

Building Organizational Climate through a Woman Principal's Transformational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Women increasingly lead schools, yet how they build a positive organizational climate through transformational practice remains underexamined, particularly in faith-based settings. This study addresses that gap by examining the leadership of a woman principal at SMA Assa'adah Bungah, a senior high school within the *Pondok Pesantren* Qomaruddin complex in Gresik, Indonesia. A qualitative case study design guided the inquiry. Data came from in-depth interviews with seven key informants, three months of participant observation, and documentary study, supported by a teacher questionnaire. Thematic analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman and yielded three findings. The principal earned her authority through modeling, since she met the standards she set before asking others to meet them. Teachers then experimented and grew because the school treated failure as material for shared learning rather than grounds for sanction. A collaborative climate followed, sustained by two-way communication and by recognition that valued trust over material reward. Together these findings point to a model of value-based transformational leadership, one in which the values of the *pesantren* give the four leadership dimensions their legitimacy and meaning. The study implies that leadership development for women principals in religious schools should begin with modeling and value grounding rather than technique alone.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received : 21 June 2025
Revised : 17 August 2025
Accepted : 13 December 2025

KEYWORDS

*Transformational Leadership,
Women's Leadership, Organizational
Climate, Pesantren*

How to Cite:

Mansyuri, A., Huda, M. N., Nisa' Irsyadiyah, A., & Rahma Ayu, Q. (2025). Building Organizational Climate through a Woman Principal's Transformational Leadership. *JUMPA: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan*, 6(2), 498–508.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of a school rests to a large degree on the person who leads it, and among leadership models the transformational approach has drawn the most sustained attention in education research. The reason is straightforward: transformational leaders influence outcomes not by issuing directives but by shaping the conditions under which teachers work and grow. Evidence for this pathway has accumulated across very different national settings, with studies confirming that principals who lead transformationally raise teacher performance largely through the organizational climate they cultivate rather than through positional authority (An et al., 2023). A systematic review of primary schools reached the same conclusion, identifying stronger staff motivation and a more positive school culture as the leading effects of transformational school leadership (Vermeulen et al., 2020). Taken together, this body of work establishes climate as the mechanism through which leadership reaches the classroom, which is precisely why the way a principal builds that climate deserves



closer study.

A closer reading of recent research reveals two themes that frame the present study. The first concerns the mediating role of climate: across Dutch, Korean, and Ecuadorian samples, transformational leadership improves teacher innovation, effectiveness, and professional attitudes chiefly by way of the school climate it produces, with inspirational motivation and individualized consideration emerging as the strongest predictors of a favorable environment (Vermeulen et al., 2020; An et al., 2023; Ayala Llumipanta et al., 2025). The second theme concerns gender, where a growing literature reports that women principals tend toward collaborative, empathetic, and participative practices that foster inclusive and supportive schools (Maharromiyati et al., 2024; Carrasco et al., 2023). A national study in Chile found that gender was the strongest predictor of leadership practice, with female principals evaluated more favorably by teachers on most measured dimensions (Weinstein et al., 2021). These two lines of inquiry, climate and gender, have developed largely in parallel.

The point at which these themes should meet is where the literature thins out, and the imbalance is visible in the evidence itself. Most studies linking transformational leadership to school climate rely on quantitative survey designs that establish correlation without showing how a principal actually builds the climate day to day (Velarde et al., 2020; Rahmia et al., 2020). Studies of women's leadership, for their part, often stop at documenting a female advantage or the barriers women face, without connecting that leadership to the specific mechanisms of climate formation (Bush, 2021). Research on Indonesian *pesantren* adds a further dimension, showing that religious values such as *uswatun hasanah* and prophetic integrity shape leadership practice, yet this work rarely foregrounds gender and seldom traces the sequence by which values translate into a working climate (Ratnawati et al., 2025; Siswahyuningsih et al., 2025). What remains unexamined is the intersection of all three: how a woman principal, drawing on the values of a *pesantren*, builds organizational climate through transformational practice.

This study addresses that gap and locates its novelty in the convergence of context, focus, and method. Rather than treating transformational leadership as a set of four abstract dimensions applied uniformly, it examines how those dimensions acquire their legitimacy and meaning from the religious and communal values of an *pesantren*, and how a female principal enacts them in practice. The contribution is therefore not a restatement of Bass's framework but a grounded account of value-based transformational leadership as it operates in a setting where the secular assumptions of the original theory do not fully hold. Where prior work on *pesantren* leadership has centered the *kiai* or male *madrasah* heads (Subandi et al., 2021; Hamdanah et al., 2025), this study foregrounds a woman leader, extending the conversation on women's educational leadership into a context it has rarely reached. The qualitative case design allows the study to show mechanism rather than merely confirm association.

The specific aim of this research is to explain how the transformational leadership of a woman principal builds a positive organizational climate at SMA Assa'adah Bungah, a school within the Pondok Pesantren Qomaruddin complex. The study does not seek to measure the strength of a correlation but to understand the process: what the principal does, how teachers and staff interpret those actions, and how a supportive climate takes shape as a result. Attention centers on the four dimensions of transformational leadership as they appear in daily practice, on the climate that emerges from them, and on the values that give that practice its particular character. This focus responds directly to calls in recent literature for research that clarifies the pathways through which leadership shapes climate rather than simply asserting that it does (Siswahyuningsih et al., 2025). By doing so, the study speaks to

both the scholarly conversation on educational leadership and the practical concerns of school development.

The relevance of this inquiry extends beyond a single school. As women take on more leadership positions in education while remaining underrepresented relative to their share of the teaching workforce, understanding how they lead effectively becomes a matter of both equity and institutional quality (Bush, 2021). A grounded model of how one woman principal builds climate through value-anchored practice offers something that survey correlations cannot, namely a transferable account of the moves that make transformational leadership work in a values-rich setting. The sections that follow set out the qualitative case study design used to develop this account, before presenting the findings organized around the themes that emerged from the field and discussing their implications for the theory and practice of educational leadership.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine, in depth, the model of women's transformational leadership in building the organizational climate at SMA Assa'adah Bungah (Viera, 2023). A qualitative approach suited the aim of understanding a social phenomenon within its natural setting through holistic interpretation, while the case study design allowed the researchers to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, where the boundary between the phenomenon and its context is not clearly defined (Hung et al., 2022). The research site was determined purposively, on the consideration that the school is led by a female principal who has applied the principles of transformational leadership and has succeeded in building a positive organizational climate. Informants were selected using inclusion criteria: direct involvement in the school's leadership and decision-making, at least two years of interaction with the principal's leadership, and willingness to take part in the study (Kuhn, 2024).

Data were collected through methodological triangulation combining in-depth interviews, participant observation, document analysis, and a supporting questionnaire (Liu et al., 2021). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven key informants, whose roles are set out in Table 1. Participant observation was carried out over three months to directly observe leadership practices and the dynamics of the organizational climate, and the documentary study covered academic documents, annual reports, and archives of school activities. In addition, a questionnaire was administered to teachers to strengthen the account of the organizational climate and job satisfaction. This questionnaire complemented the interview, observation, and documentation data rather than serving as an instrument of statistical testing, so the analysis remained within a qualitative frame throughout.

Table 1. Key informants and the basis for their selection

Code	Informant	Role in the study
W1	Principal	Central actor whose leadership practices are the focus of the study
W2	Teacher	Direct recipient of leadership practices in daily instruction
W3	Administrative staff	Observer of the principal's day-to-day management and interpersonal conduct
W4	School committee member	Perspective on school governance and community relations
W5	Foundation chair	Institutional view of leadership within the <i>pesantren</i> structure
W6	Student	Perspective on the climate as experienced by learners
W7	Parent	External view of the school's culture and partnership with families

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, comprising three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Bingham, 2023). Data reduction organized and focused the raw material from interviews, observation, and

documentation around the study's guiding questions; data display arranged the reduced material so that patterns across sources could be compared; and conclusion drawing tested those patterns against the accumulated evidence. The data trustworthiness was secured through source and method triangulation together with peer examination, and the analysis proceeded iteratively during and after data collection to ensure the depth and accuracy of the findings (Van Cleave et al., 2025).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the field findings arranged into three themes. The evidence draws on interviews with seven key informants (the principal, W1; a teacher, W2; an administrative staff member, W3; a school committee member, W4; the foundation chair, W5; a student, W6; and a parent, W7), on three months of participant observation, and on document analysis. The themes are organized around the patterns that surfaced in the field rather than around theoretical categories, so that the meanings the school's own actors attached to these practices come through before they are interpreted against the literature in the Discussion.

Modeling as the source of leadership legitimacy

"Ms. Mushlihah never asks for anything she cannot do herself. When she set the rule about arriving on time, she was the one who kept it most consistently." (W2)

This teacher's remark captures a pattern that recurred throughout the fieldwork. The principal's authority at SMA Assa'adah Bungah rested less on her position than on the example she set before asking anything of others. Modeling here was not simply an admirable personal trait. It operated as the mechanism through which rules acquired their hold, the way expectations became binding without constant supervision. The distinction matters because compliance produced by monitoring tends to lapse the moment the monitoring stops, whereas conduct rooted in an acknowledged example holds because its legitimacy is shared rather than imposed. What the field data show is a leader who earned the right to set standards by meeting them first.

Observation over three months recorded the principal arriving each morning before the daily habituation activities began, ahead of most teachers, and taking full part in the morning routines alongside students. The same consistency showed in smaller matters that staff actually noticed day to day, such as completing her own administrative obligations before requiring the same of others. In several observed instances, when she asked teachers to finish their lesson plans on time, she had already completed her own share of the work. The order of these actions, example preceding demand, repeated often enough that it is difficult to read as coincidence and more accurately understood as a deliberate way of working. Authority, in this setting, accrued to the person who was seen to do first what she later asked of others.

What gave this modeling its depth was how closely it aligned with the religious values that animate a *pesantren* environment. As part of Pondok Pesantren Qomaruddin, the school treats moral and spiritual example as something expected to reside in the figure of a leader, not as an add-on to managerial competence. The principal was present not only as an administrator but as a reference point for conduct, someone whose alignment between word and action was observed and weighed daily by the school community. She led, in other words, as much through character as through office, and the two were not kept in separate compartments.

The legitimacy built this way carried direct consequences for the school's daily life. When the person who sets a rule is also the one who keeps it most faithfully, enforcement no longer depends on tiring oversight or repeated sanction. Rules began to be followed not because anyone was watching but because a visible example made following them reasonable.

This finding lays the groundwork for the two themes that follow, since it was the trust generated by consistent modeling that allowed teachers to feel safe enough to try new things, as Theme 2 shows, and willing to invest themselves in a collaborative working climate, as Theme 3 describes.

A safe space to experiment and grow

Trust of the kind Theme 1 describes has to be spent on something, and at SMA Assa'adah Bungah it was spent on giving teachers room to take risks in their own practice. The clearest expression of this was how the school handled failure. One teacher put the condition plainly:

"We are encouraged to try new methods in teaching. If it fails, there is no punishment; instead, we discuss it together to improve." (W2)

The statement reveals the mechanism behind sustained innovation. When a method fell short, it became material for collective learning rather than grounds for reprimand. This reframing is what separates a genuine culture of experimentation from a mere exhortation to be creative. Encouragement to try new things means little if the cost of failing is high, so the assurance that a failed attempt would be examined together, not penalized, is precisely what made the encouragement credible. Teachers could afford to experiment because the downside had been removed from the equation.

The same regard for individual growth showed in how the principal approached supervision. Rather than treating classroom observation as an instrument of judgment, she conducted academic supervision through coaching and mentoring that took each teacher's circumstances into account. A weekly forum the school called "Mentoring Friday" gave this a regular place in the calendar, a standing occasion for reflection and for reinforcing teachers' motivation. An administrative staff member described how far the principal's attention reached:

"The principal knows every teacher personally, understands their family situation, and always pays attention when someone is facing difficulty." (W3)

Attention that extended to a teacher's personal situation, and not only to professional performance, became the basis for the loyalty and attachment teachers felt toward the school. The principal did not treat her staff as an interchangeable set of work units. She recognized that each person arrived with a different set of conditions and needs, and she supervised accordingly. In the field, this was what made teachers feel seen as whole individuals, and it was also what turned developmental supervision into something teachers welcomed rather than dreaded. Beyond these individual accounts, the school's documentation over the past two years shows a consistent pattern of investment in teacher growth, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Indicators of professional development at SMA Assa'adah Bungah (2022–2024)

Indicator	Results
Teachers who developed innovative learning media	75%
Teachers completing at least one development program per year	80%
Teachers showing improved pedagogical competence after mentoring	90%
Rise in teacher performance standards over three years	25%
Development budget allocated to training and workshops	15%

Read together, these figures describe a school that treated professional development as an ongoing commitment rather than an occasional event. The high proportion of teachers producing new learning media and completing development programs indicates broad participation rather than the involvement of a motivated few, and the improvement in pedagogical competence following mentoring suggests that the school's investment translated into observable change in practice. Taken alongside the tolerance for productive failure and the personal quality of supervision, this pattern explains why professional growth

at the school felt less like a requirement imposed from above and more like a shared undertaking, a point that connects directly to the collaborative climate examined next.

A collaborative climate built through communication and recognition

If the first two themes concern how the principal related to teachers individually, the third concerns the collective atmosphere those relationships produced. The field evidence points to a climate held together by two things above all, steady two-way communication and a sense that good work would be recognized fairly. Neither was left to chance. Both were built through routines and decisions the principal returned to consistently, and both showed up in how teachers spoke about their place in the school.

Communication ran in more than one direction. Meeting minutes record that strategic decisions consistently involved representatives of teachers and staff rather than being handed down, and an integrated digital communication system allowed information to move quickly and openly across the school. The morning forums played a part here too. Briefings, joint assemblies, and congregational duha prayer were not treated as formalities but as occasions to convey direction and reinforce a shared sense of purpose, often through stories of national and local figures in education that the principal folded into these gatherings. Communication, in this setting, did more than move information from one place to another. It built shared meaning, which is why teachers described the school's direction as something they felt part of rather than something announced to them.

Recognition worked along similar lines, weighted toward fairness and genuine acknowledgment rather than material reward alone. The forms it took varied, from verbal recognition in meetings and a monthly appreciation for high-performing teachers and staff to opportunities for professional development, and teachers noticed the difference between being paid and being trusted. One teacher who had been recognized for strong work explained which form carried more weight:

"The recognition given is not always material; the acknowledgment and the trust to lead a program are actually more meaningful." (W2)

Being entrusted with a program, rather than simply being praised or compensated, was read by teachers as the more serious form of recognition, since it signaled confidence in their judgment. This helps explain the depth of commitment the study found across the school. Survey data collected as supporting evidence indicate that 92% of teachers felt a strong emotional bond with the school and its educational vision, and observation of the school environment recorded an atmosphere marked by intense communication, close collaboration, and a strong appetite for innovation among teachers and staff. Commitment on this scale is not manufactured by directive. It grows where people are consulted on decisions that affect them and trusted with responsibility that matters, which is exactly the combination these findings describe. The cumulative effect of this climate is most visible in the school's performance indicators over recent years, presented in Figure 1.

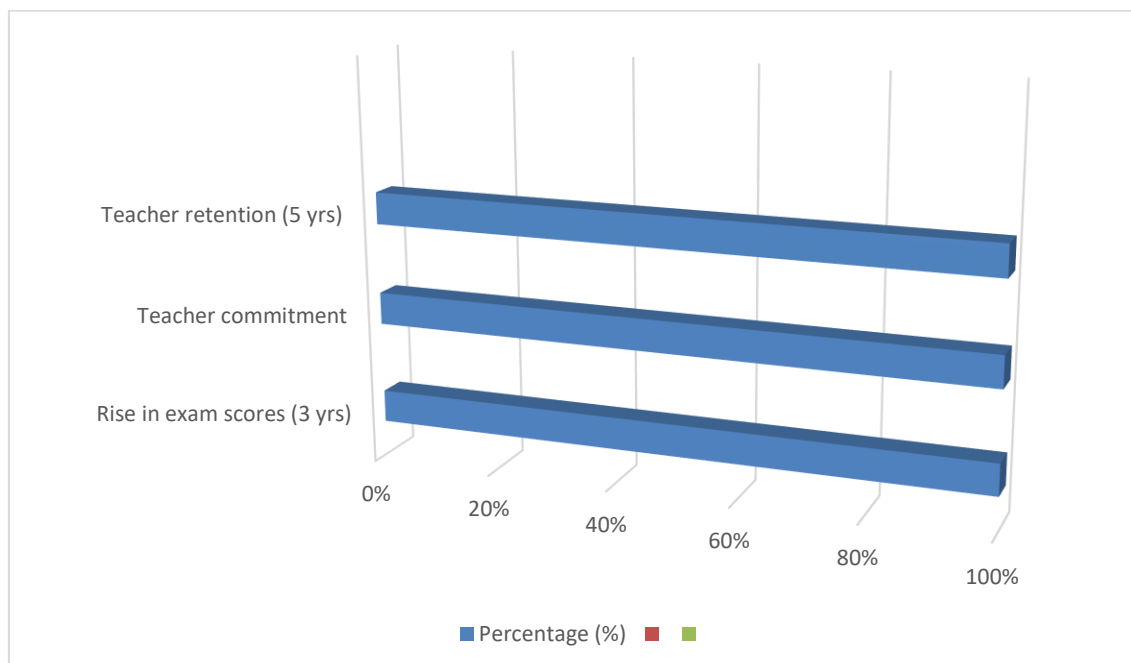


Figure 1. Organizational performance indicators at SMA Assa'adah Bungah

Beyond these percentage indicators, the school's record in competitions reinforces the same trend, with students earning 45 medals across various regional and national contests over the period. Read together with the two themes preceding it, this pattern suggests that the collaborative climate was not a byproduct of good results but part of what produced them, a relationship the Discussion takes up in detail.

Discussion

The four dimensions of transformational leadership that Bass formalized are all present in the leadership practiced at SMA Assa'adah Bungah, but the way they appear complicates the standard account rather than simply confirming it (Yusuf et al., 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2023). In Bass and Riggio's framework, idealized influence rests on a leader's competence and charisma (Afshari, 2021). What the field data show is that the principal's influence grew from something narrower and more demanding: a visible correspondence between the rules she set and the conduct she kept. This aligns with (Ayça, 2023; Barth & Tsemach, 2021; Obi et al., 2021) argument that authentic leadership builds trust through consistency, yet it extends their point, because the consistency observed here was not only professional but moral, anchored in the religious expectations of a *pesantren*. The example that legitimized her authority was read by the school community as a matter of character before competence, which is a reading the original theory does not anticipate.

The same pattern reshapes how the remaining dimensions operated. Inspirational motivation, in (Obi et al., 2021) meta-analytic account, works by articulating a shared vision. At this school the vision was carried less through statements of goals than through routines already saturated with meaning, such as briefings, joint assemblies, and congregational prayer, so that direction and devotion were communicated in the same breath. Intellectual stimulation, which Bass and Riggio tie to encouraging critical thinking, depended in practice on a prior condition the theory tends to assume rather than examine, namely a credible guarantee that failure would not be punished (Deroo & Mohamud, 2022). Teachers experimented because the school had removed the cost of experimenting, converting mistakes into shared material for improvement. Individualized consideration, finally, extended past the professional attention Eagly and Carli associate with women's leadership into a knowledge of teachers' personal and family circumstances that generated unusually

strong loyalty (Tang et al., 2024).

Read against Litwin and Stringer's dimensions of organizational climate, the findings show how leadership of this kind produced a distinctive working environment. Responsibility, structure, standards, reward, support, and commitment were all present, but they were not engineered as separate levers. They followed from the relational groundwork the leadership laid (Kim, 2022; Quinn & Cola, 2020). The high commitment the study recorded, with a large majority of teachers reporting a strong emotional bond to the school, is better understood as a consequence of being consulted and trusted than as the product of any single climate intervention. This supports Hoy and Miskel's claim that a positive climate correlates with teacher performance and satisfaction, while locating the mechanism upstream of the climate itself, in the way authority was earned and trust was spent.

The gendered quality of this leadership deserves its own consideration, though it is not the whole story. Beaton et al. (2022) found that women leaders tend toward more democratic and transformational styles, and the collaborative, personally attentive practices documented here are consistent with that finding. (Obi et al., 2021) notion of ethical accountability, which fuses formal responsibility with moral commitment, describes the principal's approach well. Yet framing the case solely as an instance of women's leadership would miss what makes it distinctive. The empathy and relational attention often attributed to women leaders were, in this setting, inseparable from a religious understanding of what a leader owes those she leads. Gender shaped the style; the *pesantren*'s values gave that style its particular authority and content.

This is where the study makes its most specific contribution, and it is best captured as a synthesis of the three findings into a single model, presented in Figure 2. The case suggests a form of value-based transformational leadership in which religious and communal values are not a backdrop to the four dimensions but their foundation and their source of legitimacy (Umar et al., 2025). In this model, values anchored in the *pesantren* support a sequence that the data show unfolding in order: modeling earns legitimacy, legitimacy makes a safe space for experimentation possible, that safety enables a collaborative climate, and the climate in turn yields measurable gains in achievement, commitment, and retention. The sequence matters, because it explains why the same four dimensions can be named in many schools yet produce a strong climate in only some. Where the foundational values and the initial modeling are absent, the later stages have nothing to rest on.

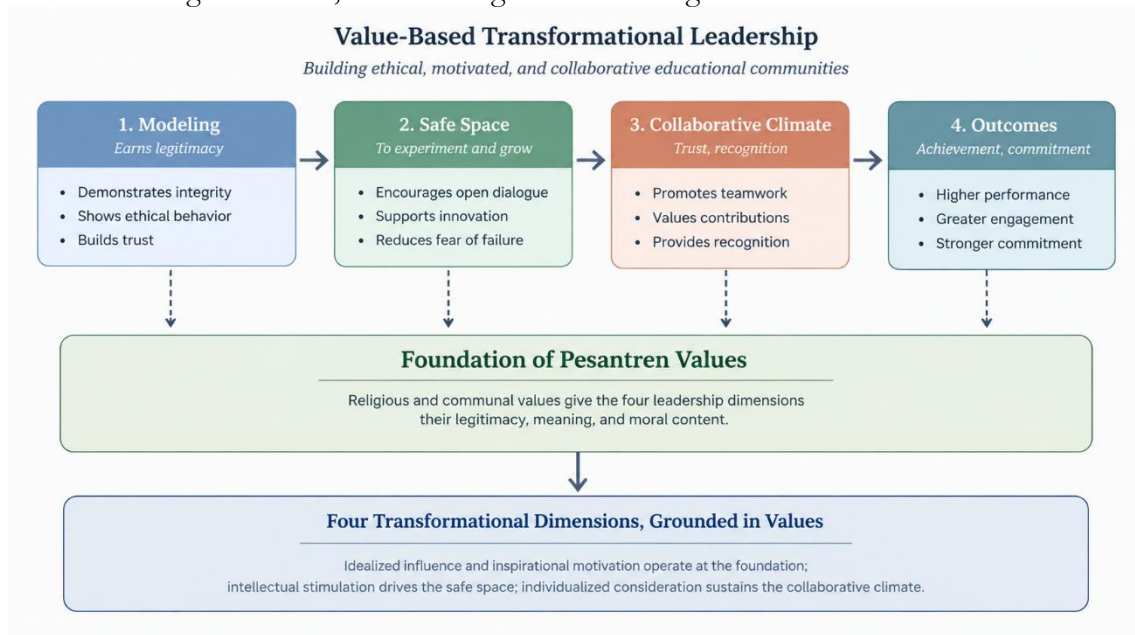


Figure 2. Proposed model of value-based transformational leadership at SMA Assa'adah Bungah

Situating the model within the wider field clarifies both its reach and its limits. It responds to Hallinger's call to bring context out of the shadows in leadership research, by showing that the effectiveness of transformational leadership is not context-free but conditioned by the values a community already holds. For educational leadership beyond this single site, the model offers a testable proposition rather than a universal prescription: transformational dimensions are most likely to build a durable climate when they are grounded in values the school community recognizes as its own, and when a leader establishes legitimacy through modeling before asking others to change. As a single case study, the model's transferability requires examination in other settings, including secular schools where the foundational values would differ in kind. That test is itself the contribution, since it reframes a familiar theory as one whose power depends on the ground it is planted in.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to understand how the transformational leadership of a woman principal builds a positive organizational climate at SMA Assa'adah Bungah, and the account it offers carries limits that should temper how far the findings travel. As a single-site case study, its conclusions describe one school within one *pesantren* and cannot be generalized to secular institutions or to settings where religious values play no organizing role. The reliance on interviews, observation, and a supporting questionnaire also means the findings rest partly on self-reported perception, which observation over three months can corroborate but not fully verify, and the study captures a single period rather than tracing how the climate was built over time. Future research could test the proposed model of value-based transformational leadership across multiple *pesantren*, compare women and men leaders within the same value context, and follow schools longitudinally to observe how legitimacy, safety, and climate develop in sequence. Comparative work in secular schools would further clarify which elements of the model depend on religious grounding and which hold more broadly.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors wish to thank the principal, vice principals, teachers, administrative staff, school committee members, and the foundation board of SMA Assa'adah Bungah within the Pondok Pesantren Qomaruddin complex in Gresik for their willingness to take part in this study and for the access they granted throughout data collection. The authors are also grateful to the students and parents who shared their perspectives as informants. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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