

The Role of Women as Leaders in Improving Educational Quality: Evidence from Indonesia

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Women have potential in leadership in various organisations, and a small proportion of women are involved in management positions. In particular, there are few female leaders in educational institutions or schools. This study aims to identify the strength of women leaders in schools in improving the quality of education. This study uses qualitative research methods. This study involved four schools consisting of one elementary school, one junior high school, one high school, and one vocational high school. The key informants in this study are the principals of the four schools. Data collection uses in-depth interview techniques. The results of the study revealed that there are seven aspects of the strength of women leaders, namely: (1) aspects of school leadership qualifications lies in physical maturity, formal competence, and legality; (2) performance aspects are the ability to carry out tasks in supporting school performance; (3) aspects of character that are not ambitious, honest, patient, exemplary and able to behave decisively; (4) leadership style that tends to be democratic, maternal and collegial; (5) managerial aspects in achieving the vision and mission of the school; (6) mental and spiritual aspects; and (7) aspects family support as an external force in carrying out its activities as a leader.

Key words: *Leader strength, female leader, education quality improvement.*

Introduction

Women have the potential to be leaders in various organisations such as in government, the corporate sector, and in academia. However, the proportion of women's roles is still far from achieving gender equality with men in leadership positions (Economist, 2015). The

phenomenon of a scarcity of women as leaders is still commonly found in various organisations. However, it has been widely proven that women have the potential to advance the organisation. Scholars (Bono et al., 2017; Eagly, 2007; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003) state that women have competencies that are comparable to men. Previous studies state that an organisation that has female executives has been associated with better financial performance (Catalyst, 2004). Another study states that women are often considered to make different policy decisions compared to men (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Also, women leaders put more emphasis on long-term considerations rather than short-term (Adams & Ferreira, 2009; Matsa & Miller, 2013). Swamy, Knack, Lee, and Azfar (2001) reveal that women leaders could improve the quality of organisational governance. This women's leadership also has the potential to bring progress in the management of education in schools.

The potential that women have in leadership is also seen in educational institutions (Leela & Brown, 2003). Although women still dominate the teaching profession in many countries, few of them are directly involved in management positions, especially as headmasters (Riley, 1994). The complexity of the work environment hampers the issue of gender equality in education. The career progression of women leaders in educational institutions is slower than their male counterparts (Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008). This condition has implications not only for women and their career advancement in the teaching profession but also raises issues of equality and their career opportunities. Apart from various obstacles for women to become leaders in educational institutions, female leaders have the potential to improve the quality of education in educational institutions. A study by Oyeniran and Anchomese (2018) reveals that the role of female leaders could have a positive influence on the learning process of students, especially students who have learning difficulties. Other findings show that female leaders can also create an environment and academic support that gives attention to children. The results of the Oyeniran and Anchomese study (2018) conclude that women's leadership could be a significant contribution to improving the quality of education in schools.

The study of leaders in schools usually refers to the headmaster. Although the headmaster is not directly involved in the teacher recruitment and learning process in the classroom, the headmaster has a vital role in planning, organising, directing, making decisions, and evaluating all activities in the school. The quality of the principal's leadership has been considered an essential criterion for creating the right school (Baume-Schneider, 2008). In Indonesia, the government has allowed women to become leaders in schools for all levels of education formally. This policy is evidenced by the absence of conditions governing gender to become a school principal (Minister of National Education, 2007). The determined standard of the principal is emphasised more on the ability of his competence. Thus, women have the same opportunities as men to become leaders in educational institutions, especially schools. Although there have been many studies that explain that women play an essential

role in advancing organisations, especially educational institutions, information is still limited on what aspects are the strengths of female leaders in improving the quality of education in schools. This study aims to explore the power of women leaders to improve the quality of education in schools. Specifically, the study questions are:

- 1) What are the qualifications of women leaders in their positions at school?
- 2) What are the aspects of the performance of women leaders in school?
- 3) What are the characteristics of women leaders in schools to improve the quality of education?
- 4) How do women leaders manage schools to improve the education quality?
- 5) What is the leadership style of women leaders in school?

Method

This study uses qualitative research methods that involve analysis and interpretation of data to find patterns of certain phenomena. The phenomenon that is the focus of this study is the power of women's leadership. The qualitative approach is used to answer study questions, which include qualifications in the position, aspects of performance, the character of integrity, and leadership style of female leaders in schools to improve the quality of education.

This study involved four schools representing each level of: elementary school education (1 public school), junior high school (1 public school), high school (1 public school), and vocational high school (1 public school). The selection of schools as study objects is based on the following criteria: (1) having a female headmaster, and (2) excellent schools in the city of Yogyakarta. The key informants of this study consisted of four headmasters.

Data collection in this study uses in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Interviews are used to explore all the information through direct interaction with research subjects. Observation and documentation are carried out as supporting data and data triangulation. Data collection uses emic and ethic principles, and holistic and consistent principles. Emic is in the form of a description of data from research results in the field and ethics is an explanation or interpretation of the data associated with the theoretical framework used. The holistic principle is systemic thinking, that refers to data as a whole and complete and the principle of consistency, concerns consistency in terms of systems, observations, and categorisation.

The validity of the data uses a test of credibility, standards of transparency, standards of dependability, and standards of confirmation or objectivity. This study uses qualitative data analysis techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994) consisting of the data reduction stage, the data presentation stage, the conclusion drawing, and data verification stage.

Results and Discussion

The finding of the research has been able to identify the strength of women leaders from these aspects:

Qualification as a Principal

Every principal who leads legally and formally can become a principal, which is having a minimum of a bachelor's degree, and age, of which all respondents shows the age of above 45 years old. Besides, school principals must have special qualifications as teachers, hold certificates as teachers, and hold certificates as principals. Therefore, the strength of leadership in the aspects of qualifications in all education units is that they have the maturity of age, competence, and formal legality. This qualification is following the law no. Twenty the year 2003, about a person's qualifications to be given the role of a principal.

Performance

Performance is strongly related to discipline, exemplary, spirit, and dedicated time. Becoming a leader demands an outstanding performance, which shows the action pattern in completing all of the assignments. Performance is also determined by how much work can be done by the respondent.

Has Good Characteristics

The strength of the leader is also shown by the possession of good characteristics, which are unambitious, honest, patient, exemplary, and decisive.

Unambitious

An excerpt from in-depth interview finding with the principal of a Vocational High School stated that "to be a principal, you cannot be ambitious, because even if you passed the test, it does not guarantee your position." The Unambitious was shown with the management of feeling from the principal of Senior High School: "I was trusted as a principal, and because of that, I have to be able to do it." The same with other opinions, which stated: "This role is a mandate, the challenge is the same, and it has to be carried on as well as possible."

Honest

Honesty is also one of the strengths of a leader. One of the critical examples in school management related to honesty is about school finance. "A principal is not the one in charge of a school's finance, but the one who manages it instead. So everything must stick to the established plan.", stated by the principal of Vocational High School. On finance-related matters, the three principals who are the respondents in this research were not in charge of the finance, be it the School Operational Aid (BOS) or Regional School Operational Aid (BOSDA) funds. A principal has a broad autonomy, including the usage of funds, but in the effort to maintain transparency and accountability, the financial aspects were entirely managed by the schools' treasurer.

Patient

Becoming a principal demands patience. As a principal, a person has to be patient in facing problems, as problems will be encountered often, both the easy and the difficult ones. Patience is also shown by the behavior observed by the author in serving teachers who seek services. It is clear from here that without sincerity, a leader will find it very difficult to perform the assignment. The principal of Junior High School also shows patience. Amidst her business, she came into a classroom to wait for the teacher back, did clinical supervision, and faced various complaints from teachers and students.

Exemplary

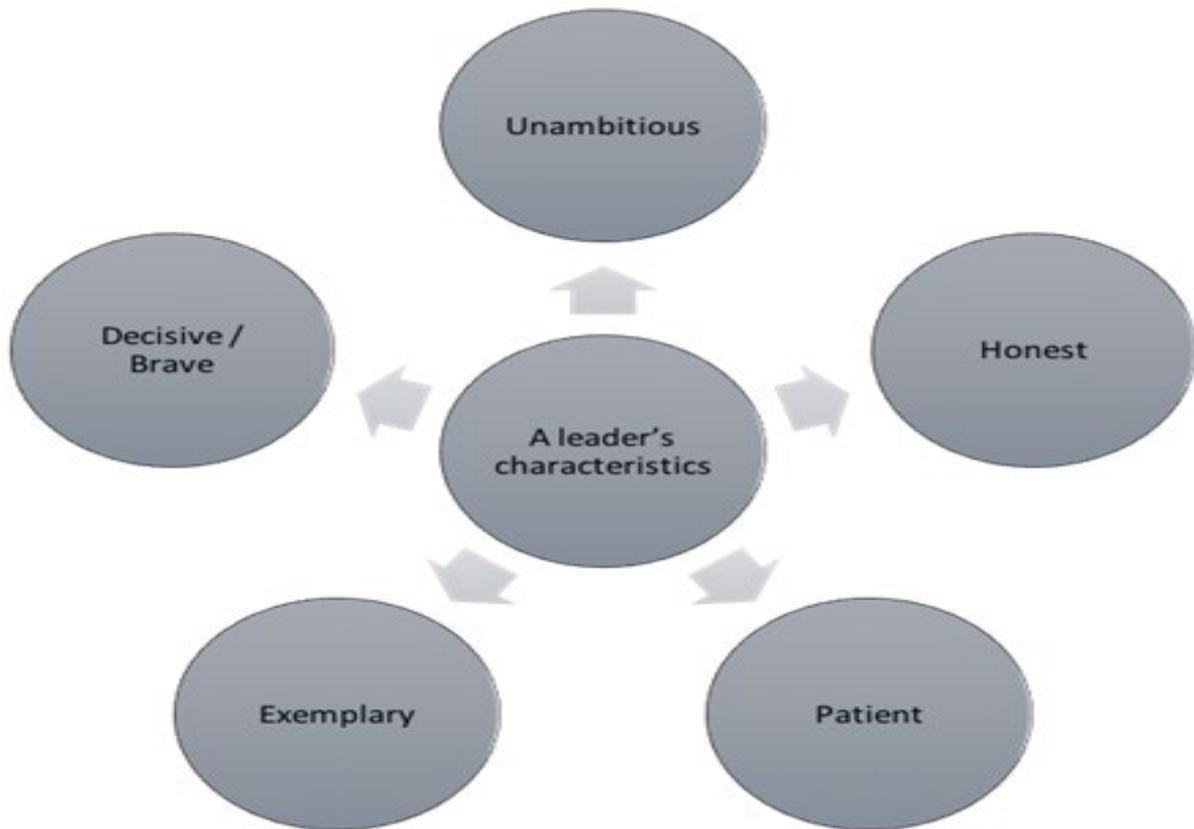
Giving an excellent exemplary in attitude and behavior, arrive on time, tolerant, passionate, and enthusiastic in working, being careful, not blaming someone when trouble comes without concrete proof. These are observed in the attitude and behaviour of the principal of Senior High School, who is humble but independent. Her humbleness was shown in her dress code, and low profile way of greeting.

Decisive

Although all respondents generally have a motherly appearance, all of them exhibit a decisive/brave trait. The courage to warn the seniors, and sometimes showing angry expression was needed when there is something not in line. The principal of Junior High School also showed decisiveness. Despite the gentle appearance, she can warn people for the good of them.

Based on the results of the interview, it can be concluded that the characteristics are the strengths of the leaders shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. A leader's characteristics



Managerial Ability

Managerial ability can be observed through the strategy in managing school activities. Delegation with authority and responsibility were fully submitted to representatives and teachers, but still thoughtfully observed and monitored. The role of the principal as a manager was shown through the placement of teachers and class rotations suitable with their competence, forming a team dealing with curriculum, means, and infrastructures, so the eight education standards can be supported.

Generally, all respondents commit to achieving their school's vision and mission, and they also feel that maintaining them is harder than obtaining them. Based on some of the interview and observation findings, in order to achieve the school's vision and mission, a few things were performed, which are making breakthroughs to improve quality, creating and performing the school's work plan consistently, and creating a religious culture in the school.

Leadership Style

The leadership of the vocational high school principal is more democratic. Proven with the election process of the vice-principal, although she has the right to choose one herself, it was handed to the mechanism determined by the ISO and added by the election procedure by voting. The same can be seen with the principal of Junior High School. She showed a common trait in choosing her vice principals, although she already has her candidate, the decision was handed to the forum through a balloting activity.

Principals of vocational high schools are willing to accept advice from teachers, vice-principals, and others. Discussion activities to get suggestions from colleagues are conducted at the meeting every Monday. At this meeting, the policymakers at the school discussed how to solve problems at school, for example, strategies to improve the image of school graduates. This activity proves that the principal is open to various criticisms and suggestions for improvement.

The leadership style of Senior High School principal is attributed to the relationship of the leader and the subordinates. She seemed to emphasise a collegial, familial, and togetherness leadership. This program can be seen when the teachers were filing for certification; they worked in the principal's room and seemed to have quite a close relationship with her.

Based on the findings of interviews and observations on all respondents, it shows that democratic leadership is more dominant by the women leaders with the characteristics of familial, maternal, and collegial. Such leadership does not reduce the power of leaders in the education field, and it makes them closer to their subordinates instead.

Problem Solving and Decision Making

According to the interview findings with the respondents, the task they deemed difficult is to make decisions and find solutions. Making a decision is based on several considerations, be it logic, experience, or suggestions from colleagues or experienced people. One of the commonly taken steps is by visiting senior teachers or former principal for their considerations and advice. The seniors' experience in solving problems can be assessed as guides or considerations in finding a solution for the trouble being faced. The same goes when there are unsolved troubles. Some steps taken are consulting with supervisors for problems about learning and consulting with the related Technical Implementation Unit for employment problems.

How to deal with problems and making decisions seemed to be also influenced by the maturity factor. A mature leader makes him/her more intimate with the Almighty. Life is a



mandate, so problems are dealt with patience and yielding. The conviction that problems always exist in life makes one has the conviction in making a decision. When difficulties cannot be overcome, there is a conviction that a solution will come from the Almighty after humans have strived enough.

Based on the interview findings, there are numerous ways the women leaders do when facing troubles — ranging from asking for advice, suggestions from colleagues, sticking to the rules, until the effort to yield and ask for the guidance of God, with the conviction that everything will be settled well. Some cases of decision making need them to stick with the rules because it is an excellent way to maintain something highly upheld.

Innovation

In order to develop the school, a leader strives to innovate on his / her leadership while still abiding by the familial leadership principle. Every woman principal who served as respondents in this research truly understands what they have to do concerning school development. The principal of elementary school developed activities aimed toward the demand for global competition through extracurricular activities, Junior High School principal accustomed the spiritual activities and searched for the root of problems in the school. In contrast, the Senior High School principal realised the uniqueness in the school she leads; stating: “It must be realised that all of the students here are smart; hence they have a high level of ego. They do not want their ideas and creations to be imitated or identical to the others. This ego has to be managed, and the principal and teachers have to be able to guide them without frustrating or disappointing them.”

Family Support

In general, all of these women leaders have strong support from their families, parental guidance, and support from husbands and children who are gender-responsive. These supports make the respondents carry out their roles as wives and mothers comfortably without excessive demands from their families. “For the career’s success, the family must be built first, so when the family finally be able to live well, then everything will be comfortable.” Hence, the family will support the success of the careers of their members. The findings of this research illustrate how a gender-responsive family truly supports the success of leading women in the education field.

Conclusion

Women have an important role in educational leadership, especially in schools. Leadership strength in all education units seen from the aspect of school leadership qualifications lies in



aspects of (a) physical maturity, (b) competence, and (c) formal legality. The strength of women's leadership in terms of performance is the ability to carry out basic tasks as a principal to support school performance. Characters that show integrity as leaders are (a) not ambitious, (b) honest, (c) patient, (d) role models shown in disciplined, independent and low-profile behaviours, and (e) assertive behaviour. The leadership style that is applied is democratic familial, maternal, and collegial.

Meanwhile, the managerial power of women leaders in the effort to achieve the vision and mission of the school is shown through commitment, perseverance in achieving goals, and courage to make breakthroughs. In the aspect of mental and spiritual strength, demonstrated by devotion, addressing leadership as a mandate, surrender to God, especially in dealing with problems related to the institution they lead. External forces in the form of family support, parents, husband, and children provide opportunities and encouragement in carrying out a woman's leadership activities.



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