

Advancing Women's Leadership in Cultivating a Quality Culture in Indonesian Vocational High Schools: An Islamic Educational Perspective

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ABSTRACT. This research examines the transformative role of female leadership in fostering a culture of quality in Vocational High Schools (SMK) in Indonesia from the perspective of Islamic education, guided by Islamic educational values and ethics. Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, this study examines how female principals serve as agents of change in the vocational education landscape. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted with female principals as part of expert triangulation to enrich perspectives on Islamic education and the transformation of women's leadership. The interviews were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The research revealed five strategic approaches used by women leaders: transitioning from top-down to participatory decision-making; recognising teachers as internal clients to enhance collaboration; benchmarking with high-performing schools to set quality standards; improving infrastructure to meet national benchmarks; and building partnerships with industry to ensure graduates' relevance in the labour market. The novelty of this research lies in integrating Islamic leadership principles with contemporary quality management, which offers a gender-inclusive framework. The findings provide valuable insights into how women's leadership drives sustainable vocational education reforms that align with the needs of leaders in the workforce.

Keywords: Women's Leadership, Vocational Education, Islamic Education Values, Educational Quality Culture, Industry Collaboration.

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INTRODUCTION

The quality of a nation's human resources is fundamentally shaped by its education (Hariadi et al., 2024; Sienkiewicz, 2022). In the context of globalization, educational institutions are expected to produce graduates with intellectual competence and relevant life skills (Thapa et al., 2023). Vocational education plays a strategic role, serving as a medium to equip students with practical competencies aligned with labor market demands (Chuan & Ibsen, 2022). In Indonesia, the government has expanded vocational education through Vocational High Schools (VHS), aiming to produce graduates ready to meet industrial needs (Asadollahi-Yazdi et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2024). However, many VHSs still struggle to meet these expectations due to systemic challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited teacher capacity, and weak school-industry linkages. At

the core of these issues lies the role of school leadership, which significantly influences establishing a school's quality culture and overall performance (Sebola, 2023).

Previous studies have emphasized the role of leadership in educational transformation. Yet, a paucity of research focuses specifically on female leadership in vocational education settings, especially in patriarchal contexts (Ahyani et al., 2024; Musrifah et al., 2024; Ruhullah & Ushama, 2025; Tihabsah et al., 2024). For instance, while countries like China and India have made strides toward gender equality in education, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles (Feng & Fang, 2023). Existing literature acknowledges women's barriers, from societal stereotypes to institutional constraints. Still, it rarely explores how female leaders overcome such obstacles to foster institutional quality, particularly in vocational schools. This research addresses that gap by focusing on a female principal leading a VHS in West Cilacap, Central Java, Indonesia, a region traditionally influenced by patriarchal norms. The novelty of this study lies in its empirical exploration of how a woman leader develops a culture of quality education within a vocational school, grounded in Islamic values and community-oriented leadership.

The choice of research site is a crucial step in determining the relevance and success of a study, because the research location not only affects the quality of the data obtained but also plays an essential role in the social, cultural, and geographical context underlying the phenomenon being studied. In this case, this research chose SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap as the study location because it has unique characteristics and high relevance to the topic raised, namely about women's leadership, which is expected to provide in-depth insight into the role of women's leadership transformation in fostering school quality culture in the perspective of Islamic education.

The prevalence of gender stereotypes and cultural impediments, which frequently make women feel unqualified or insecure about assuming such roles, is one of the fundamental causes of the dearth of women in academic leadership roles (Benzaghta et al., 2021). For instance, Shepherd (2017) discovered that women are frequently deterred from pursuing leadership roles by the need to maintain a work-life balance. Additionally, women's goals are hampered by the dearth of role models in leadership roles, which results in a notable representation gap (Hadiati et al., 2025).

In an academic context, this means that there is a need to increase the role of women leaders who are expected to provide new perspectives that fit the needs of today's society (Hadiati et al., 2025). Encouraging women to be actively involved in leadership positions not only benefits them but also provides benefits to the institution and society as a whole, thus creating an environment that is better able to adapt and respond to change (Almulhem et al., 2024). Research shows that effective leadership in formal education institutions, including in the Islamic upper secondary to higher education sectors, is becoming increasingly essential to meet modern society's evolving and complex needs.

The specific purpose of this study is to analyze and describe the leadership strategies employed by the female principal of SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap in fostering a culture of quality within her institution. This study seeks to fill the gap in existing scholarship by showcasing how gendered leadership, when oriented toward quality, can successfully transform vocational education outcomes, even in socially conservative environments. It further contributes to a context-specific understanding of educational leadership by highlighting the experiences of a female leader in a rural Indonesian setting, an area rarely addressed in global educational discourse.

Despite social and cultural resistance, this paper argues that female leadership can catalyze institutional quality reform in vocational education. The hypothesis tested in this study is that the gender of a leader is not a limiting factor in achieving educational excellence; rather, leadership style, values, and strategic vision are the determining elements. Through a qualitative case study of SMK Darussalam Karangpucung, this research investigates how a female principal navigates structural and cultural challenges to establish quality-oriented educational services.

Ultimately, this study aims to provide actionable insights for policy-makers, educators, and stakeholders in the vocational education sector. By documenting successful practices in female-led schools, particularly within the Islamic and local cultural values framework, the research offers a replicable model for other vocational schools striving to establish a sustainable quality culture. It also encourages a broader rethinking of gender roles in educational leadership, contributing to national and international discussions on inclusive and transformative school governance.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the leadership experiences of female principals in Vocational High Schools (VHS) located in the West Cilacap region, Indonesia. The phenomenological approach was selected to gain deep insights into the lived experiences of women who lead within a sociocultural context influenced by patriarchal norms (van Manen, 2017). A naturalistic and descriptive orientation framed the research process, allowing the phenomena to be studied in authentic settings without manipulation (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). The unique nature of the inquiry focusing on how female leaders establish a culture of quality in vocational education justifies the chosen design, particularly in a context where male leadership is socially dominant.

The researcher served as the primary data collection and analysis instrument, interacting directly with participants through prolonged fieldwork. Reflexivity was practiced to mitigate potential bias and strengthen the study's credibility by critically acknowledging the researcher's positionality as an observer of gendered leadership dynamics. Data was collected using three main techniques: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted with a purposive sample that included principals, teachers, administrative staff, and students. These interviews were adaptive and exploratory, allowing follow-up questions to evolve based on participant responses (Hussein, 2022). Observations examined educational practices and leadership behavior within SMK Darussalam Karangpucung. Simultaneously, documentation research, including photographs, meeting records, and school reports, was utilized to deepen the contextual understanding of the study.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model by Miles and Huberman, which includes three steps: reducing the data, showing the data, and drawing conclusions (Miles et al., 2014). In the data reduction stage, important information was chosen and organized based on key themes. The display phase involved organizing the data in a narrative structure using deductive reasoning, moving from general patterns to specific insights. To ensure the validity of the findings, source triangulation was employed across interviews, observations, and documentary evidence. Additional techniques, such as member checking, prolonged engagement, and reflective memoing, were also employed to ensure the trustworthiness and confirmability of the results. This rigorous and iterative process enabled the researcher to reach thematic saturation and draw credible conclusions regarding the role of female leadership in fostering a quality culture in vocational education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Transforming Leadership Flow: From Top-Down to Bottom-Up

Based on the research findings, five key efforts were identified that female principals undertook to develop a culture of quality vocational education at SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap. The first effort involved shifting the policy-making approach from a top-down to a bottom-up model. In Indonesia, it is common for school principals to adopt a top-down leadership style, particularly when formulating school policies. This tendency stems from the broader influence of the Indonesian government's administrative structure, which traditionally favors a hierarchical, top-down approach.

The first strategy respondents consistently strongly preferred female leadership as an adaptive and visionary model in navigating the complex transitions demanded by vocational education institutions. Their insights emphasise shifting from a patriarchal and rigid leadership style towards an approach centred on a culture of quality, emotional intelligence, and long-term innovation. She argued:

“That women's leadership plays a crucial role in fostering a culture of quality within vocational high schools (SMK). Drawing from the values of Islamic education, she emphasized that women are entrusted with equal responsibilities in guiding, educating, and inspiring the younger generation. According to her, this leadership is essential in shaping an educational environment that is not only inclusive but also rooted in a culture of excellence. By upholding these values, women leaders contribute to embedding the importance of quality education that balances technical competence with the formation of strong character and ethical values aligned with religious teachings and humanitarian principles” (Hapsari, 2025).

The principal at SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap realized that a top-down mindset would only result in principal policies that ignore the creativity and innovation of teachers. According to her, teachers are more creative and innovative than principals, so principals must be able to utilize the creativity and innovation of teachers to develop a culture of school quality, without hindering teachers from being creative and innovative. She can do this when she changes her policy flow and leadership from top-down to bottom-up. The change in the flow will motivate teachers to develop and apply their ideas to organize vocational education services at SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap.

Empowering Teachers

The second strategy positions teachers as key partners in cultivating a vocational and quality-focused educational culture. School principals must provide space and facilities to enhance teachers' professionalism, fostering a culture of excellence that upholds the core values of Islamic education. Hapsari, the Principal of SMK Darussalam Cilacap, emphasized the importance of teacher empowerment as a strategic effort in strengthening vocational education and fostering a culture of quality within the school (Hapsari, 2025). She believes that empowering teachers is a key responsibility of school leadership, as it directly contributes to sustaining and improving the institution's overall quality. By enhancing teacher professionalism through continuous development and support, the school can maintain high standards in both technical training and educational values. This approach not only reinforces the vocational mission of the school but also ensures that the culture of excellence is deeply embedded in everyday practices.



Figure 1: Documentation on Improving Teacher Empowerment and Teaching Professionalism led by the Principal of SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap

The Principal of SMK Darussalam Cilacap, Rita Fita Hapsari, reaffirmed her commitment to enhancing teacher empowerment by emphasizing the critical role of leadership in fostering professional growth. She stated that, as a leader, she must provide and cultivate an environment that supports teacher professionalism through regular training, competency development, and technology integration in learning. Furthermore, she highlighted the importance of promoting collaboration among teachers to facilitate the exchange of experiences and best practices while recognizing and appreciating their innovative efforts. According to her, such an approach would increase teachers' motivation to improve the quality of their instruction, ultimately contributing to the realization of quality education aligned with the evolving demands of the workforce (Hapsari, 2025).

The quality of education is primarily shaped by teachers' creative and innovative efforts (Antunes et al., 2021). Educators' freedom to explore, develop, and implement their ideas extensively fosters a lifelong commitment to professional growth and a strong work dedication (Casteleiro & Mendes, 2022). This dedication cultivates a quality culture within educational institutions such as SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap. Principal Hapsari emphasized this by explaining the school's initiative to implement a practicum-like model specifically for teachers. She stated, "For the teachers themselves, we have a PKL model, but for teachers, so the teachers are tested and there is a competition, from there the teachers can see how far they can develop their ideas and creativity to be applied to learning, sir" (Hapsari, 2025). This approach challenges teachers to innovate and encourages continuous improvement in teaching practices, reinforcing a sustainable culture of excellence.



Figure 2: Improving Teacher Empowerment and Teaching Professionalism led by the Principal of SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap

There are several benefits obtained from the high work dedication of teachers at SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap, namely: (1) teachers become internal customers who have high loyalty to the institution; (2) teachers become parties who continually monitor and achieve the quality of learning that is held in the classrooms; and (3) with their creative and innovative attitudes, teachers always position themselves as learners and learning becomes a work culture for them.

Conducting Benchmarking

The third strategy implemented at SMK Darussalam Cilacap is benchmarking, a continuous effort to update various aspects of the school through comparative visits and evaluations. This approach significantly contributes to advancing vocational culture and overall educational quality at the institution. The outcomes are evident in the competence of graduates across various departments, including TSM (motorbike engineering), TKRO (automotive light vehicle

engineering), TKJ (computer network engineering), and Accounting. Principal Rita Fita Hapsari strongly supports stated:

"For me, this comparative study or benchmarking activity should always be done, and yes, we always conduct benchmarking with some teachers to schools or organisations outside the school such as PT Dudi, and I try to adopt things that are considered reasonable and can be applied at school, which will have a better impact on our vocational and school quality culture (Hapsari, 2025).

In implementing the benchmarking strategy, the principal of SMK Darussalam Cilacap and several teachers conduct thorough analyses of the success factors identified during visits to other schools or external organizations. These strengths are then mapped and contextualized following the school's vision to cultivate a robust vocational and quality-oriented educational culture. Once relevant best practices are identified, they are translated into systematic procedures and clear indicators to enhance vocational education outcomes. This process focuses on academic benchmarking and involves engaging with the local community to gather feedback and insights. The principal integrates community input into the school development agenda, including occasional home visits to build stronger relationships with residents. These efforts help maintain the school's positive reputation and ensure it remains responsive to societal needs while reinforcing a culture of continuous improvement (Hapsari, 2025).

The essence of benchmarking lies in uncovering the success factors of exemplary educational institutions to inform evidence-based decision-making by school leaders (Caeiro et al., 2020). For SMK Darussalam Cilacap, this means translating benchmarking insights into actionable strategies tailored to the school's context. The benchmarking results must be disseminated thoughtfully to all educators to maximize impact. Furthermore, any adaptations should undergo careful consideration, modification, and refinement to ensure they enhance the school's vocational education programs and cultivate a sustainable quality culture.

Enhancing Infrastructure

Although not directly involved in the instructional process, educational facilities and infrastructure constitute essential components that play a pivotal role in supporting the implementation of vocational education in schools. Their presence ensures the learning and teaching processes are conducted effectively, adequately, and in alignment with the goals of quality educational culture (Abuzayan et al., 2014). At SMK Darussalam Cilacap, infrastructure availability and continual development have become integral in fostering such a culture. Initially, the school operated with minimal infrastructure, including only three classrooms and limited funding. As a private institution, early infrastructure development was heavily reliant on private financing. However, with consistent yearly improvements and the support of government programs such as the School Operational Assistance (BOS) funds, the institution has progressively expanded its facilities to meet vocational education standards.

Regarding planning, SMK Darussalam Cilacap demonstrates a strategic approach to managing educational infrastructure. The school conducts financing analyses to ensure that procurement aligns with educational objectives and available budgets. This careful planning allows the institution to avoid unnecessary expenditures while progressively improving its facilities. The school's leadership has firmly committed to initiating development, including mobilizing personal resources for early-stage investments. As a result, the school now occupies a land area of approximately 10,000 square meters, reflecting the success of a long-term vision focused on infrastructure enhancement.

Furthermore, infrastructure development at SMK Darussalam is complemented by a continuous and collaborative maintenance strategy. Maintenance activities are a shared responsibility among school stakeholders, ensuring all facilities remain functional, safe, and ready for instructional use. The principal exercises active leadership in responding to procurement and maintenance needs, balancing institutional priorities and financial realities. Under this model, the

school maintains physical growth and educational quality. Current infrastructure includes 13 classrooms, 5 practice rooms, 2 library rooms, 4 laboratories, administrative offices, and adequate teacher facilities. These developments indicate that, even under female leadership, SMK Darussalam Cilacap has succeeded in advancing the ideals of vocational education in Indonesia by fostering a robust and sustainable quality culture.

Building Partnership with Industry

The leadership of a female principal at SMK Darussalam Cilacap has played a pivotal role in strengthening institutional collaboration with the industrial sector. This strategic engagement is essential in aligning vocational education with the current demands of the labor market. As the principal, Rita Fita Hapsari is a dynamic bridge between the school and various industrial partners, facilitating sustainable and mutually beneficial partnerships. These collaborations are carefully selected to match the competencies of each vocational department within the school, thereby ensuring relevance and effectiveness (Hapsari, 2025).

The partnerships established include cooperation with PT DUDI (World of Business and Industry), Astra Honda Motor (AHM), PT Daihatsu Motor, PT Telkom Indonesia, Gamlab.id, and the Aulia Persada Group. Each collaboration is tailored to a specific vocational program, such as Light Vehicle Automotive Engineering (TKRO), Computer Network Engineering (TKJ), Accounting, and Marketing. The scope of these collaborations extends beyond mere industry exposure; it encompasses curriculum alignment, joint evaluation mechanisms, and ongoing mentoring to maintain relevance to industrial standards.

Empirical findings show that this collaborative approach yields tangible outcomes. One of the key indicators is the high rate of labor absorption among graduates. Many students undertake internships in partner companies and secure full-time employment contracts, some even before graduation. For instance, the automotive department has consistently recorded near-total absorption into AHM, demonstrating the effectiveness of synchronizing school competencies with industry expectations.

The school's approach involves pre-cooperation consultations with industry stakeholders to identify specific needs and expectations from both parties. These discussions are then formalized through written agreements that guide the implementation of a dual-curriculum system integrating the national education curriculum with the technical and procedural standards of industry. The pedagogical model prioritizes experiential learning, with a ratio of 90% practical instruction and 10% theoretical input, ensuring that students acquire hands-on experience supported by conceptual understanding (Hapsari, 2025).

This model fosters a robust vocational culture and strengthens the school's credibility and competitiveness in the education sector. The near-100% employment rate of graduates is a strong indicator of the success of this industrial partnership strategy. It demonstrates that under capable female leadership, vocational institutions like SMK Darussalam Cilacap can achieve educational excellence while simultaneously fulfilling the dynamic needs of Indonesia's industrial and business workforce.

Based on the researcher's observations of the five female leadership strategies in improving vocational and quality culture of vocational high schools above, the researcher grouped each of these strategies into a table based on the results of research at SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap to make it easier to understand the findings in the field.

Table 1: Women's Leadership Strategies in Fostering a Culture of Quality in Vocational High Schools at SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap

NO	Strategy Aspect	Strategy Explanation
1.	Transforming Leadership Flow: From Top-Down to Bottom-Up	- Transforming power. - Teachers play a greater role in decision-making and help implement policies democratically.

2.	Empowering Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Making teachers a second partner.- Giving them as much space as possible to develop ideas and creativity- Involving teachers in decision-making.
3.	Conducting Benchmarking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Conduct comparative studies or benchmarking to other institutions or schools.- Conduct curriculum evaluations with business and industry partners.- Map new policies and implement them in vocational high schools.
4.	Enhancing Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Conduct infrastructure planning.- Conduct infrastructure maintenance.- Conduct follow-up and gradual development every year.
5.	Building Partnership with Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Collaborate with business and industry partnerships.- Develop curriculum in accordance with labour market needs.- Communicate harmoniously with business and industry players.

Discussion

The shift in leadership from a top-down to a bottom-up model represents a fundamental change in developing a quality-centered school culture. This transformation creates an inverted organizational structure where internal stakeholders, particularly teachers, become the most influential actors in shaping school policies (Sallis, 2014). This situation has ensured that teachers have a greater role in developing policies. As far as the educational activities are concerned, the principal's leadership is significant in for the achievement of the quality of the human capital of an institution (Khairul Azan et al., 2021). It is their responsibility to foster teaching professionalism on the part of the employees because the principal's leadership can significantly influence the school organization's effectiveness. The principal becomes a facilitator who sets policies and helps teachers implement policies democratically (Campbell & Carayannis, 2020). Such a situation can be obtained because female principals have a character that is open to change, communicative, and willing to listen to ideas and even complaints from teachers.

Second, teachers are the first internal customers to collaborate to produce quality vocational education services, so a culture of quality is also produced. Thus, the school principal must ensure the school's quality is adequately maintained and enhances the professionalism of the students and teachers in performing instructional activities (Ramos-Pla et al., 2021). The female principal realizes that she has limitations in terms of gender within the patriarchal culture of the surrounding community. However, she made it a challenge that she had to overcome by using her and the teachers' strengths in her school. Using the pattern of strengths and challenges in the SWOT analysis, she strategically made teachers the first party to collaborate to produce quality vocational education services (Toke & Kalpande, 2022). She realized that teachers are internal customers and key figures in implementing vocational education services.

The role of principal leadership is reflected in the comprehensive management of the school's organizational system, encompassing all stages from planning to evaluation. Accordingly, an effective principal must possess a clear and strong vision for student learning, maintain high expectations for student achievement, design instructional programs, and consistently monitor teacher performance and classroom activities (Nurdi & Ahmad, 2025; Shittu et al., 2025; Zamroni

& Barnoto, 2024). In addition, principals are expected to promote efficient use of instructional time, facilitate diverse learning resources, oversee individual and group student development, conduct regular evaluations, and implement continuous improvements. The processes of learning, teaching, and leadership are inherently interconnected in the pursuit of educational objectives. As suggested by academic theorists, learning, education, and leading are intricately interwoven: to learn is to grasp the core of teaching; to teach is to embody the essence of leadership (Asmendri et al., 2024; Balqis et al., 2025; Radhi et al., 2025). Understanding this dynamic relationship is essential, as it offers a simplified yet profound framework recognizing that human learning is the driving force behind teaching and leadership. Such an understanding is critical in reducing the perceived complexity of educational leadership by anchoring it in the foundational process of human learning (Simanjuntak et al., 2019).

The collaboration efforts were carried out through various efforts: (1) involving teachers in making decisions about policies that the female principal will formulate. This involvement makes teachers feel responsible for implementing the policy. This collaboration has implications for the willingness and ability of teachers to cooperate with the principal in implementing the policy; (2) providing the most expansive possible space for teachers to apply their ideas in implementing the policies that have been formulated together. It makes teachers feel appreciated, and basically, the actualization of ideas is the highest need in humans, where, when it can be obtained, they can work according to the standards that have been determined. The success of schools in realizing independent learning implementation requires a vision, strategically planned goals, and the gradual steps that formulate a progressive framework needed to achieve them. This is essential as fostering independent learning, shifting towards a more student-centered approach in education, ultimately benefits both students and teachers. Consequently, effective school leaders must possess exceptional change management, adaptive learning leadership skills, sound leadership, and an entrepreneurial spirit (Donaldson & Mavrogordato, 2018). This ability creates and develops a quality culture for implementing vocational education services at SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap.

The principal's role as the foremost learning leader is strategically significant in fostering continuous professional growth among teachers, thereby enhancing the overall quality of education and contributing to the development of human resources with both competitive and comparative advantages (Karakose et al., 2021). Noted that the principal holds primary responsibility for the effectiveness of education within the school they lead. At SMK Darussalam Karangpucung, Cilacap, effective collaboration between the principal and teachers can be attributed to the leadership qualities of the current female principal, who demonstrates openness and strong communication skills. Her leadership approach fosters collegial cooperation and bridges communication between the teaching staff and the school foundation. As a result, the foundation is more attuned to the needs and welfare of teachers, recognizing and rewarding those who perform professionally in delivering high-quality vocational education services.

The school implements a strategic program encompassing a wide range of activities, high-quality planning, and flexibility in execution, all under the principal's committed leadership. As an educational manager, the principal is key in guiding and motivating teachers, demonstrating initiative and responsibility in administrative functions. Successfully implementing school programs is closely aligned with the principal's managerial capacity and active contribution, essential to achieving institutional goals. In this regard, telecommunication media is a crucial tool to support and facilitate executing the principal's managerial strategies (Hastuti et al., 2020). With her open, democratic, and communicative leadership style, the female principal at the school fosters collaboration by forming teacher work teams dedicated to continuously improving the quality of vocational education (Donate et al., 2020). In parallel, teachers are encouraged to self-develop to support better student achievement (Elpisah & Hartini, 2019). As a manager, the principal provides direction and empowers teachers to enhance their competencies, enabling them to apply more effective learning and teaching methods (Flores & Derrington, 2017). These initiatives are

grounded in systematic performance evaluations. The principal believes that educational quality is not achieved through abrupt change, but through continuous and incremental improvement. Over time, this consistent effort cultivates habits of quality enhancement among teachers, eventually fostering a sustainable culture of excellence within the school (Canbay & Akman, 2023).

Third, benchmarking in other schools to get an idea of the indicators of quality vocational education, and make these indicators the minimum standards they must meet. One effort that can be simple to produce and develop a culture of quality in educational institutions, including vocational education institutions, is to conduct benchmarking (Lepistö et al., 2024). This activity is carried out by the female principal and several teachers involved in managing vocational education service activities. In this activity, the principal and several teachers study the factors that can produce a culture of quality in the schools they visit. Then, based on these factors, the female principal maps the components involved in developing a culture of quality in the schools she visits. After being mapped, the principal gathers information about each component's system or work procedures. The work procedures for each element in the schools visited by the female principal are then adopted and implemented in the schools she leads. For these work procedures to truly produce a culture of quality in the schools she leads, the female principal makes the procedural steps and outputs of these steps as indicators of quality vocational education.

It can be stated that quality work indicators serve as essential benchmarks for teachers at SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap in guiding their professional duties. This aligns with previous (Copriady et al., 2021), which outlines three key programs for enhancing teacher performance: (1) the *pre-service education program*, which refers to educational activities provided before individuals assume specific teaching responsibilities; (2) the *in-service education program*, which targets the enhancement of academic and professional competencies after individuals are appointed to teaching roles, often through advanced formal education; and (3) the *in-service training program*, which aims to provide ongoing professional development opportunities for active teachers, primarily through structured training and performance-based incentives. Clear work regulations have been established to ensure teachers align with these performance indicators. Importantly, these regulations are not unilaterally imposed by the female principal but are developed collaboratively with teacher representatives involved in the school's management. This participatory approach ensures that the resulting work guidelines are not only humanistic but also tailored to the specific needs and professional characteristics of the teaching staff at SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap.

Humanistic work rules that favor the interests of teachers can be applied healthily so that a supportive work climate is created to achieve quality vocational education indicators. With this achievement, a quality culture is then produced. Female principals can also develop this quality culture by implementing healthy and fair work rules for teachers (Pirson, 2020).

Teachers' ability to work according to established regulations has become habitual, demonstrating that a school's quality culture can be cultivated by consistently implementing positive professional behaviors. One strategic effort to support and enhance teacher capacity is the provision of various forms of functional training, workshops, and seminars aimed at sustainable professional development. These activities are organized by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and other relevant institutions to strengthen teacher competencies. Continuous professional development (CPD), as mandated in the Regulation of the Minister for Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform (Permen PAN-RB) No. 16 of 2009, is conducted based on identified needs, and is implemented gradually and consistently to improve teacher professionalism (Wardoyo et al., 2020). The implications of such development are evident in cultivating a strong quality culture and enhancing teacher performance characterized by a high work ethic. From the perspective of ethical philosophy, a high work ethic emerges when institutional culture fosters individual responsibility and adherence to fair and transparent regulations. Therefore, a healthy and just work environment is essential in motivating educators to maintain professional integrity and excellence (Guidara, 2022).

Fourth, educational facilities and infrastructure must be completed following Indonesia's national vocational education standards. The principal is responsible for organizing education affairs, school administration, teacher leading, and utilizing and maintaining school facilities and infrastructures (Kushendratno et al., 2023). Based on the results of the study, it can be seen that the facilities and infrastructure at SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap have adequate facilities and infrastructure and meet the minimum criteria of national education standards for vocational education.

The principal under coordination with the Darussalam al-Fatah foundation made efforts to improve the quality of vocational education by completing the following school facilities and infrastructure: (1) Accounting and Financial Institution Expertise Practice Laboratory; (2) Online Business and Marketing Expertise Practice Laboratory; (3) Automotive Light Vehicle Engineering Expertise Practice Laboratory; (4) Computer Network Engineering Expertise Practice Laboratory; (5) Motorcycle Engineering Expertise Laboratory; (6) business center; and (7) teaching factory. These facilities and infrastructure implement memorable or productive learning that equips students with vocational skills.

From a total quality management perspective, adequate facilities and infrastructure for educational services can make it easier for teachers to organize quality learning activities (Maiya & Aithal, 2023). From quality learning, a quality culture will be produced in teachers in organizing learning. Quality learning activities will also be created for students, so a quality culture will be created among the students (Chabibi et al., 2025; Zaini et al., 2023).

For the principal at SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap, quality does not recognize gender, so whoever the teacher is, both male and female, have the same opportunity to provide quality vocational education services. Likewise, students, both male and female, can learn with various learning strategies that are oriented towards quality. From the results of the research documentation, it can be seen that female students, in terms of numbers, dominate compared to male students at SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap. This is used as an opportunity by the female principal to produce graduates ready to work, even though they are women who are often considered weak by men.

Fifth, collaborating with the industrial world to produce quality output and outcomes. SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap has three areas of expertise: Manufacturing and Engineering Technology, Information Technology, and Business and Management. This school also offers four expertise programs: Automotive Engineering, Computer Network and Telecommunication Engineering, Marketing, and Accounting and Institutional Finance.

With teachers who can provide quality vocational education services, many graduates of SMK Darussalam Karangpucung are absorbed in the business world. The Automotive Engineering and Computer Network and Telecommunication Engineering expertise programs are superior because they have collaborated and been fostered by well-known companies such as Astra Daihatsu Motor, Astra Honda Motor, and PT. Telkom Indonesia. One of the characteristics of women is being agile and diligent. The female principal at SMK Darussalam Karangpucung Cilacap also possesses this character. She is agile in capturing opportunities for collaboration and diligent in negotiating to collaborate with the industrial world. She does not want to be left behind in information from the industrial world regarding current workforce needs. Negotiating is one of the skills that must be possessed in the era of the Industrial Revolution 5.0 (Asadollahi-Yazdi et al., 2020). With the ability to negotiate, female principals can collaborate with external parties of the school, enabling them to collaborate well with the industrial world in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study found that female principals play a pivotal role in fostering a culture of quality within vocational high schools. Their leadership strategies, which shifted from top-down to bottom-up policy-making, empowered teachers, conducted benchmarking, enhanced infrastructure, and built partnerships with industry, had a greater impact than initially expected. These efforts resulted in tangible outcomes, including an "A" accreditation rating, a steady increase in student enrollment, and a high level of teacher dedication and work ethic. These findings challenge traditional assumptions about gender roles in educational leadership and underscore the transformative potential of women in vocational education. Moreover, this research reinforces and expands upon previous studies by presenting a contextualized model of female leadership within a patriarchal setting. It introduces a novel framework that integrates participatory leadership, a quality culture, and alignment with industry needs, thereby enriching the scholarly discourse on gender-inclusive educational leadership. Nonetheless, the study is limited by its focus on a single vocational school and a narrow, context-specific sample, which constrains the generalizability of its conclusions. Additionally, age, gender diversity, and institutional variation were not comprehensively examined. Future research involving broader and more diverse samples is recommended to validate and extend these findings further.

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