

# The Impact of Religion and Culture on Leadership Styles of Women Policy-Makers in the Education Industry

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## Abstract

This qualitative study is purposive in sampling and explored a small number of women leaders in the education industry who are policymakers of Malay Muslim origin of their experiences in leadership positions. Policymaking here involved policies at the micro-level, which related more to their institutions and organizations. The researcher examined the women's leadership styles and the factors that influenced how they lead explicitly. Likewise, the researcher focused on how gender, culture, and religion may relate to women's experiences. Basic interpretive and descriptive qualitative research methods were employed. Data were collected through in-depth individual interviews. Participants interviewed included nine women leaders in the public and private sector who were either teachers/lecturers or administrators in the education industry. These women held positions within the top echelon of their organization or institution. The finding of this research indicated that gender, religion, and culture play an important role in women leadership experiences, therefore, themes emerged around influences on the women's approaches to leadership, with particular emphasis on the role of the larger environment in impacting women's leadership behaviors. To further focus on the impact of culture and religion on women's leadership styles, the researcher conducted a focused discussion group on the second group of Malay Muslim women leaders. This group of women leaders comprised mainly of women leaders who are department and section heads but still involved in policymaking decision albeit within their department or sections. This study can provide insight into the landscape of women's leadership roles and how to support these leaders.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Women Leader, religion and culture in Leadership

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## ■ 1.0 INTRODUCTION

It is a worldwide phenomenon that women are underrepresented in leadership positions. Working women, who try to climb the leadership ladder face many challenges, including having to navigate the

male-normed hierarchical leadership structures (McIntosh, 1995) as well as having to carry the greater burden of home and child-care responsibilities (Eddy & Cox, 2008). Due to stereotyping and discrimination held, the leadership position hindered women's access (De La Rey, 2005). Yet, Malaysian women out-rank many western countries in their numbers in certain male-dominated fields, such as science, technology, engineering, and math fields (NSF, 2010). Thus, assertive behavior can lessen women leaders' chances for advancing in her career or getting a job also; verbally fearsome others can shake women's influences (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

This actualization of women in a predominantly Muslim country is a phenomenon that bears closer examination, as the possibility exists that the centrality of Islam and/or the noted tolerance of the Malay culture might account for some of the rises in women in leadership positions here. Certainly, it is a trend that should be shared with the western academic world, which prides itself on liberal attitudes towards women, yet trails behind Malaysia in gender equity. Therefore, this study seeks to identify the common and unique traits, influences, goals, and themes among Malay women leaders in various sectors of educational policy-setting in Malaysia, with the hope of gaining knowledge about the leadership styles of these women that can contribute to the actualization of women on the national and international scales.

## ■ 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The research carried out by (Haddad & Demskey, 1995) reflected a general underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in education. Haddad & Demskey (1995) continued that in educational planning, the important part would be the policy process, where it is of the essence to illuminate the concepts of policy and policy-making beforehand. They (Haddad & Demskey, 1995) signified policy as functionality of results that come from precise or vague individual or group decisions that lead for assisting future results, induct or restrain action, or conduct implementation of previous decisions hence before one can design implementation and evaluation procedures well in any planning cycle and planners, policy-making is the first step that must be obliged for the dynamics of policy formulation.

According to Kiamba (2008), the number of female leaders has increased, but there is still a belief that the male makes better leaders than women. In concurrence with this, a recent study (Abdul Ghani Azmi, Syed Ismail, and Basir, 2012) revealed that women at the top management in Malaysia have increased to 32.3 percent. Meanwhile, women at the decision-making level in the Malaysian public sector are only 20 percent of the overall workforce. The government of Malaysia recognizes the role of women leaders and in its 10th Malaysian Plan Report stated that women should be provided with opportunities and environment mindset to enable them to get involved actively in the national development process. This reflects Malaysia's government puts a serious effort to enhance the numbers of women's involvement in the decision-making level (Abdul Ghani Azmi, Syed Ismail, and Basir, 2012).

In defining leadership in Islam, previous research affirmed that Muslims base their behavior as a leader and/or as follower upon the Word of God as discovered in the Qur'an (Beekun and Badawi, 1999b as cited in Faris & Parry, 2011). Leadership in Islam is considered as a trust and a responsibility. A leader is required to meet his obligations to God, the Supreme Power as well as to discharge his duties towards his followers to the best of his abilities (Khan, 2007 as cited in Faris & Parry, 2011). Furthermore, by being a Muslim, religious social norms are implanted in their life such as following the lead of the prophet Muhammad that include intention (niyat) underlying every act, proficiency (Ihsan), sincerity (ikhlas), piety (taqwa), justice (adl), truthfulness (sidk), patience (sabar), consulting (syura), and so forth. Therefore, Malay leaders have Islamic faith and most of them mentioned Malay leaders use Islam as their guide to lead their people (Low, 2013).

Cultural values are always derived from the religion itself. The Malay is always presumed to be religious people (Zawawi, 2008). Malay leaders practice or try to do what they believe in and they will put some of their values into practice. Low (2011) added, the Malays are said to be united and cooperative while strong because of its ubiquitous set of core values, which the leaders supply, with the tail trailing the head. The Malays' cultural values tended to focus on displaying proper etiquette, hence when socializing with other people; the Malays practice accommodating, affiliation, appreciative, filial piety, and obedience values (Zawawi, 2008).

In leadership practices, Malay women are fairer. The Malay women often believe that their main role is to help the community members come together rather than pay too much attention to themselves as a way to strengthen the ability of the group. The difference between Malay men and women leaders arise from women experiencing motherhood and from women's nurturing nature (Hassan & Silong, 2008). Unin (2014) studied Malay women and concluded that Malay women learn to be a leader through their experiences in living. When they learned to work through impossibility, they sustained and balanced the tensions. In learning to negotiate and balance their professional and traditional roles by holding onto demands in contradictory relations to one another. Through the commitment, their learning was central to the processes by which they learned to lead in contributed to their ability to navigate the complex social roles as women leaders in a male-dominated and hierarchical society.

### ■ 3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is purely based on a qualitative method that measures the influences of religion and culture in the leadership styles of women. The participants were nine women leaders from different backgrounds of education organizations who were responsible for significant leadership positions in their educational organizations in Malaysia. Data were gathered through open-ended qualitative interviews with all participants. The list of interview questions was given to two peer reviewers for feedback and revision. Towards that, we created an interview template using the specific questions to be asked during the interviews. The one-on-one interview protocol included 10 questions that focused on the job responsibilities which relate to policy-making, their career path, reasons for pursuing the position, their leadership styles, interaction with the members in organization, reaction from their leadership approaches included gender issue, the expectation on how they lead from others, the ways on how they overcome obstacles, their experiences influenced by culture, religion in leadership, and messages to future women leaders. To further aid the research with particular reference to the influences of gender, culture, and religion on leadership styles of women in the education industry, a focus group discussion (FGD) was held. The focus group discussion examined the successes and challenges the women have faced in their roles and the perceived influence of gender, religion, and culture on their leadership experiences. The FGD were separated into 2 groups to discuss and debate on the highlighted issues. The participants of the FGD were women leaders in the education industry who held positions, which involved policy-making decisions at departmental levels. Altogether 9 women participated in the FGD. The FGD was videotaped and transcribed. The transcribed data was coded and analyzed and compared with the data collected from the individual interviews carried out.

## ■ 4.0 FINDINGS AND RESULTS

This section discusses the key findings from the research with a focus on identified patterns and themes from the research and key quotes and examples where relevant; the findings related to the job responsibilities which relate to policy-making of women leaders, a career path with formal leadership roles, and culture or religion influences in women leadership styles.

### ■ 4.1 FINDINGS FROM INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

Throughout this section, code names will be used to identify the nine participants. The code names are as below:

Participant	Code names
Participant 1	PS 1.1 (Public School)
Participant 2	PS 1.2 (Public School)
Participant 3	IPTA 1.1 (Public Institute of Higher Education)
Participant 4	IPTA 1.2 (Public University)
Participant 5	IPTS 1.1 (Private University)
Participant 6	GEA 1.1 (Government Education Agency)
Participant 7	GEA 1.2 (Government Education Agency)
Participant 8	VS 1.1 (Private School)
Participant 9	GEA 1.3 (Government Education Agency)

Table 1: Code names for Participants

#### 1. Profile of Participants

Nine participants were involved in this study. A brief description of the participants is provided below:

Code Name	Age	Present Status	Work Experience in a related field
PS 1.1	Early 50	Headmistress	25 years
PS 1.2	Mid 40	Head of Student Affairs	14 years
IPTA 1.1	Early 50	Head of College	25 years
IPTA 1.2	Early 50	Deputy Dean	20 years
IPTS 1.1	Late 50	Research Manager	27 years
GEA 1.1	Early 50	Director	11 years
GEA 1.2	Mid 50	Director	32 years
VS 1.1	Mid 50	Headmistress	30 years
GEA 1.3	Early 50	Director	28 years

Table 2: Profile of Participants

#### 2. Job Responsibilities of the Participants

Since these women are experienced in leading people, naturally they are comfortable and confident in their present position (refer table 2). Their current position is bound to government policies as well as academic, operations, administration, student affairs and community involvement at the organizational level. The figure below shows that the respondents' responsibilities involved more in the management of their organization (50%) followed by implementing the government policies (25%). Other than that their job responsibilities included student affairs or welfare (17%) and community awareness

(8%).

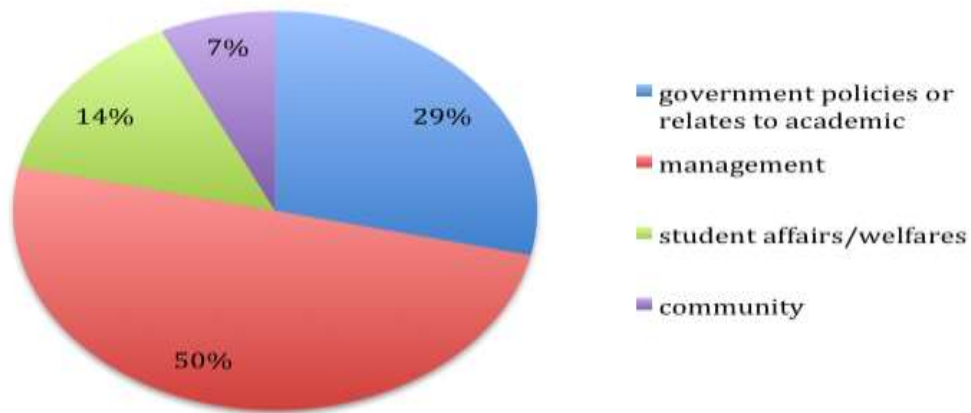


Figure 1: Job Responsibilities

### **Government and Organizational Policies**

All the respondents were involved in upholding and implementing Government policies, which affect their organization. Nevertheless, they were also involved largely in setting up policies and guidelines in the management and running of their organizations. These women had to ensure that such organizational policies were in place and adhered to.

Four of the nine women leaders claimed that their job responsibilities need them to implement government policies. The government policies required them to rule their organization by following the guidelines given by the government. When asked about their main responsibilities, PS 1.1, GEA 1.1, and GEA 1.2 quoted as below:

“I’m as a headmistress for this school is recognized as an implementer of the government policies and work hard towards building up the school.” (Respondent PS 1.1)

“That will be to the daily running of X. When there are decisions made at the highest level we have to execute. We also put up proposals to the department either at the director's meeting or the state directors meet and ministry evaluator meeting with regards to the training program, and all other things.” (Respondent GEA 1.1)

“Well in terms of my responsibility, it is from policy to implementation to sustaining to improvement....to design this program from inception until now. I am also involved in the design of both infrastructure and organizational structure.” (Respondent GEA 1.2)

### **Management**

Except for one, all respondents were involved in conducting the management aspect of their organization, which incorporated operation and administration management. Quotations from some of the respondents are as follows:

“Reskilling the teachers. There are several responsibility aspects which include a financial inspector, students’ welfare, school’s cleanliness, and a conducive and safe school environment.” (Respondent PS 1.1)

“We need to ensure that our students are marketable when they are graduated, and the industry will accept them...Our vision here is the same as in X..... but we support the vision on the education perspective, to become a leading higher education institution of choice. X is divided into education, entrepreneurship, management services, investment sector, and management of the operational budget as well.” (Respondent IPTA 1.1)

“My responsibility is basically to manage all the academic programs. In terms of managing the academic staff such as in terms of workload, I will assist the university and come out with a policy. ” (Respondent IPTA 1.2)

“Plan, develop and manage the University’s learning and library services for relevance to curriculum and research. Establish goals and measure accomplishments against recognized standards. Participate in University Senate and Senior Management Board discussions.” (Respondent IPTS 1.1)

“...Another responsibility that I have to look through for every year is in terms of finance.” (Respondent GEA 1.2)

“..To make sure the planning gets executed. To maintain the budget so the corporation does not go over budget.” (Respondent VS 1.1)

### **Student Affairs and Welfare**

Due to their involvement in the education industry, they needed to be aware of their students, two of the nine respondents answered that their responsibilities interlinked with student affairs and welfares. Their responses were as follows:

“.....students’ welfare, school’s cleanliness with a conducive study area and environment of the school are safe. Sift method of ongoing training (coaching and mentoring).” (Respondent PS 1.1)

“My overall role involves all matters relating to students which include their safety, cleanliness, and health. Other than that, I'm responsible for monitoring the student discipline and also SPBT (loan of textbooks). Cleanliness and health come together, when the student is clean then they are healthy. Moreover, we must know and take note of the incidents or phenomena that happened in Malaysia like for example, HIV, H1N1, haze, flood and more. Furthermore, I am also responsible to monitor the School Dress Code (this includes how students are expected to dress during school hours including traveling to and from school). If the school has a specific uniform I will be involved with the design and negotiating with the uniform suppliers that the school might enter into). ” (Respondent PS 1.2)

### ***3. Influences Of Religion And Culture In Leadership Styles***

The women's responses to questions about what has influenced how they lead can be categorized in two ways. These categories are the Malay's culture and religion influences.

#### **Malay's Culture Influences on Leadership Styles**

Based on the interviews, 57% of respondents signified that they agreed the Malay culture did play a role in their leadership styles. For example, give warm greetings like ‘Salam’ to other people (respondent GEA 1.1).

Respondent PS1.1 and GEA1.2 similarly stressed that being Malay gave them a high tolerance level and there can assimilate well with other races and religions.

Conversely, 43% disagreed that Malay culture influenced their leadership styles. Respondent

GEA 1.2 stated that "Culture is not affecting my leadership, I think being a Malay and women you have certain a label on your head that "Malay women are supposed to be like this, like this and this.." I'm not like that, I'm loud, I say my voice, I voice out my opinions, I argue with them, I think that this is right, you have to think about it lets say, I'm very firm in that."

Respondent GEA 1.2 shared the following remark she received when she was working in the corporate sector as the consultant, there were cynical remarks like "well you are Malay women, what do you know."

Despite that, some respondents mentioned that the Malay culture could be an obstacle, as a whole they agreed that the Malay culture could be utilized as an enhancer to their leadership styles and was unique to Malay women leaders.

**Religion Influences on Leadership Styles**

All of the respondents agreed religion was a strong influence on their leadership style. As a whole, all the respondents tended to assimilate the Islamic styles of leadership in most matters such as decision making and consensus-building. They also felt that religion was not a barrier to their gaining the present leadership position. There exist a consensus among the respondents that Malay and Islamic values are intertwined and such combined culture has somewhat shaped their leadership styles.

Respondent PS I.1Is quoted as follows: "Definitely religion and culture. Redha (pleased), Pasrah (submission). I think we are just like family and don't talk bad things about others even though we are angry. Here, we have more Malay teachers than Chinese and Indian teachers, but we manage to make Chinese, India, like our culture."

I have a religious background [Muslim] that helps me to see a problem as a challenge, not a problem; my religious roots are very, very deep (V.S 1.1)

**■ 4.2 FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION**

The discussion of this study is presented below where the discussion involved three issues, the influences from religion, culture, and gender in women's leadership styles. There were seven representatives from their organization to participate in this discussion. The discussion was grouped into two coerce have different ideas and thinking. Throughout this section, code names will be used to identify the seven participants. The code name is as below:

	<b>Code names</b>	<b>Position in organization</b>
<b>Group 1</b>		
Participant 1	R1.1	Head of Department
Participant 2	R1.2	Head of Department
Participant 3	R1.3	Head of Department
Participant 4	R1.4	Head of Programme
<b>Group 2</b>		
Participant 1	R2.1	Head of Department
Participant 2	R2.2	Head of Section
Participant 3	R2.3	Head of Section

Table 3: Code names for the discussion group

As a whole, the participants were not leading their organization but were departmental and section heads. The rationale of holding the FGD was not only to see a greater emphasis on the issues of religion, culture, and gender but also to compare the leadership levels of being in the top echelon and lower-level leadership.

### **Role of Religion**

Both group 1 and group 2 reported similar opinions when it came to the role of religion in their leadership styles.

From the discussion held, the findings based on their experience revealed that they always put religion as a top priority in their leadership styles. From the Islamic perspective, they mentioned that their leadership styles entail accountability, honesty, sincerity, consensus, and reward for both here and hereafter. In their experience women were very concerned with what happens in the hereafter, hence tended to a make-to-make decision based on the principles of Islam. They also based their leadership style on the teachings of Islam.

### **Role of Culture**

The respondents identified themselves with typical Malay values such as, give and take, accommodating, flexibility, and empathy with limitation, approachable, and also soft approach. As whole theses, women clarified that the identified virtues had somewhat shaped their leadership style. Such virtues were also identified by Hall (1976), Kim (1994) & Salleh (2005); based on their research on Malay women leaders.

### **Role of Gender**

Women characteristics as been discussed are mostly details, more dedicated, structured, systematic, more understanding, clear heart and mind, and positive-minded (respondent R1.2) like been cited in Kropiewnicki & Shapiro, (2001) and Noddings, (1984) (1992) research on the emergence of women leadership.

About their experience, the respondents realized that women leaders were less acceptable to their subordinates. There existed a perception of underestimating a woman leader. This, however, led them to strive and prove their worthiness as a women leader.

## **■ 5.0 CONCLUSION**

Interestingly it was noted that there was no difference between the leadership styles of teachers, lecturers, and administrators in the academic industry. It was also observed that the nine respondents had little issues on gender as compared to the respondents in the FGD. Members in the FGD reported they had trouble with subordinates, but such problems were settled upon them proving their ability to lead. As such it does reflect that the level of leadership plays a role. In can be concurred that upon reaching an organizational leadership position in the education industry, these women have proven their ability to lead and hence there is very little objection to their promotion.

All these women (Respondents and FGD) have succeeded in turning being Malay as well as ingraining Malay culture as positive traits in leadership styles and have adhered to the Islamic way of life. Fear and concern of hereafter have led these women to become leaders who are trustworthy and just.



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