

Women in Student Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities for Changing Campus Dynamics in the Modern Era

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ABSTRACT

The role of women in various aspects of life continues to grow in the modern era, yet their participation in student leadership within campus environments still faces significant challenges alongside emerging opportunities. Patriarchal cultures, gender stereotypes, and a lack of structural support often create barriers for women aspiring to leadership roles, particularly within student organizations. This study examines the role of women in student leadership, focusing on the challenges they encounter and the opportunities available in today's rapidly evolving context. As a microcosm of broader society with strategic potential to shape future leaders, student leadership reflects prevailing social dynamics. However, women frequently face structural, cultural, and personal hurdles that hinder their access to and success in leadership positions. Using a qualitative approach, this research incorporates in-depth interviews with female students active in campus organizations and an analysis of organizational policies and cultures. Findings reveal that while challenges such as gender stereotypes, underrepresentation, and double burdens persist, there is significant potential for women to contribute fresh perspectives, foster inclusivity, and drive positive changes in campus leadership dynamics. Consequently, women's leadership can play a transformative role in creating progressive, gender-equitable campuses and broader societal structures.

Keywords: *campus inclusivity, gender stereotypes, patriarchal culture, student leadership, women's leadership challenge*

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of women in student leadership holds important urgency in today's modern era. Despite advancements in gender equality, female students continue to face numerous obstacles in contributing effectively within leadership roles in campus organizations. This often happens in the structural, cultural, and even stereotype that develops which ultimately hinders women from contributing to activating their roles.

In general, leadership on campus covers a wide range of aspects. Although the number of female students is often greater than that of male students in many colleges, the representation of women in leadership positions is still relatively low. Data from

certain surveys, for example, show that only 30-35% of leadership positions in student organizations are filled by women, a figure that shows inequality in participation and contribution of authority, especially in a student organization.

For many women, stepping into leadership roles on campus means challenging deeply rooted expectations about gender roles, often requiring them to navigate environments where their authority may be questioned or undervalued. These challenges are further compounded by limited mentorship opportunities, insufficient structural support, and a lack of role models who can guide and inspire female student leaders to achieve their full potential.

The underrepresentation of women in campus leadership is not solely a matter of numbers. It also underscores deeper issues related to equitable opportunities and the recognition of women's potential as competent leaders. Addressing these challenges is vital for fostering a more inclusive campus environment and cultivating a diverse pool of future leaders. By tackling these barriers, campuses can pave the way for a more progressive and equitable student leadership landscape.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews with female students who are active in campus organizations, as well as analysis of organizational policies and culture. This research also delves deeply into the experiences, views, and challenges faced by women in student leadership. This approach was chosen because it is able to provide a holistic understanding of social and cultural phenomena that underlie women's participation in student organizations.

This study adopts a case study design focused on student organizations at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang. The case study approach facilitates an in-depth exploration of specific contexts and factors shaping women's involvement in student leadership. Data collection methods include, a) structured interviews: conducted with female student leaders to capture their experiences, challenges, and perspectives; b) policy and cultural analysis: examination of organizational structures and cultural norms impacting women's leadership opportunities; and c) participatory observation: researchers observe interaction patterns and campus dynamics to gain insights into the practical realities of women's leadership.

3. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

3.1. Challenges of Women in Student Leadership *Gender Stereotypes*

Gender stereotypes are often one of the significant challenges faced by women, especially in the scope of student leadership. Social perception in the public sphere often has views related to leadership that are

more suitable for men, this is a psychological and structural barrier for women to take leadership roles on campus.

Women are frequently viewed as more emotional and empathetic, which is often misconstrued as a lack of ability to make critical decisions or lead groups effectively. As a result, women are perceived as less competent to hold leadership positions, despite possessing the same skills and qualifications as their male counterparts. These stereotypes not only limit opportunities for women to emerge as leaders but also restrict them to lower-level, non-strategic roles within student organizations, reducing their active participation to mere membership rather than leadership.

Structural Barriers

Structural barriers present another significant challenge for women striving to achieve leadership roles within the campus environment. Despite the fact that female students often outnumber male students in many universities, they are frequently excluded from occupying strategic positions in student organizations. This exclusion often stems from organizational structures that prioritize male leadership or power distribution practices that fail to support women's active involvement.

In many student organizations, leadership roles are predominantly occupied by men, while women are relegated to supportive or secondary positions. These structural barriers perpetuate a cycle of inequality, making it difficult for women to bridge the gap without substantial changes in policies and organizational practices. Inclusive reforms are essential to empower women and enable their meaningful participation in student leadership.

Social and Cultural Factors

Prevailing social and cultural expectations also pose significant challenges for women seeking leadership roles on campus. Societal norms often confine women to traditional roles as caregivers or homemakers, which influences perceptions of their capabilities outside the domestic sphere, including in academic and organizational contexts.

In many communities, women are expected to handle "feminine" tasks, such as fostering social relationships or providing support, rather than taking on authoritative or decision-making roles. These expectations limit women's opportunities to lead and place additional pressure on them to balance responsibilities in student organizations with other societal obligations. Moreover, the traditional concept of leadership, often equated with masculinity, conflicts with the stereotypes of femininity, which emphasize gentleness and politeness. To foster equal opportunities for women in student leadership, a profound shift in these social and cultural expectations is necessary to dismantle the barriers that limit their participation in public life.

3.2. Opportunities for Women in Student Leadership

Increased Gender Awareness

The growing awareness of gender issues and the importance of gender equality in recent years has created new opportunities for women in student leadership. Campuses, including UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, are increasingly facilitating gender equity through programs, facilities, and policies that promote inclusivity. These initiatives serve as external factors that support both male and female students in building a more equitable leadership environment.

Additionally, external organizations have begun to emphasize the significance of empowering women by creating safe spaces, organizing gender-focused seminars, and establishing initiatives such as gender-specific Islamic schools. These efforts, though still on a small scale, contribute to fostering a culture of gender literacy and awareness. This growing understanding of gender issues acts as a catalyst for change, enabling women to step into leadership roles with greater confidence and effectiveness within student organizations.

Technology and Social Media Factors

The advent of technology and social media has created significant opportunities accessible to everyone, including students, across various aspects

of their lives. Digital platforms and social media provide women with the tools to organize, communicate, and build strong networks, making it easier for them to take on leadership roles.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of personal branding on social media has a profound impact on perceptions of an individual's electability. Women in leadership can leverage social media platforms to influence campus policies, drive social change, and enhance the visibility of their initiatives. These digital tools empower women to amplify their voices, showcase their capabilities, and contribute meaningfully to the campus environment.

Solidarity Among Women

Solidarity among women serves as a foundational internal factor that strengthens female leadership. Although often underestimated, the support women provide to one another can be instrumental in achieving leadership goals and shaping effective policies. Women's groups or communities on campus can be a powerful source of strength and encouragement, fostering collaboration and mutual support.

Through solidarity, women can share experiences, knowledge, and strategies to overcome challenges such as gender discrimination and limited access to leadership opportunities. By working together, women can advocate for equality, create meaningful change, and cultivate more inclusive leadership environments on campus. This collective effort not only addresses existing barriers but also inspires a broader movement toward gender-equitable leadership.

Research findings on women's leadership within the Student Republic at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang reveal a slow but discernible progression toward a more defined and active role for women in leadership. Each year, women are observed to play active roles in student leadership, though their representation remains limited in terms of position and proportion.

At the smallest organizational level, such as the Student Association, 1 or 2 female leaders are

typically entrusted with leading organizational activities. At the faculty level, female leadership is even rarer, with only one female leader emerging in certain years across all faculties at UIN Malang. Similarly, at the highest level of student governance—represented by the University Student Executive Board (DEMA-U)—female leadership has been observed only once in the past five years. The highest structural positions remain overwhelmingly dominated by men, and women are often excluded from opportunities to lead in these roles.

These findings underscore the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership across various levels, despite their evident capability and potential. Addressing these disparities requires continued efforts to challenge structural biases, cultivate inclusive organizational cultures, and empower women to assume leadership roles at all levels of student governance.

In reality, every female leader who attains a leadership position or chair on campus often faces rejection, even in the earliest stages of their candidacy. This rejection is prevalent across all levels, including study programs, faculties, and universities. The factors contributing to these rejections vary but are predominantly external, including peers, organizational dynamics, and general public stereotypes.

Rejection typically does not end with the initial stages; challenges persist throughout a woman's tenure as a leader. According to this research, 85% of female leaders encounter significant obstacles while leading their organizations. These challenges often originate from external sources, such as other organizations, and sometimes even from within the organizations they lead. Interviews revealed that female leaders frequently face a lack of trust and confidence from their colleagues. Moreover, they often endure verbal and non-verbal criticisms, including being labeled as overly emotional or "baperan" (sensitive) during decision-making processes.

The research also found that some female leaders experience psychological or mental strain, particularly when they struggle to resolve conflicts or provide effective problem-solving within their organizations. Despite these difficulties, women leaders play an essential role in fostering collaboration and supervising members within campus organizations. Female leaders often exhibit qualities such as maintaining a calm demeanor, fostering a family-like atmosphere, and serving as positive role models for their members.

Another significant strength of female leaders is their diligence in overseeing organizational activities, monitoring member performance, and ensuring the effective, efficient, and conducive operation of their teams. They tend to be detail-oriented, perfectionistic, and committed to achieving excellence in their work, which contributes to their organizations' success.

4. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

Women leaders play a pivotal role in the sustainability and success of organizations, including student organizations. In the modern era, women leaders face numerous challenges and opportunities, influenced by both internal and external organizational factors. These challenges are often amplified by societal expectations, but modern advancements such as technology and social media have provided new tools to help women overcome obstacles and thrive in leadership roles.

The author hopes this article will inspire current and aspiring women leaders, as well as all women who read it. May this article serve as a valuable resource in promoting and sustaining women's leadership in all aspects of life. The author also encourages future research to further prioritize the exploration of women's leadership, particularly in everyday contexts and critical roles, to continue advancing gender equity in leadership.

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