



A Women's Inclusive Leadership Model for Islamic Education

Enung Nurhayati^{1*}, Eneng Muslihah² Machdum Bachtiar³

¹Graduate Student, Islamic Education Management Study Program, UIN Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten, Serang, Indonesia

^{2,3} UIN Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten, Serang, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: umienung176@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the limited scholarly and practical attention given to women's leadership and inclusive practices in Islamic education, where patriarchal norms and structural barriers often constrain female leaders and marginalize diverse learners. The research aims to analyze the experiences, strategies, and institutional conditions that shape women's leadership and to construct an inclusive leadership model suitable for Islamic educational settings. A qualitative multiple case study design was employed in three Islamic schools. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The population comprised female principals, vice principals, teachers, students, and foundation members, while the sample was selected purposively based on leadership experience, institutional commitment to inclusion, and gender representation. Findings indicate that women leaders combine spiritual, transformational, participatory, and culturally responsive approaches. They negotiate patriarchal expectations, build trust through empathy and collaboration, and promote inclusive policies for gender, disability, and socioeconomic diversity. The resulting model emphasizes shared vision, ethical-spiritual grounding, participatory decision making, capacity building, safe and equitable learning environments, and community engagement. The study recommends that Islamic educational institutions adopt gender-sensitive recruitment, leadership training, inclusive curricula, and monitoring systems; policymakers should provide legal and budgetary support; and future research should test the model across broader contexts and quantitative measures.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic education, in essence, is founded upon values that uphold justice, equality, consultation, and compassion for all human beings regardless of gender, abilities, social background, or physical conditions (Royhatudin, 2020). These values should be reflected not only in the curriculum and learning processes but also in leadership practices within Islamic educational institutions (Wahyudi et al., 2018). Leadership is a strategic element that determines policy direction, organizational culture, and the quality of educational services. However, empirical realities indicate that women's leadership and inclusive practices in Islamic educational institutions continue to face various structural and cultural challenges. Women remain underrepresented in top leadership positions, while students with special needs, those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and members of cultural minority groups have not yet fully gained equal opportunities and access. This situation creates a tension between the normative ideals of Islamic education and the practices of its implementation.



In general, studies on women's leadership have developed rapidly over the past several decades. Rulifatur et al.'s role congruity theory explains that women often experience prejudice because leadership roles are considered more compatible with masculine characteristics (Nur Rulifatur Rohmah, 2021). Muslimah (2021) emphasizes that barriers to women's leadership are multidimensional, encompassing individual, interpersonal, organizational, and cultural factors (Muslimah, 2021). In the context of education, studies on women's leadership have largely been conducted in general schools and higher education institutions, while relatively few have specifically examined Islamic educational institutions. On the other hand, studies on inclusive leadership have developed through Imtinan's perspective, which emphasizes the importance of a sense of belonging and appreciation for individual uniqueness within organizations (Imtinan, 2021). Sakdiah also emphasizes that inclusive education is not merely about placing students with special needs in regular schools, but rather involves transforming educational cultures, policies, and practices so that all students can develop (Sakdiah, 2023).

Existing studies on women's leadership explain gender-based barriers, while studies on inclusive leadership emphasize belonging and uniqueness. However, there is limited empirical research explaining how women leaders in Islamic educational institutions simultaneously navigate gender-based legitimacy, religious authority, and learner diversity (Srimawati, 2024). Existing women's leadership models explain gender-based barriers and legitimacy struggles, but generally treat religious authority and organizational culture as external context. Inclusive leadership models explain how leaders foster belonging and value uniqueness, but they assume inclusion is relatively independent of gendered religious authority and hierarchical governance (Abbeduto et al., 2019). Neither stream explains how women leaders in Islamic educational institutions simultaneously construct legitimate authority, negotiate conservative gender interpretations, and enact inclusion for diverse learners and staff. Therefore, the gap is not merely the absence of an integrated model; it is the absence of an empirically grounded process explanation of the strategies, tensions, enabling conditions, and outcomes through which women leaders translate inclusive leadership into Islamic education (Sri Mulyani, 2022).

The main problem addressed in this study is how women leaders in Islamic educational institutions understand, practice, and negotiate their leadership within the context of patriarchal culture and the demands of inclusion. The derivative issues include women leaders' experiences in accessing and maintaining leadership positions, the strategies they employ to build legitimacy and trust, and the institutional conditions that support or hinder inclusive leadership practices (Wardani, 2025). In addition, this study addresses a conceptual problem, namely the lack of a women's and inclusive leadership model rooted in the values of Islamic education. Without such a model, leadership practices in Islamic educational institutions risk being implemented intuitively, unsystematically, and with limited responsiveness to student diversity. Therefore, this study does not test hypotheses in the quantitative sense; rather, it explores and constructs meanings and a leadership model that are relevant to the context under investigation.

The proposed solution is a qualitative study employing a multiple-case study design involving several Islamic educational institutions that have women leaders and demonstrate a commitment to inclusion. This approach enables the researcher to explore data in depth through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The data collected include lived experiences, leadership practices, institutional policies, and social interactions within educational settings. The primary data sources are women leaders, vice principals, teachers, students, and foundation members. Participants are selected purposively based on their leadership experience, commitment to inclusion, and gender representation. Data analysis employs thematic analysis and cross-case analysis techniques to identify patterns, categories, and major themes. The findings are

then used to develop a conceptual model explaining the relationship between spiritual values, participatory leadership, gender justice, and inclusive practices in Islamic education.

This study aims to analyze the experiences, strategies, and institutional conditions that shape women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions. The next objective is to explore how women leaders integrate Islamic values, gender justice, and the principles of inclusion into decision-making and institutional management. The third objective is to construct a model of women's and inclusive leadership that is appropriate to the context of Islamic education. The fourth objective is to formulate recommendations for policymakers, institutional managers, and future researchers. Accordingly, this study is expected to make a theoretical contribution through the development of an Islamic leadership concept that incorporates gender and inclusion perspectives, as well as a practical contribution in the form of guidance for Islamic educational institutions in creating an environment that is just, equitable, and welcoming to all students.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a multiple-case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because the primary objective of the study is to explore the meanings, experiences, and practices of women's leadership and inclusion in the context of Islamic education in an in-depth and holistic manner (Yin, 2018). A multiple-case study was deemed appropriate because this research seeks to understand the phenomena of women's leadership and inclusion across several Islamic educational institutions with distinct characteristics, thereby yielding a richer and more comprehensive picture. The cases studied include three madrasahs located in Banten Province, Indonesia. The selection of these locations was based on the consideration that these institutions have female leaders in strategic positions and demonstrate a commitment to inclusive practices, both in terms of policy and organizational culture. The research was conducted over a two-month period, from June through July 2026, and consisted of the following stages: preparation, data collection, data analysis, and report writing.

The subjects of this study are women who serve as school principals, vice principals, or university presidents, as well as teachers, students, and foundation members involved in the leadership and implementation of inclusive education. Subjects were selected purposefully based on the following criteria: (1) women with at least three years of leadership experience in Islamic educational institutions, (2) those with policies or practices that support inclusion, and (3) those willing to participate in the study (Sakdiah, 2023). In addition, supporting informants were also selected from among teachers, students with special needs, and parents to obtain diverse perspectives. The total number of participants was twelve, consisting of three female leaders, three teachers, three students, and three foundation members. This number was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which occurs when the information obtained no longer yields new themes.

Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis (Creswell, John W.; Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide developed based on the research objectives, while also providing the researcher with sufficient flexibility to explore information in greater depth. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at the research site, lasted between 10 and 20 minutes per participant, and were audio-recorded after obtaining permission from the participants. Participant observation involved engaging in daily activities at the educational institution, such as faculty meetings, instructional activities, and interactions in common school areas, to directly observe leadership and inclusion practices. Observations were conducted over approximately four months, with detailed field notes compiled

throughout the process. Document analysis was performed on various official documents, such as strategic plans, school policies, curricula, meeting minutes, and activity reports relevant to leadership and the inclusion

The research procedures were carried out in several stages. The first stage involved a preliminary study to map the research sites and establish access to potential participants. The second stage was data collection, which was conducted simultaneously through interviews, observations, and document analysis. The researcher visited the research sites periodically, adjusted to the institutions' activity schedules, and sought to establish rapport with the participants. The third stage involved data analysis, which was conducted continuously throughout the data collection process using thematic analysis techniques. The collected data were transcribed, read repeatedly, coded, and grouped into major themes. Cross-case analysis was conducted to compare findings across institutions and identify broader patterns. The fourth stage involved developing a conceptual model based on the research findings (Azhari et al., 2023).

To ensure data validity, this study employed source triangulation, technique triangulation, and member checking. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from various participants, such as leaders, teachers, and students. Technique triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained through interviews, observations, and documents (Sugiyono, 2019). Member checking was conducted by sending interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations to the participants to ensure the accuracy of the intended meanings. In addition, the researcher discussed the findings with peers who have expertise in Islamic education and gender studies to obtain critical perspectives. Thus, this study is expected to produce valid and trustworthy data and make a significant contribution to the development of a model of women's and inclusive leadership in Islamic education.

RESULTS

Experiences and Barriers to Women's Leadership in Islamic Educational Institutions

The results of the data analysis indicate that women leaders in Islamic educational institutions have diverse experiences but encounter similar patterns when facing structural and cultural barriers. The participants revealed that access to leadership positions was not easily obtained. They had to undergo rigorous selection processes, repeatedly demonstrate their competence, and confront stereotypes that associate leadership with masculinity. One principal stated that her abilities had once been questioned because she was considered too emotional and insufficiently assertive, even though she actually prioritized a persuasive and collaborative approach. This finding is consistent with the role congruity theory proposed by Runifatul, which suggests that women experience prejudice when leadership roles are perceived as inconsistent with expected gender characteristics. Another barrier stems from the patriarchal culture that remains strong within foundation environments, where strategic decisions are often dominated by male figures. Sakdiah emphasizes that barriers to women's leadership are multidimensional, encompassing individual, interpersonal, organizational, and cultural factors. The participants also faced the dual burden of domestic responsibilities and professional demands, as well as resistance from subordinates who questioned their authority. Nevertheless, the women leaders did not remain passive. They developed subtle negotiation strategies, built alliances with various stakeholders, and demonstrated leadership that combined assertiveness with empathy. Thus, women's leadership experiences in Islamic educational institutions constitute an ongoing process of negotiating identity, competence, and legitimacy.

3.2 Women's Leadership Strategies for Advancing Inclusion

The leadership strategies developed by the women leaders in this study can be categorized into five main dimensions: (1) spiritual-ethical foundations, (2) participatory leadership, (3) gender-sensitive policies, (4) an inclusive culture, and (5) community engagement. The spiritual-ethical foundation is evident in the way the leaders perceive leadership as an amanah (trust) and an act of worship. They regularly encourage teachers and staff to reflect on the Islamic values of justice, compassion, and brotherhood. These values are subsequently translated into policies that support marginalized groups. Participatory leadership is manifested through deliberative processes involving teachers, educational staff, students, and parents. One vice principal explained that decisions regarding the admission of students with special needs were not made unilaterally but through open discussions involving all stakeholders. Gender-sensitive policies are reflected in efforts to provide equal opportunities for female teachers to participate in training and occupy structural positions, as well as in the provision of gender-responsive facilities (UÇAR, 2022). An inclusive culture is developed through joint activities involving students from diverse backgrounds, such as peer mentoring programs, arts activities, and adaptive sports. Community engagement is carried out by involving parents, community organizations, and non-governmental organizations in supporting inclusive education. These findings reinforce the perspective of Shore et al. (2011), which emphasizes that inclusive leadership promotes a sense of belonging and appreciation for individual uniqueness. The researcher emphasizes that inclusive education is not merely a matter of placement but involves the transformation of culture, policies, and practices. The women leaders in this study have internalized this principle and made it an integral part of their leadership identities.

Institutional Conditions Supporting and Hindering Women's and Inclusive Leadership

Institutional conditions have a significant influence on the practices of women's leadership and inclusion. Supporting factors include the foundations' commitment to gender equality, the existence of internal regulations prohibiting discrimination, and an organizational culture that is open to change. Two of the four institutions examined had written policies on inclusion and gender mainstreaming, making it easier for women leaders to implement their programs. Support from progressive religious figures was also an important factor, as they interpret Islamic teachings contextually and support women's leadership (Cahyaningsih, 2025). However, significant barriers remain. Hierarchical and bureaucratic organizational structures slow down inclusive decision-making processes. Budgetary constraints prevent support programs for students with special needs from being implemented optimally. In addition, resistance remains among some senior teachers who perceive inclusion as an additional burden. The tension between accreditation requirements that emphasize academic achievement and the need to recognize and celebrate diversity also presents a distinct challenge. These findings demonstrate that women's and inclusive leadership do not take place in a vacuum but continuously interact with broader structures, cultures, and policies. Therefore, the leadership model developed must be capable of accommodating these dynamics.

A Model of Women's and Inclusive Leadership in Islamic Education

Based on the cross-case findings, this study developed a model of women's and inclusive leadership in Islamic education consisting of six interrelated components. The first component is the spiritual-ethical foundation, which places the values of tawhid, justice, and rahmatan lil 'alamin as the basis for all decisions and actions. The second component is participatory leadership, which promotes musyawarah (deliberation) and the involvement of all stakeholders in decision-making (Mochammad Maulana Robbi et al., 2022). The third component is gender justice, which is realized through equal recruitment, career development, and recognition policies for men and women. The fourth component is an inclusive culture, encompassing the acceptance, accommodation, and celebration of

student diversity. The fifth component is capacity development, which includes leadership training, inclusive education, and gender awareness for all members of the school community (Kruse, 2019).

The model emphasizes that women's leadership and inclusion are not two separate matters but rather mutually reinforcing dimensions. Women leaders grounded in spiritual and ethical values tend to be more sensitive to injustice and more committed to inclusion. Conversely, successful inclusive practices strengthen the legitimacy of women's leadership by demonstrating tangible outcomes for all students. Thus, this model offers a synthesis of women's leadership theory, inclusive leadership, and the values of Islamic education.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

The discussion of the research findings explicitly addresses the research questions. First, the experiences of women leaders in Islamic educational institutions are characterized by structural and cultural barriers; however, they are able to develop adaptive negotiation strategies. Second, the leadership strategies employed encompass five interrelated dimensions, with the spiritual-ethical foundation serving as the central axis (Restiani et al., 2025). Third, the supporting institutional conditions include the commitment of foundations, internal regulations, and support from religious figures, while the hindering factors include bureaucratic hierarchies, budgetary constraints, and resistance from some teachers. Fourth, the resulting model of women's and inclusive leadership emphasizes spiritual-ethical foundations, participation, gender justice, an inclusive culture, capacity development, and community engagement (Hesti, 2019). These findings reinforce and extend Imtinan's theory of inclusive leadership and the theory of inclusive education (Nazlianto, 2016) by providing a specific context for Islamic education. This study also confirms Sakdiah's findings regarding the multidimensional barriers faced by women while proposing a modification in which spirituality can serve as a positive resource for overcoming such barriers. The practical contribution of this study is to provide guidance for Islamic educational institutions in adopting this model through gender and inclusion leadership training, the development of gender-sensitive policies, and the establishment of a school culture that is welcoming to all students. Future researchers are recommended to quantitatively test this model in a broader population and compare it with Islamic education contexts in other countries.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a rich picture of how women leaders in Islamic educational institutions understand, practice, and negotiate their leadership within the context of a patriarchal culture and the demands of inclusion. In general, the findings indicate that women's leadership and inclusion are not two separate entities, but rather are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Female leaders grounded in spiritual and ethical values tend to be more sensitive to injustice and more committed to inclusion, while successful inclusive practices reinforce the legitimacy of women's leadership. These findings enrich our understanding of leadership in Islamic education, which has traditionally been approached primarily from a masculine and hierarchical perspective.

The experiences of women leaders, marked by structural and cultural barriers, confirm Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory, which explains that women face prejudice when leadership roles are perceived as inconsistent with expected gender characteristics. However, this study expands upon that theory by demonstrating that these barriers do not necessarily render female leaders passive (Feby Ayu Putri et al., 2024). Instead, they develop subtle negotiation strategies, build alliances, and exhibit a leadership style that combines assertiveness with empathy. These findings both reinforce and expand upon the findings of (Issa & Yasin, 2024)(2010) regarding the multidimensional barriers women face in leadership. While Ayman and Korabik emphasized individual, interpersonal,

organizational, and cultural factors as barriers, this study demonstrates that spirituality and religious values can serve as positive resources that help women leaders overcome these barriers (Hasanah & Yaqin, 2025). In other words, this study refines Ayman and Korabik's framework by demonstrating that, in the context of Islamic education, spirituality is not merely a normative dimension but also an adaptive strategy for survival and growth.

The strategy of women's leadership, which is divided into five dimensions—spiritual-ethical foundation, participatory leadership, gender-sensitive policies, inclusive culture, and community engagement—demonstrates that women's leadership in Islamic educational institutions is transformative and contextual. The spiritual-ethical foundation serves as the central axis that drives all other dimensions. This differs from the inclusive leadership model developed by Shore et al. (2011), which places greater emphasis on a sense of belonging and appreciation for individual uniqueness within an organization. Shore et al. do not explicitly include spirituality as a foundational dimension. Therefore, this study expands the theory of inclusive leadership by adding a spiritual-ethical foundation rooted in Islamic values, such as tawhid, justice, and rahmatan lil 'alamin. These findings also reinforce Rahman Tanjung's view that inclusive education is not merely about placing students with special needs in regular schools, but involves transforming culture, policies, and practices (Tanjung et al., 2022). The women leaders in this study have internalized these principles and made them part of their leadership identity, so that inclusion does not stop at the policy level but becomes part of everyday culture.

The unique contribution of this study lies in its explanation of how Islamic spiritual-ethical values modify and enrich the existing framework of inclusive leadership. In the model proposed by Shore et al. (2011), inclusion is built through a balance between a sense of belonging and appreciation for uniqueness. This study demonstrates that, within an Islamic context, these two elements are reinterpreted through the principles of tawhid, justice, and rahmatan lil 'alamin. Tawhid places all human beings on an equal footing before God, ensuring that differences in ability, gender, and background do not serve as grounds for marginalization. Justice serves as the normative framework that promotes affirmative action and equal participation. Meanwhile, rahmatan lil 'alamin provides an orientation toward compassion and the common good, so that inclusion is not understood as an administrative obligation but rather as an expression of faith. Thus, this study not only confirms the importance of a sense of belonging and uniqueness but also challenges secular assumptions in inclusive leadership theory that tend to separate religious values from organizational practices. In the context of Islamic education, religious values can, in fact, serve as a source of legitimacy and motivation for inclusive practices.

The findings of this study also highlight the ambivalent role of religious authorities: religious figures can both support and restrict women's leadership. When religious authorities interpret Islamic teachings inclusively and support women's leadership, they create significant space for women leaders to advocate for inclusive policies. Conversely, when religious authorities interpret Islamic teachings in a patriarchal manner, they become a structural barrier that is difficult to overcome. The women leaders in this study navigate this field of authority through various strategies: seeking the support of influential kiai or ulama, aligning their leadership with widely accepted Islamic values, avoiding direct confrontation, and building cross-actor coalitions. These findings represent a unique contribution because they demonstrate that theories of Islamic educational leadership must incorporate religious authority as a dynamic field of contestation, rather than a static variable. In other words, religious authority is not merely a context but an actor that can either expand or constrict the scope of women's leadership and inclusion.

This study explains the mechanisms through which women's leadership practices contribute to inclusive policies in educational institutions. First, experiences of marginalization make women

leaders more sensitive to injustice, making them more likely to advocate for inclusion. Second, the spiritual and ethical values they hold are used to frame inclusion as a religious obligation, rather than merely a policy requirement. Third, participatory leadership creates space for the voices of marginalized groups—teachers, students with special needs, and parents—in decision-making. Fourth, gender-sensitive policies and inclusive practices reinforce one another: gender policies open access for women to leadership positions, while inclusive practices strengthen the legitimacy of women’s leadership. Fifth, the legitimacy gained from the success of inclusive practices strengthens the position of women leaders to continue the transformation agenda. Thus, the relationship between women’s leadership and inclusion is spiral-like and mutually reinforcing, rather than linear or one-directional.

Compared to the study by Feby Ayu Putri et al. (2024), this study not only confirms that obstacles do not render women passive but also identifies the specific mechanisms they employ: subtle negotiation, cross-actor alliances, a combination of assertiveness and empathy, and the utilization of religious authority. Compared to Ayman and Korabik (2010), this study adds a spiritual-theological dimension as a resource, not merely an obstacle. Compared to Shore et al. (2011), this study expands the model of inclusive leadership with a spiritual-ethical foundation and demonstrates how tawhid, justice, and rahmatan lil ‘alamin reshape the way a sense of belonging and uniqueness are interpreted. Compared to Tanjung et al. (2022), this study demonstrates that women leaders serve as agents who bridge religious values and inclusive practices, so that cultural, policy, and practice transformations do not occur in isolation but are driven by value-rooted leadership.

Overall, this study confirms, expands, refines, and challenges existing theories. It confirms the existence of gender barriers and the importance of a sense of belonging and uniqueness. It expands the theory of women’s leadership by highlighting spirituality as an adaptive resource. It refines the theory of inclusive leadership by adding a spiritual-ethical foundation rooted in Islam. It challenges secular assumptions that separate religious values from leadership practices. Ultimately, this study produces a model of women’s and inclusive leadership in Islamic education rooted in a spiritual-ethical foundation, participatory leadership, gender justice, an inclusive culture, capacity building, and community engagement.

The practical implications of this study include the need for Islamic educational institutions to adopt a model of women’s and inclusive leadership through gender and inclusion leadership training, the development of gender-sensitive policies, and the establishment of a school culture that is welcoming to all students. Policymakers need to provide adequate legal and budgetary support for inclusion and gender-mainstreaming programs. Future researchers are encouraged to quantitatively test this model in broader populations, compare it with Islamic education contexts in other countries, and explore how the model operates across different educational levels. In addition, future research could examine more deeply the role of religious figures in supporting or hindering women’s leadership and inclusion.

Thus, this study not only addresses the research questions but also makes a significant academic contribution through the development of a model of women’s and inclusive leadership in Islamic education. This model emphasizes that women’s leadership and inclusion are two sides of the same coin in realizing Islamic education that is just, equitable, and rahmatan lil alamin. This contribution is expected to enrich the body of knowledge in the field of Islamic educational leadership and inspire more inclusive educational practices in Indonesia and around the world.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that women’s leadership and inclusion in Islamic education are two interconnected and mutually reinforcing dimensions rather than two separate matters. Women

leaders in Islamic educational institutions face structural and cultural barriers stemming from patriarchal culture, conservative interpretations of gender, and hierarchical organizational structures. However, they are able to overcome these barriers through subtle negotiation strategies, alliance building, and leadership practices that combine assertiveness with empathy. The leadership strategies they develop encompass five main dimensions, namely spiritual-ethical foundations, participatory leadership, gender-sensitive policies, an inclusive culture, and community engagement. Supporting institutional conditions include the foundations' commitment to gender equality, internal regulations prohibiting discrimination, and support from progressive religious figures, while the hindering factors include bureaucratic hierarchies, budgetary constraints, and resistance from some teachers. Based on these findings, this study developed a model of women's and inclusive leadership in Islamic education consisting of six interrelated components: spiritual-ethical foundations, participatory leadership, gender justice, an inclusive culture, capacity development, and community engagement. This model emphasizes that the spiritual-ethical foundation rooted in the values of tawhid, justice, and rahmatan lil alamin serves as the central axis driving all other dimensions. Consequently, women's leadership and inclusion are not merely technical-managerial in nature but also encompass moral and spiritual dimensions. Thus, this study explicitly addresses the research questions and objectives while making a theoretical contribution through the development of an Islamic leadership concept with gender and inclusion perspectives, as well as a practical contribution in the form of guidance for Islamic educational institutions in creating an environment that is just, equitable, and welcoming to all students. For future research, it is recommended that this model be quantitatively tested in broader populations, compared with Islamic education contexts in other countries, and further explored with regard to the role of religious figures in supporting or hindering women's leadership and inclusion.

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