Challenges in Becoming Female Leaders: Case Study of National and Private University in Indonesia

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Abstract

The emerging issue of gender equality raise a concern in the professional sector, questioning whether women have the same opportunity in aspiring to be leaders and strive in their career. This paper aims to portray the challenges female employees must face to become a leader. Two prominent business school from high-ranked national and private university in Indonesia are selected as the sample. In-depth interviews with six female leaders from those universities were conducted to gather a broad view on the matter. Result shows that both business schools support female advancement in leadership, hence suggesting that challenges regarding gender are minimal in an academic institution. However, a number of challenges female leaders experienced throughout their journey to a leadership position is concluded through this study, in hope to provide insight to other striving female workers. Although there is a certain belief and some hindrances that hold them from striving forward in their career, they claimed that those are still easy to manage. Based on that finding, practical implications are suggested.

I. Introduction

Invisible barriers that restrain female career advancement has been a great issue globally (Schuh, et al., 2014), creating movements to achieve equality in the professional field. Glass ceiling effect is one of the most prominent issues in gender equality at work, many women working professionally claims to not be able to climb their career ladder as easily as their male counterparts due to the unseen policy that hinders them from reaching higher positions, like a glass ceiling (Cotter, et al., 2001). Also, there used to be a deep-rooted belief that men are a better fit to tackle leadership than women.

Many skills and leader's traits are considered to be 'masculine', hence making women with the stereotyped traits correlated to them are often regarded as not suitable to be leaders. A study conducted by Koburtay & Syed (2019) claimed that women who become leaders usually possess traits that are used to be highly correlated to men in past stereotypes, such as: aggressive, analytical, assertive, forceful, and self-sufficient. Women are often disregarded due to the stereotypes attached to them, because those are considered to be a weakness in professional setting (Heilman, 2012). This prejudice against women is a barrier that restrains them from becoming a leader.

Due to that old belief that male is the suitable gender for leadership, it is also common to find more men interested in leadership. Higher leadership positions are traditionally perceived to be a masculine job, as claimed by Billing (2011), and Fletcher (2002) suggested that leaders' image was highly stereotypical to masculinity. Schuh, et al. (2014) also discussed this matter in their study about power motivation, claimed that in several studies they conducted on power motivation between men and women, it was

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consistently found that men scored higher in that test; showing that it is more common for men to aspire to be leaders than women. Since more men were found to be more into leadership, women were far less often to sit on a leadership position in their organization. Lack of leadership representation for women is still prominently discussed in many existing studies (Coleman, 2003; Paustian-Underdahl, 2014; Schuh, et al., 2014).

Organization plays a big role in providing an environment where women can strive in their professional career. Not only in the form of a policy, but also a mutual understanding throughout the entirety of the organization can that anyone with skills and competence to lead be a leader. McKinsey reported in one of their publications that although organizations may claim to have a policy that supports female leadership, members of the organization might not feel the same in the practice (Devillard, et al., 2018). There is still an invisible restriction that slows them in their career advancement.

We believe that organizations must actively work to provide similar chances for both men and women alike. Latu, et al. (2019) in their study about the behavior within an educational institution when there is a female leader in the group shows that a type of "mimicry" takes place, and it positively affects other team members that are also women. Similar outcome was gathered through a study conducted by Baskaran & Hessami (2018), also looking into the effect of female leadership within an organization but in the political sector. Similarly, this one also depicts positive effect of female leadership for the other female members in the group. The existence of female leaders in an organization may open the door for other women to have better chances in becoming a leader when they aspire to be.

However, organization is not the only barrier Redmond, et al. (2016) in their study tried to dive deeper into female leadership in education but focuses more on the life experiences of the leaders they interviewed. The findings showed that family matters also sometimes can be a hindrance in their career. Women usually adapt their decision around family urgency such as taking care of the family, having children, and any other family matters, and that creates a gap in their career path. Some of the findings also suggest that families have a certain expectation towards women, and that expectation is often times not something that is related to career achievement. They are expected to get married, then have children, then take care of the house and the family members. This statement is of a similar nature with studies take place in the middle east where patriarchy is heavily adapted in the national system of power, as explained in several currently existing studies (Hafez, 2012; Afiouni, 2014; Thompson, 2015; James-Hawkins, et al., 2018). Organization must have a goal to be achieved by the organizational members (Niati et al., 2021). The success of leadership is partly determined by the ability of leaders to develop their organizational culture. (Arif, 2019).

Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch (2018) concluded in their study about the challenges faced by female working in hospitality, travel, and tourism industry are including five points: work-life balance, support systems, mentors, systematic barriers to advancement, and organizational commitment. Work-life balanced was explained as the difficulties to divide their focus between tackling the responsibility to take care of their home and families, and their strive towards achieving the work goals. Support systems and mentors were defined as someone who female workers can look up to and seek aids from, and the lack of this figure in their professional situation makes it harder for them to strategize in climbing the leadership ladder. This is quite similar to the previously discussed point about female role models (Baskaran & Hessami, 2018) and how it could potentially be creating a positive impact on other female workers.

Based on the discussion above, we simplified the discussion into three most common challenges in female leadership, as listed below:

1) Gender stereotype
2) Organizational support
3) Personal matters

This study intends to seek out information on the challenges that female leaders in academic institutions experience in their career. A case study of higher education institutions, specifically business school in Indonesia was selected as the main focus of this study. We collect data from two universities, one being a national institution and the other one being a private institution to see if there are differences in their leadership challenges. This study is expected to fill a literature gap by providing insights of female leadership challenges in higher education management in Indonesia, contributing to the leadership and gender literatures.

II. Research Method

This study aims to explore the experience of female leaders from business schools from two different technological university, one being a national university while another is a private university. We intend to discover the challenges they experience in becoming a leader as a woman and how they tackle the issues that came towards them. For those purposes, this study implements a qualitative research method following the guidelines in Yin (2009). Case study is the chosen research design for this exploratory study as the main concern is considered to be ever-changing phenomena. We are using Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB) and Telkom University (Tel-U) as the focus of study. Both universities are technological; each have quite similar faculties and schools, and all of them are technology-based in their curriculums. Due to the numbers of similarities but also the different ownership (national and private) of both universities, the business schools from each university are chosen to be the focus of study in this research. Tel-U is a lot younger compared to ITB which was founded in 1920, therefore we expect to see if there are any differences in the characteristics of the organization.

The data collection process of this study was conducted by performing in-depth semi- structured interviews with six female leaders in total, three from each institution. Those interviewees are deemed as a prominent informant that are able to provide all of the needed information for this study. Through the interviews, we intend to discover their journey to leadership and the hardships they experienced. The variety of backgrounds of the interviewees is expected to enrich the data we collect, as they had experience different road to leadership. Interview duration ranges from sixty (60) to ninety (90) minutes and was conducted through Google Meet platform due to COVID-19 restrictions applied in academic activities. Table 1 below shows the list of interviewees' codes for the analysis that follows this section.

Table 1. Interviewees' Code

No.	University	Interviewees' Code
1	Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB)	A1
2		A2
3		A3
4	Telkom University (Tel-U)	B1
5		B2
6		B3

Through the interview we try to seek out the female leaders' opinion on the prominent challenges in their leadership journey, with the base knowledge we obtained from the literature review we conducted for this study. Three main points of general concern in include: (1) gender stereotype, (2) organizational support, and (3) personal matter. We were trying to ask questions regarding the challenges and get a confirmation whether or not they experienced a hindrance in their career due to those three points that got discussed a lot in the current literature. We also explored their own personal opinion and the exact event they experience that felt like a challenge in their career advancement.

The recordings of the interviews were transcribed to provide a written source of information for the analysis part of the study. Thematic analysis was conducted to uncover the emerging theme regarding the challenges experienced by the female leaders throughout their career. The collected themes from the analysis were then explained thoroughly interpretatively as this is a qualitative study. Online Curriculum Vitae of the interviewees as well as the public information of both the university and faculty were obtained to complete our data. Analysis of the interview result will then create a new list of challenges, giving the context of business schools of prominent technological universities in Indonesia.

III. Result and Discussion

3.1 Findings
a. Female Leader A1
In the interview with A1, she claimed that although she often heard about female discrimination at work, she never experienced it herself. Gender discrimination had never been an issue throughout her entire career, but when first joining the faculty, she found out that some people in the organization preferred to hire male members instead of female. It was discovered that the basis of that way of thought is the fact that women would have to take care of the family, giving birth, and raising children, hence some people believed that women would not be able to work as well as men. After hearing that, A1 claimed that it got her fired up to prove that women can do as well if not better at work. She believed that leadership competency cannot be viewed by one's family matter, but rather the actual work of the person.

She believed that although some people might have a certain prejudice against women, the faculty she was in as a whole is highly supportive towards gender equality. She said that chances are distributed fairly to all members of the organization and skills are what matter most in their career advancement. She noticed that outside of the academic sector, organizational support for female leadership representation might not be as high, and it must be more difficult for them to reach a certain position in their career in comparison to men. In this case, women must work harder to achieve their career aspiration and therefore inspiring more women to do the same.

b. Female Leader A2
In her interview, A2 said that although she noticed that leadership positions are usually occupied by male, she thought female leaders are starting to be quite common in many organizations in Indonesia. Different than the old belief, female nowadays is more intelligent, ambitious, and full of aspiration that they can be a leader too. However, she admitted that sometimes there are actual conditions that hinder women to be a leader even if they aspire to be one. In educational sector, she claimed that leadership positions are often times a matter of turn, specifically structural positions.

She also suggested that female's natural trait restrains them from working too hard to achieve leadership, and it is what differs them from male who generally has higher desire

for power. This comes internally instead of externally like we usually view gender equality as an issue, she believed that some women are simply do not desire any kind of power in the work they do. They are satisfied with only doing the designated task and they do not take concern in climbing to the higher position. She agreed that family plays a big role in the differentiation of male and female ambition, as women usually geared more towards taking care of the family internally, she felt like she did not want to leave her family to pursue other things in her job if that requires her less time with the family. Meanwhile, she admitted that it was more acceptable for men to do that.

c. Female Leader A3

A3 is a minority in her organization, as up to 90% of the members are male. She suggested that being a minority in the group sometimes creates an invisible restrain in a person's head to work better. In her opinion, whatever the situation we are in, we must strive to reach excellence, and that is probably what is lacking in some women working professionally. In the story that she told, she said that some countries are very condescending towards women, making it difficult for them to advance in their career path. She took an example of her experience with Japanese academia, where women are almost always considered as men's subordinate instead of a leader on their own. Indonesia, however, is much better in terms of gender equality in professional settings.

She also claimed that as a woman and moslem, she put her family as a number one priority above any other things. Nonetheless, since she had decided to be a lecturer and accepted the offer to be a leader in her organization, she tried her best to manage and create balance in her endeavors. Of course, she had to divide her focus between taking care of her family and doing her responsibilities at work, but she claimed that it's possible as long as there is a determination. This means that her main challenge in becoming a leader mostly comes from her own self instead of the organization she works in. her male counterparts had never discriminate female existence in the organizational leadership formation, gender had never been an issue. She believed that if men and women work together and with similar effort to have a balance in their life, there should not be a problem in equality in the professional field.

d. Female Leader B1

B1 started off her story by stating that when it comes to leaders' selection, she believes that her institution examines its candidates very thoroughly and it is not something to be doubted. The examination is based on not only hard skills but also the psychological situation of the candidates. Gender is not part of the examination and is outside of the competency scope. However, she believes that male and female naturally have a difference, shown in the traits where female is often, in her opinion, more of a humanist and approach a matter in a more personal way, meanwhile male is usually more rational and quicker to make a decision. Female usually have a more personal approach to their subordinates, meanwhile male is usually stricter in setting professional boundaries.

She also admitted that it is true women used to be exposed to a certain expectation that generally accepted as being a "woman". However, as the world continues to evolve and information is easily reached by the masses, many women are starting to break free of those expectations. In becoming a leader, as long as the organizational policies are obeyed and women do their job properly, she believed that women could do whatever and act however they like, although it might differ from what the traditional society expected. There is no specific set of rules that must be followed to reach competency as different

people might have different approaches in their leadership. It is all based on what lies inside of themselves.

e. Female Leader B2

As someone who are highly familiar being in a leadership role, B2 claimed that she had witnessed so many different occurrences in her career. Based on her experience, she believed that female naturally have an "internal calling" that grew from the way they raised and made believe. In a tradition-rich society as those in Indonesia, she realized that women are always put to a bigger responsibility in taking care of their home and family. As it used to be the custom to have women staying at home instead of going out and about pursuing their career, it has been engraved to many women's mind that career is not their main goal in life. She said that if it is a true calling that comes from the woman's heart, then they should definitely pursue that calling instead of working a job to earn money. On the other hand, if women want to do other things as well, such as pursuing their career, she wanted more women to realize that they are not restricted to the responsibility to just take care of the family. It all comes down to what their heart and mind desire to do in life.

However, although gender is not a component of examination in educational sector career advancement, she knows that a lot of sectors still have high favor towards men when it comes to leadership. This type of discrimination usually done in a discreet way, not openly showing that an organization prefers men to be their leader instead of women, but it happens and easy to be noticed. Indonesia is quite good in balancing and avoiding discrimination towards women, she claimed. Along her journey to leadership, external discrimination has never been a challenge she had to deal with, but she knew there are organizations that do that still, hindering female from advancing in their career.

f. Female Leader B3

Contrary to the other interviewees, B3 described a situation that she felt challenging throughout her leadership experience is more of an external factor. She claimed that it is generally difficult for female leaders to lead an organization where there are male members in it, saying that they usually did not listen to what she said or asked. It made her face a lot of difficulties to keep the organization at a stable situation and guiding them forward to reach their goal. Although family responsibility is also important for her, she believed that challenges for female leaders often come from their surroundings. She believed that the division between personal and professional matters can be done easily, meanwhile external factors are things that cannot be controlled.

She claimed that male members are sometimes difficult to control, hence her attempt to achieve goals for the organization in their leadership gets challenged. However, she also explained how it possibly be because of her approach to certain matters. She believed that a leader must know how to face issues and handle her subordinates, and since people have different perspectives on things, leaders should bridge those people so that the organization can move to a certain direction. Other than that, she believed that educational organizations in Indonesia do not discriminate female workers and typically focuses their concern on the competence and skills of a person, no matter their gender.

3.2 Discussion and Analysis

Based on the findings discussed in the previous section, we formulated thematic groups to assist the analysis of this study. They key points of challenges they experienced in becoming a leader are extracted from the interview result to be compared with one another. The table below shows the results of that extraction.

Table 2. Female leadership challenges key points

A1	B1
• Gender stereotype • Family matter	• Psychological situation • Internal values
A2	**B2**
• External condition: organizational policy • Internal condition: less desire for power, responsibility totake care of the family	• Family matter • Internal "calling" • Organizational restriction
A3	**B3**
• Minority mindset • Custom/tradition • Gender identity • Religious identity • Family matter	• Lack of external support

The interview with six female leaders from two different universities provide a broad insight of the challenges they faced in becoming a leader. There are a lot of similarities in their answers although it was delivered in various way and through different stories. Generally, family urgency comes as the top priority of their lives, and they agreed that it can sometimes be a hindrance in their career advancement. This finding shows quite a difference than many other currently existing studies that says organizational support typically comes as the most challenging point in female leadership journey, Brown, et al. (2011) claimed. This shows that situation in different countries might differ to one another and there is no general rule that guides this matter. Thompson (2015) explained in their study conducted in Saudi Arabia, women leaders must face three different levels of "pressing issues": family, societal and national. Putting family as the first level of the issue, we found a similarity between the claims of Indonesian female leaders and Saudi Arabia. However, the family matters discussed in their study weighs a lot on the external pressure instead of the internal situation our female leaders claimed to experience.

Extracted key points showing the challenges are now scattered and listed only based on the claims of the female leaders we interviewed. Based on the result of the interview, we grouped together the key points based on the source of the challenge, then we build another model depicting the challenges in a more compact and informative way. Figure 1 below shows the challenges in becoming a female leader in Indonesian business schools.
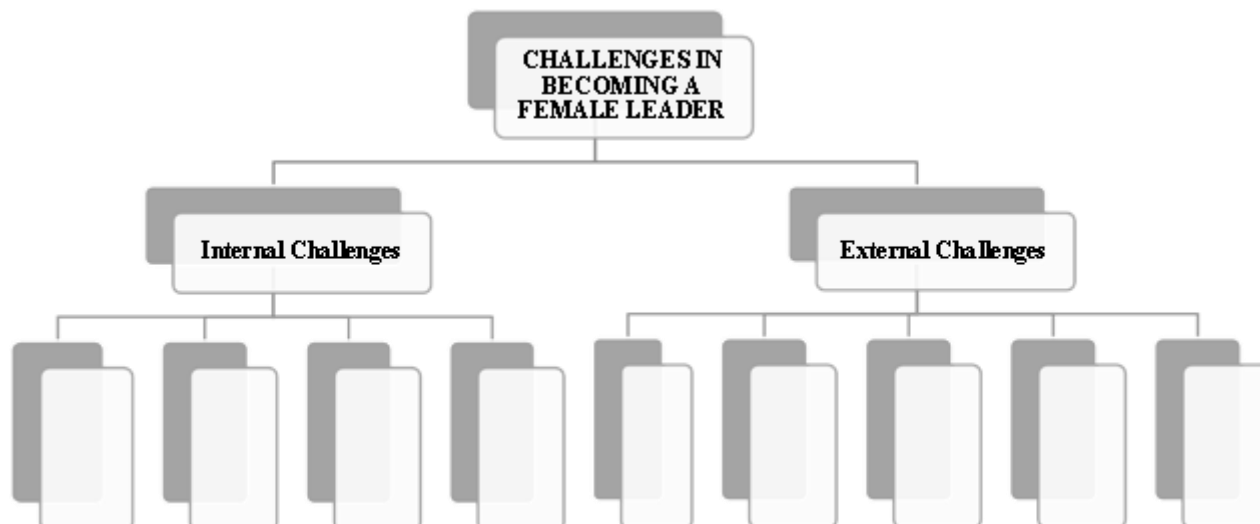
Figure 1. Challenges in Becoming a Female Leader

Internal challenges depict a hindrance that comes from within the mind, meanwhile external challenges come from the outside world. Lack of power motivation confirmed by the interviewee is supportive to the findings of the study conducted by Schuh, et al. (2014), claiming that men usually have higher power motivation in comparation to women. Gender and religious identity are something that guides their lives. Those identities got planted within women's mind due to the years of living with a certain belief, also being surrounded by people who have similar beliefs. It guides how they are supposed to act, and what their responsibilities are. They were based on a construct rooted within them. This could result in a minority mindset, where they believe that since women are the minority in leadership, it is not necessary to pursue the higher position.

External challenges, however, is something that cannot be controlled by the female workers. It comes from the organization they work at, or the people that surround them. Organizational policy regulates how the organization operates, setting the rules members of the organization mustobey. Therefore, if there is no organizational policy that supports the career advancement of their female members, it would be difficult for them to be a leader. On top of that, all members of the organization must also support anyone who becomes a leader and agree to work together with them for the sake of reaching the organizational goals.

Beside organization-related factors, their gender identity also calls for a specific expectation based on the custom or tradition in their community. Tradition views women a certain way and posed them to family expectations that believe they should be at home tacking care of the chores and feed their family. Titi Amayah & Haque (2017) also claimed in their study about female leaders in the Sub-Saharan Africa region that women in their country are faced with a patriarchal social structure, which means that it is usually men who have a higher authority, and men are widely accepted to have controls over the female members of the society. It is also believed that women's place is at home, housekeeping and taking care of the family. This patriarchal tradition makes women have more difficulties to reach leadership positions in their career.

Based on the result of this study, we grouped together the female leadership challenges into two categories: internal and external. Those challenges need different approaches to tackle. While internal challenge comes from female workers' internal battle or callings, it only needs their own self to break out of it in order to be able to reach a leadership mindset, also excellent time management and focus management ability.

However, external challenge means the situations that are surrounding them, people that works with them and the organization they work for, therefore the solution to the challenges need more work to solve. Not only those women workers need to prove themselves to be competent in their job, but they also have to actively try changing the perception and societal belief about women who work professionally.

IV. Conclusion

This paper explored the personal experience of six female leaders working in educational institution, specifically business school from two universities in Indonesia, national and private- owned organization. The women we interviewed told their own stories and shared the hardships they experience throughout their journey in becoming a leader. There are a lot of similarities in their narratives, and based on their claim, we concluded a list of challenges that female worker might encounter in their career advancement. Those key points are divided into two categories, internal and external challenges based on where it comes from. Internal challenges illustrate a hindrance that comes from their own personal situation, meanwhile external challenges come from the outside world, such as the organization they are in and the people that surround them.

Internal challenges include lack of power motivation, gender identity, religious identity, and minority mindset. External challenges include public stereotype, custom/tradition, family expectation, organizational policy, and male members' submission. These challenges are things that need to be acknowledged and solved by female workers in order to strive in their career, or if they aspire to be a leader in their organization. In a society where the system is heavily influenced by the patriarchal belief, skill and competence are not always enough for women, but the barriers can be broken with enough determination.

These challenges are shown for other women to acknowledge and get prepared before actually encountering one, also as an insight for the organization to provide policies and an environment where women's career advancement is supported. This finding is expected to contribute to the theories of leadership and add into the richness of gender studies. However, since this study is conducted in Indonesia, further research might be needed to generalize the conclusions.

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