Munaddhomah: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam
e-ISSN: 2775-2933
Volume 7, Issue. 4, 2026, pp. 982-997

Structural alignment: Women's leadership in strengthening religious moderation

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Submitted: 02-12-2025 Revised : 23-09-2026 Accepted: 20-10-2026

Abstract: Women's leadership *in Islamic higher education* remains shaped by a persistent institutional gap between formal commitments to equality and the everyday practices that determine access, legitimacy, and participation. This study examines *how structural alignment at IAIN Kerinci* supports *women's leadership and contributes to* strengthening religious moderation within an Indonesian State Islamic Religious Higher Education Institution. The study employed *a qualitative* embedded single-*case study design,* focusing on IAIN Kerinci as a bounded case. *data were collected through* semi-structured *interviews, observations, and document analysis involving* university *leaders, women* leaders*, lecturers, and students.* The findings show *that gender-inclusive* recruitment and promotion procedures*, flexible work arrangements, and supportive facilities* expand *women's participation* in leadership and *enable* them *to promote* religious *moderation through curriculum development, community service, and public engagement.* At *the* same time, stereotype-driven gatekeeping, gendered task assignment, and the unequal effects of ostensibly neutral rules continue to constrain leadership legitimacy and institutional influence. These results indicate that women's leadership becomes most effective when *institutional* structures do not merely permit participation, but actively support it through organisational routines and recognised authority. The study implies that strengthening religious moderation in Islamic higher education requires gender-responsive governance reform, not only normative commitment, so that inclusive leadership and moderation can be institutionalised in a more sustainable way.

Keywords: *Women*'s *leadership; structural alignment; institutional support; religious moderation*

https://doi.org/10.31538/munaddhomah.v7i4.1753

How to Cite Lukluk Isnaini, R., & Syamsarina, S. (2026). Structural alignment: Women's leadership in strengthening religious moderation. *Munaddhomah: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 7(4), 982–997.

INTRODUCTION

Religious moderation is understood as an orientation and set of practices promoted in Indonesian higher education that emphasise national insight, non-discrimination, tolerance, and acceptance of local traditions in religious life and civic engagement (Alam et al., 2026; Ichwan et al., 2025; Khoir et al., 2024; Mahmudah et al., 2025). Women's leadership refers to women's participation and authority in formal leadership roles and leadership practices within Islamic higher education, including agenda setting, policy influence, curriculum governance, and program coordination (Maharromiyati et al., 2024; Mustikamah et al., 2025; Nasution et al., 2026; Siswadi et al., 2025). Structural alignment denotes the extent to which institutional rules, procedures, resources, and everyday practices are configured to enable women's leadership and to embed religious moderation, including recruitment and promotion systems, work arrangements, facilities, task assignment practices, and decision-making procedures (Jamaludin, 2022; Selçuk, 2023).

The interrelation between structural misalignment, institutional bias, women's leadership, and religious moderation increasingly shapes educational and societal frameworks in multicultural societies. In Indonesia, the largest Muslim-majority democracy, fostering women's leadership in

Islamic higher education institutions is crucial for promoting inclusive religious discourse and strengthening social cohesion (Adeoye et al., 2025; Chaman & Siddiqui, 2023; Daulay et al., 2024; Jamaludin, 2022; Syahnan, 2021). Institutional structures that facilitate women's leadership can advance gender equity and influence policy decisions that reinforce religious moderation (Cahyono et al., 2025; Koburtay et al., 2023; Selçuk, 2023; Uula & Ali, 2025). Conversely, institutional bias and entrenched gender hierarchies limit women's ability to participate fully in the governance of religious education, thereby constraining their potential to foster harmony (May & Taylor, 2022; Selçuk, 2023). This constellation of issues justifies a closer examination of how structural alignment can empower women leaders to act as agents of moderation.

Previous scholarship has addressed the barriers faced by women leaders in academic and religious environments, highlighting the impact of cultural traditions, societal prejudices, and gender-based stereotypes on career advancement (Carter et al., 2023; Ghafournia, 2022). Research has also documented how factors such as educational attainment, institutional size, and socio-cultural norms influence the persistence of gender disparities in leadership positions (Obi et al., 2021; Qin et al., 2023). Women leaders in various contexts have demonstrated resilience by leveraging personal experiences to challenge dominant narratives and influence organisational cultures (Smarr et al., 2018; Touati, 2018). In religious education settings, these strategies often intersect with broader debates on authority, identity, and the negotiation of modernity within traditional frameworks (Fuller, 2018; Stamper & McGowan, 2022). However, while such studies provide valuable insights into individual agency, they often understate the institutional dimension of structural reform.

Studies in Islamic contexts suggest that women's leadership can be a transformative force in moderating religious discourse and challenging male-dominated interpretative authority (Ghafournia, 2022; Zion-Waldoks, 2021). Participation of women in leadership roles within Islamic educational institutions has been associated with fostering balanced interpretations of religious teachings, integrating tradition with contemporary values, and promoting interfaith understanding (Selçuk, 2023; Syahnan, 2021). Nevertheless, controversies regarding theological legitimacy and varying interpretations of women's leadership across Islamic societies persist (Lafkas et al., 2021; Yakar, 2022). This persistent ambiguity underscores the necessity of situating leadership discourse within the specific socio-religious conditions of each context.

Despite the contributions of previous research, a critical gap remains in understanding how institutional structures themselves can be designed or reformed to actively support women's leadership and strengthen religious moderation. Most existing studies concentrate on individual leadership strategies or broad cultural trends, leaving insufficient analysis of the systemic mechanisms that can facilitate sustainable change in religious educational institutions (Ferguson, 2020; Koburtay et al., 2023). The Indonesian context, with its unique combination of religious diversity, state involvement in Islamic higher education, and policy emphasis on moderation, offers a distinctive setting for such an inquiry. Particularly lacking is empirical work examining specific cases where structural reforms have been implemented to enhance women's leadership in State Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN). Addressing this lacuna is essential for developing evidence-based recommendations that integrate gender equity with religious moderation goals.

This study aims to examine the interplay between structural misalignment and institutional bias, women's leadership, and the promotion of religious moderation at IAIN Kerinci, designated by the Ministry of Religious Affairs as a pilot project for strengthening religious moderation. The research seeks to assess how institutional structures can be aligned to both empower women leaders and reinforce inclusive religious narratives. The analysis is guided by an institutional perspective that treats leadership opportunities as shaped by formal rules, organisational resources, and everyday practices, alongside a gendered-organisational lens that explains how apparently neutral procedures may reproduce unequal legitimacy and access (Ferguson, 2020; Hylen, 2019; Koburtay et al., 2023; Mills & Tancred, 1992; Qin et al., 2023; Scott, 2014). By situating the analysis within a concrete

institutional context, the study contributes empirical insights to ongoing debates on leadership, gender, and religion in higher education (Selçuk, 2023; Syahnan, 2021). It further intends to test the argument that structural alignment for women's leadership can function as a catalyst for religious moderation and, by extension, for broader social harmony. The findings are expected to inform both policy and practice, offering a model for integrating gender-sensitive leadership strategies into the governance of Islamic higher education in Indonesia and beyond.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative embedded single-case study design to analyse the impact of structural alignment and institutional bias on women's leadership and its role in fostering a balanced and inclusive religious environment, particularly in strengthening religious moderation within State Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN). The approach was situated within the interpretive paradigm, which emphasises how meaning is constructed through everyday interactions (Creswell, 2014). The case was bounded at IAIN Kerinci and selected because it represents a strategically relevant institutional setting, particularly as a pilot project for strengthening religious moderation and as a site where women occupy several strategic leadership positions. This made IAIN Kerinci an analytically significant case for examining how institutional structures, leadership practices, and moderation agendas intersect in one specific socio-religious context. The study was conducted over a six-month period, encompassing preparation, data collection, and analysis phases, which allowed for an in-depth understanding of women's leadership dynamics.

As an embedded single-case study, the research examined several subunits within the same institutional case, including university leadership, women leaders in strategic offices, lecturers, and students who were directly connected to leadership practices and moderation-related activities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis to ensure comprehensive coverage of the research focus (Cohen et al., 2017). Informants were purposively selected from these embedded subunits to capture variation in perspectives on institutional policy, decision-making practices, and the enactment of religious moderation on campus. Observations focused on leadership interactions and moderation-related activities within the campus environment, while document analysis included institutional policies, activity reports, and relevant internal archives.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasted approximately one hour, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured format relied on open-ended guiding questions and follow-up probes to elicit concrete examples of institutional practices. Core question areas included: (1) pathways to leadership roles (recruitment, promotion, and appointment processes); (2) experiences in decision-making forums (e.g., how proposals are debated, accepted, or rejected); (3) perceived enabling policies and facilities (e.g., flexible work arrangements, lactation rooms, workload distribution); (4) perceived constraints and cultural barriers (e.g., stereotypes, informal legitimacy judgments, exclusion from strategic assignments); and (5) women leaders' roles in strengthening religious moderation through curriculum design, campus inclusivity initiatives, and community engagement. The interview guide was informed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs' indicators of religious moderation (national insight, prevention of workplace violence or discrimination, tolerance, and acceptance of traditions) and was expanded into thematic prompts to explore leadership roles in policy design, inclusivity, interfaith dialogue, and conflict mediation.

Data analysis followed a systematic thematic content analysis approach, consistent with common practices in case study research (Yin, 2014). Interview recordings were transcribed and checked against audio for accuracy, followed by repeated readings to familiarise the researchers with the data. Meaningful units were coded inductively, iteratively compared across informants, and clustered into broader categories that were refined into key themes through constant comparison and memo-writing. Trustworthiness was strengthened through Source triangulation (interviews, observational notes, and documents), prolonged engagement, and efforts to identify

disconfirming evidence where available. Ethical standards were maintained by obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and restricting data use to academic purposes only, consistent with qualitative research principles (Miles et al., 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Structural and Policy Support for Women's Leadership

The institutional structure at IAIN Kerinci reflects a clear commitment to promoting women's leadership. opportunities are framed as equally accessible and supported by institutional mechanisms. This commitment can be seen in recruitment and promotion systems which, according to JA, Vice Rector II, *"provide equal opportunities for women to occupy leadership positions without gender discrimination"* (Informant 1, 2024). WS, Director of the Postgraduate Program, reinforced this by stating, *"the process is open and fair, although we still need to address lingering biases"* (Informant 4, 2024). A similar view was shared by ZF, Vice Dean I of the Faculty of Sharia, who commented, *"there are policies in place, but they need to be accompanied by cultural change"* (Informant 5, 2024). These observations align with gender-equality principles in higher education governance, where institutional arrangements are designed to facilitate inclusion rather than reinforce exclusion. The approach taken at IAIN Kerinci resonates with the view that diversity within leadership enhances institutional adaptability and strengthens responsiveness to societal needs.

Beyond simply granting access to leadership roles, the institution has also adopted policies that take into account the dual roles often carried by women leaders. SY, Head of the Community Service Center, explained that *"the campus offers flexibility for* women *lecturers with domestic responsibilities, including flexible working hours and lactation rooms"* (Informant 2, 2024). JA also mentioned, *"we try to make sure that women leaders can carry out their tasks without sacrificing family obligations"* (Informant 1, 2024). TR, Head of the Department of Islamic Financial Management, added, *"flexibility is essential, and without it, participation drops significantly"* (Informant 6, 2024). These measures demonstrate that the institution is aware of the socio-cultural contexts in which women operate, aligning with gender-sensitive policy models that seek to dismantle structural barriers to women's full participation in leadership.

While these policies are in place, certain cultural perceptions regarding women's leadership abilities persist. WS stated that *"there is democratic support, but stereotypes about women's capabilities still need to be addressed"* (Informant 4, 2024). SY observed, *"in some circles, women are still seen as less capable of making strategic decisions"* (Informant 2, 2024). SK, Head of the Islamic Banking Program, supported this concern, noting, *"such perceptions can undermine women's confidence to take higher responsibilities"* (Informant 7, 2024). These remarks suggest that even with open and fair selection processes, cultural bias can limit women's influence and deter their active participation.

Cultural barriers and stereotypes in institutional decision-making

To further clarify how cultural barriers and stereotypes shape institutional decisions and policies, interview data illustrate several recurrent mechanisms that affect deliberation, assignment, performance evaluation, and program implementation.

In decision-making forums, proposals associated with women leaders could be diverted from substantive evaluation into procedural questioning, resulting in the persistence of existing policy designs. As noted by one informant:

> "During the meeting to decide the programme, I proposed a mentoring scheme that was more responsive to the needs of female students. The response was not to discuss the substance, but to ask, 'Who have you coordinated this with?' In the end, the proposal was not adopted, and the previous design was retained." (Interview, Informant K3, 2024)

This episode indicates that cultural gatekeeping can operate through procedural challenges that displace substantive assessment and weaken the uptake of gender-responsive proposals at the point of policy adoption.

Stereotypes also affected how critical feedback was received, which in turn reduced women's participation in institutional deliberation. One informant described how critique could be reframed as emotionality: "*When I criticise a plan that I consider unfair, the comment is often, 'Do not bring feelings into it, this is technical.' After that, I speak less because I worry I will be seen as irrational*." (Interview, Informant P1, 2024)

Such interactions can narrow women's space to influence decisions, shaping whose perspectives are recorded, prioritised, and translated into policy.

In assignment practices, domestic-role assumptions shaped access to strategic roles and visibility. An informant reported exclusion from high-mobility activities and being redirected to administrative tasks:

> "For evening events or out-of-town trips, I am usually not appointed. The reason is phrased gently, 'It would be a pity because you need to take care of the children.' Even though I am ready, a male colleague is always assigned, and I am asked to prepare the administration." (Interview, Informant S2, 2024)

This pattern can reduce women's accumulation of leadership-relevant experiences, such as networking, representation, and coordination, which are often informally valued in subsequent selection and promotion processes.

Although formal rules were perceived as open, informal discourse could still shape candidate legitimacy and the distribution of leadership opportunities. One informant noted:

> "Formally, everyone may apply, but informally there is talk that 'this role suits a man better because it requires firmness.' As a result, women candidates are not encouraged and are even advised to focus on supporting programmes." (Interview, Informant L4, 2024)

This suggests that informal cultural judgments may reproduce gendered leadership expectations despite formal equality provisions. Seemingly neutral policies could also generate gendered effects when they do not accommodate differential constraints. One informant described how attendance rules affected performance records:

> "The attendance rule is the same for everyone, but when I have to accompany a family member for medical care, I am considered undisciplined. My performance record declines, even though my work is completed." (Interview, Informant M2, 2024)

This indicates that policy design and evaluation criteria can inadvertently penalise women leaders, affecting their institutional standing and potentially their eligibility for future leadership roles.

Finally, cultural bias was reported to influence program implementation, including the pace of coordination and decision-making when women led key initiatives: "*The moderation programme I designed is considered good, but when I lead it, the support is not as strong as when a man leads. Coordination becomes slow because decisions are often postponed*." (Interview, Informant R5, 2024)

This mechanism links leadership legitimacy to the effectiveness of institutional efforts to strengthen religious moderation.

At the same time, the data also indicate variation across units, suggesting that supportive leadership cultures can mitigate cultural barriers. As one informant stated: "*In my unit, performance is what matters. If a woman is ready and has a track record, she is still selected. So it is possible, depending on the unit leader's culture*." (Interview, Informant N1, 2024)

This negative case indicates that institutional culture is not monolithic and that unit-level leadership norms may condition how formal policies and practices are enacted in practice.

To facilitate a clearer and more visual understanding of the findings, the main enabling and constraining institutional policies and practices are summarised in **Table 1**, while the mechanisms through which cultural stereotypes shape institutional processes are synthesised in **Table 2**.

Table 1. Institutional policies and practices that support or hinder women's leadership at IAIN Kerinci

Policy/practice domain	Supports women's leadership (examples)	Hinders women's leadership (examples)	Illustrative evidence (data sources)
Recruitment and promotion	Equal opportunity framing in recruitment/promotion ; openness of selection procedures	Informal candidate-legitimacy judgments may weaken formal openness	Interviews: Informant 1, 4, 5; Informant L4 (2024)
Work arrangement and facilities	Flexible working hours; lactation room provision	Limited gender-responsive facilities in some settings; unmet needs can persist	Interviews: Informant 2, 6; Informant 11 (2024)
Task assignment and exposure	Opportunities to lead curriculum/community programs when supported by unit culture	Exclusion from night/out-of-town assignments; women redirected to administrative roles	Interview: Informant S2 (2024); triangulated with leaders' accounts (Informant 1, 2)
Performance evaluation rules	Uniform rules may be intended to ensure fairness	Attendance rules can generate gendered effects in evaluation and career standing	Interview: Informant M2 (2024); policy references discussed by Informant 5
Program implementation support	Formal endorsement of moderation initiatives and curriculum integration	Lower coordination intensity when women lead; delayed decisions in program rollout	Interview: Informant R5 (2024); moderation integration noted by Informant 3

Women leaders at IAIN Kerinci are not only beneficiaries of these institutional arrangements but also active agents in promoting religious moderation. JA noted that women in leadership positions are *"often more active in embedding moderation values in the curriculum and community service programs"* (Informant 1, 2024). SY added, *"we design community outreach activities that bring together people of different backgrounds"* (Informant 2, 2024). FD, a senior lecturer, commented, *"*women *leaders here are proactive in ensuring moderation values are part of both formal and informal education"* (Informant 8, 2024). This involvement reflects participatory leadership principles that emphasise collaboration between leaders and community stakeholders in pursuing shared objectives.

Despite these advances, some challenges remain unresolved. JA observed that *"some still believe that women tend to focus more on domestic matters"* (Informant 1, 2024). WS noted, *"these stereotypes are deeply rooted, so changing them will take time"* (Informant 4, 2024). ZF concluded, *"without addressing cultural norms,* institutional *support will not be fully effective"* (Informant 5, 2024). These perspectives reflect broader societal patterns where entrenched gender norms influence professional opportunities and expectations. Overcoming these barriers requires a combined strategy of institutional reform and cultural transformation, ensuring that the promotion of women's leadership is both a formal policy and a valued aspect of academic life. The mechanisms through which cultural stereotypes shape institutional processes and policy-level consequences are synthesised in Table 2.

Table 2. Cultural stereotypes, institutional manifestations, and policy-level consequences

Cultural barrier/stereotype	Manifestation in institutional process	Institutional consequence for decision/policy	Illustrative evidence
Gender-responsive proposals are treated as needing extra "gatekeeping"	Substantive proposals redirected into procedural questioning in meetings	Gender-responsive proposal excluded; existing policy design retained	Interview: Informant K3 (2024)
Women's critique reframed as emotionality	Critical feedback dismissed as "not rational/technical"; self-censorship increases	Reduced participation in deliberation; narrower perspective base for decisions	Interview: Informant P1 (2024)
Domestic-role assumptions limit leadership exposure	Women not selected for night/out-of-town tasks; assigned administrative support	Reduced strategic visibility and leadership-relevant experience; constrained promotion pipeline	Interview: Informant S2 (2024)
Masculine leadership ideal ("needs to be firm")	Informal talk legitimises male candidates; women discouraged from competing	Formal openness undermined by informal selection dynamics; women pushed into support roles	Interview: Informant L4 (2024)
"Neutral" rules produce unequal effects	Attendance policy applied without accommodation for differential constraints	Performance record affected despite output completion; affects leadership eligibility	Interview: Informant M2 (2024)
Leadership legitimacy affects moderation program execution	Support weaker and coordination slower when women lead key initiatives	Delayed decisions; reduced implementation pace of moderation programs	Interview: Informant R5 (2024)
Unit culture can mitigate stereotypes (negative case)	Meritocratic norms in some units; performance-based selection	Variation across units suggests policy enactment depends on leadership culture	Interview: Informant N1 (2024)

Women's Leadership in Strengthening Religious Moderation at IAIN Kerinci

The integration of religious moderation values into the educational process at IAIN Kerinci is realised through their inclusion in the Semester Learning Plan (RPS) and related courses. FD, Vice Dean I of the Faculty of Sharia, explained that *"we ensure that religious moderation values are integrated into learning"* (Informant 3, 2024). WS, Director of the Postgraduate Program, emphasised that such integration aims to develop students' understanding of the importance of moderation in religious life. This alignment of curriculum and values reflects a conscious institutional effort to create an academic environment that supports harmony and respect for diversity. By embedding these principles into formal learning structures, the institution promotes both cognitive and social competencies necessary for inclusive religious life.

Character education rooted in local wisdom is also a key element in fostering moderate attitudes among students. WS noted that *"local cultural values provide relevant guidance for building tolerance"* (Informant 4, 2024). FD added, *"when we teach moderation through local wisdom, students connect it more easily to their daily lives"* (Informant 3, 2024). Such an approach ensures that moderation values are not only theoretical concepts but also practical behaviours grounded in familiar cultural

contexts. This supports the view that local wisdom can serve as a bridge between universal values and specific community norms, making moderation more tangible and sustainable.

In curriculum development, SY, Head of the Community Service Center, stressed the need for inclusivity, stating, *"we must ensure that our curriculum reflects values of tolerance and respect for differences"* (Informant 2, 2024). FD reinforced this by highlighting the importance of openness in curriculum design, while WS observed that inclusive curricula help prepare students to engage productively in diverse environments. These perspectives align with educational theories that link inclusive content with the cultivation of empathy, mutual respect, and collaborative problem-solving skills among students. Such curriculum strategies are essential in shaping graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also socially responsible.

The involvement of women leaders in community service further demonstrates their role in advancing moderation values. SY described LP2M's annual program, stating, *"every year, we have a community service program based on moderation, targeting lecturers, students, and the public"* (Informant 2, 2024). ZF, Vice Dean I of the Faculty of Sharia, noted that these initiatives extend the institution's reach beyond the campus, allowing moderation principles to be promoted in diverse social settings. By actively engaging in community outreach, women leaders bridge academic knowledge with societal application, reinforcing the relevance of moderation in everyday life.

Participation in social organisations such as PKK and BKMT provides additional platforms for disseminating moderation values. FD emphasised that *"through these organisations, women leaders can model tolerance and mutual respect"* (Informant 3, 2024). ZF added, *"these forums allow us to interact directly with various community groups and spread moderation principles"* (Informant 5, 2024). Such involvement positions women leaders as role models whose actions demonstrate the practical application of moderation values, thereby enhancing their credibility and influence both on and off campus.

The impact of women's leadership on students is evident in shifting perceptions and attitudes. MH admitted that *"at first, I did not agree with women as leaders, but I now see how they balance organizational dynamics"* (Informant 6, 2024). RA stated, *"leadership should not be dominated by men; women can also lead"* (Informant 7, 2024). RL, who participated in a community service program led by women leaders, shared that *"the leadership of women in the program was very inspiring"* (Informant 8, 2024). PM and HN also acknowledged that the example set by women leaders strengthened tolerance on campus. These testimonies suggest that women's leadership not only enhances diversity in governance but also contributes significantly to fostering a campus culture rooted in inclusivity and mutual respect.

Challenges and Obstacles Faced by Women Leaders at IAIN Kerinci in Promoting Religious Moderation

Women in leadership positions at IAIN Kerinci often face the dual demands of professional duties and domestic responsibilities. JA explained that *"the main barrier for women in leadership is obstacles from the domestic sphere"* (Informant 1, 2024), while SK noted, *"sometimes it feels like the role as a mother is neglected due to work demands"* (Informant 7, 2024). WS added that *"balancing home and career requires constant negotiation"* (Informant 4, 2024). These overlapping roles create both time constraints and emotional strain, making it difficult for women to engage fully in strategic decision-making. Without adequate institutional flexibility, such pressures can undermine their ability to lead effectively.

Stereotypes and negative perceptions about women's capacity for leadership add another layer of challenge. WS observed that *"women need to overcome the perception that they are less capable of leading"* (Informant 4, 2024). AC highlighted that *"women are often seen as more emotional and less resilient to criticism"* (Informant 9, 2024), while AS stressed that such biases *"narrow opportunities for women to prove themselves"* (Informant 10, 2024). These ingrained attitudes can erode self-confidence and deter women from pursuing higher leadership roles, reinforcing barriers that are both cultural and psychological.

Institutional policies can also hinder women's advancement. ZF pointed out that *"rigid attendance policies fail to accommodate women's specific needs"* (Informant 5, 2024), and Tiara noted that *"the absence of lactation rooms is a real obstacle"* (Informant 11, 2024). WS added, *"we need gender-responsive policies to support work-life balance"* (Informant 4, 2024). Such shortcomings indicate a lack of proactive measures to create an inclusive and supportive environment. Addressing these issues requires policy reforms that recognise and accommodate gender-specific needs.

The limited quota or absence of formal mechanisms to increase women's representation in leadership further constrains opportunities. WS remarked that *"there is no specific quota for women in structural positions"* (Informant 4, 2024), and JA emphasised that *"support from leaders is essential for equal opportunities"* (Informant 1, 2024). Without targeted measures, women's access to leadership roles remains uneven, and structural barriers persist. Implementing quotas and targeted leadership development programs could help bridge this gap.

Cultural expectations and resistance from peers also present significant obstacles. AC noted that *"traditional views still position women primarily as homemakers"* (Informant 9, 2024), while AS and AD agreed that *"domestic responsibilities are often seen as women's primary obligation"* (Informants 10 and 12, 2024). SY shared that *"resistance often comes in subtle, personal forms rather than formal opposition"* (Informant 2, 2024). These cultural norms and interpersonal dynamics make it harder for women to be fully accepted in leadership, even when they meet all professional requirements.

Strategies to overcome these barriers include building strong support networks among women leaders. ZF stressed that *"we need to support one another so that more women are brave enough to take leadership roles"* (Informant 5, 2024), while WS emphasised the importance of *"flexible policies to enable women to contribute optimally"* (Informant 4, 2024). FD added, *"women must value themselves and show exemplary behaviour"* (Informant 3, 2024). These internal strategies aim to boost self-confidence, encourage mutual support, and advocate for institutional changes.

External engagement and advocacy are also critical. SY highlighted that *"we need to be involved in decision-making so that women's voices are heard"* (Informant 2, 2024). Collaborations with organisations such as Dharma Wanita and the Federation of Women's Organisations (GOW) provide platforms for promoting equality and religious moderation beyond campus. Participation in interfaith activities and community networks enables women leaders to extend their influence and contribute to broader societal change, reinforcing both their leadership roles and the values of tolerance and inclusivity.

Taken together, the findings indicate that structural alignment at IAIN Kerinci supports women's leadership participation through gender-inclusive recruitment and promotion procedures, flexible work arrangements, supportive facilities, and enabling leadership cultures at the unit level. These institutional conditions expand women's access to leadership roles and strengthen their involvement in curriculum development, decision-making, community service, and public engagement. At the same time, the findings also show that this process remains constrained by cultural and institutional barriers, including stereotype-driven gatekeeping, gendered task assignment, procedural diversion in meetings, and the unequal effects of ostensibly neutral rules. As a result, women's leadership emerges not only as an outcome of institutional support but also as a mediating force through which religious moderation is translated into inclusive learning, campus climate, and community outreach. The overall relationship among these findings is synthesised in Figure 1.

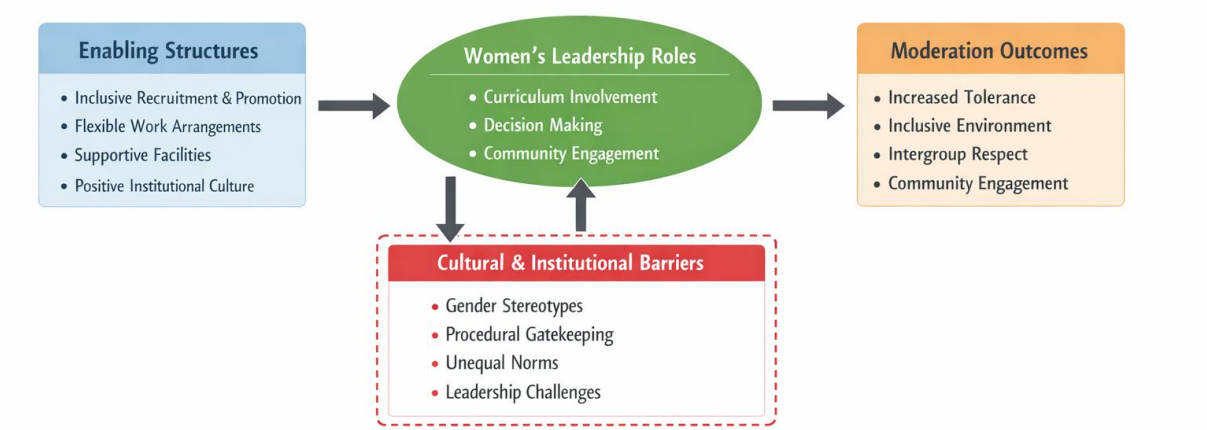

Figure 1. Synthesis model of structural alignment, women's leadership, and religious moderation at IAIN Kerinci

Discussion

At IAIN Kerinci, women's leadership did not become influential merely because women occupied formal positions, but because institutional arrangements enabled them to participate in decision-making, curriculum development, and community engagement in ways that reinforced religious moderation. Much of the literature has treated women's leadership and religious moderation as adjacent concerns rather than as processes that become mutually reinforcing under supportive institutional conditions. Research on religious moderation in higher education has emphasised tolerance, non-discrimination, and national insight as normative educational goals (Jamaludin, 2022; Syahnan, 2021), while studies of women's leadership have often highlighted agency, resilience, and negotiated authority in overcoming exclusion (Ghafournia, 2022; Smarr et al., 2018; Touati, 2018). Read through an institutional and gendered-organisational lens, the evidence from IAIN Kerinci indicates that neither moderation nor women's leadership is adequately explained through personal disposition alone. In institutional terms, rules and resources do not merely regulate action but also shape legitimacy and taken-for-granted expectations, while gendered-organisational processes help explain why formally neutral arrangements can still reproduce unequal authority (Mills & Tancred, 1992; Scott, 2014). Leadership becomes influential when formal rules, organisational resources, and everyday routines enable women to participate in decision-making, curriculum governance, and public engagement. In that sense, structural alignment is not simply a background condition of leadership, but part of the mechanism through which moderation values are operationalised in campus life and community-facing programs.

This pattern is consistent with work emphasising the importance of organisational resources, institutional design, and gendered norms in shaping leadership opportunities (Ferguson, 2020; Glanz, 2020; Hylen, 2019; Koburtay et al., 2023). At IAIN Kerinci, open recruitment and promotion procedures, flexible work arrangements, and enabling facilities did not merely reduce practical burdens for women. They also signalled institutional legitimacy, indicating that women's leadership was recognised as compatible with the governance of a religious higher education institution. That matters in Islamic higher education, where leadership debates can remain entangled with normative assumptions about authority, gender, and religious propriety (Selçuk, 2023; Yakar, 2022). The findings therefore strengthen prior arguments that institutional support can widen leadership access, but they also refine them by showing that support operates on at least two levels. At the formal level, policies create pathways into leadership. At the symbolic level, they communicate whether women's presence in strategic positions is treated as ordinary, exceptional, or conditional. The evidence suggests that these two levels are inseparable. Flexible arrangements and lactation facilities are often read as welfare provisions, yet in this case they also functioned as signals that leadership is not reserved for subjects imagined as free from domestic obligations. This is a more specific contribution than a generic claim about gender inclusion because it demonstrates how concrete

institutional accommodations shape the social legitimacy of women leaders within PTKIN governance.

At the same time, the case shows that formal openness does not eliminate gender bias. One of the most important analytical contributions of the findings is the clear gap between formal equality and lived institutional practice. Interview accounts revealed procedural diversion in meetings, stereotype-driven judgments about decisiveness, gendered task assignment, and the unequal effects of apparently neutral attendance rules. These patterns support wider scholarship showing that gender hierarchy persists not only through explicit exclusion but through ordinary routines that appear technical, neutral, or culturally natural (May & Taylor, 2022; Mills & Tancred, 1992; Qin et al., 2023; Roberts et al., 2020). The implication is that institutional bias is often reproduced through process rather than proclamation. In the IAIN Kerinci case, women were not usually denied participation through direct statements of disqualification. Instead, constraints appeared through softer mechanisms: questioning coordination rather than substance, assuming that out-of-town or evening assignments are more appropriate for men, or evaluating discipline without accounting for unequal social responsibilities. This extends previous discussions of women's leadership in religious settings by demonstrating how informal legitimacy is filtered through organisational routines (Hylen, 2019; Lafkas et al., 2021; Selçuk, 2023). The problem, therefore, is not simply that stereotypes exist, but that they are embedded in decisions about who is visible, who accumulates strategic experience, and whose proposals are treated as institutionally viable. For that reason, procedural neutrality cannot be assumed to produce substantive equality.

Women's leadership at IAIN Kerinci also functioned as a mediating force in the institutionalisation of religious moderation. The role of women leaders at IAIN Kerinci was not confined to occupying positions. Their leadership shaped how moderation entered the curriculum, community service, student formation, and public engagement. This point is stronger than a descriptive claim that women support moderation. The evidence indicates that women leaders translated moderation into institutional practices, including inclusive curriculum design, moderation-based outreach, and everyday forms of tolerance anchored in local wisdom. In this respect, the case deepens work on moderation in Indonesian higher education by demonstrating a more explicit organisational pathway from leadership participation to moderation outcomes (Jamaludin, 2022; Syahnan, 2021). It also resonates with scholarship arguing that leadership in religious and educational environments is not merely administrative but interpretive, relational, and pedagogical (Fuller, 2018; Stamper & McGowan, 2022; Werbner, 2018). Women leaders in this case helped produce moderation not only by endorsing it rhetorically, but by embedding it in teaching plans, social interaction, and civic outreach. That matters because moderation often remains framed as a state discourse or policy slogan (Rusdinal et al., 2024; Syarip et al., 2026). The findings suggest that moderation becomes socially credible when it is enacted through institutional actors who can connect formal values with everyday educational practice. Women's leadership thus appears less as a symbolic representation of inclusion and more as a practical channel through which inclusive religious narratives are normalised.

Variation across subunits within the same institution further clarified how unevenly formal policy was translated into everyday practice. Because the research was designed as an embedded single-case study, it was possible to observe that formal policy did not translate uniformly across university leadership, faculty structures, program units, and student-facing contexts. Some units appeared more meritocratic and supportive, while others reproduced stronger informal constraints. This internal variation is analytically important. It suggests that institutional reform cannot be read only at the level of official policy documents or rectorate commitments. Leadership culture at the unit level affects how policies are enacted, how women's participation is interpreted, and how moderation initiatives gain or lose momentum. This finding adds nuance to literature that tends to discuss institutions as coherent actors. In practice, institutions are layered settings where policy meaning is filtered by local norms, interpersonal relations, and micro-level authority structures (Obi et al., 2021; Smarr et al., 2018). The IAIN Kerinci case therefore supports a more differentiated

reading of structural alignment. Alignment is not achieved once a policy exists; it must be reproduced in the everyday conduct of meetings, assignments, evaluations, and program implementation. This point is consistent with institutional theory, which treats formal policy and enacted practice as related but not identical layers of organisational life (Scott, 2014). This is precisely where the embedded nature of the case becomes analytically useful. It reveals that the institutionalisation of women's leadership and moderation depends on the consistency between central commitments and subunit practices. Without that consistency, formal inclusion may coexist with uneven leadership legitimacy.

For Islamic higher education governance, these patterns sharpen several policy implications. If women's leadership contributes to moderation through institutional practice, then policy responses must move beyond representational inclusion toward procedural redesign. Transparent and criteria-based recruitment and promotion are necessary, but they are not sufficient when informal judgments continue to define who is considered firm, rational, mobile, or strategically suitable. Institutions therefore need explicit safeguards against soft gatekeeping, including documented decision rationales, clearer assignment procedures, and accommodation mechanisms for rules that otherwise generate gendered effects. This implication aligns with broader arguments in institutional and gender governance scholarship that formal commitment only becomes meaningful when it is translated into procedures that reduce practical inequality and unequal legitimacy. For PTKIN contexts, the findings further suggest that moderation policy should not be treated as separate from governance reform. A campus cannot persuasively advocate tolerance and non-discrimination while its own leadership structures continue to rely on informal bias. The relationship between women's leadership and moderation is therefore not additive but constitutive: more gender-responsive governance strengthens the credibility of moderation, and a serious moderation agenda requires institutional practices that do not marginalise women's authority. This formulation pushes beyond previous literature that has often discussed gender equity and moderation in parallel rather than as mutually dependent dimensions of institutional development.

The case also connects three conversations that are often kept apart: gender and leadership, organisational structure, and religious moderation. Existing studies have made important contributions on women's agency in religious settings, on moderation as an educational or theological agenda, and on the barriers faced by women in leadership roles (Carter et al., 2023; Selçuk, 2023). These strands come together in showing that the effectiveness of women's leadership in a religious university depends on the degree of structural alignment, and that the success of moderation as an institutional agenda partly depends on whether women can exercise authority with recognised legitimacy (Ghafar et al., 2025; Kertamukti et al., 2025; Wonuola et al., 2025; Zainal et al., 2025). This does not mean that women are inherently more moderate than men, which would simply reproduce another essentialism. The evidence instead points to a governance dynamic: when women gain meaningful access to leadership, they often widen the social reach of moderation because their roles connect curriculum, pastoral care, community networks, and inclusive educational practice (Amzat et al., 2022; Jumilati et al., 2026; Liu et al., 2024; Ningsih et al., 2025; Siswadi et al., 2026; Yuliana et al., 2025). That distinction is critical. The contribution of the case is not biological or moral, but institutional and relational.

Interpretation, however, should remain cautious. As a single institutional case, the findings are analytically transferable rather than statistically generalisable. IAIN Kerinci is significant because it is a bounded case with a formal moderation mandate and visible women leaders in strategic positions, not because it can stand in for all PTKIN settings. Even so, the case offers a useful analytical lesson for comparable institutions. Where leadership legitimacy remains gendered, moderation programs may be slowed, narrowed, or rendered less credible. Where structural alignment is stronger, women's leadership can help translate moderation from policy language into sustained institutional practice. Future work would benefit from multi-site comparison across PTKIN to examine how different leadership cultures, organisational histories, and regional socio-religious contexts condition the relationship between gender-responsive governance and

moderation outcomes. Such work would help test whether the patterns observed here are exceptional, emerging, or widely characteristic of Islamic higher education governance in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that structural alignment, including gender-inclusive recruitment and promotion procedures, flexible work arrangements, and enabling facilities, can expand women's leadership participation in PTKIN and strengthen the institutionalisation of religious moderation through curriculum, community engagement, and public-facing initiatives. At the same time, the findings identify constraining mechanisms within institutional processes, including procedural gatekeeping in deliberation, gendered task assignment, and unequal effects of ostensibly neutral rules. At IAIN Kerinci, women leaders were not only beneficiaries of aligned institutional structures but also key actors who translated moderation values into learning plans and outreach programs. However, the persistence of stereotype-driven gatekeeping and uneven leadership legitimacy indicates that formal openness alone is insufficient without deliberate cultural reform.

In practical terms, the findings offer actionable implications for educational policy in Islamic higher education. Institutions seeking to replicate these outcomes can (1) formalise transparent, criteria-based leadership selection and promotion (including documented deliberation and decision rationales) to reduce informal legitimacy bias; (2) conduct a "gender impact review" of ostensibly neutral policies (e.g., attendance rules, meeting schedules, assignment practices) and shift evaluation toward output-based indicators with clear accommodation procedures; (3) institutionalise equitable access to strategic assignments through rotation and explicit consent mechanisms rather than domestic-role assumptions; and (4) embed moderation goals into governance by assigning executive sponsorship, timelines, and escalation pathways for moderation programs led by women so that coordination and decisions are not routinely delayed.

The study is limited to a single institutional case and therefore cannot claim statistical generalisability; nevertheless, it provides transferable lessons for comparable PTKIN contexts. Future research should extend to multi-site comparative designs and include broader demographic variation to examine how unit-level leadership culture conditions the enactment of formal policies and practices and how cultural reform interventions (e.g., meeting protocols, anti-bias training, and accountability indicators) accelerate women's leadership legitimacy and moderation outcomes across institutions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta for funding this research. Their generous support has been instrumental in facilitating this study and enabling us to contribute valuable insights to the field. We deeply appreciate their commitment to advancing academic research and innovation.

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