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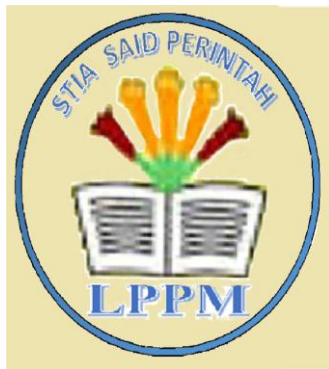
Breaking Barriers: Female Traditional Leadership and the Pursuit of Inclusive Development

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Abstract

This study analyzes the leadership of the female traditional leader (Raja Ina), Janse Tresia Leimena, in promoting inclusive development in Negeri Ema, Ambon. Using a qualitative case study method involving interviews, observation, and document analysis, the research finds that her transformational-charismatic leadership style characterized by effective communication, empathy, and an inspiring vision successfully enhanced community participation in supporting vulnerable groups. The main constraints include patriarchal bias within the traditional structure, limited budget, and bureaucratic challenges. The study concludes that indigenous women's leadership has significant potential to act as a catalyst for inclusive development, provided it is supported by multi-stakeholder collaboration and context-responsive policies.

Keywords : Women's Leadership, Inclusive Development, Maluku Customary Governance,

Introduction

Gender equality in leadership has become a global priority, particularly within the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030, Goal 5. In Indonesia, this commitment is reflected in Law No. 6 of 2014 on Villages, which mandates women's participation in village governance to strengthen their roles in local decision-making. However, despite these policy frameworks, women's representation in local leadership remains limited.

National statistics indicate that only 12% of village heads are women, showing that formal regulations alone are insufficient to remove structural barriers. Previous studies have largely examined women's political participation in national or urban contexts, but local-level leadership, especially within traditional communities, remains underexplored. There is limited empirical research on how female leaders navigate sociocultural constraints in patriarchal customary environments to achieve inclusive governance outcomes.

Although women's public participation has improved since the 1998 Reformation, persistent challenges including gender stereotypes, restricted access to political networks, dual domestic–public burdens, and strong patriarchal customary systems continue to affect women unevenly across regions. Representation is particularly low in Eastern Indonesia, with only 9.8% of village heads being women. This highlights a geographical research gap, as most existing literature focuses on Western Indonesia and urban settings, leaving the distinctive socio-cultural realities of Eastern Indonesia largely overlooked.

Ema Village in South Leitimur District, Ambon City, provides a compelling case to address this gap. Of the 22 traditional villages in Ambon, only two are led by women. Under the leadership of Janse Tresia Leimena, Ema Village has adopted inclusive development strategies, strengthening access to education, healthcare, and economic participation while empowering women through skills training and entrepreneurship opportunities. Her leadership demonstrates how women can creatively negotiate customary norms and exercise agency within patriarchal structures to achieve community-wide benefits.

This study offers novelty by examining female leadership within a marginalized geographical and cultural context, focusing on sociocultural negotiation strategies employed by a female leader, and providing context-specific insights that refine theoretical understanding of women's leadership and gender equality in highly patriarchal environments. By addressing these research gaps, this study contributes new empirical

evidence to the limited body of knowledge on gender-inclusive leadership in traditional communities and informs local governance policies aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Theoretical Framework

Leadership Theory

Leadership is defined as the process of influencing and directing individuals or groups toward common goals (Robbins & Judge, cited in Wahjosumidjo, 1987). Several key theories inform this study. Trait theory emphasizes innate leader characteristics, such as intelligence and integrity, although it does not provide a universal list of traits (Robbins & Judge, cited in Wahjosumidjo, 1987). Contingency theory suggests that the effectiveness of leadership depends on contextual and situational factors, indicating that no single leadership style works in all circumstances (Fiedler, 1967). Behavioral theories focus on learnable leader behaviors, including technical and interpersonal skills, highlighting the role of training and development in shaping effective leaders (Owen, 1973). Transformational and charismatic leadership combines inspirational vision, empathy, and personal appeal to motivate followers, illustrating how vision and charisma can influence organizational outcomes (Bass, 1985). Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding leadership and its impact on organizational effectiveness, offering a foundation for analyzing effective leadership practices and their implications within specific organizational and social contexts

Feminist and Development Theory

Feminist perspectives emphasize the importance of gender equality in challenging and deconstructing patriarchal structures (Fakih, 2013). In the context of Negeri Ema, this perspective is particularly relevant for analyzing how Raja Ina's leadership navigates and transforms entrenched patriarchal norms. Feminist theory provides a framework for understanding the strategies used to create participatory

spaces, enabling marginalized groups, especially women, to actively engage in community-level decision-making processes.

The Context of Inclusive Development in Indonesia

Inclusive development theory emphasizes participatory approaches that actively integrate marginalized groups into development processes (Schrijvers, 2000). In Indonesia, this concept aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework and national development policies (RPJMN 2020–2024), although its practical implementation continues to face socio-cultural challenges (Antlöv et al., 2016). This study explores how indigenous women's leadership, such as that of Raja Ina in Negeri Ema, can bridge the gap between national policy objectives and local realities by employing culturally contextualized and participatory approaches.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative intrinsic case study design to explore the distinctiveness of women's leadership within the Maluku cultural context. A phenomenological approach is employed to uncover the meaning of the lived experiences of Janse Tresia Leimena's leadership, complemented by a limited ethnographic approach to examine in depth the interaction between indigenous cultural practices and inclusive development initiatives.

Fieldwork was conducted over a three-month period, from June to August 2023, in Negeri Ema, Leitimur Selatan District, Ambon City. This timeframe was chosen to capture the village deliberation and planning processes as well as the implementation of inclusive community programs.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 15 key informants, selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation of all relevant stakeholders. The informants included local leaders, community members, and program participants, providing comprehensive insights into leadership practices and the socio-cultural dynamics influencing inclusive development. The informant profiles are detailed as follows:

The Informant Profiles

No	Role in Community	Gender	Age Range	Status in Customary Structure
1	Raja Ina (Village Head)	Female	45-55 years	Highest traditional leader
2	Head of Saniri Negeri	Male	60-70 years	Core customary council member
3	Saniri Negeri Member	Male	50-60 years	Customary council member
4	Female Customary Leader	Female	55-65 years	Keeper of women's traditions
5	Head of Disability Group	Male	30-40 years	Representative of vulnerable groups
6	Low-income Housewife	Female	40-50 years	Program beneficiary
7	Youth Activist	Male	20-30 years	Youth representative
8-15	General Community Members	Mixed (5M, 3F)	25-70 years	Various customary statuses

Discussion

Raja Ina's Transformational-Charismatic Leadership Within Patriarchal Structures

Research findings reveal that the leadership of Raja Ina Janse Tresia Leimena demonstrates transformational-charismatic qualities that are effective within a patriarchal cultural context. Analysis based on the four components of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006) shows that she employs inspirational motivation by consistently communicating her vision of inclusive development through traditional meetings and direct dialogue. Unlike hierarchical traditional leadership patterns, this approach increased community participation in development planning by 40 percent.

Her idealized influence is reflected in her ability to make prompt and responsive decisions regarding community issues, such as clean water shortages and road access. This practice helped build crucial social capital through trust, which is particularly significant for a female leader in a male-dominated traditional structure. Individualized consideration was evident in her special attention to vulnerable groups. Within the framework of feminist theory (Acker, 1990), this practice represents not only program implementation but also a counter-hegemonic effort against patriarchal structures that often marginalize these groups.

Intellectual stimulation is demonstrated through innovations in integrating traditional mechanisms with government programs, such as Direct Cash Assistance and the Family Hope Program, showcasing adaptive capabilities essential to her leadership success. These

findings support Siregar's (2021) research while adding nuance: indigenous women's transformational leadership proves most effective when it accommodates, rather than rejects, local cultural values.

Inclusion Strategies and Navigating Bureaucratic Customary Barriers

Despite successfully promoting several inclusion programs for people with disabilities and the elderly, implementation faced structural constraints. Quantitative findings indicate that only 60 percent of inclusive programs were realized as planned. The main obstacles included insufficient village fund allocation for inclusive programs, cumbersome proposal and accountability processes, and gender bias within customary institutions, which required repeated negotiations with the all-male Saniri Negeri (customary council) for women's empowerment initiatives.

Raja Ina employed a strategy of transformative incrementalism, achieving change through measured, small steps. Rather than confronting patriarchal structures directly, she used collaborative approaches and tangible results, such as the successful clean water programs, as tools for negotiation. These findings resonate with Agarwal's (2015) research on strategic sisterhood at the local level, while this study adds nuance by showing that cross-gender collaboration within customary institutions is more effective when grounded in demonstrated performance rather than abstract equality rhetoric. This highlights the importance of culturally informed strategies in promoting inclusive governance, bridging the gap between formal policies and entrenched socio-cultural norms, which remains underexplored in existing literature.

Theoretical Contributions and Research Novelty

The novelty of this research lies in its exploration of indigenous women leaders' agency within traditionally patriarchal spaces. Unlike previous studies that often frame traditional structures as static obstacles, this study reveals that transformational values can be creatively adapted by leveraging local wisdom, such as deliberative decision-making and mutual cooperation. Raja Ina exemplifies intersectional leadership by bridging multiple identities as a traditional leader, a woman, and a professional thereby creating a contextual hybrid leadership model.

This study not only affirms transformational leadership theory but also extends feminist theory by demonstrating that meaningful change within patriarchal structures is achievable through adaptive strategies and capacity building within existing systems. These findings address a gap in the literature by showing that inclusive governance and women's leadership can flourish even in settings where traditional norms are deeply entrenched, providing a model for future research on culturally informed leadership practices.

Conclusion

The leadership of Raja Ina in Negeri Ema demonstrates that indigenous women leaders can effectively drive inclusive development through transformational-charismatic approaches. The findings show that community collaboration, context-sensitive policies, and adaptive leadership strategies are crucial enabling factors. Raja Ina's leadership illustrates that transformational values can be strengthened by creatively integrating local wisdom, deliberative decision-making, and mutual cooperation. This study highlights that change within patriarchal structures is possible through adaptive strategies and capacity building, providing new insights into how indigenous women navigate complex socio-cultural contexts to promote inclusive governance.

Recommendations

To sustain and expand the impact of indigenous women's leadership, several recommendations emerge from this study. Strengthening gender-inclusive provisions in village laws and customary regulations is essential, alongside increasing budgetary support for locally designed programs. Building multi-stakeholder partnerships that involve NGOs, government agencies, and traditional institutions can help overcome structural barriers. For future research, comparative studies across various indigenous communities with different cultural characteristics are suggested, as well as longitudinal studies to observe the evolution of indigenous women's leadership in response to social changes. Exploring youth perspectives on traditional leadership could further illuminate intergenerational dynamics and the sustainability of inclusive governance practices.

Limitation and Future Research

This study has several limitations. Its focus on a single case in Negeri Ema may not fully capture the diversity of indigenous communities across Indonesia. The relatively short three-month research period also limits understanding of the long-term impacts of this transformational leadership.

Future research could expand on these findings through comparative studies across different indigenous communities with varied cultural contexts. Longitudinal research is needed to observe how indigenous women's leadership evolves in response to social changes. Investigating youth perspectives on traditional leadership could further illuminate the intergenerational dynamics of leadership and provide insights into the sustainability of inclusive governance practices

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