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Negotiating Power and Identity in Female Leadership within Patriarchal Organizational Cultures

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Abstract: This study aims to examine how women leaders negotiate power and build professional identities in patriarchal organizational cultures. In particular, this study highlights the interaction between gender expectations, leadership practices, and organizational structures that often marginalize women's authority in managerial contexts. This study uses an interpretive qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews with 12 women leaders at various managerial levels in male-dominated organizations in Indonesia. Thematic analysis was used to uncover patterns of identity negotiation, resistance strategies, and adaptive leadership practices in patriarchal environments. The results show that women leaders face ongoing challenges such as gender stereotypes, double standards of competence, and symbolic exclusion from decision-making. However, they apply adaptive strategies such as relational leadership, strategic network building, and reconstructing femininity as a source of leadership legitimacy. This research also confirms that identity negotiation is a dynamic process influenced by organizational culture, peer recognition, and self-reflection. Women's leadership in patriarchal organizations is characterized by continuous negotiation between conformity and resistance. Although institutional structures reinforce gender hierarchies, women leaders demonstrate agency through tactical adaptations that allow them to maintain authority while encouraging inclusive leadership practices. This study is limited to the qualitative scope and cultural context of Indonesia, so the findings may not fully represent cross-cultural variations in women's leadership experiences in other patriarchal contexts. This study contributes to the literature on human resource management and gender studies by offering a contextual understanding of women's leadership strategies in patriarchal systems. In addition, this research provides practical insights for organizations to design gender-sensitive HR policies, leadership development programs, and organizational cultures that are more inclusive and empower women.

Keywords: Women's Leadership, Patriarchal Organizational Culture, Human Resource Management, Identity Negotiation, Gender Equality.

INTRODUCTION

Women's leadership has become a central topic in human resource management (HRM) and organizational studies. Despite increasing participation in the workforce and gradual gains

in leadership roles, significant gender disparities persist globally. The Global Gender Gap Report indicates that women remain underrepresented in executive and board-level positions (World Economic Forum, 2022). This underrepresentation is closely linked to patriarchal organizational cultures that continue to privilege masculine norms, even when women possess equivalent qualifications and competencies (Goryunova & Madsen, 2024).

Within patriarchal organizational contexts, leadership is shaped not only by formal structures such as career pathways and governance systems but also by deeply embedded gendered norms and stereotypes (Carbajal, 2018). Patriarchy, as a social system, centers authority around men, positioning women's leadership as atypical or conditional. Consequently, female leaders face the well-documented "double bind" dilemma: they are expected to demonstrate assertiveness and authority while simultaneously conforming to socially prescribed feminine traits such as empathy and warmth (Chikwe et al., 2024). This tension often complicates decision-making processes and intensifies psychosocial pressures within leadership roles (Benschop & van den Brink, 2019).

Gendered organizations theory further explains how leadership norms are institutionally structured around masculine standards embedded in performance evaluations, communication practices, and promotion systems (Sangha-Rico, 2020; Jadick, 2023). As a result, women leaders must continuously negotiate their leadership identities, balancing authenticity with organizational legitimacy. Prior studies document adaptive strategies such as inclusive communication, solidarity-building, and strategic blending of masculine and feminine attributes to maintain authority (Adisa et al., 2019). However, much of the existing literature emphasizes representation gaps or performance outcomes rather than examining how women actively exercise agency within patriarchal constraints (Waldman et al., 2019; Karhu & Ritala, 2018).

Limited research has explored how women leaders enact moral agency in navigating ethical tensions within masculine organizational cultures. Understanding this process is crucial because leadership in such contexts involves not only role negotiation but also ethical positioning amid structural asymmetries. Exploring women's lived experiences can illuminate how identity negotiation, power dynamics, and institutional constraints intersect in everyday decision-making (Dappa et al., 2019; H. K. Smith, 2025).

From a strategic HRM perspective, these dynamics have important implications. Organizations are increasingly expected to foster inclusive cultures and equitable governance systems that enable women leaders to act with integrity without compromising professional legitimacy (Goryunova & Madsen, 2024). Failure to address structural bias risks perpetuating inequality and undermining long-term organizational sustainability.

Therefore, this study investigates how women leaders negotiate power, identity, and ethical decision-making within patriarchal organizations. Using an interpretive qualitative approach, the research examines subjective experiences, adaptive strategies, and institutional factors shaping moral agency. The study contributes theoretically by extending the concept of moral agency into gendered organizational contexts and practically by informing more inclusive HRM policies and leadership development frameworks.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of female leaders navigating patriarchal organizational cultures. An interpretive phenomenological design is particularly appropriate because it enables an in-depth examination of how individuals make sense of complex and sensitive social phenomena through their personal experiences. Phenomenology emphasizes understanding meaning as it is constructed and interpreted by individuals within specific social and organizational contexts (Alase, 2017; J. A. Smith & Fieldsend, 2021).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) specifically focuses on the dynamic interplay between participants' subjective experiences and the researcher's interpretative engagement, commonly referred to as the double hermeneutic process. This approach allows the researcher to capture how female leaders interpret, negotiate, and give meaning to issues of power, identity, and ethical agency within patriarchal organizational environments. By privileging participants' sense-making processes while acknowledging the interpretative role of the researcher, IPA provides a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of leadership experiences that are often marginalized in dominant organizational discourses (Mako Robinson, 2024).

Research Context and Sampling Strategy

The study was conducted in organizational contexts characterized by hierarchical and patriarchal cultural norms, including state-owned enterprises, family-owned corporations, and bureaucratic institutions across Indonesia. These settings were intentionally selected because they represent environments where patriarchal values are deeply embedded in decision-making processes, power distribution, and leadership assessment, thereby providing a relevant backdrop for examining the negotiation of power and identity among female leaders. A total of 12 participants were selected in accordance with the standards of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which emphasizes depth of experiential exploration rather than breadth of sampling. A range of 6–15 participants is considered adequate to achieve data saturation (J. A. Smith & Fieldsend, 2021).

A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit participants who met specific criteria, female leaders holding managerial or executive positions for at least three years, experience in navigating organizational cultures with explicit or implicit patriarchal structures, and direct involvement in decision-making processes with ethical or political implications. Based on these criteria, twelve participants were selected, representing diverse sectors such as finance, education, government, and manufacturing. The chosen sample size aligns with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) guidelines, which emphasize depth over breadth and typically range between six to fifteen participants (C. Robinson & Williams, 2024).

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to balance consistency across respondents with the flexibility for participants to elaborate on their unique experiences. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in a confidential setting to minimize organizational influence and ensure participants' comfort. The interview protocol was structured around four thematic areas, experiences of negotiating power in daily leadership practices, identity construction strategies under patriarchal expectations, ethical dilemmas and the exercise of moral agency in leadership decisions, and adaptive strategies in responding to institutional and cultural constraints. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to protect confidentiality. In addition, supplementary field notes were taken during the sessions to capture contextual nuances and non-verbal cues that enriched the interpretation of the data.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, with thematic development conducted within an idiographic and interpretative framework (J. A. Smith & Fieldsend, 2021; Noon, 2018). The analysis followed the core principles of IPA, which emphasize an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and the researcher's interpretative engagement with those experiences.

The analytic process began with a familiarization stage, in which the researcher repeatedly read the interview transcripts and field notes to gain an immersive understanding of

participants' narratives. This was followed by initial noting and open coding, focusing on participants' language, meaning-making processes, and experiential accounts related to negotiation, identity, and ethics. Rather than treating themes as purely descriptive categories, emergent codes were interpreted idiographically to capture how participants made sense of their experiences within specific organizational and cultural contexts.

Subsequently, related codes were clustered into superordinate and subordinate themes, including conflict of loyalty and integrity, personal values as an ethical compass, lack of institutional ethical support, and adaptive strategies in navigating ethical dilemmas. The interpretative stage involved linking these themes to relevant theoretical constructs, such as patriarchal organizational culture, power negotiation, and moral agency, consistent with IPA's double hermeneutic process, wherein participants make sense of their experiences and the researcher, in turn, interprets that sense-making. To enhance the credibility and rigor of the analysis, emerging themes were continuously checked against the raw data, and reflexive discussions were conducted with two peer researchers to examine alternative interpretations. NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software was used to support data management and organization. The interpretative process remained researcher-driven, in line with IPA methodological principles.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure methodological rigor, this study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation of data sources by combining interviews and field notes, and member checking, in which participants were invited to review and validate summarized interpretations of their responses (Enworo, 2023). Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the organizational contexts and participant demographics, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a transparent audit trail that documented coding decisions, theme development, and analytical memos throughout the research process. Finally, confirmability was strengthened through the practice of reflexivity, with the researcher keeping a reflective journal to monitor and mitigate potential biases that could influence interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the host university. All participants provided informed consent prior to interviews and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Pseudonyms were assigned, and sensitive details were modified to prevent organizational identification. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage of the research without consequences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participant Characteristics

The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of twelve female leaders working within patriarchal organizational cultures yielded four superordinate themes, each encompassing several subordinate themes. These themes represent the participants' lived experiences and capture the dynamic negotiation of power, identity, and ethics within professional contexts characterized by systemic gender asymmetry. The findings are presented to reflect both shared patterns across participants and the idiographic depth central to IPA. To provide contextual background for interpreting these findings, the demographic profile of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Code	Age Range	Sector / Organization Type	Position / Role	Years in Leadership
P1	35–40	State-Owned Enterprise	Middle Manager	7
P2	41–45	Government Institution	Department Head	10
P3	30–35	Private Company (Finance)	Senior Supervisor	5
P4	46–50	Education (University)	Dean / Head of Faculty	12
P5	38–42	Family-Owned Corporation	Director	8
P6	29–34	Manufacturing Industry	HR Manager	6
P7	36–40	Non-Profit Organization	Program Manager	7
P8	42–47	Private Company (IT)	Senior Executive	11
P9	33–37	Education (High School)	Principal	9
P10	39–44	Healthcare Organization	Hospital Administrator	10
P11	31–36	Government Institution	Division Manager	6
P12	45–50	Private Company (Retail)	Regional Manager	13

Conflict of Loyalty and Integrity

Participants frequently articulated a profound tension between institutional demands and their personal moral convictions, a theme that emerged consistently across interviews. This tension was often experienced as a conflict between organizational expectations of loyalty, commonly framed in terms of obedience, conformity, and alignment with hierarchical authority—and participants’ deeply held commitments to fairness, justice, and professional integrity. For many participants, loyalty was not understood as ethical alignment, but rather as silent compliance within patriarchal organizational structures. One participant working in a state-owned enterprise described this experience as an internal struggle between conscience and organizational expectations:

“I was expected to remain silent about unfair promotions. Everyone knew it was wrong, but speaking up was seen as being disloyal. My conscience wouldn’t allow me to just accept it” (P1).

Similarly, another participant reflected on how questioning unethical practices was immediately interpreted as insubordination rather than professional responsibility:

“In this organization, loyalty means not asking questions. The moment you challenge something, you are labeled as problematic” (P8).

These accounts illustrate the double bind frequently faced by female leaders: compliance is rewarded as loyalty, while ethical resistance carries the risk of professional marginalization. Participants emphasized that these dilemmas were not abstract moral reflections but were accompanied by tangible consequences, including exclusion from decision-making processes, stalled career progression, and reputational vulnerability within organizational networks. One participant described the emotional and psychological cost of such experiences:

“After I spoke up once, I noticed I was no longer invited to important meetings. It wasn’t said directly, but the message was clear” (P4).

The tension between loyalty and integrity also manifested as an ongoing psychological burden, where participants continuously negotiated their leadership roles against their moral identities. Several participants described adopting strategies of what they termed “silent

resistance,” such as using neutral language, delaying decisions, or selectively complying with directives to minimize ethical compromise. As one participant explained:

“I learned to resist quietly. You don’t openly fight, but you also don’t fully cooperate. It’s a way of surviving without losing yourself” (P6).

Others, however, recounted moments of overt confrontation, despite recognizing the risks involved:

“There were times when I knew speaking up would cost me something, but staying silent felt worse. At that point, integrity mattered more than position” (P12).

From an interpretative phenomenological perspective, these narratives reveal that ethical decision-making within patriarchal organizational contexts involves more than rule compliance. Instead, it reflects a complex process of meaning-making in which participants actively negotiate power asymmetries, moral agency, and identity preservation. Maintaining professional integrity, as experienced by these female leaders, required sustained moral courage and a willingness to endure institutional repercussions in order to remain aligned with their personal and ethical convictions.

Personal Values as Ethical Compass

Despite the absence of institutional ethical safeguards, participants consistently relied on deeply internalized personal values as their primary compass when navigating ethical dilemmas. In contexts where formal mechanisms such as whistleblowing systems, ethical oversight committees, or protective organizational policies were absent or ineffective, participants described turning inward to moral frameworks shaped by upbringing, faith traditions, and long-standing personal integrity. These values were not experienced as abstract ideals, but as lived reference points that actively guided decision-making under conditions of moral uncertainty. One participant articulated this reliance on personal values as a non-negotiable aspect of her leadership identity:

“Even when the system is corrupt, I cannot betray myself. My values are not something I can compromise, no matter the situation” (P5).

For many participants, ethical decision-making was framed as an internal negotiation—an ongoing dialogue between professional expectations and personal conscience. Maintaining alignment between who they were and how they acted emerged as a central concern, even when such alignment entailed personal and professional costs. As another participant explained:

“Sometimes you already know the decision will affect your career, but you still ask yourself, ‘Can I live with this choice?’ That question matters more than promotion” (P9).

This reliance on moral identity highlights how ethical agency extended beyond compliance with formal codes of conduct. Participants perceived organizational rules as insufficient, vague, or selectively enforced, particularly in patriarchal environments where power hierarchies often shielded unethical practices. In contrast, personal values offered a stable and coherent framework that anchored leadership practices amid ambiguity. One participant reflected on this contrast:

“Policies can change depending on who is in power, but your values stay with you. When there is no protection from the organization, that’s all you really have” (P2).

In line with Sekerka & Stimel (2024) conception of moral agency, the women in this study enacted ethics as a deeply personal and reflexive practice. Rather than relying on institutional authority, they positioned themselves as the final guardians of integrity when organizational systems failed to provide ethical direction or protection. Several participants also emphasized that their ethical resilience was rooted in formative life experiences, including family upbringing and spiritual beliefs, long before entering leadership roles:

“I was taught from a young age that integrity is who you are when no one is watching. That lesson guides me more than any organizational policy ever could” (P7).

From an interpretative phenomenological perspective, these accounts suggest that ethical leadership in patriarchal organizational contexts is sustained through what may be understood as an “internal moral infrastructure.” Grounded in identity, faith, and conscience, this internal infrastructure enabled participants to resist systemic pressures while preserving a coherent sense of self, even in environments where external ethical support was limited or absent.

Lack of Institutional Ethical Support

Participants consistently described the absence of robust institutional ethical infrastructures within their organizations. Formal mechanisms such as whistleblowing systems, independent ethics committees, or protective policies for dissenting voices were either non-existent or perceived as ineffective. Rather than fostering transparency and accountability, organizational cultures were widely experienced as reinforcing compliance with hierarchical authority, thereby discouraging ethical questioning and silencing dissent. One participant working in a family-owned corporation described this condition succinctly:

“There is no space to voice ethical concerns here. Silence is survival” (P5).

Similarly, another participant reflected on how the lack of institutional support transformed ethical concerns into personal risks:

“You are expected to follow instructions without asking questions. If you raise ethical issues, it’s seen as challenging authority, not as doing your job responsibly” (P12).

These accounts illustrate how organizational structures actively cultivate cultures of silence, in which speaking up is interpreted not as principled leadership but as a threat to organizational harmony and personal security. Participants emphasized that such environments placed a disproportionate burden on individual leaders, particularly women, who often found themselves isolated when attempting to confront unethical practices. One participant described the sense of isolation that accompanied ethical resistance:

“When I tried to raise concerns, I realized I was standing alone. There was no system to support me, and that made everything feel much heavier” (P2).

In patriarchal organizational contexts, loyalty to authority figures was frequently prioritized over ethical accountability. Participants noted that dissent was often reframed as insubordination, reinforcing gendered power asymmetries in which women leaders were more easily marginalized or labeled as “difficult” when they resisted unethical directives. This finding aligns with prior research showing that formal ethical codes are often insufficient when organizational cultures discourage their application (Babri et al., 2021). As one participant explained:

“If a male leader questions a decision, it’s called being assertive. When I do it, it’s seen as being problematic” (P8).

From an interpretative phenomenological perspective, these narratives indicate that ethical decision-making occurred within organizational “grey zones,” where formal ethical guidelines provided limited practical support and individuals were compelled to navigate ambiguous power relations (Bowen & Watson, 2024; Roszkowska & Melé, 2021). In response to this lack of institutional support, participants described developing adaptive coping strategies, such as reframing ethical concerns in technical language, maintaining private documentation of misconduct, or strategically withdrawing from ethically compromising situations. One participant reflected on this adaptive response:

“Sometimes the only way to protect yourself is to speak in technical terms, not moral ones. It’s a way to raise concerns without putting a target on your back” (P6).

While these strategies demonstrated moral agency and resilience, they also revealed the heavy psychological and ethical burden borne by individuals when institutions fail to provide adequate ethical infrastructures. As noted by Gantt-Shafer (2025), moral agency in such contexts involves acting ethically despite institutional constraints rather than merely adhering to formal rules.

Adaptive Strategies in Navigating Ethical Dilemmas

Rather than direct confrontation, most participants reported developing adaptive strategies to maintain their ethical integrity while mitigating the risks of institutional backlash. These strategies included careful wording in official reports, selective disengagement from ethically compromising projects, and coalition-building with trusted allies. One senior executive described keeping a “private log of hidden truths” as a personal safeguard—a way of documenting unethical practices for her own conscience, even if such information never entered official channels. Others admitted to withdrawing from high-risk assignments that threatened to compromise their ethical boundaries, despite the potential costs in terms of career advancement, financial stability, or strained professional relationships.

These accounts reveal what can be described as a tactical form of moral agency. Instead of positioning themselves in direct opposition to patriarchal organizational structures—an act often met with hostility or professional exclusion, female leaders employed subtle, negotiated strategies that enabled them to preserve personal dignity while continuing to function within the system. Such practices align with what Bracken et al. (2023) conceptualize as adaptive moral agency, wherein professionals engage in ethically motivated actions that are context-sensitive and calibrated to minimize personal harm. The strategic deployment of silence, ambiguity, or selective disengagement illustrates how female leaders navigate “grey zones” (Ni Aolain, 2020), balancing survival within the organization against fidelity to their own moral standards.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings resonate with the broader literature on resistance within patriarchal institutions. Unlike overt rebellion, which is often unsustainable in highly hierarchical and gendered environments, adaptive strategies reflect what Liu (2017) terms “everyday forms of resistance”, incremental acts of subversion that safeguard individual integrity without provoking overt retaliation. For example, coalition-building with allies not only provided emotional support but also created informal networks of solidarity that buffered against isolation. Similarly, the deliberate use of neutral or technical language in reporting allowed participants to raise concerns without being branded as insubordinate or “too emotional,” labels that patriarchal organizations often weaponize against women leaders.

The discussion also highlights the paradoxical nature of such strategies. On one hand, adaptive tactics demonstrate resilience, creativity, and pragmatic negotiation skills, showing how female leaders sustain agency in contexts designed to constrain it. On the other hand, reliance on these individualized strategies underscores systemic failures in institutional accountability. By forcing leaders to shoulder the burden of navigating ethical dilemmas alone, organizations effectively normalize silence and ambiguity as coping mechanisms, thereby perpetuating patriarchal cultures of compliance. In this sense, adaptive strategies are both a form of survival and a symptom of deeper structural inequities.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that female leaders' reliance on adaptive moral agency reflects both strength and vulnerability (V. J. Robinson, 2025). It is a strength in that it allows them to operate ethically under oppressive conditions, preserving professional identity and personal dignity. Yet it also represents vulnerability, because such strategies often come at significant personal cost and fail to challenge the root causes of systemic inequality. For long-term transformation, adaptive strategies must be complemented by institutional reforms that provide structural protections, such as whistleblower mechanisms, independent ethics committees, and inclusive leadership policies, that reduce the need for women leaders to rely solely on tactical negotiation to safeguard their moral agency.

Theoretical Contribution

This study makes three primary theoretical contributions. First, it expands moral agency theory into gendered organizational contexts by demonstrating how ethical agency is enacted under patriarchal power asymmetries rather than within neutral institutional environments. Second, it conceptualizes adaptive moral agency as a form of tactical negotiation, showing that women leaders do not merely comply with or resist structural constraints, but strategically recalibrate their ethical positioning to preserve integrity and professional legitimacy. Third, the study bridges feminist leadership scholarship and strategic HRM governance literature by situating women's ethical decision-making within broader institutional structures, thereby linking identity negotiation with organizational policy and power dynamics. Through this integrative framing, the study advances a context-sensitive understanding of moral agency in contemporary leadership research.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that female leaders enact moral agency in patriarchal organizations through continuous negotiation between institutional constraints, personal values, and professional survival. Ethical decision-making is shaped by gendered power structures, yet participants demonstrated adaptive strategies that preserve integrity without direct confrontation.

The study contributes to leadership and HRM scholarship by conceptualizing adaptive moral agency as a tactical, context-bound practice rather than a binary of compliance or resistance. Practically, the findings highlight the need for HRM policies that reduce structural bias and strengthen institutional support for ethical leadership. Given its qualitative and context-specific scope, the findings are not statistically generalizable. Future research should explore comparative settings and examine how institutional reforms shape moral agency across cultural contexts.

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