



Ratu Zalecha: Social Construction, Women's Leadership and a Critical Study in the Context of Modern Leaders

*Siti Muflichah^c, Rochmatunnisa², Annida Afifah³

^{1,3}Universitas Islam Negeri Antasari, Banjarmasin, Indonesia, ²Lembaga Mutiara Pendidikan Islam, Jakarta, Indonesia

Correspondence Author: sitimuflichah@uin-antasari.ac.id

Keywords:

Feminist Leadership;
Social Construction;
Women's Leadership;
Ratu Zalecha; South
Kalimantan

Abstract :

This study examines how women's leadership in South Kalimantan is socially constructed and how Ratu Zalecha functions as a cultural-historical source of leadership legitimacy for contemporary female leaders. Drawing on social construction theory and feminist leadership perspectives, this study explores the ways in which leadership meanings are shaped by competence, institutional recognition, gendered expectations, and local historical memory. A qualitative case study design was employed, involving four female leaders in educational and organizational contexts in South Kalimantan. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal three main themes: leadership is constructed as a relational and contextual practice; female leaders negotiate layered challenges related to gender stereotypes, seniority, emotional expectations, and organizational legitimacy; and Ratu Zalecha serves as a symbolic model of courage, patience, resilience, moral integrity, and transformative influence. This study contributes to social construction and feminist leadership scholarship by showing that women's leadership legitimacy is produced not only through organizational competence, but also through cultural memory and historically rooted narratives of female agency. The findings suggest that local female historical figures can strengthen women's leadership identity and provide culturally relevant models for promoting gender-equitable leadership in educational and organizational settings.

Received: 2026-02-10

Revised: 2026-02-21;

2026-03-29

Accepted: 2026-05-20

Published: 2026-05-21

How to cite: Muflichah, S., Rochmatunnisa, R., & Afifah, A. (2026). Ratu Zalecha: Social Construction, Women's Leadership and a Critical Study in the Context of Modern Leaders . *Management of Education: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 12(1). 100-113. <https://doi.org/10.18592/moe.v12i1.20085>

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Introduction

Leadership is not merely an individual attribute or a formal organizational position; it is also a social reality shaped by cultural meanings, institutional expectations, and gendered norms. Social construction theory provides an important lens for understanding how leadership roles are produced, legitimized, and contested within society. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that social reality is formed through social interaction,

internalization, and institutionalization. In leadership studies, this perspective suggests that the perception of who is considered suitable to lead is not neutral, but is shaped by socially embedded assumptions about authority, competence, gender, and public legitimacy.

The social construction of leadership becomes particularly important in discussions of women's leadership. Although women's participation in public and professional life has increased, women remain underrepresented in strategic leadership positions across many organizational contexts. This underrepresentation is not simply the result of individual limitations, but reflects persistent social bias, patriarchal norms, and institutional structures that continue to associate leadership with masculine authority. Recent studies show that women still face barriers to top leadership positions despite evidence that women contribute significantly to organizational performance, innovation, and work culture (Baker et al., 2025; Buss & Tiberius, 2025; Miriam et al., 2025). Gendered organizational structures, unequal work-life expectations, and male-dominated leadership cultures continue to shape women's access to authority, even when formal gender equality policies are present (Ali et al., 2025; Engeli & Mazur, 2022; Kalysh et al., 2016; Kanjere & Ramaotswa, 2025; Konrad & Mangel, 2000; Safari & Gekara, 2025).

In this context, women's leadership must be understood not only as a question of representation, but also as a struggle over legitimacy within gendered social systems. Studies on gender and leadership show that gender is not merely a biological category but a social and cultural construct produced through daily practices, occupational roles, institutional expectations, and normative power relations (Alonso-Ferreira et al., 2022; Beagan & Saunders, 2005; Pouliot-Morneau et al., 2025). The persistence of patriarchal norms and masculine leadership ideals continues to position men as more "natural" holders of authority, while women's leadership remains subject to doubt, scrutiny, and additional expectations (Hoyt et al., 2025; Matsui, 2025; Reinhold et al., 2025; Sari et al., 2025). These dynamics suggest that leadership effectiveness is not a rigid biological attribute, but a socially developed capacity shaped by cultural interpretation, institutional recognition, and organizational practice.

Critical feminist approaches are therefore necessary to examine how women experience, negotiate, and reconstruct leadership. Feminist leadership studies challenge mainstream leadership assumptions that often overlook women's perspectives and the structural conditions that shape women's access to authority. Ford (2005) emphasizes the importance of reading leadership critically because social structures, patriarchal values, and cultural representations influence how women's leadership is interpreted and evaluated. Feminist research also gives space to women's voices, agency, and lived experiences, particularly in contexts where leadership has historically been framed through masculine traditions (Harding, 1987; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). Feminist ethics further requires researchers to take women's lived experiences seriously and to recognize them as moral and social agents whose narratives matter in the construction of knowledge (Brennan, 1999).

At the same time, women's leadership should not be reduced to a single stereotype of care, empathy, or emotional sensitivity. Studies have shown that women can demonstrate effective leadership through transformational, collaborative, relational, and inclusive practices, especially in contexts requiring coordination, trust, team cohesion, and crisis response (Eagly et al., 2003; Helgesen, 1990; Hsu et al., 2022; Post, 2015; Post et al., 2019; Stajkovic & Stajkovic, 2024; Suranga Silva & Mendis, 2017). However, these strengths are often interpreted within gendered organizational cultures that simultaneously value and constrain women's leadership. Women may be praised for empathy and collaboration, yet still be excluded from strategic authority when masculine norms dominate organizational definitions of leadership (De La Cruz, 2026; Elias, 2018; Mousa et al., 2021). This paradox

highlights the need to examine how women's leadership is constructed in specific cultural and historical contexts.

In the Indonesian context, Ratu Zalecha represents an important historical figure for examining women's leadership through social construction and feminist perspectives. Ratu Zalecha was a female warrior from South Kalimantan who fought against Dutch colonialism during the Banjar War. Previous studies describe her as an active figure in the resistance movement and as a woman who challenged gender norms in a historical context where public leadership was often associated with men (Mursalin, 2023; Saleh & Sutjiningtias, 1993; Usman, 1994). Her leadership was not only connected to her royal lineage as the daughter of Sultan Muhammad Seman, but also to her role in mobilizing resistance, demonstrating courage, and participating in public struggle. In this sense, Ratu Zalecha offers a historical example of female authority that was socially constructed through resistance, sacrifice, and collective memory.

Existing studies on Ratu Zalecha have provided important insights into her role in anti-colonial resistance, gender history, Islamic intellectual contribution, and character education. Hasanah and Jannah (2022) show that women in the Banjar Sultanate, including Ratu Zalecha, contributed to Islamic knowledge and public leadership. Mansyur et al. (2023) further emphasize that Ratu Zalecha's struggle embodied values such as courage, perseverance, patriotism, and sacrifice. Yulianti et al. (2018) also argue that women's leadership capacity should be understood as a realistic and socially meaningful possibility rather than as an anomaly. These studies are important, but they generally remain historical, descriptive, or character-oriented. Limited attention has been given to how Ratu Zalecha's legacy informs contemporary women's leadership, particularly how female leaders in South Kalimantan interpret her figure as a source of leadership identity, legitimacy, and inspiration.

This gap is significant because local female historical figures can function as cultural resources for rethinking women's leadership in contemporary society. While global studies have examined women's leadership through transformational leadership, gender equality, organizational barriers, and crisis leadership, fewer studies have connected these debates with local historical memory and culturally embedded models of female authority. In Indonesia, women leaders often navigate masculine power structures through local cultural contexts, and their legitimacy may be strengthened when leadership is connected to culturally close role models and historical narratives (Blackburn, 2004). Therefore, examining Ratu Zalecha through the narratives of contemporary female leaders can extend leadership scholarship by showing how historical memory contributes to the social construction of women's leadership legitimacy.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how women's leadership is socially constructed among contemporary female leaders in South Kalimantan and how Ratu Zalecha functions as a cultural-historical source of leadership inspiration. Specifically, this study examines how female leaders define effective leadership, negotiate gendered leadership challenges, and interpret Ratu Zalecha's values in relation to their own leadership identity and practice. By integrating social construction theory and feminist leadership perspectives, this study contributes to the literature by positioning Ratu Zalecha not merely as a historical heroine, but as a symbolic resource for reconstructing women's leadership legitimacy in contemporary Banjar society.

Methods

This research employed a qualitative case study design to examine how contemporary female leaders in South Kalimantan construct leadership meanings and how Ratu Zalecha informs their leadership identity and practice. A qualitative design was appropriate because

the study focused on lived experiences, subjective interpretations, gendered leadership dynamics, and culturally embedded narratives rather than statistical measurement. The case study approach enabled an in-depth exploration of women’s leadership within the Banjar socio-cultural context, where institutional roles, gender expectations, and local historical memory shape the legitimacy of leadership.

The study was informed by feminist research principles, which emphasize women’s voices, lived experiences, agency, and the social structures that shape their opportunities and constraints. This orientation was used not only as a methodological approach but also as an ethical and analytical lens. It allowed the researchers to examine how women leaders interpret leadership, negotiate gendered expectations, and draw meaning from Ratu Zalecha as a local female historical figure. Such an approach is consistent with the aim of understanding women’s leadership from women’s own perspectives rather than through externally imposed assumptions.

The participants were four female leaders in South Kalimantan with experience in educational or organizational leadership. They were selected purposively because they had relevant leadership experience, understood the Banjar socio-cultural context, and were able to reflect on women’s leadership and the influence of Ratu Zalecha. To protect confidentiality, participants were identified using codes in the findings section. This coding also helped maintain the analytical focus on the meaning of their experiences rather than on personal identity.

Table 1. Participant Profile

Participant Code	Leadership Background	Institutional Context	Relevance to the Study
P1	Female leader in school management	Educational institution in Banjar/South Kalimantan	Provided insights into communication, gender expectations, and institutional authority
P2	Female school leader	Educational institution in Banjarmasin/South Kalimantan	Shared views on competence-based leadership, gender equality, and contextual wisdom
P3	Former school and educational supervisor	Educational supervision context in South Kalimantan	Reflected on seniority, authority, staff management, and leadership motivation
P4	Female leader in an organizational unit	Organizational/institutional setting in Banjarmasin/South Kalimantan	Discussed role modelling, organizational dynamics, stereotypes, and Ratu Zalecha’s symbolic influence

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This technique allowed the researchers to explore participants’ experiences in depth while maintaining focus on the main research concerns. The interviews addressed three areas: participants’ understanding of effective leadership, the dynamics and challenges of women’s leadership, and the ways in which Ratu Zalecha shaped their leadership identity and practice. Semi-structured interviews were particularly suitable for this study because they enabled participants to articulate their experiences in their own words, which aligns with feminist research values of voice, subjectivity, and lived experience.

The interview process followed feminist ethical principles. The researchers sought to build respectful and non-hierarchical communication with participants, protect confidentiality, and represent their narratives carefully. Participants' identities were anonymized, and their accounts were interpreted with sensitivity to context. This ethical stance was essential because the study involved women's experiences, gendered leadership challenges, and personal reflections on authority, identity, and social recognition.

Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the first stage, the interview data were read repeatedly to identify meaning units related to leadership construction, gendered challenges, and Ratu Zalecha's inspirational role. In the second stage, the data were organized into thematic categories and compared across participants. In the final stage, patterns were interpreted and verified by examining their consistency with the research questions and the theoretical framework of social construction and feminist leadership.

Table 2. Data Analysis Procedure

Stage of Analysis	Analytical Activity	Output
Data condensation	Reading interview transcripts, identifying meaning units, and reducing repeated or less relevant information	Initial codes related to leadership meaning, gendered challenges, and Ratu Zalecha's influence
Data display	Organizing coded data into thematic categories and comparing patterns across participants	Three major themes: socially constructed leadership, gendered dynamics and challenges, and Ratu Zalecha as leadership inspiration
Conclusion drawing and verification	Interpreting relationships among themes and checking consistency with the theoretical framework	Final interpretation of women's leadership as socially negotiated and historically grounded

Trustworthiness was strengthened through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability strategies. Credibility was supported by repeated engagement with the interview data and cross-participant comparison. Dependability was maintained through a transparent analytical procedure based on Miles and Huberman's model. Confirmability was ensured by grounding interpretations in participants' narratives and the theoretical framework. Transferability was supported by providing contextual information about the participants and the South Kalimantan setting, allowing readers to assess the relevance of the findings to similar contexts.

Results

The findings of this study are organized into three major themes: leadership as a socially constructed concept, gendered dynamics and leadership challenges, and the inspirational influence of Ratu Zalecha on contemporary female leaders in South Kalimantan. These themes emerged from the participants' narratives and show how women construct, negotiate, and practice leadership within cultural, institutional, and gendered contexts.

a. Leadership as a Socially Constructed Concept

The first finding shows that leadership is understood not merely as a formal position, but as a social role shaped through interaction, communication, cultural values, institutional responsibility, and moral example. The participants described effective leadership as the ability to communicate, respect others, understand the surrounding context, recognize

people's potential, and guide an organization toward shared goals. One participant emphasized that effective leadership depends on communication and respect:

"Effective leadership is reflected in a person's ability to communicate effectively and respect others in order to achieve shared goals." (P1)

This statement indicates that leadership is constructed through relational interaction rather than authority alone. A leader becomes effective when they are able to build respectful communication and direct people toward collective objectives. Another participant connected leadership with social interaction and cultural context:

"Leadership is also a social characteristic formed through leadership skills based on continuous interaction with the surrounding environment. In the context of women's leadership, current public perception tends to be quite positive, although challenges remain in the form of a strong patriarchal culture in some Banjar regions." (P1)

This finding shows that leadership is not a fixed or natural attribute. It is formed through repeated interaction with the social environment. In the context of women's leadership, this construction remains influenced by patriarchal culture, although public acceptance of women leaders has gradually improved. A similar view appeared in another participant's explanation that leadership requires wisdom and contextual awareness:

"In my opinion, effective leadership is leadership that can be wise in all aspects, namely aspects from your perspective in education, both to colleagues and to the children of educators that you are currently supervising." (P2)

This statement suggests that leadership requires sensitivity toward different groups within an educational environment. Leadership is not only about giving instructions, but also about understanding colleagues, students, and the institutional setting. The participant further rejected gender-based distinctions in leadership:

"A good leader cannot be said to be good if they cannot see the surrounding environment, especially in the area they hold during their leadership and in terms of leadership, we do not differentiate between gender, male or female, as long as a person has the basic and qualified competencies to carry out leadership, whatever the gender, I think everyone is worthy of being a leader as long as they are competent." (P2)

This statement confirms that leadership legitimacy is constructed through competence rather than gender. The participant viewed leadership as an open role for both men and women, as long as they possess the required competence, qualification, and contextual understanding. Another participant emphasized that leadership involves the ability to optimize human resources and delegate roles according to individual capacity:

"Well, in my opinion, based on experience and the literature I have read about leadership, it boils down to how a leader can optimize the potential of the human resources they employ. How a leader can delegate roles according to their subordinates' abilities." (P3)

The same participant also stressed that leadership requires attention to the social and personal needs of followers:

"But beyond that, a leader must also be able to manage the situation and meet the physiological and social needs of those they lead. So, not only can they delegate tasks, but they must also pay attention to their physiological and social needs." (P3)

These statements show that leadership is relational and human-centered. A leader is expected not only to distribute tasks but also to understand the needs, abilities, and social

realities of the people they lead. Another participant associated leadership with role modelling, inspiration, and staff development:

“A leader is the one who can lead by example or be a role model. Then a leader recognizes the potential of each of their staff and can explore and develop that potential together. Ummm...a leader who can inspire all their staff to achieve the goals or vision and mission of the institution.” (P4)

This statement strengthens the finding that leadership is constructed through moral example, trust, influence, and shared institutional goals. Leadership is therefore not only administrative, but also transformative because it involves developing people and inspiring them to work toward a common vision.

Overall, this finding shows that the participants construct leadership as a relational, contextual, and value-based practice. Leadership is not reduced to formal authority, but is understood as communication, competence, care, example, and the ability to mobilize people toward shared purposes.

b. Gendered Dynamics and Leadership Challenges

The second finding reveals that female leaders experience complex challenges related to gender expectations, seniority, emotional pressure, organizational culture, and social stereotypes. Although the participants recognized that women are capable of leading, their experiences show that women’s leadership continues to be shaped by cultural assumptions and institutional expectations.

One participant explained that female leaders often experience doubt at the beginning of their leadership, especially because of assumptions about physical strength and gender identity. However, this resistance gradually decreased after their competence was proven and supported by formal legitimacy. After obtaining a valid leadership position, the participant described the main challenge as managing diverse human characters:

“Well, armed with this valid position, my leadership experience now focuses on the dynamics of dealing with various human characters, where the biggest challenge that continues to be faced is the art of controlling the various natures of different members so that they remain synergistic in order to achieve common goals.” (P1)

This statement shows that women leaders must negotiate two forms of challenge. First, they must prove their legitimacy in an environment that may initially doubt women’s authority. Second, they must manage diverse personalities so that team members remain aligned with organizational goals.

Another participant described leadership challenges as psychological and emotional. Female leaders are often expected to solve problems firmly while also maintaining gentleness and emotional control. This creates a dual expectation: women must be assertive enough to lead, but not too assertive to be judged negatively. This finding indicates that women’s leadership challenges are not only structural, but also emotional and relational. A different challenge emerged in relation to age and seniority. One participant described the difficulty of leading people who were older and professionally more senior:

“Yes seniority. Seniority,... leading principals who are much older.” (P3)

This short statement reveals that women’s leadership legitimacy is shaped not only by gender, but also by age, professional hierarchy, and social expectations of seniority. Young female leaders may need to work harder to gain recognition from older subordinates or colleagues. The same participant also explained that leaders must handle the personal interests and everyday realities of their subordinates:

“The most common challenge is that everyone has their own interests. Sometimes the ideals and good things we convey depend on our personal interests. For example, there was a senior teacher who always arrives at school late. Always late. Oh, it turns out she has to take her 5 year old child to school first. Sometimes there are problems before leaving child school, like having to go to the restroom or doing some errands. Those are actually her own interests, and they can be a difficulty (for me as her leader). We have to understand that, because her position is indeed a growing one, but on the other hand, we have to develop discipline and..... so on.” (P3)

This quotation shows that leadership requires the ability to balance discipline and empathy. The leader must maintain institutional rules while also understanding the personal and family responsibilities that shape staff behavior. Another participant highlighted gendered stereotypes in organizational life:

“I think.... women have character, they have the tendency to form groups. For example, they form cliques, small groups within the facility itself, with those they find suitable for friendship, and that becomes their own small group. Men, on the other hand, tend not to behave like that; they can be neutral and fit in wherever they want.....” (P4)

This statement reflects how women’s behavior in organizations is often interpreted through gendered assumptions. The perception that women tend to form small groups may create additional challenges for female leaders, because they must manage not only organizational tasks but also social perceptions attached to women’s behavior.

Taken together, these findings show that women leaders face layered challenges. They must negotiate gender stereotypes, seniority, emotional expectations, diverse staff characters, and institutional demands. Their leadership requires competence, resilience, empathy, firmness, and the ability to transform social doubt into trust.

c. Ratu Zalecha as a Source of Leadership Inspiration for Contemporary Female Leaders

The third finding shows that Ratu Zalecha functions as a symbolic and cultural source of inspiration for contemporary female leaders in South Kalimantan. The participants did not view Ratu Zalecha merely as a historical figure, but as a model of courage, resilience, patience, integrity, and strategic leadership. One participant emphasized that Ratu Zalecha’s leadership expanded the meaning of women’s leadership:

“Zalecha’s leadership opened up awareness that women possess not only the capacity for empathy and tenderness, but also courage, assertiveness, and strong mental resilience. This contributed to the dismantling of unequal gender power relations.” (P4)

This statement shows that Ratu Zalecha challenges the narrow image of women as merely gentle or nurturing. Her leadership provides an alternative model that combines empathy with courage, assertiveness, and resilience. The same participant criticized the simplification of Ratu Zalecha as merely the “Kartini of Kalimantan”:

“I label Zalecha as the Kartini of Kalimantan demonstrates an attempt to simplify discourse that does not fully represent the complexity of her leadership.” (P4)

This statement indicates that Ratu Zalecha should not be reduced to a symbolic label. Her leadership needs to be understood in its own historical, cultural, and political complexity. She was not only a symbol of women’s emancipation, but also a leader who practiced resistance, strategy, and social mobilization. Another participant interpreted Ratu Zalecha’s leadership through the value of patience:

“From Zalechah, we see her patience. Her patience, in other words, allows her to exist even when placed at a lower level than men. It requires patience, complete patience, not just being able to display

vague emotions. It requires a strong vision and mission. Only then can people like Ratu Zalecha be seen, in other words, with an open mind, not with a blind eye.” (P2)

This statement shows that patience in women’s leadership should not be understood as passivity. Instead, patience becomes a form of endurance, emotional strength, and commitment to a larger vision. In this interpretation, Ratu Zalecha teaches that women leaders need patience when facing rejection, dismissal, or unequal treatment. Another participant viewed Ratu Zalecha as a model of influence and transformative leadership:

“She is an extraordinary figure, in my opinion. With her motivation and abilities, I want to be like her, someone who can spread greater benefits, because being a leader has greater benefits than being a helper, having the power to change things.” (P3)

This statement shows that Ratu Zalecha inspired the participant to see leadership as a space for broader benefit and meaningful change. Leadership is understood as a position that enables women to influence others, solve problems, and create institutional improvement. The participant further connected this inspiration to her own career journey:

“This is what I feel is actually my motivation for why I went from being a teacher to applying for education to become a supervisor or a school teacher. Because I have been a subordinate too. We have innovations, we see a problem that can be solved with that innovation, but if it does not align with the leader’s thinking, it cannot be done, it is limited.” (P3)

This quotation shows that Ratu Zalecha’s influence is not only symbolic but also practical. Her leadership narrative encouraged the participant to move into a leadership role because leadership provides greater authority to implement innovation and solve institutional problems.

Overall, this finding indicates that Ratu Zalecha provides cultural legitimacy for contemporary women’s leadership in South Kalimantan. Her figure helps women imagine leadership as historically rooted, culturally meaningful, and socially possible. Through Ratu Zalecha, female leaders find a local model of leadership that combines courage, patience, firmness, moral integrity, and transformative influence.

d. Summary of Findings

To strengthen the analytical structure of the findings, Table 3 presents a thematic condensation of the interview data. The table organizes participants’ narratives into three major meaning units: the definition of leadership, the dynamics and challenges of women’s leadership, and the inspirational role of Ratu Zalecha for contemporary female leaders in South Kalimantan. Rather than reproducing the interview data descriptively, the table highlights the central meanings that emerged from the participants’ experiences and shows how leadership is socially constructed through competence, legitimacy, gendered negotiation, and cultural memory. This presentation also clarifies the empirical foundation of the findings before moving to deeper theoretical interpretation.

Table 3: Women’s Leadership

Theme	Interview Evidence	Interpretation
Leadership as a socially constructed concept	P1, P2, P3, and P4 described leadership through communication, competence, contextual awareness, delegation, role modelling, and staff development	Leadership is constructed through interaction, values, institutional responsibility, and social recognition
Gendered dynamics and	Participants described challenges related to gender doubt, seniority, emotional	Women leaders must negotiate gender expectations and transform social doubt into trust

leadership challenges	pressure, stereotypes, and diverse human characters	
Ratu Zalecha as leadership inspiration	Participants described Ratu Zalecha as courageous, patient, resilient, assertive, strategic, and influential	Ratu Zalecha provides cultural legitimacy and symbolic strength for contemporary female leadership

Thus, the findings show that women’s leadership in South Kalimantan is shaped by the interaction between personal competence, social recognition, cultural values, gender expectations, and historical memory. Ratu Zalecha becomes an important symbolic figure because her leadership narrative enables contemporary women leaders to reinterpret leadership not as a male-dominated domain, but as a space where women can exercise authority, courage, patience, and transformative influence.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that women’s leadership in South Kalimantan is constructed through the interaction of competence, social recognition, cultural expectations, institutional legitimacy, and historical memory. Leadership is not understood merely as a formal position, but as a relational and contextual practice developed through communication, moral example, the ability to manage human resources, and sensitivity to the social environment. This confirms the relevance of social construction theory, which views social roles and meanings as products of interaction, internalization, and institutionalization rather than as naturally fixed realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In this context, women’s leadership is not an exception to male leadership, but a legitimate social practice that is continuously negotiated within local cultural and organizational settings.

The findings also challenge essentialist assumptions that associate leadership with masculine identity. The participants’ narratives show that leadership legitimacy is built through competence, trust, contextual understanding, and the capacity to influence others. This aligns with studies that conceptualize gender as a social and cultural construct shaped through daily practices and occupational roles (Alonso-Ferreira et al., 2022; Beagan & Saunders, 2005). Therefore, women’s leadership in this study should not be interpreted as naturally feminine, soft, or emotional. Instead, it reflects a socially developed leadership capacity shaped by professional experience, institutional responsibility, and cultural negotiation. This argument is also consistent with transformational leadership literature, which suggests that women can demonstrate effective leadership through empathy, collaboration, emotional intelligence, and the development of others (Eagly et al., 2003; Hsu et al., 2022; Post, 2015).

At the same time, the study reveals that female leaders continue to face layered barriers in constructing leadership legitimacy. These barriers include patriarchal assumptions, gender stereotypes, seniority, emotional expectations, and the need to prove authority in everyday organizational practice. This finding supports critical feminist perspectives which argue that leadership studies often overlook the structural and symbolic conditions that shape women’s authority (Ford, 2005). Women leaders may formally occupy strategic positions, but their legitimacy is still evaluated through gendered expectations about how women should behave, communicate, and exercise power. As Hoyt et al. (2025) argue, gender identity awareness can operate as a hidden pillar of gender hierarchy, influencing how women are perceived and assessed in leadership roles.

The issue of seniority further shows that women’s leadership challenges are not shaped by gender alone. Age, professional hierarchy, institutional status, and organizational culture also influence whether women’s authority is accepted. This suggests that leadership

legitimacy must be understood intersectionally, particularly in educational settings where age and seniority often carry strong symbolic power. In such contexts, women leaders must build authority not only through formal appointment, but also through consistency, relational skill, ethical judgement, and demonstrated competence. Thus, the barriers faced by female leaders should not be viewed as individual weaknesses, but as outcomes of broader organizational and cultural systems that continue to attach different expectations to women and men.

The role of Ratu Zalecha is central to the contribution of this study. Previous studies have positioned Ratu Zalecha as an important figure in the Banjar resistance against Dutch colonial rule and as a symbol of courage, sacrifice, patriotism, and perseverance (Mansyur et al., 2023; Mursalin, 2023). However, this study extends that discussion by showing how Ratu Zalecha's historical legacy continues to shape contemporary women's leadership imagination. She is not only remembered as a historical heroine, but also functions as a culturally embedded model of female authority. Her figure provides symbolic legitimacy for women leaders by showing that women's leadership has historical roots in Banjar society.

This finding is significant because many leadership theories are developed from general organizational or Western-centered perspectives. By placing Ratu Zalecha within the discussion of contemporary women's leadership, this study demonstrates the importance of local historical memory in constructing leadership legitimacy. Blackburn (2004) argues that Indonesian women leaders often navigate masculine power structures through local cultural contexts. In a similar way, Ratu Zalecha becomes a culturally close role model through which contemporary Banjar women can imagine leadership as possible, legitimate, and socially meaningful. Her leadership narrative connects women's present leadership practices with a local history of resistance, courage, and public responsibility.

From a critical feminist perspective, Ratu Zalecha should not be reduced to a simplified symbolic label. Her leadership needs to be understood as a complex form of agency involving resistance, strategy, moral courage, and collective mobilization. Feminist research emphasizes the importance of recovering women's voices, experiences, and agency from social and historical structures that often marginalize them (Harding, 1987; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). In this study, Ratu Zalecha becomes a historical resource for reconstructing the meaning of female leadership beyond domestic, passive, or supportive roles. Her figure challenges the assumption that leadership is culturally inappropriate for women and instead demonstrates that women's authority has deep cultural and historical legitimacy in South Kalimantan.

Overall, this study contributes to social construction and feminist leadership studies by showing that women's leadership legitimacy is produced through the interaction of competence, cultural norms, gendered expectations, institutional recognition, and historical memory. Practically, the findings suggest that educational institutions and organizations should develop more gender-equitable leadership environments by reducing gender bias, strengthening mentoring for women leaders, and integrating local female figures into leadership education. In the South Kalimantan context, Ratu Zalecha can serve as a culturally relevant model for strengthening women's leadership identity, confidence, and legitimacy. Thus, contemporary women's leadership in Banjar society can be understood as both socially negotiated and historically grounded.

Conclusion

This study concludes that women's leadership in South Kalimantan is a socially constructed process shaped by competence, institutional recognition, cultural expectations, gendered experiences, and local historical memory. The findings show that female leaders build legitimacy through communication, contextual sensitivity, moral example, relational

competence, and the ability to mobilize others toward shared goals. At the same time, their leadership remains negotiated within patriarchal assumptions, seniority structures, emotional expectations, and stereotypes surrounding women's authority. By positioning Ratu Zalecha as a culturally embedded source of inspiration, this study demonstrates that local historical figures can strengthen the legitimacy of contemporary women's leadership and expand feminist leadership discourse beyond general organizational frameworks.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its small number of participants and its context-specific focus on female leaders in South Kalimantan. Therefore, the findings should be understood as context-bound rather than generalizable to all Indonesian women leaders. Future studies may involve more diverse participants, compare women's leadership across different cultural regions, and examine how other local female figures shape women's leadership identity, authority, and gender equality in educational and organizational settings.

References

- Ali, M., Baker, M., Grabarski, M. K., & Konrad, A. M. (2025). Influence of gender equality practices and work–life programs on women in leadership, management, and nonmanagement: The role of industry gender composition. *European Management Journal*, S0263237325001860. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2025.12.010>
- Ali, M., Shin, D., & Yang, Y. (2025). The impact of management gender diversity on productivity: The contextual role of industry gender composition. *Australian Journal of Management*, 50(1), 32–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03128962231184664>
- Alonso-Ferreira, M., Farias, L., & Rivas-Quarneti, N. (2022). Addressing the gender construct in occupation-based research: A scoping review / Abordaje del constructo género en investigación basada en la ocupación: Un estudio de alcance. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 29(2), 195–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2021.1955943>
- Baker, M., Ali, M., Grabarski, M. K., & Konrad, A. (2025). Influence of Women in Leadership on Gender-Equality, Work–Life, and Domestic Violence Coping Practices: The Role of Chief Executive Officer Gender. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 35(4), 1032–1046. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12611>
- Beagan, B., & Saunders, S. (2005). Occupations of Masculinity: Producing Gender through What Men Do and Don't Do. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 12(3), 161–169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2005.9686559>
- Luckmann, T. (1966). Peter Berger. *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Anchor Books (Doubleday), New York.
- Blackburn, S. (2004). *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia*. Cambridge University Press.
- Brennan, S. (1999). Recent work in feminist ethics. *Ethics*, 109(4), 858–893. <https://doi.org/10.1086/233951>
- Buss, M., Andler, S., & Tiberius, V. (2025). Female leadership: An integrative review and research framework. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 36(3), 101858. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2024.101858>
- [Butler, J. \(1990\). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.](#)
- De La Cruz, L. (2026). Leadership styles of minority women administrators in US medical schools. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRDE-12-2025-0024>
- Eagly, A. H., Johannesen-Schmidt, M. C., & Van Engen, M. L. (2003). Transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles: A meta-analysis comparing women and men. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129(4), 569–591. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.4.569>

- Elias, E. (2018). Lessons learned from women in leadership positions: How working women can survive and thrive. *Work*, 59(2), 175–181. <https://doi.org/10.3233/WOR-172675>
- Engeli, I., & Mazur, A. G. (Eds.). (2022). *Gender Equality and Policy Implementation in the Corporate World: Making Democracy Work in Business* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198865216.001.0001>
- Ford J. Examining leadership through critical feminist readings. *J Health Organ Manag*, 2005;19(3):236-51. <https://doi.org/10.1108/14777260510608961>
- Harding, S. G. (Ed.). (1987). *Feminism and methodology: Social science issues*. Indiana University Press.
- Hasanah, N., & Jannah, R. (2022). Kiprah perempuan di masa Kesultanan Banjar: sebagai aktor intelektual hingga memimpin rakyat. *Muadalah*, 10(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.18592/muadalah.v10i1.7440>
- Helgesen, S. (1990). *The female advantage: Women's ways of leadership*. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000216794>
- Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. (2007). *Feminist research practice: A primer*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications
- Hesse-Biber, S. N. (Ed.). (2014). *Feminist research practice: A primer*. Sage Publications.
- hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press
- Hoyt, C. L., Hudson, S. T. J., Chin, S., & Cutler, A. (2025). Gender Identity Awareness as a Shadow Pillar of the Gender Hierarchy: How It Can Undermine Women in Leadership. *Sex Roles*, 91(6), 40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-025-01589-z>
- Hsu, N., Newman, D. A., & Badura, K. L. (2022). Emotional Intelligence and Transformational Leadership: Meta-Analysis and Explanatory Model of Female Leadership Advantage. *Journal of Intelligence*, 10(4), 104. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jintelligence10040104>
- Kalysh, K., Kulik, C. T., & Perera, S. (2016). Help or hindrance? Work–life practices and women in management. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 27(3), 504–518. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.12.009>
- Kanjere, M. M., & Ramaotswa, N. M. (2025). The implementation of National Gender Policy Framework in addressing gender equality in selected Johannesburg Stock Exchange listed retail companies. *Gender and Behaviour*, 22(3), 22990–23004. <https://doi.org/10.4314/gab.v22i3.12>
- Konrad, A. M., & Mangel, R. (2000). The impact of work-life programs on firm productivity. *Strategies Management Journal*, 21(12), 1225–1237. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1097-0266\(200012\)21:12<1225::AID-SMJ135>3.0.CO;2-3](https://doi.org/10.1002/1097-0266(200012)21:12<1225::AID-SMJ135>3.0.CO;2-3)
- Mansyur, M., Elmy, M., Subroto, W., & Warlim, W. (2023). Nilai-Nilai Karakter Ratu Zaleha, Pejuang Perang Banjar, di Kalimantan Selatan Tahun 1880-1953. *Jurnal Pendidikan Kewarganegaraan*, 13(1), 98-108. <http://dx.doi.org/10.20527/kewarganegaraan.v13i1.17117>
- Matsui, T. (2025). Grounds and anchors in social construction. *Synthese*, 206(5), 242. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-025-05329-4>
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. (1994). M.(1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications
- Mursalim, M. (2023). Ratu Zaleha 1905-1906: Peran Gender dan Perlawanan Terhadap Penjajah. *Muadalah*, 11(1), 13-26. <https://doi.org/10.18592/muadalah.v11i1.9190>
- Post, C. (2015). When is female leadership an advantage? Coordination requirements, team cohesion, and team interaction norms: When is Female Leadership an Advantage? *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 36(8), 1153–1175. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2031>

- Post, C., Latu, I. M., & Belkin, L. Y. (2019). A Female Leadership Trust Advantage in Times of Crisis: Under What Conditions? *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 43(2), 215–231. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684319828292>
- Pouliot-Morneau, D., Nussbaumer, L., & Stucki, V. (2025). Gender precedes sex: Epistemological considerations for occupational science from a materialist feminist perspective. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 32(4), 688–702. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2024.2412622>
- Reinhold, M., Stenling, A., Keisu, B.-I., Lundmark, R., & Tafvelin, S. (2025). Does gender matter? The impact of gender and gender match on the relation between destructive leadership and follower outcomes. *BMC Psychology*, 13(1), 270. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-02566-7>
- Safari, M., & Gekara, V. (2025). Investigation of the effectiveness of the implementation of gender equality strategies: A case study of an Australian public sector organization in a male-dominated industry. *Meditari Accountancy Research*, 33(1), 144–165. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MEDAR-11-2023-2243>
- Sari, N. R., Gunawan, A., & Rahmawati, F. (2025). Analisis Ketimpangan Gender terhadap Partisipasi Perempuan di Dunia Kerja. *Sahmiyya*, 4(2). <https://e-journal.uingsdur.ac.id/sahmiyya/article/view/11397>
- Stajkovic, K., & Stajkovic, A. D. (2024). Ethics of Care Leadership, Racial Inclusion, and Economic Health in the Cities: Is There a Female Leadership Advantage? *Journal of Business Ethics*, 189(4), 699–721. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-023-05564-0>
- Suranga Silva & Mendis. (2017). Male vs Female Leaders: Analysis of Transformational, Transactional & Laissez-faire Women Leadership Styles. *European Journal of Business and Management*, 9(9), 1–8. [iiste.org/Journals/index.php/EJBM/article/view/35913](https://www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/EJBM/article/view/35913)
- Yulianti, R., Putra, D., & Takanjanji, P. (2018). Women Leadership: Telaah Kapasitas Perempuan Sebagai Pemimpin. *Madani Jurnal Politik Dan Sosial Kemasyarakatan*, 10(2), 14–29. <https://doi.org/10.52166/madani.v10i2.973>