Students' Perceptions of Women's Inclusive Leadership in Managing Study Programs in the Era of Higher Education Transformation

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Abstract
This research aims to analyze students' perceptions of women's inclusive leadership in managing study programs in the era of higher education transformation. This phenomenon is relevant considering that women still experience underrepresentation in academic leadership positions even though they play an important role in supporting adaptive and equitable education governance. The research approach uses phenomenological qualitative methods to explore students' subjective experiences related to women's leadership practices. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation of study program academic activities, and document review, with final year student participants from graduate study programs led by women. The analysis was carried out using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) through the process of coding, categorization, and theme development. The results of the study identified four main themes: openness and accessibility, relational sensitivity and personal support, fairness and transparency in decision-making, and digital adaptive capacity. Students interpret women's leadership as a leadership model that is responsive, supportive, and empowerment-oriented, especially in the context of academic digitalization. These findings confirm that women's inclusive leadership contributes significantly to the creation of a safe, equitable, and collaborative academic environment. This study provides theoretical implications for strengthening the gender-based inclusive leadership literature, as well as practical implications for capacity building of women leaders in higher education digital governance. Follow-up research recommendations include cross-institutional exploration and comparative analysis between male and female leadership models in the context of educational transformation.

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1. Introduction

The transformation of higher education in the 21st century is accelerating with the digitization of the academic system, the expansion of access, and the increasing need for governance that is responsive to diversity and inclusivity (Bravo-Jaico et al., 2025). These changes not only affect learning practices, but also shift the paradigm of academic leadership that was previously rooted in masculine and hierarchical values (Abidin, Ghani, Pabbajah, & Fatmawati, 2023). In this context, women's leadership is increasingly prominent as a strategic theme, especially in key units such as study programs, given that women continue to experience underrepresentation in decision-making positions in global universities (Times Higher Education, 2024).

Although women now surpass men in higher education participation globally (Correa, Glas, & Opara, 2025), the leadership gap remains significant. Report Holon IQ (2024) shows that women's representation in educational leadership is still far from balanced. Similar conditions were found in Indonesia, according to a Kompas report, more female students than male students (Napitupulu, 2024), but female leadership in student organizations is only 18% in the Madura region (Azizah & Tianah, 2024). This inequality indicates that cultural, structural, and institutional barriers still limit women's opportunities to enter the academic leadership path.

In the digital age, inclusive leadership is becoming increasingly important to ensure that technological transformation is based on the principles of equity and broad participation. The concept of inclusive leadership refers to the leader's ability to foster a sense of psychological security, ensure the involvement of the whole individual, and create an environment that allows for optimal contributions from diverse backgrounds (Advance HE, 2024; Randel et al., 2017). Studies show that inclusive leadership improves creativity, performance, and organizational effectiveness (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, & Ziv, 2010). However, studies on how the dimension of inclusive leadership is appreciated by students in the context of study programs are still limited, especially in the era of digitalization of learning which requires adaptive and collaborative skills from academic leaders (Vanlommel, van den Boom-Muilenburg, & Kikken, 2025).

In particular, the research gap appears in three main aspects. First, the majority of previous research has focused on the experiences of women leaders towards the senior level (Thien et al., 2025), while the perception of students as the main stakeholder has not been widely investigated. Second, the literature has not explored the intersection between gender, inclusive leadership, and the digitalization of higher education, even though digital transformation demands a different leadership model than the previous era (Benavides, Tamayo Arias, Arango Serna, Branch Bedoya, & Burgos, 2020; Gkrimpizi, Peristeras, & Magnisalis, 2024). Third, there has been no study that specifically analyzes how students assess female leaders in carrying out managerial functions at the study program level—the operational unit that is the center of academic policy implementation, curriculum innovation, and digital adaptation.

The research gap is relevant in the Indonesian context, considering that women leaders still experience consistent stigmatization (Andajani, Hadiwirawan, & Sokang, 2016). In areas with strong communal cultures such as Madura, family values and religious interpretations have shaped perceptions of the feasibility of women's leadership (Azizah & Tianah, 2024). This condition shows that understanding student perceptions is important to assess whether these barriers are still reproduced in the daily academic context, especially in the era of higher education transformation that is increasingly digital and inclusive.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to analyze students' perceptions of women's inclusive leadership in managing study programs in the era of higher education transformation. This research provides three main contributions. First, theoretical contributions through mapping how inclusive leadership theory is applied in the context of gender and digitalization, an area that has not been widely studied. Second, empirical contributions by presenting the perspective of students as the main user group of academic services. Third, practical contributions through policy recommendations to strengthen women's leadership in Indonesian universities, in line with the SDG 4 and SDG 5 agendas as well as national higher education reforms such as digitalization of learning. Thus, this research not only fills theoretical and empirical gaps, but also supports transformative efforts towards a more equitable and sustainable higher education system.

2. Research Methods

This research uses a phenomenological qualitative approach to explore in depth the experiences, perceptions, and construction of students' meanings related to inclusive women's leadership in study programs in Islamic higher education. Phenomenological design was chosen because it is able to reveal the essence of an individual's subjective experience of a complex social phenomenon, such as leadership practices in the context of collectivist culture (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is relevant to analyzing how students interpret

women's leadership behavior, ranging from participation, empathy, justice, to openness in the dynamics of digital-based higher education transformation.

The research participants consisted of final year students from three postgraduate study programs at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University Yogyakarta led by women. The determination of informants is carried out by technique purposive sampling, With the following criteria: (1) interacting directly with the head of the women's study program, (2) having at least three semesters of academic experience, and (3) being willing to provide information reflectively. Approach Purposive is considered effective because it allows the selection of informants who understand the phenomenon in depth (Patton, 2015). The number of participants is not rigidly determined, following the principle Information power, that is, the more specific the focus of the research and the stronger the informant's experience, the smaller the number of participants (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016).

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, observation limited to the academic activities of the study program, and review of documents such as academic policies and activity reports. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide the flexibility to explore personal narratives while maintaining thematic consistency (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The entire interview lasted 45–60 minutes, was recorded with the informant's permission, and transcribed verbatim. Observations focused on patterns of interaction, communication, and decision-making by women leaders, while documents assisted in triangulation to ensure data reliability.

Data analysis is carried out using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) through the stages: repeated reading, initial coding, theme development, theme clustering, and in-depth interpretation of the meaning of the student experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The analysis is performed using the help of Software Nvivo 15 to ensure consistency and depth of interpretation. The validity of the data is maintained using source triangulation, member checking, and trail audits. Triangulation was carried out by comparing interview narratives, observation results, and supporting documents, while member checking was used to validate the researcher's interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This procedure ensures that interpretations of inclusive women's leadership are credible, accountable, and in accordance with the rigor standards of international qualitative research.

3. Results and Discussion

General Findings from Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis based on phenomenology using NVivo 15 was carried out to explore in depth the experiences of students related to women's inclusive leadership in managing study programs. The process of open coding and categorization produces structured patterns of meaning, which are then visualized through the word cloud as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Word Cloud Visualization

The word cloud visualization in Figure 1 shows the set of terms with the highest frequency of occurrence in student interview transcripts. Words such as "experience," "academic," "digital," "justice," "openness," "support," "transparency," "accessibility," and "relational," appear dominantly, describing how students interpret the women's leadership practices they experience in their daily academic interactions.

These preliminary findings indicate that women's leadership is perceived not just as an administrative or managerial function, but as a relational experience built through accessibility, responsiveness, and moral commitment in assisting students. The dominance of the words "support," "openness," and "relational" suggests that students feel a warm and inclusive leadership atmosphere, while terms such as "transparency," and "justice," reflect informants' attention to aspects of accountability, objectivity, and fair procedures in academic decisions.

In addition, the word "digital" and "Adaptive" What emerged is quite strong that students assess the capacity of women leaders in responding to the demands of digital transformation as an important part of the effectiveness of contemporary leadership. This is in line with the context of changes in higher education which increasingly rely on academic information systems, digital communication, and information technology-based governance (Benavides et al., 2020; Gkrimpizi et al., 2024).

Based on the pattern of word occurrence in the word cloud and the results of thematic coding using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), four main themes were formed empirically and became the basis for the discussion of this research, namely: (1) openness and accessibility in leadership; (2) relational sensitivity and more personalized academic support; (3) the perception of fairness and transparency in decision-making; and (4) digital adaptive capacity in the era of higher education transformation. The four themes reflect students' perceptions of women's inclusive leadership in managing study programs in the era of higher education transformation.

Openness and Accessibility in Leadership

Students describe women leaders at the study program level as open, accessible, and responsive to academic issues. They emphasized that two-way communication became a prominent characteristic that distinguished women's leadership styles from the hierarchical and masculine patterns that were previously dominant in college structures. Students stated that the head of the women's study program tends to provide a space for informal dialogue, respond quickly to messages through digital platforms such as WhatsApp and involve students directly in helping in the preparation of the curriculum and other academic activities. One of the informants stated: *"Female leaders do not distance themselves from students but instead create an atmosphere where we feel comfortable asking questions and expressing opinions without fear of being seen as intrusive."*

These findings show conformity with the dimensions Openness and Availability in inclusive leadership theory, which states that inclusive leaders display an open attitude towards new ideas and facilitate the active participation of members of the organization (Carmeli et al., 2010). In the context of Islamic higher education, this openness is also related to the ethos of service-based leadership (Serving Leadership Ethic) which is often associated with religious values and the philosophy of mentoring in the tradition of Islamic boarding schools and contemporary Islamic institutions.

Students state that the openness of female leaders creates a sense of psychological security (Psychological Safety), which is a condition in which individuals feel free to express ideas, ask questions, or admit wrongdoing without fear of being judged or punished. This is consistent with the findings (Edmondson & Lei, 2014) that responsive and humble leaders are able to encourage interpersonal trust that is the basis for active involvement and innovation in learning organizations. In the digital era that demands rapid adaptation to technological changes, learning platforms, and academic systems, open communication is an important component so that students feel treated as academic partners (Academic Partners), not just a recipient of policies or administrative objects.

However, some students said that the openness sometimes caused Communication overload, which is a situation where students' expectations of the leader's response speed become very high, thus creating pressure on both sides. Some informants admitted that they sometimes sent messages outside of working hours and expected an immediate response, while female leaders felt obligated to always respond to maintain their reputation as caring leaders. This shows that while women's leadership is considered inclusive and responsive, there are still challenges in setting a healthy professional boundary between accessibility and emotional workload. This phenomenon is in line with the findings (Thien et al., 2025) which states that female

leaders often face excessive emotional pressure due to gender expectations to always appear responsive, empathetic, and supportive, even outside of formal work contexts.

Overall, the first theme emphasizes that the openness and accessibility of women leaders strengthen the dimension of empowering inclusion in inclusive leadership theory, namely the empowerment of organizational members through active participation and interpersonal trust. However, these findings also raise important issues regarding emotional labor and the need for institutional support to protect the well-being of women leaders amid the high demands of accessibility in the digital age.

Relational Sensitivity and More Personal Academic Support

Students assess that female leaders show a high level of relational sensitivity to their needs, both in academic and personal contexts. They feel listened to personally, especially when facing academic obstacles such as the stress of working on a final project, administrative difficulties, or financial constraints that affect study performance. This assessment shows an affective relationship between students and female leaders, who not only focus on formal academic aspects but also pay attention to the emotional well-being and living conditions of students holistically. An informant explained: *"Our female head of study program not only asked about the progress of the thesis, but also asked about her health, and the difficulties we were facing, so that we felt really cared about as students."*

These findings are consistent with studies (Randel et al., 2017) that inclusive leaders emphasize belongingness (sense of belonging) without eliminating Uniqueness (uniqueness) of individual identity. Students feel that the concern of women leaders makes them more motivated to complete their studies, more comfortable to express their opinions in academic forums, and more confident to actively participate in scientific activities such as seminars, publications, or research collaborations. This act of mindful leadership creates a learning ecosystem that fosters a sense of belonging (sense of ownership) to the study program and facilitates the creation of a supportive academic community.

In the context of collectivist culture such as that found in Indonesian Islamic higher education, relational sensitivity has important weight because of familial values (Familism), interpersonal closeness, and social harmony is considered the ideal basis of social interaction (Andajani et al., 2016). Women leaders are considered more capable of building an atmosphere Academic community harmonious and inclusive, where students feel valued not only as users of educational services, but as part of an intellectual family that supports each other and grows together. It reflects the integration between traditional religious values with modern leadership practices that emphasize participation and empowerment.

Some students also revealed that the academic support provided by female leaders directly facilitated their productivity in writing scientific articles, participating in international conferences, completing final project projects on time, or developing academic networks with other lecturers. Women leaders not only provide technical direction, but also moral support and motivation to keep trying despite challenges. This consistent attitude of attention and mentoring strengthens the Supportive Leadership that has been shown to improve academic achievement, student satisfaction, and study retention in a variety of global higher education contexts (Vanlommel et al., 2025).

However, some students noted that this highly personalized relational approach requires more time and energy from leaders, which sometimes slows down the decision-making process. Some informants admitted that *"although we are happy with the attention given, sometimes formal decisions such as approval are a little late because the head of the study program takes too much care of students' personal problems."* This shows that there is a trade-off between a deep relational leadership style and managerial efficiency in the context of program governance. However, students in general still consider that the positive impact of this relational approach is much greater than the challenges that arise, because they feel long-term benefits in the form of motivation, confidence, and better psychological well-being.

Perception of Fairness and Transparency in Decision Making

Students consider that women leaders show a strong commitment to the principles of fairness and transparency in academic policies at the study program level. They assessed that female leaders tend to follow procedures consistently, do not take sides with certain individuals or groups, and provide equal opportunities for all students to access information, facilities, and academic opportunities. Justice is especially seen in the distribution of information regarding scholarships, training, conferences, as well as in the determination of assignment loads, academic assessments, and resource allocation of study programs. An informant stated that: *"Our Head of Study Program is always open in conveying information and explaining the reasons behind every*

decision, including changes in schedules or new policies, so we are confident that the decision is taken with objective and fair consideration."

These findings reflect the dimensions of fairness in an inclusive leadership model, which emphasizes fair treatment, minimal bias, and based on clear and accountable procedures (Randel et al., 2017). Procedural justice and distributive justice have become increasingly essential in the digital age, when access to information, learning platforms, and academic services must be equal for all students regardless of gender background, regional origin, socio-economic status, or organizational affiliation. Transparency in decision communication also helps reduce the potential for rumors, suspicions, or internal conflicts among students.

Students also consider that women leaders are more consistent in following the formal academic regulations set by the university, as well as providing a clear and rational argumentative basis when making far-reaching decisions. This attitude increases the legitimacy of leadership and strengthens students' trust in the academic structure and governance of the study program. Some students compared their experiences with other male-led courses and stated that female leaders tended to be more detailed, more careful in examining documents, and more thorough in ensuring that no student was harmed due to lack of information or administrative errors.

However, students also admit that female leaders are more careful in every decision so as not to be considered biased or emotional, so they tend to re-examine decisions more and ask for more parties' opinions. This reflects the phenomenon gender expectation burden, where women leaders must prove their competence harder than men to gain equal recognition and legitimacy a pattern also found in global women's leadership studies (Bravo-Jaico et al., 2025; Correa et al., 2025).

Thus, these findings show that women leaders are not only perceived as fair and transparent by students but also go the extra mile to convince social and institutional structures that their leadership is legitimate, professional, and based on objective competence. These findings reinforce the argument that although women have demonstrated inclusive leadership qualities, structural and cultural barriers still significantly affect their leadership experiences.

Digital Adaptive Capacity in the Era of Higher Education Transformation

Students assessed that female leaders showed strong digital adaptive capacity in managing study programs, especially after the acceleration of the digitalization of higher education after the COVID-19 pandemic. They assessed that the head of the women's study program was able to facilitate the use of learning management platforms, cloud-based academic information systems, digital communication applications (WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Meet), as well as support students in accessing digital training and international webinars. Students also mentioned that women leaders are responsive to technological changes and are willing to learn to use new tools to improve administrative efficiency and the quality of academic services.

This adaptive capacity is in line with the literature showing that effective leadership in the digital age requires the ability to adapt, experiment with new technologies, and integrate technology into academic and managerial processes holistically (Benavides et al., 2020; Gkrimpizi et al., 2024). Leaders who can manage digital transformation not only understand the technical aspects of technology but are also able to facilitate organizational culture change towards an inclusive and collaborative digital learning culture.

Students also assessed that women leaders are more careful in monitoring digital systems such as online attendance, online-based assessments, assignment submissions through Google Drive, and academic administration based on integrated information systems. This rigor reinforces the perception that women have a more meticulous and detail-oriented tendency, a stereotype that students find positive and relevant to the demands of complex digital academic governance. Some informants stated that: *"our study program heads are very regular in setting schedules, reminding deadlines through WhatsApp groups, and ensuring that all digital documents are neatly stored on shared drives, so that we are never confused about looking for information."*

In addition, female leaders are also considered more proactive in facilitating students' digital literacy, for example by holding workshops on the use of data analysis software (SPSS, NVivo, Mendeley), training in writing scientific articles based on AI tools (Grammarly, ChatGPT), or tutorials on the use of international journal databases. This reflects a leadership orientation that not only focuses on administration, but also on empowering students to develop the digital competencies needed in the era of higher education transformation.

However, students noted that the digital competencies of women leaders still face structural and institutional barriers, such as a lack of formal training from universities on digital governance, limitations on campus technology infrastructure (slow internet, server down, limited access to premium software), and high

administrative workloads that reduce time for in-depth exploration of new technologies. This condition shows that even though women leaders have good personal adaptive capacity, they still need adequate institutional support in the form of continuous training, technology budget allocation, and reduction of routine administrative burdens to focus more on innovation and development of digital-based study programs.

Some students also mentioned that not all aspects of digitalization went smoothly, for example, there is still confusion in the use of new academic systems, or lack of socialization regarding changes in digital procedures. However, they appreciate that women leaders remain open to receiving feedback and are willing to improve the system based on student input, which reflects the attitude of continuous improvement and participatory leadership in the context of digital transformation.

4. Conclusions

This research shows that students interpret women's inclusive leadership at the study program level as a leadership model that emphasizes openness, relational sensitivity, justice, transparency, and adaptive ability to digitize higher education. These findings show that women's leadership not only functions administratively but also build a humanistic academic experience through responsive communication, emotional support, and personalized academic mentoring. Students' positive perceptions of procedural justice, accountability, and policy transparency strengthen the legitimacy of women leaders in academic governance. In addition, the digital adaptive capacity possessed by women leaders shows that they can respond to the demands of the technological transformation era and support the strengthening of an inclusive digital learning ecosystem.

Theoretically, the findings of this study enrich the literature on inclusive leadership by emphasizing how the dimensions of justice, relationality, and digital adaptivity interact in the context of women's leadership in Islamic higher education. In practical terms, the results of the study emphasized the importance of institutional support in the form of technology training, work policies that are sensitive to emotional burdens, and governance systems that strengthen participatory spaces for students. In policy, these results highlight the need for a national strategy to expand women's access to academic leadership positions and remove cultural and structural barriers that have limited their representation. This research opens opportunities for further studies on the dynamics of women's leadership at the faculty or university level, comparative exploration with male leaders, and a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between digitalization and inclusive leadership practices. Further studies can also expand the research context in public, private, or Islamic boarding schools to enrich understanding of how organizational culture affects the legitimacy and effectiveness of women's leadership.

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