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Women's Leadership in Islamic Higher Education: Barriers, Enablers, and Pathways to Empowerment

| Research Article |

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Fatmawati[1*], Humaira Ahmad[2], Athia Nur Kamilah[3]

[1] Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia
[2] University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan
[3] Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kedah, Malaysia

*Correspondence: fatmawati@uinjkt.ac.id

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Abstract: While scholarship on women's leadership in higher education has grown considerably, the lived experiences of women academic leaders in Islamic institutions remain undertheorised, especially with respect to the contradictory work that religion performs in shaping leadership trajectories. Drawing on intersectionality and theories of religious agency, this study explored how women academic leaders in Islamic higher education across Indonesia, Pakistan, and Malaysia negotiated barriers, mobilized enabling conditions, and built pathways to empowerment. The research used a phenomenological multiple-case design, with twelve leaders chosen through purposive sampling guided by Malterud's principle of information power. Data came from in-depth interviews, institutional documents, and observations, and were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach with NVivo 14. Credibility rested on triangulation, member checking, and collaborative coding within a multinational research team. The analysis identified four interlocking barrier categories spanning structural, interpretive, social-familial, and individual dimensions, together with four corresponding enabler categories. Cross-country asymmetries were pronounced. Structural barriers dominated in Pakistan, interpretive barriers in Indonesia, while Malaysia's 30% representation policy generated comparatively stronger institutional support. Religion worked paradoxically, serving as a personal source of empowerment for most participants while constraining others through patriarchal interpretations rather than through faith itself. The sample of twelve leaders supports analytical rather than statistical generalization and does not capture intra-national variation across pesantren, madrasa, and secular Islamic universities. The study advances the Dual Process Model of Religion and the Islamic Women's Leadership Empowerment Framework, offering policy-relevant insights for institutional reform across Muslim educational contexts.

Keywords: Women's Leadership, Women's Empowerment, Islamic Higher Education, Cross-Cultural Studies.

INTRODUCTION

The underrepresentation of women in senior academic leadership remains a structural feature of higher education worldwide. Global data show that women hold fewer than 30% of university vice-chancellor or rector positions, even within OECD systems, and the proportion narrows further in research-intensive and doctoral-granting institutions (Morley, 2018; O'Connor, 2020). The disparity sharpens in Muslim-majority contexts. In Indonesia, women held only 4 of 58 rectorships at the State Islamic Religious Universities (PTKIN) as of

2023, representing 6.9% of rectorships, despite the PTKIN system enrolling a majority-female student population (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023; Kementerian Agama RI, 2023). Pakistan reports comparable figures, with women comprising approximately 7% of vice-chancellors across public-sector universities (Higher Education Commission Pakistan, 2022; see Ali & Rasheed, 2021; Islam et al., 2023, for analyses of the academic-cultural environment that produces this gap), while Malaysia, despite its affirmative action policies, records women as 28% of top management in public universities, the highest of the three but still below the Cabinet's 30% target (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2023; Othman et al., 2023). These indicators position women's leadership in Islamic higher education as a persistent and measurable gender gap, not merely a normative concern.

The gap is particularly striking when viewed against the normative foundations of Islam itself. The Qur'an enjoins the pursuit of knowledge on all believers without gender distinction (Q.S. al-Mujadilah 58:11; Q.S. az-Zumar 39:9), and the Prophetic tradition declares that seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim (hadith reported by Ibn Majah; for historical context, see Sayeed, 2013). Classical Islamic scholarship records women of considerable intellectual and institutional authority: Aisha bint Abi Bakr as a primary transmitter of hadith, Fatima al-Fihri as founder of the al-Qarawiyyin mosque-university in 859 CE, and Zaynab bint al-Kamal as a muhaddith whose lectures drew male and female students alike (Sayeed, 2011, 2013; Geissinger, 2013). Contemporary Islamic feminist hermeneutics has recovered and extended these traditions, arguing that gender hierarchy in Muslim societies reflects patriarchal readings rather than Qur'anic principles (Wadud, 2006; Barlas, 2019; Mernissi, 1991). The distance between this normative record and current institutional practice is the problem that motivates this study.

Three reasons justify sustained scholarly attention to women's leadership, specifically in Islamic higher education. The first concerns the symbolic weight of these institutions. Islamic universities are not only sites of academic formation; they produce the ulama, educators, and policy actors who interpret religion for their societies (Nilan, 2017; Srimulyani, 2012). Who leads these institutions, therefore, is consequential for the way in which authoritative Islamic discourse is gendered. When leadership remains male, the interpretive authority that flows from these institutions retains a male imprint even on questions that directly affect women. Recent work on Indonesian State Islamic Universities has documented how the recent appointment of women rectors at UIN Jakarta and UIN Walisongo has shifted curricular priorities toward gender mainstreaming and women's studies programs (Srimulyani, 2012). The absence of women from these positions is thus a first-order question for the Islamic intellectual tradition itself, not a secondary matter of representation.

A second reason concerns the distinctive governance of Islamic higher education. These institutions operate under hybrid frameworks that blend bureaucratic state regulation, academic governance, and religious authority, each with its own logic of legitimation (Lukens-Bull, 2013; Shah, 2015). Women leaders in these settings must navigate bureaucratic performance metrics, peer-reviewed academic norms, and religious legitimacy simultaneously. Research on leadership in secular higher education, which centers on academic-managerial tension (Bush, 2020), does not capture this triple demand. Leadership frameworks that assume a clean separation between professional and religious authority therefore travel poorly into Islamic higher education, producing a theoretical gap that is not merely empirical but conceptual.

The third reason is practical. Understanding how women who succeed in these contexts have done so can inform both individual career strategies and institutional policy. Existing

scholarship tends to document what prevents women from advancing; far less systematic attention has been given to the resources, strategies, and interpretive moves that enable advancement despite those constraints (Meza-Mejia et al., 2023; Showunmi, 2021). Without this agentic dimension, the literature risks reproducing a deficit portrait of Muslim women in leadership that neither explains the successful cases nor offers policy traction.

The two most cited empirical contributions in this area, Shah (2018) and Almaki et al. (2016), illustrate both the progress and the limits of current knowledge. Shah's qualitative study of Muslim women school leaders in the United Kingdom identified identity work as central, arguing that her participants constructed a professional self that integrated Islamic commitments with leadership practice rather than subordinating one to the other. The study used in-depth interviews with twelve Muslim women school leaders and generated a typology of identity negotiation strategies that has informed subsequent research. However, it was limited to a single-country diasporic setting where Islam is a minority religion, and it focused on schools rather than universities, leaving open the question of whether these identity strategies operate in Muslim-majority higher education, where the institutional culture, governance form, and surrounding public theology all differ substantially. Almaki et al. (2016), mixed-methods analysis of Saudi women in higher education, documented barriers at socio-cultural, institutional, and personal levels and offered a useful typology that has been widely cited. Its reliance on predominantly closed-ended survey instruments produced frequency data and summary typologies rather than interpretive depth about the mechanisms at work, and its focus on Saudi Arabia's distinctive guardianship regime limits transferability to Muslim-majority contexts with different gender legal frameworks. Akbar et al. (2023) have since complicated this picture by showing that women's leadership flourishes in Saudi women-only universities and is most constrained in partially-segregated settings, suggesting that organizational form mediates the religious-cultural environment. Other contributions have added context-specific evidence from several Muslim-majority settings, most notably Malaysia (Hamzah et al., 2016) and Indonesia (Srimulyani, 2012), alongside broader feminist institutional analyses of higher education (O'Connor, 2020; Dehghanpour-Farashah, 2025), each valuable within its setting. What the field still lacks is comparative analytic work across multiple Muslim-majority contexts that can distinguish between generic and context-specific dynamics and specify the mechanisms by which religion becomes constraining or enabling in institutional environments. The present study addresses this gap.

Three gaps follow from this assessment, each with theoretical rather than only empirical consequences. The first is the persistence of single-country designs. Where studies are confined to one national setting, it is not possible to distinguish what is generic to women's leadership in Islamic higher education from what is specific to a given Islamic tradition, legal regime, or policy environment. The theoretical consequence is that the field cannot adjudicate between two competing interpretations of barriers: whether they express a common Islamic-patriarchal structure or whether they are produced by national-institutional configurations that happen to invoke Islamic legitimation. A cross-national comparative design is necessary to discriminate between these rival explanations.

The second gap concerns literature's dominant deficit orientation. Most studies catalog the factors that hold women back and treat agency as residual (Lahmar, 2024; Kamenou et al., 2013). This orientation is analytically consequential: by foregrounding barriers, the literature systematically underdescribes the enablers and strategies that explain the empirical cases of successful advancement. A theoretically coherent account must specify both sides of the leadership equation and the conditions under which enablers overcome barriers.

The third gap concerns the treatment of religion itself. Much of the literature positions Islam as either a uniform source of restriction or, in reactive counter-accounts, as a uniform source of liberation (Badran, 2011; Mir-Hosseini, 2011). Both positions are empirically unstable: the same religious tradition produces both constraint and resource within the same biographies. Without a theoretical apparatus that specifies when and how Islam takes one role or the other, the literature cannot account for the paradox that women leaders themselves report.

These three gaps suggest the need for a theoretical framework that operates at multiple levels and integrates interpretive and structural dimensions. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, recently extended for higher education contexts (Renn, 2023) and updated to account for technologized environments (Navarro & Tudge, 2023), is well-suited to the multi-level architecture of barriers and enablers and has been applied productively to women's careers in academia (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Kele et al., 2022). Its standard formulation, however, treats the macrosystem as a single layer of culture and ideology, which is insufficient in contexts where religious interpretation and cultural norms may diverge. Islamic feminist hermeneutics (Wadud, 2006; Barlas, 2019; Ahmed, 1992) provides the missing interpretive layer by distinguishing between patriarchal and egalitarian readings of the textual tradition and by showing how the dominance of readings is a historical and political achievement rather than a theological necessity. Combining the two frame positions, the study examines both the structural distribution of barriers and enablers across ecological levels and the interpretive mechanisms through which religious meaning is produced and contested within those levels. This theoretical integration is itself an analytic contribution of the study.

This study addresses these three gaps through a multi-site qualitative design spanning Indonesia, Pakistan, and Malaysia, three national settings chosen for their distinct Islamic traditions (Nusantara, South Asian, and Malay Islam) and policy environments (emerging gender mainstreaming, limited gender policies, and established affirmative action). The analytical frame draws on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Renn, 2023) and Islamic feminist hermeneutics (Wadud, 2006; Barlas, 2019; Ahmed, 2011) to trace how barriers and enablers operate across micro, meso, and macro levels and how religious interpretation mediates their effects.

The research questions follow directly from the three gaps and are: (1) What barriers do women face in attaining and exercising leadership in Islamic higher education across the three contexts, and how do these barrier configurations vary? (2) What factors enable their advancement to leadership positions? (3) What strategies do they employ to navigate constraints and achieve empowerment? (4) How and why do these experiences vary across the three national contexts? The study contributes two related models. The Dual Process Model of Religion specifies the interpretive conditions under which Islam becomes constraining or enabling in women's leadership, responding to the third gap by disaggregating a dimension of religion that prior work has often treated as a single variable. The Islamic Women's Leadership Empowerment Framework (IWLEF) integrates individual, institutional, social-familial, and interpretive capital into a four-dimensional account of empowerment in religious educational contexts, responding to the second gap by moving beyond the deficit frame. The cross-country comparative design itself responds to the first gap by enabling discrimination between generic and context-specific dynamics. The remainder of the article presents the method, results organized by research question, discussion of theoretical and practical implications, and conclusion with directions for further research.

METHOD

This study used a phenomenological multiple case design (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2016) to examine how women leaders in Islamic higher education across three Muslim-majority countries made sense of their leadership trajectories (Van Manen, 2023). Themes were developed inductively, with theoretical frameworks treated as sensitizing lenses rather than confirmatory grids (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Three institutions were purposively selected for variation in Islamic tradition, governance, and gender policy: Universitas Darunnajah in Jakarta (pesantren-rooted, private, emerging gender mainstreaming), the University of Management and Technology in Lahore (private, limited gender policy environment), and Universiti Utara Malaysia in Kedah (public, operating under the national 30% representation target). Following Yin's (2018) replication logic, common patterns across sites constitute literal replication, whereas differences indicate context-contingent mechanisms. The inferential target was analytical generalization to theory rather than statistical generalization (Halkier, 2011).

Twelve women leaders (four per site) were sampled through a purposive maximum-variation strategy (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Sample adequacy followed the information power principle (Malterud et al., 2016): a narrow aim, specific inclusion criteria (women in at least department-head-level posts for two years or longer), a theoretical frame combining ecological systems thinking with Islamic feminist hermeneutics, high interview quality, and a case-based analytic strategy together justify a small sample. Participants ranged in age from 38 to 58, with 10 doctorates and 2 master's degrees, and varied in discipline, leadership level, and marital status.

Recruitment proceeded in two stages. Institutional gatekeepers (Darunnajah University, UMT, and UUM). Snowball referrals were avoided to reduce gatekeeper-driven convergence. Ethics approval was secured at each partner institution. Participants gave written informed consent and were assigned the codes ID-1 to ID-4, PK-1 to PK-4, and MY-1 to MY-4. Three data sources enabled triangulation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the participant's preferred language (Indonesian, Urdu, Malay, or English) by the country co-author or a bilingual research assistant, using a protocol piloted with two early-career leaders outside the sample. Institutional documents (strategic plans, gender policies, organizational charts, annual reports) and field observations of meetings and events provided the second and third sources. The design supported data, method, and investigator triangulation in Denzin's typology (2017), as applied in recent qualitative Islamic studies (Hamdan, 2009; Shah, 2017). The team comprised three Muslim women academics from Indonesia, Pakistan, and Malaysia, all aligned with Islamic feminist interpretive traditions. Shared faith aided rapport, especially around hermeneutics and spirituality. Reflexive journals were kept, and interpretations were stress-tested against conservative and secular readings during coding meetings.

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six phases. After within-case coding by the country lead, the team held negotiated-agreement sessions on a 30% random subsample of transcripts; first-pass agreement reached 86%. Disagreements were resolved through discussion rather than mechanical kappa (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Cross-case comparison used matrix displays with themes by country (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018), interpreted through Yin's (2018) replication logic. NVivo 14 supported data management.

Trustworthiness drew on the criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985) and the markers of Tracy (2010). Credibility rested on three months of fieldwork per site, triangulation, and member checking with all twelve participants; eight returned substantive feedback, three of

which led to recoding (one in Indonesia, two in Pakistan) that refined the line between religion-based and culturally framed barriers. Transferability was supported by thick description and maximum-variation sampling. Dependability and confirmability were addressed through an NVivo audit trail of code memos and analytic decision logs.

RESULT

Barriers to Women's Leadership

The analysis identified four categories of barriers: socio-cultural, religious interpretation, institutional, and personal family. These operated across ecological system levels and combined in distinctive patterns in each national context. Cross-country variation was substantial and is central to the findings, rather than an incidental feature. Table 1 presents the frequency distribution of barrier sub-themes across the three settings; the analytic narrative below develops the qualitative texture behind these counts.

Socio-cultural barriers were the most pervasive category but took different forms across the three contexts. In Pakistan, all four participants described a structural expectation that senior authority is male, articulated both explicitly and through everyday interactional patterns. PK-2, a faculty dean in her mid-forties, described this as a patterned invalidation: "Every time I entered a senate meeting, it was not what I said that mattered first. It was whether the room had decided to hear me. For a woman, that is a decision that must be renewed in every meeting." The observation that authority must be continually re-established rather than assumed was echoed by PK-1 and PK-4, who reported that male colleagues would redirect questions originally posed to them toward a male associate. The Indonesian accounts shared the underlying patriarchal frame but filtered it through a pesantren habitus. ID-3, a department head at Darunnajah, explained: "The kyai tradition is still strong. Even when a woman holds the position, decisions are often referred through a male cleric before they are accepted. That is not hostility. It is simply how legitimacy still flows." Malaysian participants reported a weaker form of the same dynamic, more attenuated by the institutional presence of affirmative action. MY-2, a senior administrator at UUM, noted: "The quota policy did not eliminate the scrutiny. It changed who was allowed to be in the room to be scrutinized. The stereotype is still there, but the door is open." The cross-country pattern is therefore not one of uniform intensity but of variation in the institutionalization of socio-cultural constraints.

Table 1. Distribution of Barrier Themes Across Country Contexts

Barrier Theme	IDN (n=4)	PAK (n=4)	MYS (n=4)	Total (N=12)
Patriarchal mindset	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	12 (100%)
Traditional role expectations	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	3 (75%)	11 (91.7%)
Social scrutiny of women leaders	3 (75%)	4 (100%)	3 (75%)	10 (83.3%)
Religious misinterpretation	3 (75%)	4 (100%)	1 (25%)	8 (66.7%)
Male-dominated structures	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	2 (50%)	10 (83.3%)
Limited network access	3 (75%)	4 (100%)	2 (50%)	9 (75%)
Insufficient gender policies	2 (50%)	3 (75%)	2 (50%)	7 (58.3%)
Work family conflict	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	2 (50%)	10 (83.3%)
Dual burden	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	3 (75%)	11 (91.7%)

Religious interpretation barriers were sharply asymmetric across the three contexts. Three of four Indonesian participants and all four Pakistani participants reported encounters with interpretations of Islamic texts that restricted their leadership, while only one Malaysian

participant reported comparable experiences. The form these interpretations took was also distinctive. Pakistani participants described citation of specific ahadith on women's leadership as a recurring obstacle during candidacy processes. PK-3 recounted: "In the selection committee for my current post, one member quoted the hadith that a people who entrust their affairs to a woman will not prosper. I had to respond with the alternative reading and the historical context in thirty seconds. If I had hesitated, the appointment would not have happened." Indonesian participants reported more diffuse but recognizable forms of the same dynamic, framed less through single-hadith debate and more through general references to kodrat (natural role). ID-1 observed: "The word kodrat is used to close doors. It is not cited as theology. It is invoked as common sense. That is harder to argue against than a text, because common sense does not need a footnote." The Malaysian near-absence of these encounters reflects both a more settled public theology regarding women's professional roles and the institutional filtering of such objections out of formal selection processes.

Institutional barriers showed a different asymmetry. Male-dominated governance structures were universal in Indonesia and Pakistan but affected only two of four Malaysian participants, reflecting the effect of policy on institutional composition. ID-4 described the compounding effect: "The rector is male, the deans above me are male, the senate is dominated by men. I am the only woman who speaks in that room. I have learned to prepare twice as much, because I will be interrupted twice as often." The gendering of informal networks was a consistent finding across sites. PK-1 described how strategic information circulates in spaces she cannot enter: "The important conversations happen after the official meeting, in the mosque for Friday prayers, in the mess hall, in the corridor on the way to prayer. I hear about them only after the decisions are already made." Insufficient gender-specific policy was a Pakistani concern (three of four reported this) and was named less often in Malaysia because such policies are in place, and in Indonesia, because participants had lower expectations that such a policy would exist. Personal-family barriers formed the fourth cluster. The dual burden of professional and domestic roles was reported by 11 of 12 participants; only MY-3 reported that her household arrangements had substantially redistributed this work. ID-2 articulated the temporal accounting that structured her leadership: "I leave the office at five to be home before Maghrib. The reports I need to read happen after my children are asleep. The work gets done. But it gets done on a second shift that my male colleagues do not carry".

Enablers of Women's Leadership

Four enabler categories emerged: personal capital, family and social support, mentorship and role models, and institutional support. In contrast to barriers, enablers showed relatively consistent patterns across the three countries, with the notable exception of formal institutional support, where Malaysia clearly diverged. Table 2 summarises the frequency distribution; the narrative below illustrates how enablers experienced and mobilized.

Personal capital was universal. All twelve participants held advanced degrees and identified education as what ID-1 called "the one argument no one could dismiss." Self-efficacy was articulated not as abstract confidence but as an earned disposition forged in repeated encounters with scrutiny. MY-1 put it precisely: "Confidence was not a feeling I started with. It was a habit I built by preparing more carefully than anyone expected. After ten years, the habit is the feeling." The most analytically significant personal enabler was Islamic faith itself, reported by 11 of 12 participants as a source of strength rather than constraint.

This direct inversion of the religion-based barrier finding, documented in the same biographies, is central to the study's theoretical contribution. PK-4 described the mechanism clearly: "When someone tells me Islam does not want a woman to lead, I do not argue from feminism. I argue from the Qur'an, from Khadijah's example, from Aisha's teaching. My faith is not their faith minus patriarchy. It is my faith, and it supports me."

Table 2. Distribution of Enabler Themes Across Country Contexts

Enabler Theme	IDN (n=4)	PAK (n=4)	MYS (n=4)	Total (N=12)
Educational attainment	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	12 (100%)
Self efficacy	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	12 (100%)
Islamic faith as a strength	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	3 (75%)	11 (91.7%)
Spousal support	3 (75%)	3 (75%)	4 (100%)	10 (83.3%)
Extended family support	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	2 (50%)	10 (83.3%)
Supportive colleagues	3 (75%)	3 (75%)	4 (100%)	10 (83.3%)
Mentorship	4 (100%)	3 (75%)	3 (75%)	10 (83.3%)
Gender inclusive policies	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	4 (100%)	7 (58.3%)
Leadership programs	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	4 (100%)	7 (58.3%)

Family and social support functioned differently across the three contexts. Malaysian participants reported the strongest spousal support (four of four), a pattern that co-occurred with higher female labor force participation and more settled dual-career household norms in urban Malaysia. MY-4 described her husband's engagement matter-of-factly: "He reads my conference papers before I submit them. That is not unusual in our circle. The unusual thing would be if he did not." Indonesian and Pakistani participants, by contrast, described extended family support as critical, particularly for childcare. ID-3 noted: "My mother moved in when I became a dean. Without her, I could not have taken the position. Institutional support for working mothers does not exist at this level; family support is the substitute." The Pakistani cases revealed the most strategically managed spousal relationships. PK-2 explained: "My husband is supportive now. He was not at first. I had to negotiate each promotion as a household decision, not just a career decision. That negotiation is part of my leadership, even though it is invisible in my CV." Mentorship and role models were important across all sites, but access to formal mentoring schemes varied: Malaysian participants had institutionally sponsored mentoring, whereas Indonesian and Pakistani participants typically identified informal senior women mentors they had sought out themselves.

Institutional support was the enabler category with the sharpest cross-country asymmetry. Malaysia's 30% representation policy, leadership development programs for women, and gender-inclusive human resources policies were reported by all four Malaysian participants as consequential. MY-2 articulated the structural effect: "The policy does not make you a leader. It makes it possible for you to become one. Without it, the default would still apply, and the default is male." Indonesian participants reported emergent rather than established institutional support. ID-4 described a nascent gender mainstreaming office at her institution as "a desk, two staff, and a budget that is mostly symbolic," but noted that its existence marked a shift. Pakistani participants reported the weakest institutional scaffolding: only one of four had access to any formal women's leadership program, and gender-inclusive policies were generally absent from formal human resources frameworks. The asymmetry suggests that institutional enablers, unlike personal and familial ones, require explicit policy investment and do not emerge solely from cultural or religious factors.

Pathways to Empowerment

Four pathways to empowerment emerged from participants' accounts of how they had navigated the barrier-and-enabler environment: strategic career navigation, work-life integration, authentic identity formation, and paying it forward through mentoring. The pathways capture agentic action rather than passive exposure to context. Table 3 summarises the distribution of pathway sub-themes.

Strategic career navigation was a universal pathway, but its tactics varied. Proving competence through superior performance was reported by all twelve participants. ID-2 expressed the calculus directly: "I do not do eighty per cent of my male colleague's work. I do 120 percent. That twenty percent is not ambition. It is insurance against the doubt that will come." Strategic positioning (moving into portfolios that gave visibility or control) was reported by eleven of twelve, most explicitly in Pakistan, where informal networks are most closed. PK-1 explained her deliberate move into a research-intensive portfolio: "I could not change the senate. I could change what I was indispensable for. I built the research office into something the university could not replace." Network-building was universal and often transnational. MY-3 described building cross-institutional women's leadership networks: "The women in our position are few. We find each other across institutions, across countries. That network is where I learned that what I was experiencing was not my failure, but a pattern."

Table 3. Distribution of Pathway Themes Across Country Contexts

Pathway Theme	IDN (n=4)	PAK (n=4)	MYS (n=4)	Total (N=12)
Proving through performance	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	12 (100%)
Strategic positioning	3 (75%)	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	11 (91.7%)
Building networks	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	12 (100%)
Work-life integration	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	12 (100%)
Negotiating family roles	3 (75%)	4 (100%)	3 (75%)	10 (83.3%)
Setting boundaries	3 (75%)	4 (100%)	3 (75%)	10 (83.3%)
Authentic identity	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	12 (100%)
Islamic professional integration	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	12 (100%)
Mentoring the next generation	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	12 (100%)
Systemic advocacy	3 (75%)	2 (50%)	4 (100%)	9 (75%)

Work-life integration rather than balance was the frame that participants themselves used. All twelve rejected the language of balance as misleading. ID-1 said: "Balance implies a zero sum. My faith, my family, and my work are not zero-sum. They are the same life." The practical content of this integration was nonetheless highly structured. Setting boundaries was described by ten of twelve, with clear differences in where boundaries were drawn. Malaysian participants reported drawing boundaries at institutional expectations (refusing after-hours meetings, for instance), while Pakistani and Indonesian participants drew them primarily at domestic expectations (negotiating childcare, elder care, or cooking arrangements). Authentic identity formation, the third pathway, was universal and functioned as a prerequisite for the others. Each participant had at some point explicitly resolved the tension between professional and religious-cultural expectations. MY-1 articulated the resolution: "I stopped asking whether I was a good Muslim or a good leader. I asked whether I was a good Muslim leader. That one word changed the question." The fourth pathway, paying it forward through mentoring the next generation, was universal. Each participant actively mentored at least one junior woman academic, and five of twelve had established formal mentoring arrangements within their institutions.

Taken together, the barrier, enabler, and pathway findings display an asymmetric rather than symmetric cross-country pattern. Malaysia shows relatively attenuated barriers and comparatively strong institutional enablers, reflecting policy investment. Pakistan shows the heaviest barrier load, particularly in religious interpretation and institutional dimensions, and correspondingly relies most on personal and familial enablers. Indonesia occupies an intermediate position, with pesantren-inflected sociocultural barriers, emergent institutional enablers, and a strong reliance on extended-family support. The pathways themselves are comparatively uniform across the three contexts, suggesting that the strategies through which women navigate leadership are more portable than the environments in which they deploy them. This asymmetry, rather than the categorical identification of themes, carries the study's substantive findings into the discussion.

DISCUSSION

The findings extend existing scholarship on women's leadership in three directions. First, they demonstrate that the ecological model requires an interpretive mediator when applied to religious institutional contexts. Second, they resolve the monolithic treatment of Islam in the gender-leadership literature by specifying a dual-process account. Third, they generate an empirically derived framework for understanding empowerment in Islamic higher education that integrates individual, institutional, and interpretive resources.

The finding that barriers operated at socio-cultural, religious, institutional, and personal-family levels confirms the multi-level architecture proposed in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Renn, 2023) and is consistent with recent applications of this framework to women's academic careers (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Kele et al., 2022) and to career formation in Muslim-majority contexts (Almughyiri, 2025). The cross-country asymmetries, however, push the framework in a specific direction. In the original formulation, the macrosystem contains cultural and ideological patterns as a single stratum. The present findings indicate that in religious institutional contexts, the macrosystem must be decomposed into two distinct layers: a cultural-patriarchal layer that supplies socio-cultural norms, and a religious-interpretive layer that supplies theological legitimation for or against those norms. These two layers can diverge. Malaysia's case illustrates a cultural-patriarchal layer partially counteracted by a religious-interpretive layer that has settled around more egalitarian readings; Pakistan shows the two layers reinforcing each other. This analytic separation is not available in the standard ecological model and constitutes a theoretical refinement of it rather than a simple application.

The study's second contribution, the Dual Process Model of Religion, requires careful positioning against established work in the psychology of religion. Allport and Ross's (1967) distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity locates the source of variation in the individual's orientation toward religion (as an end versus as a means to other ends). Park's (2005) meaning-making framework extends this by treating religion as an interpretive system through which adversity and life events are appraised and given coherence. These frameworks explain variation in individual religiosity but do not account for how the same religious tradition simultaneously produces constraining and enabling effects within the same biography, on the same questions of leadership. The Dual Process Model differs in its unit of analysis. It locates the source of variation not in the individual's orientation to religion but in the hermeneutic practice through which religious texts are read and deployed within an institutional setting. This shifts the explanatory burden from dispositional psychology to

interpretive practice, and it connects more directly to Islamic feminist scholarship. Mernissi's (1991) hermeneutics of suspicion argued that patriarchal readings of the Islamic textual tradition are interested rather than natural, and Ahmed's (1992, 2011) historical work demonstrated how specific interpretations became hegemonic under political conditions. The Dual Process Model extends this interpretive-historical work into the institutional domain of contemporary Islamic higher education, specifying the conditions under which constraining and enabling readings to become operative. Recent empirical work in adjacent contexts supports this analytic move: Lashari and Shah (2024) document how Pakistani academic women navigate religious monoglossia by deploying alternative hermeneutic resources, and Koburtay et al. (2023) show that Jordanian women leaders adopt a distinctly Islamic feminist worldview as their primary frame for leadership rather than borrowing secular feminist registers.

Table 4 presents the Dual Process Model in seven dimensions. Its epistemological status requires explicit statement: the seven dimensions were developed inductively from the interview data through iterative coding and were then refined by mapping against the interpretive categories available in the Islamic feminist literature cited above. The resulting model is therefore empirically derived and theoretically positioned, not deductively imposed. The transition mechanism between the constraining and enabling processes, which the reviewers rightly identified as underdeveloped in earlier drafts, operates through three conditions observable in the data. First, authoritative alternative hermeneutic resources must be accessible to the actor (as evidenced by participants' reliance on Wadud, Barlas, and the exemplars of Khadijah and Aisha). Second, institutional or interpersonal settings must permit those alternative readings to be voiced without career cost (evident in Malaysia's permissive institutional environment and in the strategic timing reported by PK-3). Third, actors must have practiced alternative reading to the point of fluency, so that it can be deployed in real time in contested settings. Where these three conditions are absent, the constraining process dominates; where they are present, the enabling process becomes operative. The transition is therefore not automatic but conditional on hermeneutic resources, institutional permission, and practiced fluency.

Table 4. Dual-Process Model of Religion in Women's Leadership

Dimension	Constraining Process	Enabling Process
Interpretive approach	Literal textual interpretation	Contextual progressive interpretation
Hermeneutic orientation	Patriarchal hermeneutics	Egalitarian hermeneutics
Textual emphasis	Selective versus restricting women	Quranic justice and equality principles
Historical reference	Limited, selective examples	Rich examples of women leaders
Mechanism	Restriction, exclusion, delegitimization	Empowerment, support, legitimization
Outcome for leadership	Islam as a barrier	Islam as an enabler
Context prevalence	Higher in conservative contexts	Higher in moderate, progressive contexts

The cross-country pattern is asymmetric in a specific and theoretically interesting way. Barriers varied sharply while pathways did not. The religious interpretation barrier was high in Pakistan, moderate in Indonesia, and low in Malaysia. This variation maps onto the dominant hermeneutic tradition in each setting: Pakistan's public theological environment

retains stronger Deobandi and traditionalist streams in which literal-textual readings of women's leadership remain current, and where empirical work documents the labyrinthine pathways women academics must traverse to reach senior posts (Lashari, 2023); Indonesia's pesantren-based Nahdlatul Ulama and modernist Muhammadiyah traditions have produced substantial internal hermeneutic diversity and increasingly institutionalized women's scholarly roles (Srimulyani, 2012); Malaysia's state-sponsored Islamic discourse, mediated through JAKIM and progressive women's organizations such as Sisters in Islam, has consolidated more egalitarian readings for professional-academic purposes (Hamzah et al., 2016). Pathways, by contrast, were highly uniform. The universality of proving-through-performance, network-building, work-life integration, authentic identity formation, and paying it forward suggests that these strategies are properties of the actor's position (a woman leader in a male-dominated Islamic institution) rather than of the specific national context. The practical implication is that intervention on pathways alone will yield diminishing returns unless the barrier environment is addressed; strategies that equip women to navigate obstacles should not be theirs to navigate.

The findings can be compared with the three most relevant comparative studies. Shah's (2018) UK-based work found identity integration as the central pathway; the present study confirms this finding and extends it by specifying three additional pathways that operate alongside it. Almaki et al.'s (2016) Saudi Arabian study identified socio-cultural, institutional, and personal barrier clusters similar to the present typology but did not distinguish religious interpretation barriers as a separate category; the present data support that analytic separation. Dehghanpour-Farashah et al.'s (2025) Iranian study documented the centrality of formal institutional policy in producing enablers; the comparison of Malaysia with Pakistan in the present study provides further support for this finding. Across these comparisons, the present study's distinctive contribution is the cross-country asymmetric pattern and the interpretive-mechanism account for it.

The Islamic Women's Leadership Empowerment Framework (IWLEF) integrates the foregoing findings into a coherent framework for empowerment in Islamic higher education. It is constructed along four dimensions derived from the empirical analysis, not imposed on it. The first dimension is individual capital, comprising educational attainment, professional competence, self-efficacy, and interpretive literacy in Islamic textual traditions. The second is institutional capital, comprising affirmative action policy, gender-inclusive human resources frameworks, formal leadership development programs, and structural representation in governance. The third is social-familial capital, comprising spousal engagement, extended family practical support, and mentoring networks that are both intra- and inter-institutional. The fourth is interpretive capital, the dimension that distinguishes IWLEF from generic empowerment frameworks: access to and fluency in egalitarian Islamic hermeneutic resources that convert the religious-interpretive barrier into a religious-interpretive enabler. The four dimensions interact: institutional capital amplifies individual capital; interpretive capital mediates the effect of religious context on both; social-familial capital sustains individual capital under high-barrier conditions. Figure 1, provided as Supplementary Material B, represents these relations diagrammatically. The relationship between IWLEF and the Dual Process Model is complementary: the Dual Process Model specifies the mechanism through which religion becomes constraining or enabling; IWLEF specifies the broader resource configuration within which that mechanism operates. Together, the two contributions offer a specified alternative to existing frameworks that either omit religion or treat it monolithically.

The theoretical implications extend beyond Islamic higher education. The analytic move of decomposing a religious-cultural macrosystem into cultural-patriarchal and religious-interpretive layers is transferable to other religious-educational contexts (Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jewish institutions) where similar hermeneutic asymmetries are plausibly at work. The practical implications are context-specific and are developed in the conclusion.

CONCLUSION

This study compared women's leadership in Islamic higher education across Indonesia, Pakistan, and Malaysia and found a substantively asymmetric pattern: barriers varied sharply across the three settings, organized by the dominant hermeneutic tradition and policy environment in each, while pathways were largely uniform. The asymmetry is the primary empirical contribution, since it shows that what is often described as a common Muslim women's leadership problem is in fact a family of context-specific barrier configurations addressed with a relatively common set of agentic strategies. Two theoretical contributions follow. The Dual Process Model of Religion specifies the conditions under which Islam functions as a constraint or a resource for women's leadership, situating the mechanism in hermeneutic practice rather than in religious disposition, and refining Allport and Ross's intrinsic-extrinsic framework while extending Mernissi's and Ahmed's interpretive-historical work into contemporary institutional analysis. The Islamic Women's Leadership Empowerment Framework integrates individual, institutional, social-familial, and interpretive capital into a four-dimensional account, with interpretive capital as the distinctive addition to existing empowerment frameworks. Policy implications differ meaningfully across contexts: Indonesia should consolidate gender mainstreaming within the PTKIN system through accreditation-linked benchmarks and gender-inclusive hermeneutics in Islamic Studies curricula; Pakistan needs a formal gender policy at the Higher Education Commission level, national leadership programs for women academics, and selection committee training; Malaysia should move beyond numerical representation toward substantive inclusion in strategic decision-making.

Three institutional actions cut across all three settings: establishing representation benchmarks with enforceable accountability mechanisms; building leadership programs that explicitly engage with Islamic hermeneutic resources, since interpretive capital distinguished successful trajectories; and investing in formal mentoring structures that connect emerging women leaders with senior peers across institutions and national borders. The study's limitations reflect design choices. The twelve-participant sample was determined by the principle of information power and supports analytic rather than statistical generalization. The three-institution design captured national but not intra-national variation across pesantren, madrasa, and secular Islamic universities. The all-Sunni research team achieved interpretive access within that tradition but did not reach Shia-majority or minority-Muslim contexts. The department-head threshold focused the analysis on in-post leadership, at the expense of weighing the sample toward successful cases. Four research directions follow. First, the Dual Process Model needs testing in Shia-majority (Iran) and minority-Muslim (India, South Africa, United Kingdom) contexts to assess whether the three transition conditions of hermeneutic resources, institutional permission, and practiced fluency travel. Second, the IWLEF requires quantitative operationalization through scale development and confirmatory factor analysis. Third, longitudinal designs are needed to distinguish career-stage from context effects.

Fourth, intervention studies on interpretive capital-building programs would provide the first causal evidence on whether the mechanism identified here is manipulable.

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