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Women and Leadership in Banking Sector: Opportunities and Challenges Within Malay Cultural Values

Tessa Shasrini[1], Al Sukri[2], Yudi Daherman[3]
[1,2,3] Fakultas Ilmu Komunikasi, Universitas Islam Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia

ABSTRACT
The increasing presence of women in banking leadership reflects progress in workplace gender inclusion; however, structural and cultural barriers remain, particularly in societies with strong traditional values such as Malay culture. This study examines the opportunities and challenges faced by women leaders in the banking sector and the influence of Malay cultural values on their leadership experiences. This study employed a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation involving five female leaders from banking institutions in Pekanbaru. The findings show that women gain leadership opportunities through educational qualifications, professional competence, work performance, and merit-based organizational support. Participants demonstrated participative and transformational leadership characterized by effective communication, empathy, and collaboration. However, they continued to face role conflict, gender stereotypes, and cultural expectations emphasizing women's domestic responsibilities. Malay cultural values shape women's leadership in complex ways by promoting harmony, responsibility, and interpersonal sensitivity while also reinforcing traditional gender norms that may constrain career advancement. These findings highlight the interaction between organizational meritocracy, leadership competence, and sociocultural expectations in shaping women's leadership experiences in the banking sector.

KEYWORDS
Women Leadership, Banking Sector, Malay Culture, Gender, Organizational Communication

INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in professional and managerial positions has increased substantially in recent decades; however, their representation in senior leadership remains uneven across sectors and countries. This imbalance is particularly evident in the financial sector, where women remain underrepresented in executive and board-level positions. Global evidence indicates that women have historically occupied only a small proportion of senior decision-making positions in financial institutions despite their substantial participation in the workforce (Sahay et al., 2017; Sahay & Čihák, 2018). Recent empirical studies further demonstrate that women's presence in banking leadership is not merely an issue of representation. Female leadership and gender diversity have been associated with differences in organizational risk, governance, and performance. Palvia et al. (2020), for example, found that female-led banks demonstrated greater resilience and lower default risk under severe real-estate shocks, while Arnaboldi et al. (2021) found that greater female representation on bank boards was associated

CONTACT Tessa Shasrini B.Comm.,M.HrD. Fakultas Ilmu Komunikasi Universitas Islam Riau. Jalan Kaharuddin Nasution No. 113 Pekanbaru-Riau. tessashasrini@comm.uir.ac.id
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with a lower frequency of misconduct. Evidence from Asian banking also suggests that female CEOs can perform as effectively as, and under certain organizational conditions better than, their male counterparts (Ting, 2021). These findings strengthen the case for examining the organizational and cultural conditions that shape women's access to and experiences within banking leadership.

Gender-related expectations remain an important factor influencing women's leadership opportunities. Role congruity theory explains that prejudice toward female leaders can emerge when societal expectations associated with women are perceived as inconsistent with conventional expectations of leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Leadership has traditionally been associated with agentic characteristics such as assertiveness, authority, and decisiveness, whereas women are often socially expected to demonstrate communal qualities such as empathy, cooperation, and caregiving. This perceived incongruity may create additional barriers for women seeking leadership positions and may result in their competence and authority being evaluated differently from those of male leaders.

These challenges extend beyond formal discrimination. Subtle and embedded organizational practices can influence women's leadership development by shaping access to professional networks, challenging assignments, sponsorship, and opportunities to develop a credible leadership identity. Ely et al. (2011) argue that leadership development for women cannot be separated from the gendered organizational environments in which leadership identities are formed. Empirical research in Indonesia similarly demonstrates that women leaders often have to negotiate organizational expectations alongside gendered and culturally embedded understandings of legitimate leadership. Mulya and Sakhiyya (2021), in their study of women leaders in Indonesian academia, found that women actively negotiated dominant institutional definitions of merit and leadership rather than simply accepting established organizational expectations. These findings indicate that women's leadership involves not only career advancement but also continuous negotiation of institutional and cultural norms.

Within the financial sector, persistent gender gaps are shaped by organizational structures, career pipelines, professional networks, and institutional practices that influence access to senior positions (Girardone et al., 2021). Empirical research further illustrates that women's leadership can have meaningful organizational implications. Studies of banks have linked female leadership and board gender diversity with risk management, governance, and organizational conduct (Palvia et al., 2020; Arnaboldi et al., 2021). In the Asian context, Ting (2021) found that female CEOs in Chinese banks possessed levels of organizational power comparable to male CEOs and, in some organizational contexts, demonstrated stronger performance. Together, these studies challenge assumptions that women's limited representation in banking leadership reflects differences in leadership capability and instead direct attention toward the structures and conditions shaping access to senior positions.

The challenges faced by women leaders may be particularly complex in societies where professional expectations intersect with deeply embedded cultural and family norms. Women often experience competing expectations between professional responsibilities and socially prescribed family roles. Multiple-role conflict can generate psychological pressure and affect professional performance when individuals must simultaneously meet demanding work and domestic responsibilities (Muis et al., 2021). In culturally traditional contexts, these pressures may become more pronounced when caregiving and household responsibilities continue to be perceived primarily as women's obligations.

The Indonesian context provides an important setting for examining these dynamics. Although women have achieved substantial educational and professional advancement, gendered barriers continue to shape access to senior leadership positions. Research on women in Indonesia's civil service identifies organizational structures, social expectations, family responsibilities, and gendered institutional practices as important influences on women's career progression (McLaren et al., 2023). Similarly, studies of women leaders in Indonesian institutions show that leadership practices are negotiated within complex relationships among professional competence, gender expectations, religion, and local cultural values (Mulya & Sakhiyya, 2021).

The experience of women leaders is also influenced by access to professional relationships and developmental support. Mentorship can provide guidance, organizational knowledge, career support, and access to professional networks that may otherwise be difficult to obtain through formal structures alone (Ragins & Kram, 2007). These relationships may be particularly important for women operating in hierarchical or male-dominated environments, where informal networks often shape access to information, visibility, and advancement opportunities.

At the same time, women may develop leadership strategies that draw on relational competencies such as communication, empathy, collaboration, and consensus building. Studies of gender and leadership suggest that women frequently employ participative and relational approaches, although such characteristics should not be treated as inherently or universally feminine (Eagly & Chin, 2010; Merchant, 2012). Rather, these competencies may become strategically important when women must establish legitimacy, maintain organizational relationships, and exercise influence within environments shaped by gendered expectations.

These leadership dynamics become particularly significant within culturally specific environments such as Riau, Indonesia, where Malay cultural traditions and Islamic values influence social expectations and interpersonal relationships. Research conducted in Indonesia and Malaysia shows that women leaders may draw on local cultural values, including collaboration, interpersonal respect, and collective responsibility, as resources for developing culturally legitimate leadership practices (Marno et al., 2024). Research on leadership in culturally diverse Malaysian institutions similarly emphasizes the importance of contextual adaptation, shared values, and harmonious interpersonal relationships in leadership practice (Adams & Velarde, 2021). At the same time, research on Malay-Muslim women demonstrates that women's participation and influence continue to operate within gendered political and sociocultural structures (Arosoaie, 2020). Cultural values may therefore function simultaneously as resources for leadership and as structures that reinforce traditional expectations regarding women's roles.

Despite the growing literature on women's leadership, important gaps remain. Much of the existing literature examines gender bias, leadership style, work–family conflict, mentorship, banking governance, and cultural expectations as separate issues. Empirical studies of women in banking have primarily focused on measurable organizational outcomes such as performance, risk, and governance (Palvia et al., 2020; Arnaboldi et al., 2021; Ting, 2021), while studies in Indonesia and Malaysia have more frequently examined women's leadership within public administration, academia, education, or political institutions (Mulya & Sakhiyya, 2021; McLaren et al., 2023; Marno et al., 2024). Comparatively little research has explored how cultural norms, institutional structures, work–family expectations, mentorship, and relational leadership intersect in the lived experiences of female banking leaders within a specifically Malay-Indonesian context.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of six female leaders working in state-owned and private banks in Riau, Indonesia. Specifically, it examines how women navigate patriarchal and institutional barriers, manage work–family expectations, access mentorship and professional support, employ relational leadership strategies, and negotiate Malay cultural norms in exercising leadership. By examining these interconnected dimensions, the study seeks to provide a context-sensitive understanding of women's leadership in the Indonesian banking sector and contribute practical insights for gender-inclusive organizational policies and leadership development.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of female leaders in the banking sector within the cultural context of Riau, Indonesia. Phenomenology was considered appropriate for understanding how participants perceived and interpreted their leadership experiences and the gender-related dynamics they encountered. The study involved six female leaders, comprising three participants from private banks and three from government banks, who were selected through purposive sampling based on their leadership experience and ability to provide relevant insights into organizational and cultural dynamics. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and document analysis to support data triangulation and enhance the credibility of the findings. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and explored participants' leadership experiences, challenges, strategies, perceptions of gender dynamics, and cultural influences. Workplace observations were conducted to examine interactions, decision-making processes, and contextual behaviors, while organizational policies, reports, and internal communications were reviewed to contextualize and corroborate the interview and observational data. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman (1994) framework, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were coded inductively to identify emerging themes related to leadership challenges, cultural influences, mentorship, relational skills, and structural barriers.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Patriarchal Norms and Leadership Legitimacy

Patriarchal norms emerged as a significant challenge for female leaders in both private and state-owned banks. Participants frequently described situations in which male colleagues were more readily perceived as legitimate authority figures, while women felt required to repeatedly demonstrate their competence and justify their decisions. These experiences indicate that gender influences not only access to formal leadership positions but also everyday perceptions of leadership credibility.

The findings can be explained through role congruity theory, which proposes that prejudice may arise when characteristics traditionally associated with women are perceived as inconsistent with conventional expectations of leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The experiences of the participants are also consistent with more recent empirical findings from Indonesia. Mulya and Sakhiyya (2021) demonstrate that women leaders negotiate institutional structures in which dominant definitions of merit and leadership remain embedded within gendered organizational arrangements. Similarly, McLaren et al. (2023) found that Indonesian women's career progression was shaped by the interaction of professional qualifications, interpersonal relationships, family support, and gendered social and institutional constraints.

The present findings extend this literature into the banking sector by showing that gendered expectations may continue after women have formally achieved leadership positions. Participants were not only required to qualify for leadership roles but also to continuously establish the legitimacy of their authority through expertise, careful communication, and relationship building.

Cultural Leverage and Contextual Leadership

The findings demonstrate that participants did not experience culture solely as a barrier. They also strategically navigated cultural expectations to establish legitimacy and influence. Participants described approaches emphasizing respect for seniority, consultation, consensus building, interpersonal sensitivity, and collective decision-making.

These findings are consistent with Marno et al. (2024), whose empirical study of women leaders in Indonesia and Malaysia demonstrates how local cultural values can be incorporated into egalitarian and relational leadership practices. Similarly, Adams and Velarde (2021) found that leaders working in culturally diverse Malaysian organizations emphasized shared values, harmonious interaction, and contextual sensitivity in managing organizational relationships. These studies support the present finding that culturally responsive leadership can become an important strategic resource.

However, cultural adaptation should not be interpreted as evidence that local cultural structures are inherently gender equitable. The experiences described by participants show that the same cultural environment may simultaneously provide resources for relationship building and reinforce expectations regarding gender, hierarchy, and domestic responsibility. Research on Malay-Muslim women similarly illustrates how women's agency and organizational participation can operate within persistent gendered sociopolitical structures (Arosoaie, 2020). Culture should therefore be understood as a dynamic context that women actively interpret, negotiate, and sometimes strategically employ rather than as a fixed set of either supportive or restrictive values.

Women's Leadership and the Banking Context

The findings also contribute to the growing empirical literature on women's leadership in banking. Participants in this study demonstrated professional competence, relational capability, and strategic decision-making while simultaneously navigating gendered organizational barriers. Their experiences support a broader body of evidence suggesting that women's limited representation in senior financial leadership cannot simply be explained by differences in capability.

Palvia et al. (2020) found that female-led banks showed lower lending losses and default risk under severe financial shocks, illustrating the potential relevance of women's leadership to organizational resilience. Arnaboldi et al. (2021) similarly found that greater female representation on bank boards was associated with reduced misconduct, particularly when women achieved meaningful representation and were supported by women in other leadership positions. In an Asian banking context, Ting (2021) found that female CEOs had comparable organizational power and performance to male CEOs, with evidence of stronger performance in some types of banks.

These studies should not be interpreted as suggesting that women inherently possess particular leadership qualities or automatically generate superior organizational outcomes. Rather, they challenge assumptions that masculine leadership remains the natural or more effective model for banking organizations. The present findings add an experiential dimension to this literature by demonstrating how female banking leaders exercise leadership while simultaneously negotiating cultural expectations, family responsibilities, informal networks, and organizational structures.

Structural and Institutional Barriers

Despite participants' ability to develop effective leadership strategies, structural and institutional barriers remained significant. Participants identified informal male-dominated networks, promotion practices, limited support for caregiving responsibilities, and gendered assumptions about leadership suitability as obstacles to career advancement.

These findings are consistent with empirical studies demonstrating that women's advancement is shaped by organizational systems rather than individual capability alone. McLaren et al. (2023) found that women's career progression in Indonesia remained embedded within complex familial, social, religious, and organizational conditions. Mulya and Sakhiyya (2021) similarly show that women leaders often have to negotiate institutional norms and dominant definitions of leadership and merit.

The banking literature further demonstrates why removing such barriers is organizationally relevant. Female leadership and gender-diverse governance have been associated with meaningful organizational outcomes across different banking contexts (Palvia et al., 2020; Arnaboldi et al., 2021; Ting, 2021). Therefore, increasing women's access to leadership should not be framed solely as an individual career-development issue. Transparent promotion processes, equitable access to strategic assignments and networks, structured mentorship and sponsorship, and organizational support for work–family responsibilities are necessary to address the institutional conditions that restrict women's advancement.

Integrated Discussion

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that women's leadership experiences in Riau's banking sector are shaped by a complex interaction between gender norms, organizational structures, family responsibilities, professional relationships, and cultural expectations. Participants were not passive recipients of these constraints. They actively developed strategies to establish legitimacy, build networks, negotiate organizational relationships, and adapt leadership practices to culturally specific contexts.

The study also helps connect two bodies of literature that have largely developed separately. Contemporary banking research has primarily examined the organizational consequences of female leadership and gender diversity, including performance, risk, and misconduct (Palvia et al., 2020; Arnaboldi et al., 2021; Ting, 2021). In contrast, research on women leaders in Indonesia and Malaysia has emphasized lived experiences, institutional barriers, cultural negotiation, and locally embedded leadership practices (Mulya & Sakhiyya, 2021; McLaren et al., 2023; Marno et al., 2024). The present study brings these perspectives together by examining how female banking leaders themselves experience and negotiate the cultural and institutional environments within which leadership is exercised.

An important contribution of these findings lies in showing that leadership legitimacy is not determined solely by formal position or professional competence. For the participants, authority had to be continuously negotiated through everyday interactions, communication practices, professional relationships, and culturally acceptable forms of influence. This supports the argument that women's leadership development is closely connected to the gendered organizational contexts in which leadership identities are constructed (Ely et al., 2011). It also illustrates the relevance of role congruity theory, as participants frequently encountered expectations that positioned leadership as more naturally associated with men, requiring women to demonstrate competence beyond formal qualifications alone (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

The findings further indicate that relational leadership and mentorship should not be viewed merely as individual coping strategies. Rather, they function as important organizational resources that can influence women's access to information, visibility, support, and decision-making opportunities. Mentoring relationships may help compensate for exclusion from informal networks, while relational competence enables women to build trust and negotiate authority in environments where formal position does not automatically guarantee acceptance. However, reliance on these individual strategies also reveals the limitations of organizational systems that require women to continuously adapt to structural inequalities.

The Malay cultural context adds an important dimension to these findings. Cultural expectations concerning hierarchy, family responsibility, respect, and social harmony influence both the constraints women encounter and the strategies through which they establish leadership legitimacy. Participants demonstrated that culturally embedded values could be strategically used to build cooperation and acceptance, particularly through consultation, consensus building, and respect for seniority. At the same time, these same cultural expectations could reinforce assumptions about women's domestic responsibilities and appropriate forms of authority. Culture therefore operates neither as a purely restrictive nor supportive force, but as a dynamic context within which women negotiate leadership.

The findings therefore suggest that women's leadership in banking cannot be fully understood through universal leadership models alone. It must also be examined in relation to the specific cultural and organizational environments in which women exercise authority. This is particularly important in non-Western contexts, where leadership practices may be shaped simultaneously by global organizational norms and locally embedded expectations regarding gender, hierarchy, family, and social relationships.

Ultimately, women's career progression should not depend solely on their ability to adapt to unequal organizational structures. While mentorship, relational competence, and cultural intelligence may strengthen women's leadership practices, sustainable gender equality requires institutional change. Banks should therefore combine leadership development programs with transparent promotion systems, structured mentoring and sponsorship, inclusive work–family policies, and active efforts to address gendered assumptions about leadership competence. Such reforms would not only improve women's access to leadership positions but also reduce the additional burden placed on female leaders to continuously prove their legitimacy within systems that remain shaped by gendered expectations.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the experiences of six female leaders in state-owned and private banks in Pekanbaru, Indonesia, and found that women's leadership trajectories are shaped by the interaction of cultural expectations, relational competencies, mentorship, work–family responsibilities, and structural barriers. The findings demonstrate that women's leadership advancement cannot be explained solely by individual capability, as organizational and cultural conditions strongly influence access to authority, recognition, and career progression.

Patriarchal norms were reflected in male-dominated networks, gendered assumptions about leadership legitimacy, and organizational practices that required women to repeatedly establish their credibility. These findings are consistent with role congruity theory, which explains how women may face prejudice when socially constructed expectations of femininity are perceived as inconsistent with conventional leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Work–family conflict further intensified these challenges, particularly where domestic responsibilities remained strongly associated with women and were insufficiently supported by organizational policies (Muis et al., 2021; McLaren et al., 2023).

At the same time, mentorship and relational leadership emerged as important sources of support and influence. Mentoring relationships provided access to organizational knowledge, professional networks, confidence, and career guidance, consistent with the literature on workplace mentoring and developmental relationships (Ragins & Kram, 2007). Relational competencies, including communication, collaboration, conflict resolution, and trust building, also enabled participants to exercise influence beyond formal authority.

The findings further show that Malay cultural norms functioned both as constraints and as strategic resources. Participants navigated values related to hierarchy, respect, social harmony, and collective decision-making to strengthen leadership legitimacy while operating within gendered organizational environments. This supports recent research emphasizing that women's leadership in Indonesia and Malaysia must be understood within culturally specific institutional contexts rather than through universal leadership models alone (Mulya & Sakhiyya, 2021; Marno et al., 2024).

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by integrating role congruity, relational leadership, mentoring, and culturally embedded perspectives in explaining women's leadership experiences in the banking sector. Practically, the findings suggest that financial institutions should strengthen transparent promotion systems, formal mentoring and sponsorship programs, flexible work arrangements, and leadership development initiatives that recognize relational and collaborative competencies. Such interventions are necessary because individual adaptability alone cannot overcome persistent structural inequalities.

Overall, achieving gender-inclusive leadership in the banking sector requires a combination of individual agency, supportive professional relationships, cultural awareness, and institutional reform. By addressing both formal and informal barriers, banking institutions can create more equitable opportunities for women's advancement while strengthening inclusive and contextually responsive leadership practices.

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