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## Leadership of Millennial Women in Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools: A Multi-Specific Study of Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City, Indonesia

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### Abstract

*This study aimed to explore leadership of millennial women principals in Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City, focusing on challenges, support, and contributions to management. Despite the dominance of women in the teaching profession, there is a low representation in leadership positions. A qualitative approach was used with a multi-case design in three Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools led by women principals. The results showed that millennial women principals did not face significant challenges related to sexism or ageism, but experienced challenges such as skepticism related to age and experience. Support from Muhammadiyah organization, family, and professional networks helped in overcoming these challenges effectively. Leadership of millennial women principals showed high effectiveness by adopting four main elements, namely cognition, behavior, attitude, and motivation. The style comprised task-oriented, change-oriented, relations-oriented, and external leadership behavior. Respondents had successfully implemented innovations such as digital transformation, modern financial management, and student exchange programs, which contributed to improving the quality of education. A humanistic approach, providing incentives, and using technology were identified as key elements of success in creating an inclusive and productive work environment. These results indicate that millennial women principals were not only able to lead effectively but also bring positive changes in school management. Support from Muhammadiyah organization, such as training and scholarships, was an important factor in shaping leadership capacity. This study contributes to the development of educational leadership theory, specifically in the Islamic context. It provides practical insights to improve the quality of school management through an inclusive and sustainable approach.*

**Keywords:** Women Leadership, Millennial Principals, Muhammadiyah Elementary School, Participatory Leadership, Educational Innovation, Gender and Leadership

### Introduction

Intergenerational leadership transitions are increasingly visible in organizations, with growing interest in understanding generational differences, specifically among millennials who currently dominate the global workforce alongside Generation Z (Ng & Gossett, 2021; Twenge, 2023; BPS, 2021). Millennials, who have faced challenges such as the 2007–2008 Global Financial Crisis and COVID-19 pandemic, have demonstrated leadership potential despite often facing high levels of stress that can lead to burnout (Gillett, 2021; Smith & Nicol, 2021; Peterson, 2023).

Globally, women are starting to dominate higher education and expand participation in the workforce, although representation in leadership positions remains low due to systemic bias

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(United Nations, 2022; Ely et al., 2022). Previous studies showed that women leaders tend to be more effective, focus on sustainable strategies, and contribute to improved organizational governance by creating a culture of transparency, accountability, and better risk management (Hoobler et al., 2023; Swamy et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022).

In Indonesian education, women dominate the teaching profession with a tendency to perform better, but the number of women principals remains low despite being more effective in school management (Kemendikbudristek, 2023; INOVASI, 2022). Millennial women leaders have great potential to bring about positive change through collaborative leadership, but gender barriers and lack of career opportunities remain significant challenges (Lestari & Wulandari, 2023; Pooja & Khumar, 2021).

Leadership in schools shows positive results, with women teachers being more appreciative, proactive in the use of learning media, less absent, and displaying better literacy performance. Moreover, women teachers tend to be more effective in school management, allocation of funds for teacher development, and receive more satisfaction (Arsendy et al., 2020). Support for women principals continues to grow due to policies such as Indonesian Minister of Education Regulation number 13 of 2007 which prioritizes competence. A study also showed that leadership styles of women are more democratic, participatory, and focused on empowerment than the directive style often used by men (Robbins & Judge, 2023). Women leaders tend to demonstrate integrity by being unambitious, honest, patient, disciplined, and able to build effective teams (Endarwati, 2017; Wulandari et al., 2018).

Public Elementary Schools (SD Negeri) face challenges with the decreasing number of students switching to private Elementary Schools. An example is Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools which excel due to collective-collegial leadership as well as the implementation of Islamic values, *tajdid*, and cooperation, in addition to organizational support in the form of teacher competency development and supporting facilities (Afandi, 2022; Mahesa et al., 2023). Muhammadiyah, as the second largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, continues to develop with a focus on modern education that integrates religion and general knowledge, while providing social support and coaching for teachers. All the attributes have a collective positive impact on welfare and productivity (Ki, 2023; Smeds et al., 2020).

One of the focuses of attention in this study is leadership of women in Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City, which is mostly occupied by men principals. The province of DIY (Special Region of Yogyakarta) has the largest number of Elementary Schools affiliated with Muhammadiyah in Indonesia. Among the total 1094 schools, DIY has 241 accounting for about 22% of the total. In addition, DIY is more specific, namely, Yogyakarta City is the birthplace of Muhammadiyah and also the location of Muhammadiyah Leadership Center (PP) office.

Leadership of the principals, both men and women, greatly influences the effectiveness of schools. Women principals have the same potential as men, and in some cases are even superior. A study of three women principals at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City showed significant transformation. Anis Rofiah led Muhammadiyah Elementary School in Sokonandi to win the Most Inspiring Islamic Elementary School award. Ani Sulistyansih developed information technology in Demangan, and Ulva Dian Citra Resmi led the school in Purbayan to achieve A accreditation and national student achievement. This success is supported by a positive work environment, where teachers feel comfortable and loyal despite higher

government incentives. A previous study showed that organizational support and participatory leadership can increase loyalty and reduce turnover. However, the growth of women principals remains slow due to gender gaps, lack of managerial experience, and challenges in implementing education policies. Support from Muhammadiyah organization, including coaching and welfare, greatly helps overcome these challenges.

Further analysis is needed to understand the challenges and opportunities for leadership of women principals, specifically in Muhammadiyah Elementary School environment. Despite inclusive efforts, the gender gap in leadership still requires serious attention.

This study contributes to understanding leadership of millennial women principals in the context of education, including the values, strategies, and distinctive approaches often applied, as well as the development of educational leadership theories, specifically related to the use of technology and participatory approaches. The understanding of gender roles in Islamic educational leadership, specifically in Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools was explored.

Empirically, this study provides practical contributions to improving the quality of school management, with millennial women principals able to implement the results for more effective strategies. The results also support the development of inclusive leadership, which ensures the participation of all employee members and students in decision-making.

## **Methods**

This study can be included in the field survey category when viewed from the perspective of the data source location (Moleong, 2021). A qualitative approach with a multi-case or multi-site type design was used. The case study strategy according to Yin (2015) is an empirical inquiry that investigates phenomena in a real-life context when the boundaries between phenomena and contexts are not visible and where multiple sources of evidence are used. The location explored was Yogyakarta City, DIY Province, specifically at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Sokonandi, Demangan, and Purbayan. These three Elementary Schools have millennial women principals whose leadership periods have been extended due to the success in leading respective schools.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Results**

#### **Challenges and Support Received by Millennial Women Principals at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City**

Based on the results of the child nodes in Figure 4.1, the principals in Sukonandi, Demangan, and Purbayan stated that there were no racial or gender barriers in leadership, with the organization fully supporting women principals and not differentiating roles based on gender. The challenges faced included ageism, with principals leading more senior colleagues, as well as differences in character between employees that required a personal approach. The principal in Sukonandi faced challenges in building student character and aligning employee perceptions, while the principal in Demangan faced a financial crisis at the start of leadership period and differences in character between employees. The principal in Purbayan faced the challenge of a burdensome pandemic after the inauguration as well as differences in character and the need to foster self-confidence in leadership. Social support, as explained by Taylor et al. (2015) and

Karina & Sodik (2018), is very important in facing leadership challenges. Support from family, friends, and the community can reduce stress and improve well-being.

The child nodes results in Figure 4.2 showed that the principals from the three schools agreed informational support was obtained from various sources. The principal in Sukonandi received informational support from stakeholders such as families, employees, students, and guardians, while the principal in Demangan relied on WhatsApp groups for communication. The principal in Purbayan received informational support through employee age mapping, monthly meetings with guardians, and communication through WhatsApp groups.

Based on the results of the child nodes in Figure 4.3, the principals of Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Sukonandi, Demangan, and Purbayan explained that PDM support for leadership includes direction, administrative support, as well as assistance in solving problems and difficulties. This support forms a Social Support System (SSS), an important pillar in creating a work environment that improves leadership performance of millennial women principals.

### **Millennial Women Principals Can Play a Role in the Progress of Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City**

Based on the results of the child nodes in Figure 4.4, the principals of Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Sukonandi, Demangan, and Purbayan explained that improving cognitive policies was performed through communication and collaboration, workshops, further studies, and student exchange programs. The principal in Demangan also added the importance of helping networks to improve the cognitive abilities of parents and employees.

As shown by the results of the child nodes in Figure 4.5, the principal in Sukonandi explained that employee motivation was performed by providing role models, as well as giving rewards. The principal in Demangan explained that employee motivation was carried out by raising employee awareness. Meanwhile, the principal in Purbayan explained that employee motivation was carried out by providing role models, as well as improving the achievements of the principal and employees.

The child nodes results in Figure 4.6 showed that the principals agreed professionalism in schools was carried out by positioning themselves, annual evaluations, and knowing each other job descriptions. The principal in Demangan also added the importance of simplifying administration.

Based on the results of the child nodes in Figure 4.7, the principals in the three schools explained that the administrative demands from the Education Office were carried out by fulfilling all administrative responsibilities. Specifically, the principal in Demangan explained that this was performed only to fulfill the needs of the Education Office.

### **Effective Leadership of Millennial Women Principals in Managing Schools at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City**

Principal leadership plays a crucial role in school management, with principals expected to be both leaders and managers who develop a culture to support effective change management. Effective principals can influence school objectives and strategies, school community motivation, learning, and mutual trust and cooperation, with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of student learning. Transformational leadership is related to effectiveness, and the characteristics of millennial women principals in Elementary Schools are characterized by a

participatory style, openness to innovation, and the ability to adapt to technological change. Millennial women principals tend to engage employees in decision-making, create an inclusive atmosphere, and use technology in school management, which is appropriate to the demands of the digital era and the needs of students of Generations Alpha and Z.

Based on the results of the child nodes in Figure 4.8, the Head and the Secretary of the Yogyakarta Elementary and Secondary Education Council explained that leadership of millennial women in Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools has the characteristics of being more caring towards others, effective and not discriminating, having a strong paradigm, being straightforward or outspoken. For those who were active as members of Aisyah, there was no doubt about the quality of leadership.

As shown by the results of the child nodes in Figure 4.9, the Head and the Secretary of the Yogyakarta Elementary and Secondary Education Council explained that Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools provide support in the formation of principal leadership strategies, including development opportunities, such as Masters scholarship, implementation of training, cadreship, refreshment or rolling transfers to other schools, not differentiating support and provision of the same policies between men and women principals. In addition, PDM assists principals, including financial support from LAZISMU for schools that have a budget deficit, providing direction in solving problems, routine evaluations, forming units and coordinators, as well as mentoring new principals.

Performance improvements during leadership at Sukonandi include excellent programs such as international classes, student exchange to Malaysia, employee welfare, and use of technology. The principal in Demangan observed improvements in complete learning facilities and employee welfare, while the principal in Purbayan succeeded in improving performance by using technology in computer classes for students, as well as transforming financial management from a manual to a digital system through data recording and payments using bank transfers.

Based on the results of the child nodes in Figure 4.11, the indicators of employee, student, and parent satisfaction with the principal performance include a large number of students, building trust, and no employee moving. At the end of each school year, the school distributes a satisfaction questionnaire through Google Form to parents of students for evaluation, with the aim of improving the quality of the school and the performance of the principal in the following year.

As shown in the results of child nodes in Figure 4.12, the Head and the Secretary of the Yogyakarta Elementary and Secondary Education Council explained that the contribution of women principals to the progress of education was enhanced by a supportive social background, well-managed school quality, and supervision from Muhammadiyah Organization. Millennial women principals tend to have a participatory leadership style, are open to innovation, and adaptive to technology. Other characteristics include engaging employees in decision-making, creating an inclusive work atmosphere, as well as being more empathetic in understanding the needs of students and employees. The use of technology is also a major focus in school management and curriculum development, in line with the needs of students from Generations Alpha and Z. The results of this study identified propositions related to leadership of millennial women at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools.

## **Proposition Discussion**

### **Proposition 1a (PPN 1a): Sexism influences leadership of millennial women principals at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City**

At Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City, sexism is not a significant factor that weakens leadership of millennial women principals. The inclusive and progressive environment provides structural and non-structural support that enables women to lead effectively. By relying on competence, family support, and organization, women principals have successfully overcome informal challenges as well as built professional and influential leadership.

### **Proposition 1b (PPN 1b): Ageism influences leadership of millennial women principals at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City**

Ageism in leadership of millennial women principals in Muhammadiyah environment is not a permanent challenge that weakens the role. Support from the progressive and inclusive Muhammadiyah Organization, as well as the ability to continue learning, adapting, and working together with all parties, makes this challenge a motivation. With a professional, collaborative, and innovative approach, millennial women principals have succeeded in building credibility and proving leadership capacity in developing schools significantly.

### **Proposition 2a (PPN 2a): Emotional/esteem support supports leadership of millennial women principals at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City**

Emotional/esteem support provided by family and organization contributes significantly to supporting leadership of millennial women principals in Muhammadiyah. This support not only helps face challenges mentally and emotionally but also strengthens leadership capacity in achieving educational goals and managing schools effectively. With a balance between family support and organization appreciation, women principals can demonstrate resilient and innovative leadership in a dynamic educational environment.

### **Proposition 2b (PPN 2b): Instrumental support supports leadership of millennial women principals at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City**

Instrumental support including professional cooperation, human resource management, provision of facilities and infrastructure, as well as family assistance, significantly contribute to leadership of millennial women principals in Muhammadiyah. This support enables focus on carrying out roles more effectively, adaptively, and innovatively. Therefore, women principals can overcome the challenges faced and advance the quality of education in the schools.

### **Proposition 2c (PPN 2c): Informational Support Supports Leadership of Millennial Women Principals at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City**

Information support plays a strategic role in supporting leadership of women principals in Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City. The use of modern technology, professional forums, and inclusive communication approaches enable women principals to overcome information barriers, build social networks, and improve leadership capacity. With strong informational support, women principals can solve problems effectively, develop innovative programs, and build transparent communication with all school stakeholders.

**Proposition 2d (PPN 2d): Companionship Support Supports Leadership of Millennial Women Principals at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City**

Companionship support in the form of guidance, collaboration, and professional networking significantly contributed to the effectiveness of women principals leadership at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools. This support allows principals to obtain solutions from mentors, broaden horizons through networking, and use organization resources for school development. With this support, women principals are not only able to overcome leadership challenges but also create innovations and successes that have a positive impact on school development.

**Proposition 3a (PPN 3a): Cognition Supports the Ability of Millennial Women Principals to Lead Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City**

The cognitive abilities possessed by millennial women principals at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City were attributed to a commitment to continue learning, adapting, and innovating. Workshops, professional networks, evaluations, and the use of modern learning resources are the main supporting factors in improving critical thinking and problem-solving skills. With this approach, principals can lead effectively, create innovative solutions, and develop better educational organizations. This study is in line with a recent study by Meyers et al. (2023), which showed leaders with high Personal Growth Initiative have better abilities in dealing with stress, managing teams, and using strategic opportunities for organizational progress.

**Proposition 3b (PPN 3b): Behavior Supports The Ability of Millennial Women Principals to Lead Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City**

Leadership behavior demonstrated at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City shows that millennial women principals can apply the principles of professionalism in school management. Through an adaptive, evaluative, and empathetic approach, the principal created a structured, transparent, and collaborative work environment. This study supports the results of Lestari and Prasetyo (2022), stating that leadership based on professional behavior has a significant impact on increasing organizational effectiveness and building harmonious working relationships. Therefore, behavior is an important foundation in supporting the success of leadership of millennial women principals.

**Proposition 3c (PPN 3c): Attitude Supports the Ability of Millennial Women Principals to Lead Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City**

Leadership attitudes demonstrated by millennial women principals demonstrate the ability to adapt to situations, maintain professionalism, and create a harmonious work environment. Meyers et al. (2023) and Fitriani et al. (2022) stated that adaptive and positive attitude in leadership contributed significantly to increasing organizational effectiveness. This attitude not only supports the success of school management but also increases stakeholder trust, ensuring that schools develop sustainably.

**Proposition 3d (PPN 3d): Motivation supports the Ability of Millennial Women Principals to Lead Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City**

Motivation provided by millennial women principals included a combination of personal approaches, appreciation, and role models through real actions. By creating a supportive environment, principals have succeeded in increasing employee morale, strengthening loyalty,

and encouraging productivity in schools. Meyers et al. (2023) showed that personal and inspirational motivation could form a collaborative and professional work culture. Motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, is an important foundation in leading educational organizations effectively and sustainably.

**Proposition 4a (PPN 4a): External Leadership Behavior of Millennial Women Principals Contributes to Managing Schools at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City**

The external leadership behavior implemented by millennial women principals at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools showed that participatory and collaborative leadership, supported by effective communication and professional networks contributed majorly to the management of more inclusive, adaptive, and highly competitive schools. A recent study by Wang et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of participative leadership in creating a sustainable and progressive organizational culture.

**Proposition 4b (PPN 4b): Task-Oriented Behavior of Millennial Women Principals Contributes To Managing Schools at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City**

The task-oriented behavior implemented has shown success in creating a productive, harmonious, and results-oriented work environment. This approach supported the achievement of strategic goals, increased management efficiency, and had a positive impact on the quality of education.

**Proposition 4c (PPN 4c): Change-Oriented Behavior of Millennial Women Principals Contributes to Managing Schools at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City**

Leadership of millennial women at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools reflected how change-oriented behavior could create positive change. Innovative strategies, cross-organizational collaboration, and use of modern technology were identified as keys to success in improving the quality of education and the efficiency of school management. This approach builds a solid foundation for sustainable education development and can answer the challenges of the modern era (Kurniawan & Anjani, 2020; Mulyana & Rahmawati, 2019).

**Millennial Principals Contribute to Managing Schools at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City**

Relations-oriented behavior implemented by millennial women principals not only created a supportive work environment but also increased teacher loyalty, strengthened relationships between organizations, and created innovations relevant to current developments. This approach ensured that the focus on interpersonal relationships was balanced with the achievement of organizational goals, creating sustainability in school management and improving the quality of education (Wijayanti & Prasetya, 2021; Suharno & Triyono, 2021).

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, millennial women principals at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Yogyakarta City did not face challenges such as sexism or ageism, despite initial skepticism

regarding the experiences. Support from family, professional networks, and technology helped develop, prove competence, and advance the schools. Leadership of millennial women principals was effective with four key elements namely cognition, behavior, attitude, and motivation. Women principals continued to develop competence, built an adaptive work environment, and motivated the team through role models and appreciation, which contributed to better quality education. Leadership used a task-based approach, change, relationships, and external collaboration. The strategies entailed implementing efficient management, innovation, employee welfare, and collaboration with external organizations, which strengthened the quality of education and the sustainability of the organization.

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