*Research Article*

# Leadership Styles of Female Principals at SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo Tulang Bawang Lampung

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**Abstract:** School leadership plays a strategic role in improving educational quality through effective management, the creation of a positive school culture, and the achievement of learning outcomes, while women's participation in educational leadership continues to face structural and cultural challenges related to gender stereotypes. This study aims to analyze the leadership styles of female principals at SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo, identify supporting and inhibiting factors, and examine the strategies implemented to improve school quality. The research employed a descriptive qualitative approach, with principals, teachers, and students as research subjects. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, passive participatory observation, and documentation, and were analyzed using interactive qualitative analysis techniques involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, with validity ensured through triangulation and member checks. The results indicate that female principals apply a combination of democratic-participatory, transformational, visionary, humanistic-communicative, and professional exemplary leadership styles. These leadership practices are reflected in inclusive decision-making, open communication, moral exemplarity, and strategic programs oriented toward student competence and institutional development. Supporting factors include strong personal commitment, high discipline, a conducive school climate, and stakeholder support, while inhibiting factors consist of limited infrastructure, policy changes, internal differences of opinion, and gender-based social pressures. The study concludes that, despite existing obstacles, female principals are able to implement adaptive and participatory leadership strategies that foster a positive work climate, enhance school community involvement, and contribute significantly to improving the quality and sustainability of vocational education.

**Keywords:** Educational; Female Principals; Leadership Style; Leadership; School Management.

## 1. Introduction

School leadership is a key factor in improving the quality of education, as it plays a role in resource management, shaping school culture, and achieving student achievement (Fitrah & Kristiawan, 2018). In the context of the 21st century, women's involvement in educational leadership is increasingly recognized as part of sustainable development, despite still facing gender inequality and social stereotypes (Nurvita, 2019; Febriantina, 2015).

A number of studies show that female principals tend to apply democratic, participatory, communicative, and empathetic leadership styles that contribute positively to the school climate and quality of education (Rosner, 1990; Yeni Wulandari et al., 2018). However, female leadership also faces various obstacles, such as the burden of dual roles, limited infrastructure, and a patriarchal culture that still influences perceptions of the effectiveness of female leadership (Rahmawati, 2020; Beason, 1992).

This condition is also evident at SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo, Tulang Bawang Regency, where even though the schools are led by female principals and have good accreditation achievements, there are still disciplinary and managerial issues.

Therefore, this research is important to examine the leadership style of female principals, the obstacles they face from a gender perspective, and the strategies they implement to improve school quality.

School leadership is widely acknowledged as a central determinant in enhancing educational quality, as it directly influences the effectiveness of resource management, organizational decision-making, and the cultivation of a positive school culture that supports student achievement (Bush, 2011; Bass, 1990). In contemporary educational discourse, leadership is no longer perceived merely as administrative authority, but rather as a dynamic process that integrates vision, motivation, and adaptive capacity in response to complex educational challenges (Heifetz, 1994). Effective school leaders are required to balance managerial competence with instructional leadership in order to ensure sustainable school development and continuous improvement (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Consequently, leadership in education becomes a strategic instrument in shaping institutional resilience and academic excellence within rapidly changing social contexts.

In the 21st century, the involvement of women in educational leadership has increasingly gained recognition as an essential component of gender equality and sustainable development, particularly within the framework of inclusive governance in public institutions (Febriantina, 2015; Fitrah & Kristiawan, 2018). Statistical data indicate that gender development in Lampung Province has shown gradual improvement, although disparities in leadership representation persist, especially at decision-making levels within educational institutions (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Lampung, 2023). Despite improvements in educational access and outcomes, women leaders continue to face structural and cultural barriers that limit their full participation and recognition in leadership roles (Connell, 2002). These conditions reflect the ongoing tension between progressive policy frameworks and deeply rooted social norms that influence perceptions of women's leadership capacity.

Numerous studies demonstrate that female leaders tend to exhibit leadership styles characterized by democratic decision-making, participatory engagement, open communication, and heightened empathy, which collectively contribute to a supportive school climate and improved organizational performance (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Helgesen, 1990). Empirical evidence suggests that women leaders are more likely to adopt transformational leadership behaviors that foster collaboration, trust, and professional commitment among teachers and staff (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Bass & Avolio, 1994). Such leadership orientations align closely with contemporary educational demands that emphasize shared leadership and collective responsibility for learning outcomes (Eagly & Carli, 2003). As a result, female principals are often perceived as effective agents of change who prioritize relational leadership and human-centered management approaches.

However, female leadership in education is not without significant challenges, as women principals frequently encounter obstacles rooted in gender stereotypes, role incongruity, and patriarchal organizational cultures (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). The dual burden of professional responsibilities and domestic expectations often intensifies the pressure faced by female school leaders, potentially affecting leadership sustainability and work-life balance (Beason, 1992). Additionally, limited institutional infrastructure and unequal access to leadership networks further constrain women's capacity to exercise authority effectively within school systems (Helgesen, 2011). These challenges reinforce the persistence of gender bias in evaluating leadership effectiveness, despite evidence supporting women's leadership competencies.

The educational context of SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo in Tulang Bawang Regency illustrates these broader dynamics, as both schools are led by female principals and have achieved commendable accreditation status according to regional education statistics (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Lampung, 2024). Nevertheless, despite these achievements, the schools continue to face internal challenges related to discipline, managerial coordination, and institutional consistency, which require adaptive leadership responses. This situation highlights the complex interplay between leadership style, organizational culture, and contextual constraints within vocational education settings. Therefore, examining leadership practices at these schools provides a valuable opportunity to understand how female principals navigate structural limitations while striving to improve school quality.

Based on these considerations, this research is essential to analyze the leadership styles adopted by female principals, the gender-based obstacles they encounter, and the strategic efforts they implement to overcome such constraints within the school environment. By integrating gender theory and educational leadership perspectives, this study seeks to

contribute to a more nuanced understanding of women's leadership experiences in Indonesian secondary education (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2002). Furthermore, the findings are expected to offer empirical insights that inform policy formulation and leadership development programs aimed at promoting gender-responsive school leadership. Ultimately, this research aspires to support the advancement of equitable and effective educational leadership practices that align with broader goals of educational quality and social justice.

## 2. Literature Review

### Educational Leadership

Educational leadership is the process of influencing and directing the entire school community to achieve educational goals effectively through resource management, vision building, and teacher empowerment (Bush, 2011; Northouse, 2016). Leadership style reflects the pattern of behavior of leaders in influencing the attitudes and performance of subordinates, which is influenced by character, values, and organizational situations (Mulyasa in Nursam, 2020; Machali & Hidayat, 2016). In the context of education, democratic, transformational, and situational leadership styles are considered effective because they emphasize participation, motivation, and flexibility according to the readiness of subordinates (Leithwood et al., 2006; Hersey & Blanchard, 1982).

### School Principal Leadership

The school principal is an educational leader responsible for managing learning, resources, and overall school quality development (Purwanto, 2011; Wahjosumidjo, 2011; Perdirjen GTK No. 7327 of 2023). The role of school principal leadership includes the functions of educator, manager, administrator, supervisor, leader, innovator, and motivator, which are integrated to improve the quality of education (Mulyasa, 2006; Kristiawan, 2017). The effectiveness of school principal leadership is influenced by personal characteristics, managerial competence, leadership style, school culture, and stakeholder support (Wahjosumidjo, 2010; Sergiovanni, 2001; Robbins & Coulter, 2016).

### Gender-Based School Principal Leadership

Gender-based school leadership views leadership as a social practice influenced by gender role constructions and relations, rather than merely biological differences (Butler, 1990; Connell, 2002). Female principals tend to display democratic, participatory, collaborative, and empathetic leadership styles, with strengths in interpersonal communication and school community empowerment (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly & Carli, 2003). The effectiveness of female leadership is influenced by internal factors such as competence, motivation, and leadership style, as well as external factors such as organizational culture, gender stereotypes, double role burdens, and environmental support (Heilman, 2001; Coleman, 2003). Indicators of female school principal leadership include effective communication, inclusive decision-making, sensitivity to the school's psychological climate, collaborative conflict management, moral exemplarity, and a humanistic approach (Northouse, 2016; Sergiovanni, 1992).

### Framework



**Figure 1.** Framework.

## 3. Materials and Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the leadership styles of female principals based on the perspectives of teachers and students at SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, passive participatory observation, and documentation, with the researcher as the key instrument (Creswell, 2018; Sugiyono, 2019; Moleong, 2021). Data validity was ensured through triangulation and member checks based on the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data analysis was conducted interactively through data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing according to the Miles and Huberman model (Miles & Huberman, 2014)..

## 4. Results and Discussion

The results of the study show that the female principals at SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo apply democratic-participatory, transformational, visionary, humanistic-communicative, and professional exemplary leadership styles. The vision and mission were formulated participatively with teachers and the school committee. "We formulated the vision and mission together, starting from the teachers, staff, to the school committee... so that they truly reflect the needs of the school" (KS01/PT), while the SMK Siap Kerja (Vocational School Ready to Work) program improves student competence through training and industry cooperation, "Training and industry cooperation really help students to be more ready for work" (GR03/PT). The principal balances firmness with empathy, "Her leadership style is transformational but motherly. Firm but still pays attention to the human side" (GR24/PT), builds open communication, "The principal is easy to meet and willing to listen" (SW05/PT), and sets an example in discipline, "I cannot demand discipline from teachers if I myself do not set an example" (KS18/PT).

The transformational style of the principal can be seen in their ability to inspire, motivate, and encourage innovation and positive change in schools through flagship programs such as literacy, teacher training, and strengthening technology-based learning (Bass, 1990). Democratic-participatory leadership is reflected in the active involvement of school members in program formulation and decision-making (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939), while a humanistic-communicative approach is demonstrated through empathetic interaction and attention to individual needs (Helgesen, 2011; Eagly & Carli, 2007). The professional exemplary behavior of the principal in terms of discipline, work ethic, and consistency reinforces idealized influence in transformational leadership.

Supporting factors for leadership include personal commitment and high discipline, a conducive school environment, harmonious communication between teachers, students, and committees, as well as external support from the education office and the community (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). Meanwhile, the obstacles faced include limited infrastructure, internal differences of opinion, changes in government policy, and emotional pressure related to gender roles. Efforts to address these obstacles are carried out through facility improvements, external collaboration, internal deliberation, and optimization of the roles of teachers and staff, so that leadership remains effective, participatory, and oriented towards improving the quality of education (Heifetz, 2009). Overall, the leadership of female principals in these two vocational schools has proven capable of creating a positive work climate, encouraging school community participation, improving education quality, and building a conducive, collaborative, and sustainable school culture (Bass, 1990; Helgesen, 2011; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

**Leadership Styles Practiced by Female Principals**

The findings of this study indicate that female principals at SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo demonstrate a combination of democratic-participatory, transformational, visionary, humanistic-communicative, and professional exemplary leadership styles. These leadership patterns reflect a comprehensive approach that integrates managerial effectiveness with relational sensitivity in managing vocational education institutions. Such an approach aligns with contemporary theories of educational leadership that emphasize adaptability, inclusiveness, and shared responsibility (Bush, 2011; Northouse, 2016). The integration of multiple leadership styles enables principals to respond effectively to diverse institutional demands and stakeholder expectations.

Democratic-participatory leadership is evident in the formulation of school vision and mission through inclusive deliberation involving teachers, staff, and school committees. This participatory process fosters a sense of collective ownership and shared commitment toward

institutional goals, which is a defining characteristic of democratic leadership practices (Lewin et al., 1939; Li et al., 2022). By involving stakeholders in decision-making, principals strengthen trust and transparency within the school organization. Such leadership practices are particularly relevant in vocational schools where collaboration with internal and external partners is essential.

Transformational leadership is strongly reflected in the principals' ability to inspire and motivate school members through visionary programs oriented toward improving student competence and employability. Initiatives such as the *SMK Siap Kerja* program illustrate how leadership vision translates into concrete actions through industry collaboration and skills-based training. This approach corresponds with Bass's (1990) conceptualization of transformational leadership, which emphasizes inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Through these efforts, principals contribute directly to enhancing students' readiness for the labor market.

Visionary leadership further manifests in the principals' capacity to anticipate future challenges in vocational education and align school programs with labor market needs. By prioritizing literacy, teacher professional development, and technology-based learning, principals demonstrate strategic foresight in responding to global educational trends (Leithwood et al., 2006). This strategic orientation enables schools to remain competitive and responsive in an evolving educational environment. Visionary leadership thus functions as a catalyst for sustainable institutional growth.

Humanistic-communicative leadership is reflected in the principals' empathetic interactions and openness to dialogue with teachers, students, and staff. Open communication channels foster psychological safety and encourage constructive feedback, which are essential for organizational learning (Helgesen, 2011). This leadership style aligns with research indicating that women leaders tend to emphasize relational and emotional dimensions of leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Such an approach strengthens interpersonal trust and cohesion within the school community.

Professional exemplary leadership is demonstrated through the principals' consistent display of discipline, work ethic, and moral integrity. By modeling professional behavior, principals reinforce organizational norms and expectations, thereby enhancing institutional credibility (Sergiovanni, 1992). This exemplary conduct embodies the principle of idealized influence within transformational leadership theory (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Teachers and staff are thus encouraged to emulate similar standards of professionalism.

The balance between firmness and empathy observed in the principals' leadership reflects situational adaptability in managing diverse school contexts. This balance enables principals to enforce rules while remaining attentive to the personal and professional needs of school members. Such adaptability resonates with situational leadership theory, which emphasizes flexibility in leadership behavior based on follower readiness (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982). Consequently, leadership effectiveness is enhanced through contextual responsiveness.

Gender perspectives further enrich the understanding of these leadership styles, as female principals often navigate leadership roles within patriarchal social structures. Despite these constraints, women leaders demonstrate resilience and competence by leveraging relational strengths and collaborative strategies (Fitrah & Kristiawan, 2018). This finding supports arguments that women possess unique leadership advantages rooted in empathy and inclusiveness (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Therefore, gender should be viewed as a resource rather than a limitation in educational leadership.

The leadership practices observed in both schools illustrate how female principals integrate ethical, instructional, and managerial dimensions of leadership. These multidimensional practices reflect holistic leadership models that emphasize moral purpose and instructional improvement (Sergiovanni, 2001). By aligning leadership values with institutional goals, principals strengthen organizational coherence. This coherence is essential for sustaining school improvement initiatives.

Overall, the leadership styles practiced by female principals at SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo demonstrate a synthesis of theory and practice. Their leadership approaches validate contemporary leadership theories while responding to local educational realities. Such findings contribute empirical evidence to the growing body of literature on women's leadership in education. Consequently, these leadership styles represent effective models for vocational school leadership in similar contexts.

**Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Female School Leadership**

The effectiveness of female principals' leadership is influenced by various supporting factors that strengthen their capacity to manage schools successfully. Personal commitment, high discipline, and strong moral responsibility emerge as internal factors that underpin leadership effectiveness. These personal attributes align with leadership theories emphasizing character and integrity as foundational leadership elements (Robbins & Coulter, 2016). Such internal strengths enable principals to maintain consistency and credibility in their leadership roles.

A conducive school environment also serves as a critical supporting factor for effective leadership. Harmonious relationships among teachers, students, and school committees foster collaborative problem-solving and collective engagement. Organizational climate theory highlights the importance of positive interpersonal relations in enhancing school effectiveness (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). In this context, supportive environments amplify the impact of participatory leadership practices.

External support from education authorities and the wider community further strengthens leadership effectiveness. Policy support, professional development opportunities, and community collaboration provide essential resources for school improvement. This external backing aligns with systems theory, which views schools as open systems interacting with their environments (Bush, 2011). Such support enables principals to implement innovative programs and sustain institutional development.

Statistical data from Lampung Province indicate gradual improvements in educational access and gender development, which indirectly support women's leadership in education (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Lampung, 2023; 2024). However, these improvements coexist with persistent gender disparities in leadership representation. This paradox highlights the complex interaction between structural progress and cultural resistance. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for contextualizing female leadership experiences.

Despite these supports, female principals face significant obstacles that challenge leadership effectiveness. Limited infrastructure remains a major constraint, particularly in vocational schools requiring specialized facilities. Resource limitations can hinder program implementation and reduce organizational efficiency. Such challenges reflect broader systemic issues in educational resource distribution (Kristiawan, 2017).

Internal differences of opinion among school members also pose challenges to leadership cohesion. Divergent perspectives on policy implementation and program priorities can create organizational tension. Managing such differences requires advanced communication and conflict-resolution skills (Robinson, 2001). Female principals often rely on participatory strategies to mitigate these challenges.

Policy changes at the governmental level further complicate leadership stability. Frequent regulatory adjustments demand rapid adaptation and administrative flexibility from school leaders. This situation aligns with adaptive leadership theory, which emphasizes responsiveness to complex and evolving challenges (Heifetz, 1994). Principals must therefore balance compliance with innovation.

Gender-based emotional pressure constitutes another significant obstacle for female principals. Societal expectations regarding women's roles can intensify emotional labor and leadership stress (Beason, 1992; Rahmawati, 2020). These pressures may affect leadership sustainability if not adequately addressed. Gender role theory provides a useful lens for understanding these dynamics (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Cultural stereotypes also influence perceptions of leadership effectiveness. Patriarchal norms may undermine confidence in women's authority despite demonstrated competence (Heilman, 2001). Such biases reinforce structural inequalities within educational leadership. Addressing these stereotypes requires systemic cultural change.

Overall, the interaction between supporting and inhibiting factors shapes the leadership experiences of female principals. While supportive conditions enhance leadership capacity, persistent obstacles necessitate strategic adaptation. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing gender-responsive leadership policies. This analysis underscores the need for holistic support systems to sustain female leadership effectiveness

**Strategies and Implications for Improving Educational Quality**

Female principals employ various strategies to overcome leadership obstacles and enhance school quality. Facility improvement initiatives represent a key strategy to address infrastructure limitations. By prioritizing gradual development and external collaboration, principals optimize available resources. This pragmatic approach reflects strategic management principles in educational administration (Mulyasa, 2006).

External collaboration with industry partners and community organizations further strengthens vocational education outcomes. Such partnerships enhance curriculum relevance and student employability. Collaborative leadership practices align with participatory leadership frameworks that emphasize stakeholder engagement (Li et al., 2022). These partnerships also reinforce the school's social legitimacy.

Internal deliberation and consensus-building are employed to address differences of opinion among school members. Through dialogue and negotiation, principals foster shared understanding and collective commitment. This deliberative approach reflects democratic leadership values and enhances organizational cohesion (Lewin et al., 1939). As a result, conflict becomes a source of learning rather than division.

Optimizing the roles of teachers and staff is another critical strategy for leadership effectiveness. Delegation and empowerment enhance professional autonomy and accountability. Empowerment-based leadership aligns with transformational leadership principles emphasizing capacity building (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Such strategies promote sustainable organizational performance.

Professional development programs are implemented to enhance teacher competence and instructional quality. Continuous learning initiatives support innovation and pedagogical improvement. These efforts correspond with instructional leadership models emphasizing teacher growth (Leithwood et al., 2006). Consequently, leadership impact extends directly to classroom practices.

Technology-based learning initiatives further demonstrate leadership responsiveness to contemporary educational demands. Integrating digital tools enhances learning accessibility and effectiveness. This approach aligns with national education policies emphasizing technological adaptation (PerDirjen GTK, 2023). Principals thus position schools within broader educational modernization efforts.

Humanistic leadership strategies also play a vital role in sustaining organizational well-being. By prioritizing empathy and emotional support, principals mitigate leadership stress and enhance morale. Such strategies align with women's leadership strengths identified in gender leadership studies (Helgesen, 2011). Emotional intelligence becomes a key leadership asset.

The implications of these leadership strategies extend beyond individual schools. They contribute to broader discussions on gender equity and leadership effectiveness in education. Female principals' success challenges traditional leadership stereotypes and promotes inclusive leadership models (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These implications are particularly relevant in vocational education contexts.

From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the importance of institutional support for female leaders. Gender-responsive leadership training and infrastructure investment are essential for sustaining leadership effectiveness. Policymakers must address structural barriers while leveraging women's leadership strengths (Fitrah & Kristiawan, 2018). Such efforts align with national education goals.

In conclusion, the leadership of female principals at SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo demonstrates the capacity to create positive work climates, enhance participation, and improve educational quality. Their leadership practices integrate theory, gender sensitivity, and contextual adaptability. These findings contribute valuable insights to educational leadership scholarship. Ultimately, female leadership emerges as a strategic asset in advancing sustainable and equitable educational development.

## 5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the female principals of SMK Negeri 1 Penawar Tama and SMK Negeri 1 Banjar Margo demonstrate effective leadership through a combination of democratic-participatory, transformational, visionary, humanistic-communicative, and professional exemplary styles that positively influence school culture and educational quality. Their leadership is characterized by inclusive decision-making, strong interpersonal communication, moral exemplarity, and strategic orientation toward improving student competence and institutional sustainability, particularly within the context of vocational education. Although their leadership effectiveness is supported by personal commitment, a conducive school environment, and stakeholder collaboration, it continues to face challenges related to limited infrastructure, policy dynamics, and persistent gender stereotypes rooted in patriarchal norms. Nevertheless, through adaptive strategies such as participatory problem-solving, empowerment of teachers and staff, external collaboration, and humanistic

approaches, female principals are able to overcome these obstacles, thereby affirming that women's leadership constitutes a significant and strategic asset for advancing equitable, effective, and sustainable educational development.

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