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Being a Mother at School: An Interpretive Phenomenological Study of the Maternal Leadership of the Female Principal of MTs Hudaatul Umam

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Abstract

This research is motivated by the limited understanding of how female madrasah principals interpret maternal leadership as a leadership identity, not merely managerial effectiveness or gender representation. This study aims to interpret the lived experiences of female madrasah principals in implementing maternal leadership in the madrasah environment. The study used a qualitative approach with the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method. The study population was female madrasah principals, while the sample consisted of one purposively selected principal of MTs Hudaatul Umam. Data were collected through two in-depth semi-structured interviews supported by reflective notes and member checking. Data analysis was conducted through repeated readings, initial noting, theme development, and the arrangement of superordinate themes according to IPA procedures. The results identified five main themes: building legitimacy as a female leader, defining oneself as a second mother at school, implementing collaborative leadership based on caring, balancing compassion with assertiveness, and building leadership based on life experiences. This study concludes that maternal leadership is a leadership identity that continues to develop through life experiences, nurturing values, and the socio-religious context of the madrasah, not simply a leadership style.

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Keywords : Collaborative Leadership, Female Leadership, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Maternal Leadership, School Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions require not only an organized administrative system, but also leadership capable of building interpersonal relationships, creating a sense of security, and developing the potential of all school members. The principal or head of a madrasah holds a strategic position as a policy director, decision-maker, and a figure who shapes the organizational culture. UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report confirms that school leadership influences the quality of learning, teacher development, collaborative culture, and student outcomes. Effective leadership is measured not only by administrative skills but also by the ability to build trusting relationships, develop human resources, and create an inclusive learning environment.(Variani et al., 2024).

Although the number of women teaching continues to increase in many countries, opportunities for women to occupy educational leadership positions remain unequal. UNESCO reports that women constitute the majority of the teaching workforce in many countries, but the proportion of women as principals is much lower. Globally, the average percentage of female principals is at least 20 percentage points lower than the proportion of female teachers. This situation indicates that structural and cultural barriers still exist that limit women's access to educational leadership positions.(UNESCO, 2024).

A similar phenomenon is also seen in Indonesia. Women make significant contributions as educators, including in madrasas under the auspices of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. However, the representation of women as leaders in educational institutions remains lower than the number of female teachers. Research on women's leadership in Indonesia shows that women still face various challenges, ranging from gender stereotypes, patriarchal culture, perceptions of leadership abilities, to the demands of fulfilling dual roles as leaders and mothers in the family.(Sakdiah et al., 2024)Madrasahs have distinct characteristics compared to public schools. In addition to carrying out formal educational functions, madrasahs also integrate Islamic values into all aspects of school life. This situation makes the leadership of a madrasah principal related not only to organizational management but also to character development, moral formation, and moral exemplarity. In such an environment, leadership style often develops through closer social interactions with students, teachers, parents, and the community. These relationships are not always built through bureaucratic approaches, but also through emotional engagement that reflects values of caring,

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empathy, and nurturing.

One form of leadership that is increasingly being discussed in educational studies is maternal leadership. This concept does not view motherhood as a symbol of weakness, but rather as a source of leadership strength. Values such as compassion, caring, empathy, listening skills, patience, protection, and attention to individual development are part of leadership practices that can create a healthier work environment while improving the psychological well-being of school residents. In practice, maternal leadership does not mean eliminating assertiveness. A leader still enforces organizational rules, but the decision-making process is carried out with consideration for the human conditions of the people they lead.

The initial findings of this study indicate that the experience of being a female madrasah principal is not solely related to structural positions. Interviewees defined leadership as a form of nurturing and caring for the entire school community. When dealing with students experiencing learning difficulties, being bullied, or experiencing family issues, their approach involves more than just sanctions, but also mentoring, embracing, dialogue, and personal coaching. These experiences demonstrate that their identity as mothers shapes how participants understand and exercise their leadership.

Similar experiences were evident in how participants viewed their relationships with teachers and other educational staff. Participants explained that they strive to create a work environment where teachers feel cared for, protected, and have a space to express their concerns. When conflicts arise between teachers or between teachers and parents, the principal chooses to act as a mediator, providing understanding before making decisions. This approach demonstrates that leadership is understood as a process of building relationships, not simply a supervisory function.

Interestingly, this motherly attitude does not eliminate the dimension of firmness. Participants continue to implement clear disciplinary procedures through Statement Letters (SP), summoning parents, and even academic decisions if violations continue. However, every decision always begins with a coaching process and consideration of the student's individual circumstances. In certain situations, student assessments are based not only on academic aspects but also on the student's health, psychological development, discipline, and demonstrated effort.

The participants' experiences demonstrate that women's leadership in madrasas is not adequately explained by the transformational, transactional, or instructional leadership theories commonly used in educational research. The participants' interpretation of themselves as "second mothers" to their students demonstrates a more complex subjective experience, shaped by their life journey,

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family values, professional experiences, and social interactions within the madrasa environment. Therefore, these experiences need to be understood through an interpretive phenomenological perspective, which seeks to explore how individuals give meaning to their life experiences, rather than simply describing visible leadership behaviors.

From this description, it can be understood that female leadership in madrasas is not merely a matter of gender representation or organizational effectiveness. Such leadership is also related to how a woman constructs her identity as a leader and as a nurturing figure in the educational environment. To date, studies on female madrasa principals in Indonesia have focused more on gender challenges, leadership strategies, or managerial effectiveness. Meanwhile, research specifically exploring the meaning of the experience of being a "mother at school" through an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach remains very limited. This gap serves as the starting point for this research to more deeply understand the lived experiences of female madrasa principals in developing maternal leadership practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on women's leadership in education have experienced rapid development in recent years. This change is influenced by increased attention to gender equality, relational leadership, and the importance of emotional intelligence in managing educational organizations. In contrast to traditional leadership paradigms that emphasize authority and control, recent studies have shown that women's leadership prioritizes communication, collaboration, empathy, and building strong interpersonal relationships. This approach is considered capable of creating a more positive school climate, improving teacher well-being, and supporting student development.(Kartiwi et al., 2025).

In the Indonesian context, research on female principals generally focuses on leadership effectiveness, personal characteristics, and challenges arising from the social construction of gender roles. Research by Sakdiah et al. shows that female principals still face challenges in the form of patriarchal culture, seniority, and public perceptions of women as leaders. Nevertheless, women are able to develop adaptive strategies through professional competence, communication skills, and social support, enabling them to maintain effective leadership.(Sakdiah et al., 2024).

More recent developments have begun to introduce the concept of maternal leadership. This concept views motherhood not as a trait incompatible with leadership, but rather as social capital that strengthens organizational effectiveness. Research by Sari et al. shows that female principals implement maternal characteristics through empathy, emotional closeness, intensive

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communication, concern for teachers and students, and the ability to build a harmonious school culture. This leadership style is combined with a democratic and situational style, thus improving the quality of education without compromising decisiveness in decision-making.(Sari et al., 2025).

These findings are reinforced by research on the characteristics of female leadership in vocational education. The results showed that maternalism, thoroughness, adaptability, open communication, tolerance, and creativity were the most prominent characteristics of female principals. These characteristics have been shown to positively influence leadership implementation and school organizational development. However, this research used a mixed methods approach, which emphasizes the relationships between variables and therefore failed to explore the meaning of female leaders' lived experiences in depth.(Cahyaningsih, 2025).

Although research on women's leadership continues to grow, most previous studies still position women as objects of study within the framework of organizational effectiveness, managerial competency, or gender challenges. Few studies have specifically examined how a madrasah principal defines herself as a "mother" in the school environment and how this identity influences decision-making, building relationships with teachers, and guiding students. Yet, these experiences are a crucial part of shaping daily leadership practices, particularly in madrasahs with a religious character and a strong emphasis on nurturing values as part of the institutional culture.

Based on a review of previous research, several gaps remain to be addressed. First, most research on women's leadership in Indonesia uses case study, qualitative descriptive, or mixed methods approaches that focus on leadership effectiveness and organizational achievement. These studies have not explored how the subjective experiences of madrasah principals shape how they understand and implement leadership.(Sari et al., 2025).

Second, the concept of maternal leadership has been used to explain the characteristics of female leadership, but it is still positioned as a leadership style or strategy. Previous research has not addressed maternal leadership as a lived experience born from the personal journey, family values, professional experiences, and social interactions of female leaders within the madrasah environment.(Sari et al., 2025).

Third, research on female madrasah principals more often addresses the challenges of patriarchy, gender stereotypes, or leadership effectiveness. Studies that specifically explore the experience of being a "second mother" to students, teachers, and the madrasah community through an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach are still very limited, particularly in the context of junior madrasahs in Indonesia.(Variani et al., 2024).

This research offers novelty in both conceptual and methodological aspects. Conceptually,

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this study does not view maternal leadership simply as a set of characteristics or leadership styles, but rather as a leadership identity interpreted and constructed through the life experiences of female madrasah principals. Leadership is understood as a process of becoming, not simply a process of doing.

Methodologically, this study uses an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to interpret the subjective experiences of female madrasah principals in exercising maternal leadership. This approach allows researchers to explore the meanings participants attach to their experiences of nurturing, protecting, guiding, and enforcing discipline within the madrasah environment. Thus, this study broadens the study of women's leadership from an organizational perspective to a lived experience and meaning-making perspective.

Based on this description, this study aims to interpret the lived experiences of female madrasah principals in interpreting and implementing maternal leadership in the madrasah environment. This study seeks to uncover how personal experiences, maternal values, relationships with teachers and students, and the socio-religious context shape their leadership practices. The results are expected to enrich the study of women's leadership in Islamic education and provide new perspectives on maternal leadership as a leadership practice oriented toward nurturing, relationships, and character building.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design. This approach was chosen because the research objective was not to measure or generalize, but rather to understand how an individual gives meaning to their life experiences. IPA was used because it specifically seeks to explore the meaning of a person's personal experience of a phenomenon they have experienced themselves, and is idiographic in nature, thus paying full attention to the particular case before drawing a broader understanding (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In the context of this research, the phenomenon being explored is the experience of being and living the role of a female madrasah principal who interprets her leadership in a maternal manner.

The participant in this study was a female principal at MTs Hudaatul Umam who had led for a long period of time. Purposive sampling is a common approach in natural science because this approach prioritizes depth of meaning in a small, homogeneous sample, even a single case study, over breadth of coverage (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Participants were selected because they had direct and rich experience with the phenomenon under study, thus providing an in-depth

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picture of how maternal leadership is constructed and implemented in daily life.

Data were collected through two in-depth interviews, conducted on July 1, 2026, and July 25, 2026. The first interview focused on career background, the appointment process, and experiences facing challenges as a female leader, while the second interview focused on maternal leadership practices in relationships with students, teachers, and education staff. The interviews were semi-structured so that participants had the freedom to share their experiences in their own words, while the researcher maintained the direction of the conversation. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed in full for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted following the stages of natural science (IPA). Researchers read the transcripts repeatedly to obtain a comprehensive overview, made initial notes on salient points, developed emergent themes, and then grouped them into superordinate themes that represented the participants' experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This process was doubly interpretive, in that researchers sought to understand participants who were trying to understand their own experiences.

Because the researcher has a close personal relationship with the participants, this position is not hidden but rather openly acknowledged and managed through reflexivity. The researcher recognizes that this closeness provides the benefits of in-depth access and openness, but also risks introducing interpretive bias. Therefore, the researcher is based on the idea that the researcher's position is never completely inside or outside, but rather occupies a space between the two, so that closeness can be a strength without sacrificing the credibility of the data (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). The validity of the data is maintained through reflective note-taking during the analysis process and cross-checking interpretations with participants, or member checking, to ensure that the meanings drawn truly reflect the participants' experiences, not the researcher's assumptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to understand the lived experiences of female madrasah principals in interpreting maternal leadership through an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. Data were obtained through two in-depth interviews conducted on July 1, 2026, and July 25, 2026. The analysis process was carried out in stages through repeated readings of the interview transcripts, initial coding, grouping of meanings, and the compilation of main themes that represent the participants' experiences.

The analysis produced five main themes that describe how participants construct, interpret, and implement maternal leadership in the madrasa environment.

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Table 1. Themes of Science Analysis Results

Main Theme	Subtheme
Building legitimacy as a female leader	Appointment process, family support, proof of ability
Understanding yourself as a second mother at school	Nurturing, emotional protection, closeness to students
Collaborative leadership as a form of caring	Deliberation, listening to teachers, joint decision making
Balancing affection and firmness	Persuasive approach, application of discipline, consideration of student conditions
Life experience as a source of leadership	Experience of being a mother, educational experience, life values

Theme 1. Building Legitimacy as a Female Leader

The participant's journey to becoming a madrasah principal began with an appointment after the previous madrasah principal was appointed as a civil servant. This appointment came at a very young age, prompting both surprise and self-doubt.

"At first I was shocked, because at that time I was only around 27 or 28, still under 30 years old. At first I was a bit hesitant, but with the support of my husband and Abah, who no longer doubted me, the important thing was that I already had the basics."

These doubts did not deter her, as she relied on her teaching education and the support of those closest to her. When some opposed her appointment, she chose not to confront her, but rather to prove herself through concrete actions. She emphasized that the way to address these doubts was to demonstrate the parenting style she applied to her students through concrete evidence, particularly through character development. Interestingly, the means of proof she chose were maternal, namely nurturing and moral development. This demonstrates that from the outset, the legitimacy of her leadership was woven from the values of caring, not from asserting authority.

Theme 2. Understanding Yourself as a Second Mother at School

The most dominant theme in this study was the self-concept of being a second mother to students. Participants viewed junior high school students as pre-adolescents who still needed the

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presence of a close caregiver.

"A woman is like a substitute mother at home, closer than a man. Women have a gentle nature and are more empathetic, so children feel more comfortable with a female principal."

This interpretation confirms that the participant sees herself not merely as a superior, but as a mother figure re-emerging in the school environment. She even eloquently described the feeling of a mother at school, giving children a mother beyond the home. This interpretation is evident in the way she responds to students who are having problems. When a female student is teased by her male classmates and cries, her first response is not punishment, but rather an emotional approach. She said that the girl, who is a little emotional and crying, is guided and hugged. This act of hugging and reassuring her demonstrates that for the participant, the madrasah principal is a place where students find a sense of security that they may not always find at home.

Theme 3. Collaborative Leadership as a Form of Caring

Participants described that important decisions were not taken alone, but through joint deliberation with the teacher closest to the students.

"I prioritize the opinions of teachers, especially homeroom teachers, because they are closer to the students. In my conclusions, I will take a middle path."

This decision-making approach demonstrates that the participant views leadership as a process of building understanding, not simply giving instructions. He also expressed the same concern for interpersonal relationships at the madrasah. When disputes arose, whether between teachers or between teachers and parents, the participant chose to act as a mediator. He explained that when a teacher had a disagreement with a colleague, the matter was resolved and explained, and when the issue arose with a parent lacking communication, he took the lead and resolved the issue. This presence as a mediator demonstrated that the participant's concern extended beyond the students to teachers and other educational staff.

Theme 4. Balancing Affection and Firmness

While placing affection as the foundation, participants emphasized that a motherly approach does not mean condoning violations. Firmness is maintained through clear and gradual procedures.

"For example, the first SP still has a policy of calling the child. The second SP is calling the child and parents. If there's no change by the third SP, we have to strictly follow the rules, or we might not

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be promoted to the next grade."

However, this firmness is never without consideration of each child's individual circumstances. A participant shared her experience dealing with a student with a history of illness that limited their cognitive abilities, and she felt a dilemma. She chose not to judge the child solely on academics.

"There's a dilemma there. But we look at the child's attitude, because education isn't just about cognitive skills. This child might have good psychomotor skills, diligence, and discipline, even if their cognitive abilities are lacking. So we look at the positive side."

These findings demonstrate that compassion and assertiveness are not viewed as opposing forces. Instead, they complement each other in shaping just and humane decisions.

Theme 5. Life Experience as a Source of Maternal Leadership

The participant explained that her maternal leadership style didn't emerge suddenly, but rather stemmed from extensive life experience. One source she cited was her own experience of being mentored in college.

"From my experience leading a lecture, I found that female lecturers are different from male lecturers. A mother's directive nature is strong. So that's the experience I felt in lectures."

Her experience of being a caregiver and then passing on similar patterns to her students shows that the participants' leadership style is rooted in her own experiences. She also connects her role to the changing conditions of today's families, where many parents are busy working, leaving children without a space to talk at home. She strives to fill this void at school, and she has observed that it has led to students becoming more open.

"They often confide in each other, asking questions outside of school hours, about themselves, their dreams, and what they should do."

For the participants, maternal leadership is not just an organizational strategy, but a necessity of the times. She concluded by emphasizing that this kind of parenting is desperately needed now, as many parents come home from work tired and rarely ask questions of their children, even though pre-teens, especially seventh-graders, desperately need guidance.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study demonstrate that the maternal leadership practiced by participants is not simply a leadership style, but rather an identity that is interpreted and

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constructed through life experiences. The five themes that emerged are interconnected and form a coherent understanding: that leadership is understood by participants as a form of nurturing. These findings reinforce and deepen previous studies that position maternal traits as leadership assets, not weaknesses (Sari et al., 2025). However, this study goes further by demonstrating how this identity is formed within the participants.

In the first theme, the experience of building legitimacy demonstrates that women do not simply gain recognition simply because of formal positions. Participants who were appointed at a very young age faced doubts, and they responded not with confrontation but with proof through concrete work in shaping students' character. This pattern aligns with findings that female madrasah principals often face patriarchal social and cultural perceptions and then develop adaptive strategies based on competencies and relationships to maintain effective leadership (Sakdiah et al., 2024). Interestingly, the means of proof chosen by participants was maternal, namely character nurturing, so that from the outset, their leadership legitimacy was woven from the value of caring.

The second theme is central to the overall findings. The self-definition of being a second mother emphasizes that caring relationships are placed at the heart of leadership practices. This closely aligns with the ethics of care, which views caring relationships as the foundation of moral education, where educators pay full attention to the needs of those being educated (Noddings, 2013). Similar interpretations are also found in an international context, where more than half of female principals consciously describe their leadership as a form of mothering (Lumby & Azaola, 2014). What makes this finding socially significant is the rationale behind it. Participants present as second mothers precisely to fill the emotional void left by many parents' busy work lives. In other words, maternal leadership here is a response to real issues, not simply a stylistic preference.

The third theme demonstrates that concern extends beyond students to teachers and other educational staff. Collaborative leadership, which prioritizes the homeroom teacher's opinion and positions the principal as a conflict mediator, reflects relationship-based leadership. This pattern aligns with women's tendency to exhibit a transformational style that addresses individual needs and encourages growth (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003). However, this finding demonstrates something more specific: collaboration is implemented not solely for effectiveness, but as a manifestation of caring that makes teachers feel protected and unafraid, thus creating an open work climate.

The fourth theme addresses one of the most common misconceptions about maternal leadership: the notion that compassion means weakness or permissiveness. The findings suggest

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otherwise. Participants continued to enforce rules through gradual mechanisms, from Statement Letters to academic sanctions, but each decision was preceded by guidance and consideration of the student's individual circumstances. This emphasizes that in an ethic of care, caring does not mean neglect, but rather demands the best from students while being mindful of their circumstances. Compassion and firmness are not opposites but rather combine to form a humane form of authority.

The fifth theme explains where it all comes from. Participants interpreted their leadership styles as the fruit of extensive life experiences, from motherhood, to being mentored by female lecturers, to years of mentoring students. This reinforces the idea that parenting practices can foster distinctive ways of thinking that are then carried over into other domains, including leadership (Ruddick, 1989). Herein lies the novelty of the research, as maternal leadership appears not to be a mere role, but rather an identity that continues to develop and grow throughout life.

However, these findings need to be read critically to avoid falling into gender essentialism. In several sections, participants constructed their identities by contrasting the gentle and empathetic nature of women with the perceived more assertive or harsh nature of men. This study does not intend to conclude that women are naturally more compassionate or that caring is a biological trait. What this study demonstrates is how one individual interprets and constructs her leadership relationally in the context of a religious madrasah. This reading allows for maternal leadership to be understood as a socially constructed and learnable practice, not a gendered destiny.

It should be noted that the findings of this study are confined to its context as a single case study with one participant and are therefore not intended to be generalized. The strength of this research lies in its depth of meaning, not its breadth of coverage. Readers can consider the transferability of these findings to other madrasah contexts with similar characteristics, while remaining aware of the uniqueness of the experiences focused on in this study.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of being a female madrasah principal explored in this study ultimately lead to one simple yet profound meaning: leadership is perceived as another way of nurturing. For the participants, the role of madrasah principal was never truly separate from her role as a mother. She was present at school not merely to manage, but to nurture, accompany, and be a source of support for both students and teachers. This leadership style was not something she learned from management books, but rather something that grew from her own life journey, from years of

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experience raising, nurturing, and accompanying children.

Interestingly, this gentleness never led to her losing her firmness. She continued to enforce the rules, but always prioritized understanding the circumstances of each person she led. This is where this research contributes, demonstrating that maternal leadership deserves to be read as a meaningful identity, not simply a style. This understanding complements studies of women's leadership, which have so far focused on measuring effectiveness and mapping styles.

However, these findings stem from one voice, one experience, and one specific madrasah context, and therefore are not intended to represent all female madrasah principals. The compassion demonstrated here is best understood as something developed and learned, not as a natural characteristic of women. Future research could enrich this picture by listening to more voices, both from other madrasah principals and from teachers and students who directly experience this leadership on a daily basis.

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