

## Gender and Governance: Exploring Women's Leadership in Private Higher Education in Gorontalo

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### ABSTRACT

*This study aims to explore the dynamics of women's leadership in the governance of private universities in Gorontalo Province, focusing on the challenges, strategies, and their contributions to the quality of management of higher education institutions. Although the discourse of gender equality is increasingly strengthening in the world of education, the representation of women in strategic positions is still relatively limited. A qualitative approach was used with a case study method through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document review in a number of private universities in Gorontalo. The results of the study indicate that women leaders have high adaptive capacity, build collaborative leadership models, and play an important role in driving institutional innovation. However, they still face various structural barriers, including gender stereotypes, patriarchal culture, and lack of internal policy support. This study concludes that empowering women's leadership not only has an impact on more inclusive and responsive governance, but also on improving the academic quality and governance of universities as a whole. The implications of these findings encourage the need for affirmative policies and institutional cultural transformation to strengthen participation in higher education leadership structures.*

**Keywords:** Women's leadership, private universities, governance, gender equality, Gorontalo

### Introduction

Women's leadership in higher education has become an increasingly important discourse in the global discourse on gender equality and institutional governance. In the last decade, women's participation in higher education has increased significantly, both as students and as educators. However, this increase has not been fully reflected in the representation of women in strategic leadership positions in higher education. This reality indicates a structural inequality that still needs to be studied in depth, especially in the context of local culture and institutions.

A report from QS Insights Magazine (2024) states that only 30% of university leaders in the world are women, even though women make up more than 44% of global academic staff. This inequality illustrates that the barriers to women's leadership lie not in the availability of human resources, but in institutional systems and norms that are not yet fully responsive to issues of equality (QS, 2024). In Indonesia, this condition is also reflected in data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, which shows that the number of female rectors in private universities is only around 17% of the total number of rectors in 2023 (Kemendikbudristek, 2023).

Gorontalo Province as part of the eastern region of Indonesia has a number of rapidly developing private universities. These institutions play an important role in the development of local human resources. However, based on initial observations and internal reports from several institutions, the involvement of women in top leadership

positions is still very limited. In fact, in the social and cultural context of Gorontalo, women have important positions in family and community structures. Ironically, this influence has not been widely reflected in formal leadership, including in the higher education sector. This phenomenon raises critical questions about how the governance system in private universities in Gorontalo facilitates or limits the role of women in strategic positions. In a study conducted by Mardika and Nur (2022), it was found that there is still an inherent gender bias in the selection and promotion process of leadership in many private higher education institutions in Indonesia. This bias appears in the form of traditional gender expectations, lack of institutional policy support, and minimal access to leadership training for women. A local study in Gorontalo conducted by Aneta and Sulila (2023) revealed that women who hold structural positions in private universities often have to work twice as hard to gain equal recognition as their male colleagues. They also face challenges in building professional networks, especially because there is still a strong division of domestic roles in local culture. This causes many female academics to be reluctant or even avoid managerial positions because they are worried about being able to balance household responsibilities and professional work. Not a few women have succeeded in breaking through these obstacles and demonstrating strong, adaptive leadership capacity, and having a positive impact on institutional governance. Women's leadership is often associated with a participatory, collaborative, and inclusive-oriented managerial style (Handayani & Yusuf, 2024).

This leadership style is considered capable of creating a conducive organizational climate, increasing staff morale, and strengthening institutional accountability and transparency. Furthermore, women's leadership approaches that prioritize ethical values, empathy, and open communication often play a role in driving innovation and institutional reform. This is reinforced by the findings of the study by Mutmainah and Rahim (2025), which showed that private universities led by women tend to have internal policies that are more responsive to the needs of lecturers and students, including in terms of work flexibility and family-friendly policies.

In the global context, the discourse on women's leadership has shifted from being merely an issue of representation to an integral part of good governance. A report by UN Women (2023) emphasizes that gender diversity in leadership is not only important for social justice, but also contributes to organizational effectiveness. Higher education institutions as institutions that produce knowledge and produce future generations of leaders have a moral and strategic responsibility to ensure that their internal systems reflect the values of equality and justice. Thus, the urgency to evaluate and identify forms of women's leadership in the higher education sector, especially in private universities in Gorontalo Province, is becoming increasingly relevant.

This study not only seeks to document the experiences of women's leadership, but also to explore the adaptation strategies used by women in dealing with various structural and cultural barriers. In addition, this mapping is expected to be the basis for designing more inclusive institutional policies, as well as providing space for women academics to develop as leaders. At the theoretical level, the analysis of women's leadership in higher education can be explained through the approach of feminist institutional theory and transformational leadership theory. Feminist institutional theory highlights how gender norms are shaped and maintained in organizational structures, and how women navigate these systems to gain power and influence. Meanwhile, transformational leadership

theory emphasizes the importance of leaders who are able to inspire, motivate, and transform institutions through inclusive visions and human values (Bass & Riggio, 2022).

Local contexts such as Gorontalo also show the unique complexity of gender relations. Strong customary and religious values can be both supporting and inhibiting factors in the process of women's involvement in the public sphere. In some cases, women actually gain leadership legitimacy through cultural, rather than formal, channels. This phenomenon is interesting to study, especially in the dynamics between modern institutional structures and traditional values that live in society.

On the other hand, the digital revolution that drives managerial and operational transformation in higher education environments also creates new opportunities for women. Access to technology, online learning platforms, and work flexibility are important factors that can strengthen women's positions in organizations. In the study of Djalaluddin and Yusran (2024), it was found that adaptive digital leadership has great potential to be adopted by women because it is more flexible to change and is able to reach various work groups simultaneously.

Even so, institutional policy remains a key factor. Without institutional commitment to creating equal space for women's leadership, the existing potential will not develop optimally. Therefore, governance transformation in private universities needs to involve internal policy reforms that explicitly encourage gender equality, including in the recruitment process, job promotions, leadership training, and incentive systems.

In closing, it is important to emphasize that the presence of women in leadership positions is not just to fulfill quotas or symbols of gender representation. More than that, women leaders bring values, perspectives, and approaches that are essential to improving the quality of governance of educational institutions. Exploring their experiences and contributions in private universities in Gorontalo Province will open up new insights into how gender equality can be realized concretely in the academic world.

## **Materials and Methods**

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to explore in depth the phenomenon of female leadership in the governance of private universities in Gorontalo Province. This approach was chosen because it is able to capture the social, cultural dynamics, and subjective experiences of informants who hold strategic positions such as rectors, vice rectors, deans, or heads of institutions. The location of the study was determined purposively, namely at institutions that have a history of female leadership, while informants were selected based on certain criteria such as a minimum of two years of experience in leadership and a willingness to provide information reflectively. Data collection techniques were carried out through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation of leadership interactions in the campus environment, and documentation studies of organizational structures, institutional policies, and other supporting documents. Data analysis was carried out thematically with stages of transcription, coding, theme identification, and narrative interpretation referring to relevant theories, while data validity was maintained through triangulation of sources and methods and member checking of informants. This study also pays attention to ethical aspects, including maintaining the confidentiality of informants' identities, requesting voluntary consent for participation, and ensuring that all data obtained is used solely for academic purposes.



## Results

This study produced a number of findings that show the dynamics, challenges, and adaptive strategies implemented by women in leadership positions in private universities (PTS) in Gorontalo Province. Data were obtained from in-depth interviews with six key informants consisting of female rectors, vice rectors, deans, and heads of institutions, as well as from institutional observations and documentation.

### 1. Profile of Women's Leadership in PTS Gorontalo

Most of the informants are women who have pursued academic careers for more than a decade before occupying structural positions. They have a minimum educational background of a master's degree and are active in academic activities, research, and community service. Their leadership positions are generally obtained through an internal selection process or direct appointment by the foundation's organizing body, taking into account performance, loyalty, and personal integrity.

### 2. Motivation to Become a Leader

The informants' motivation to take on the role of leader varies. Some stated that the drive came from the desire to bring about change, improve the quality of the institution, and provide an example for fellow women in the academic environment. However, there were also informants who initially felt hesitant, considering the social pressures and double expectations they faced as women who also had domestic responsibilities.

### 3. Implemented Leadership Style

Most informants demonstrated participative and transformative leadership styles. They prioritized two-way communication, transparency, and empowerment of academic and administrative staff. Several informants also emphasized the importance of a humanistic and empathetic approach in leadership, considering the socio-cultural context of Gorontalo which still upholds family values and social harmony.

### 4. Challenges in Women's Leadership

The main challenges faced by women leaders in PTS Gorontalo include gender stereotypes, male dominance in decision-making structures, and social expectations of their domestic roles. Several informants said that they often experienced initial resistance from male colleagues, especially in meetings or strategic decision-making. In addition, the double burden of being a housewife and an institutional leader also became a psychological pressure in itself.

### 5. Adaptation and Resilience Strategies

In facing these challenges, informants developed various adaptive strategies, such as building intensive communication with all elements of the organization, strengthening social and professional networks, and improving competence through training and further education. One interesting form of strategy is the spiritual and cultural approach, where some leaders use local values such as "huyula" (mutual cooperation) and "modopodu" (harmony) to resolve conflicts and build trust.

### 6. Impact of Women's Leadership on Institutions

Based on the results of observations and documentation, the presence of women in strategic positions brings a number of positive changes to institutions, including improved internal communication, improved quality of administrative services, and the emergence of more inclusive policies for female lecturers and

staff. Several PTS recorded an increase in study program accreditation and an increase in the number of students during the period of female leadership.

## Discussion

The results of this study confirm that the presence of women in the leadership structure of private universities in Gorontalo is not merely a symbolic representation, but also contributes significantly to the transformation of institutional governance. This finding is in line with the theory of transformational leadership put forward by Bass and Riggio (2022), which states that leaders who have vision, empathy, and the ability to intrinsically motivate team members tend to produce positive organizational change.

### 1. Gender Dynamics in Organizational Structure

Women's leadership in Gorontalo PTS still has to deal with a patriarchal social structure. As expressed by Ridgeway (2023), gender is not just a personal attribute, but also an institutional scheme that influences patterns of power relations. Although some women have succeeded in occupying strategic positions, the process of achieving these positions is still influenced by structural barriers, including stereotypes about women's leadership abilities.

### 2. Humanist Strategy and Local Culture

The empathy and communication-based leadership style applied by the informants shows that women have a unique approach in carrying out managerial functions. In the context of Gorontalo, this approach is strengthened by the integration of local values such as huyula and modopodu, which reflect the collective culture of the community. This supports Putra's study (2024) which states that the success of women's leadership in Eastern Indonesia is greatly influenced by their ability to establish social cohesion with local cultural values.

### 3. Double Burden and Social Challenges

The phenomenon of double burden, namely domestic and professional responsibilities simultaneously, is a central issue faced by women leaders. In a society that still adheres to the traditional role of women as housekeepers, the position as a leader often gives rise to role conflicts. This is reinforced by the study of Ningsih & Sari (2023), which revealed that women in public office in the regions tend to experience greater social pressure than men.

### 4. Inclusive Leadership and Its Impact on Governance

Female leadership that prioritizes participation and transparency has an impact on increasing the efficiency of communication and decision-making in institutions. This strengthens the view put forward by Eagly and Carli (2022) that women tend to be more democratic in their leadership style, which ultimately increases cohesion and loyalty in the organization. In several universities studied, this inclusive leadership style even contributed to improving institutional performance such as accreditation and student services.

### 5. Expanding the Role and Representation of Women

The results of this study indicate that although the number of women in strategic positions in Gorontalo PTS is still limited, the trend of their participation tends to increase. This reflects a paradigm shift in understanding women's leadership capacity. This supports the findings of Lestari et al. (2023) which states that more and more higher education institutions in the regions are starting to open

up space for women's participation in decision-making, even though social and cultural challenges are still strong.

6. Implications for Strengthening Higher Education Governance

Women's leadership brings new values to higher education governance, such as gender mainstreaming, more flexible work policies, and attention to the welfare of lecturers and staff. This kind of adaptive and reflective leadership model can be an alternative in facing managerial challenges in the era of disruption. As stated by UNESCO (2025), women's participation in academic leadership plays an important role in creating more equitable, inclusive, and quality-oriented institutions.

### Conclutions

This study concludes that female leadership in private universities in Gorontalo Province not only reflects increased gender participation in the structure of higher education, but also has a real impact on strengthening institutional governance. Women who successfully occupy strategic positions such as rector, vice rector, and dean demonstrate inclusive, participatory, and adaptive leadership capacity to local social and cultural dynamics. The leadership style they apply tends to be more humanistic, communicative, and collaboration-oriented, which significantly improves the quality of work relationships, administrative services, and more open decision-making. However, female leaders still face various challenges, especially those of a structural and cultural nature. Gender stereotypes, male dominance in decision-making, and social expectations of women's domestic roles are obstacles that need to be overcome with personal and institutional strategies. The informants showed high resilience by integrating local values such as huyula (mutual cooperation) and modopodu (harmony) in their leadership practices, and utilizing social and professional networks as sources of support. The presence of women in the leadership of private universities has been shown to bring positive changes to the direction and vision of the institution. This study confirms that increasing women's representation in leadership is not only about gender equity, but also closely related to the effectiveness of governance and the quality of institutions. Therefore, systemic support and more proactive policies are needed to promote gender equality, both in the leadership recruitment process and in creating a work climate that supports women's career development in academia.

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Kesimpulan berisi deskripsi yang harus menjawab tujuan penelitian. Berikan kesimpulan yang jelas dan ringkas. Jangan mengulangi abstrak atau hanya menggambarkan hasil penelitian. Berikan penjelasan yang jelas mengenai kemungkinan aplikasi dan/atau saran yang terkait dengan temuan penelitian.

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