaches that are transformative, adaptive, and student-centered. By analyzing leadership from organizational, educational, and character-building dimensions simultaneously, this research provides a more holistic understanding of how female leaders influence institutional sustainability and educational quality. Such an approach contributes to the development of contemporary leadership discourse in Islamic education and offers a framework for understanding the broader significance of women's leadership in shaping future-oriented educational institutions.

Based on these considerations, this study addresses the question of how a female leader contributes to the development of Islamic education through leadership practices that integrate institutional management, educational innovation, and student character formation. The study argues that female leadership possesses distinctive strengths derived from its ability to combine transformational, spiritual, and nurturing dimensions in responding to institutional challenges. It is assumed that this leadership model enables the effective harmonization of traditional religious values and contemporary educational needs while fostering discipline, independence, resilience, and moral integrity among students. Therefore, this research contributes theoretically by expanding the discourse on women's leadership in Islamic education and contributes practically by providing an empirical model of leadership that can strengthen educational institutions in increasingly complex social contexts. The findings are expected to support future efforts toward inclusive, sustainable, and transformative educational development.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore in depth the leadership model of Anisah Mahfudz and its contribution to Islamic education (Kertamukti et al., 2025; Labibah et al., 2022). A qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to understand social phenomena from the perspectives of the participants and within their natural settings. The case

study method was considered appropriate because it facilitates a comprehensive examination of a specific individual whose leadership experiences are relevant to the research objectives. By focusing on a single case, the study sought to generate a holistic understanding of leadership practices, decision-making processes, educational strategies, and their influence on institutional development and student character formation (Amatullah, 2024). This approach also allows for the exploration of contextual factors that shape female leadership within Islamic educational institutions.

The research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Putri Al-Islahiyah, where Anisah Mahfudz serves as the principal caregiver and leader of the institution. The site was selected purposively because it represents an Islamic educational institution led by a female figure who has demonstrated a significant role in educational management and student development (Lahmar, 2024). The primary research subject was Anisah Mahfudz, while supporting informants were selected through purposive sampling to obtain rich and relevant information. These informants included pesantren administrators who worked closely with her, female students who directly experienced her leadership and educational system, as well as alumni and community figures familiar with her contributions (Brooks & Ezzani, 2021). Data were collected through three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, enabling the researcher to obtain comprehensive and triangulated data regarding leadership practices and educational outcomes.

Data analysis followed the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña as cited in Abdul Fatah. The analysis consisted of four interconnected stages: data condensation, data display, data verification, and conclusion drawing (Muafiah et al., 2024). Data condensation involved selecting, simplifying, and organizing information relevant to the research focus. Subsequently, the data were systematically displayed to facilitate interpretation and pattern identification. Verification was conducted continuously throughout the research process to ensure the credibility and consistency of emerging findings before conclusions were formulated. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, source triangulation was employed by comparing information obtained from different participants, including Anisah Mahfudz, pesantren administrators, and students. This strategy ensured the accuracy, reliability, and validity of the findings by confirming data consistency across multiple sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Historical Development of Pondok Pesantren Putri Al-Islahiyah

Pondok Pesantren Putri Al-Islahiyah was established in 1955 by KH. Mahfudz Kholil and his wife, Hj. Hasbiyah Hamid. The historical foundation of the pesantren is closely linked to a prominent Nahdlatul Ulama scholarly family. The institution originated from informal educational activities conducted at the

residence of KH. Kholil Asy'ari and Nyai Halimah in Singosari, which served as a learning space for young Muslim women. Following the passing of Nyai Halimah, the educational mission was continued by Nyai Hasbiyah Hamid, who later became widely recognized for her contribution to women's Islamic education.

As the number of students increased, the institution underwent organizational development and was formally established as a foundation in 1983. Various educational and student development programs were introduced, including structured classical learning systems and student organizational activities. Following the death of KH. Mahfudz Kholil in 1985, leadership was continued by Nyai Hasbiyah Hamid together with her children, ensuring the continuity of the pesantren's educational vision.

Today, the pesantren continues to develop under the leadership of the next generation, including Dra. Hj. Anisah Mahfudz, M.A.P., who actively manages the institution while simultaneously contributing to broader Islamic educational organizations. Under her leadership, the pesantren maintains its traditional values while adapting to contemporary educational needs through character-based educational programs and daily student guidance.

Leadership Practices of Anisah Mahfudz

Findings from field observations and interviews indicate that Anisah Mahfudz plays a dual role as both institutional leader and caregiver. Her leadership extends beyond administrative responsibilities and emphasizes direct involvement in students' personal, emotional, and spiritual development. Student mentoring is conducted through room-based supervision involving both herself and members of her family.

"Pengasuh harus hadir secara langsung dalam membimbing, bahkan menegur santri dengan kasih sayang, yang ketika dia dipasrahkan oleh orang tuanya kepada pesantren maka dia seperti anak kita sendiri, tanggung jawabnya dalam hal memenuhi kebutuhan kasih sayang serta mendidiknya."

The findings also show that communication between the caregiver, students, and parents remains open at all times. Students, administrators, and parents acknowledged that Anisah Mahfudz consistently provides support and guidance whenever needed.

"Bu Nyai menerima laporan, keluh atau kesah kami setiap saat, meski malam hari pada jam istirahat atau kapanpun saat kami membutuhkan kehadiran beliau. Selain itu Bu Nyai juga masuk dalam grup wali santri dan selalu memberikan informasi serta himbauan pada wali santri."

Daily supervision was also identified as a significant aspect of her leadership. The caregiver routinely monitors student activities and ensures that educational values are implemented consistently throughout the pesantren environment.

“Bu Nyai berkeliling pesantren setiap malam hari pada jam istirahat santri, beliau juga melarang kami mengunci pintu atau menutup tirai jendela, agar supaya Bu Nyai bisa menengok kami saat kami tidur, memantau setiap pergerakan yang ada di kamar. Bu Nyai juga memberikan hak pengurus untuk membuka lemari santri pada saat hari pemeriksaan yang harinya ditentukannya seketika itu.”

Overall, interviews with administrators, students, and parents reveal that Anisah Mahfudz demonstrates a leadership approach characterized by direct presence, care, supervision, and personal responsibility in guiding students' development.

Character-Based Educational Development

In addition to her role as the primary caregiver of the pesantren, Anisah Mahfudz actively participates in organizational activities at the provincial level while continuing to oversee educational development within the institution. The findings indicate that she has designed various daily policies intended to strengthen students' character formation.

Several policies focus on developing independence, responsibility, and discipline. For example, students are encouraged to manage their personal finances independently and are required to handle many daily needs without excessive dependence on parental support. Laundry services are restricted to specific items, requiring students to develop self-reliance in managing personal responsibilities.

These policies are not treated merely as administrative regulations but are integrated into the pesantren's educational system. Through consistent implementation, students are encouraged to develop habits that support moral development, self-discipline, responsibility, and social maturity. The findings suggest that character education is embedded within everyday activities and reinforced through continuous supervision and guidance from the leadership.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the leadership of Anisah Mahfudz extends beyond formal administrative authority and incorporates a strong relational dimension characterized by direct involvement in students' daily lives. This finding is consistent with the conception of leadership as a process through which individuals influence, motivate, and direct others toward shared goals (Said et al., 2023). Similarly, leadership can be understood as a relational process in which leaders consciously influence others to achieve organizational objectives (Samsu et al., 2021). The active presence of Anisah Mahfudz in mentoring,

supervising, and communicating with students and parents illustrates how leadership functions not merely through formal authority but through continuous interpersonal engagement and moral influence.

The study further reveals characteristics that closely align with transformational leadership theory. Transformational leaders inspire followers through vision, moral commitment, individualized consideration, and value-based influence (Alkouatli et al., 2023). The leadership practices identified in this study, particularly the emphasis on character formation, personal mentoring, and the cultivation of responsibility among students, reflect these dimensions. The findings also support subsequent developments of transformational leadership theory, which emphasize the leader's role in facilitating personal and organizational transformation (Alkouatli et al., 2023). Furthermore, these developments remain fundamentally rooted in Burns' original conceptualization of transformational leadership (Cardozo et al., 2022).

Another significant finding concerns the nurturing dimension of leadership demonstrated by Anisah Mahfudz. The results indicate that educational supervision is conducted through continuous care, emotional support, and personal involvement in students' development. This finding corresponds with the concept of nurturing leadership, which highlights the importance of creating supportive environments, fostering meaningful relationships, and developing responsibility through ongoing guidance (Hsu et al., 2022). Unlike leadership models that primarily focus on organizational efficiency, the leadership observed in this study integrates emotional engagement and educational care into everyday institutional practices. This characteristic appears particularly relevant within the pesantren context, where educational processes extend beyond classroom instruction into all aspects of daily life.

The findings also reveal substantial alignment with spiritual leadership theory. Effective spiritual leadership is grounded in the dimensions of calling and membership, enabling followers to experience meaning, belonging, and commitment (Rahtikawatie et al., 2021). The leadership practices observed in this study indicate that Anisah Mahfudz leads not only through institutional structures but also through deeply internalized religious and moral values. Her commitment to maintaining constant accessibility, fostering close relationships with students and parents, and integrating character education into daily routines reflects a leadership approach rooted in spiritual responsibility. This finding suggests that spiritual leadership may serve as a particularly effective framework for understanding female leadership within Islamic educational institutions.

The novelty of this study lies in its identification of a leadership model that integrates transformational, nurturing, and spiritual dimensions within a single framework of female leadership in an Islamic boarding school. Previous studies primarily highlighted transformational, instructional, and participatory leadership characteristics among female educational leaders (Siswadi et al., 2025). Meanwhile, research on women's leadership in pesantren has largely focused on issues of legitimacy, gender equality, and cultural barriers. This study extends the existing literature by demonstrating how these leadership dimensions operate simultaneously in everyday educational practice and contribute directly to institutional management, student development, and character formation. Consequently, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how female leadership functions within contemporary Islamic educational settings.

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in enriching the discourse on women's leadership by proposing a holistic model that combines organizational effectiveness with emotional, moral, and spiritual development. Practically, the findings offer insights for Islamic educational institutions seeking to strengthen character education through leadership practices that emphasize presence, care, and value-based guidance. The study also challenges persistent assumptions regarding women's limitations in leadership by providing empirical evidence of their capacity to manage educational institutions effectively while fostering strong relational and spiritual bonds with students. Therefore, this research contributes both to leadership theory and to the development of inclusive, adaptive, and humanistic educational practices within Islamic educational institutions.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that female leadership in Islamic boarding schools can serve as a holistic educational force that integrates institutional management, character development, and spiritual guidance. The most important finding is that the leadership of Dra. Hj. Anisah Mahfudz, M.A.P. embodies a combination of transformational, spiritual, and nurturing leadership, enabling the effective cultivation of students' independence, responsibility, discipline, and moral integrity through both formal educational policies and everyday interactions. The key lesson from this research is that women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions is not merely complementary but can function as a central driver of educational transformation and institutional sustainability. Academically, this study contributes to the literature on women's leadership in Islamic education by proposing an integrated leadership model that combines transformational, spiritual, and nurturing dimensions within the

context of pesantren leadership. Nevertheless, this research is limited by its focus on a single case study, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other Islamic educational settings. Future studies are therefore encouraged to examine female leadership across different pesantren contexts, regions, and organizational cultures to further validate and refine the proposed leadership model.

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