

Negotiating Legitimacy, Enacting Care: A Phenomenological Study of Women's Leadership in Start-ups in Makassar, Indonesia

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Abstract

While start-ups are often celebrated as agile and egalitarian spaces that disrupt traditional hierarchies, women leaders within them continue to navigate gendered expectations, institutional ambiguities, and cultural constraints—particularly in emerging entrepreneurial ecosystems of the Global South. Drawing on in-depth phenomenological interviews with 10–12 women leading start-up teams across technology, creative, and service sectors in Makassar, Indonesia, this study explores how these leaders construct, enact, and sustain leadership amidst intersecting global norms and local socio-cultural logics. Findings reveal that participants engage in continuous relational labor to assert legitimacy, craft hybrid leadership models that blend strategic agency with communal care, and reinterpret domestic roles as both resources and constraints. Rather than conforming to dominant masculine entrepreneurial archetypes, they mobilize narrative, empathy, and ethical stewardship to build team cohesion and organizational identity. This research contributes to transnational feminist scholarship by centering the lived experience of women in Southeast Asian start-ups, challenging universalist assumptions in entrepreneurship theory, and highlighting the need for culturally grounded, gender-responsive support ecosystems.

Keywords: Women's Leadership, Start-Ups, Phenomenology, Gender, Entrepreneurship.

1. Introduction

In recent years, start-ups have been celebrated for their agility, flat structures, and capacity to reconfigure conventional management forms—conditions that can create novel leadership pathways for women. Yet the very features that make start-ups fertile for innovation also produce organizational ambiguities about roles, authority, and career trajectories, making the experience of leading in such contexts distinct from leadership in established firms. Empirical syntheses of the start-up literature highlight how these firms occupy unique positions in ecosystems that privilege rapid learning, boundary-spanning collaboration, and uneven institutional supports—conditions that shape how leaders enact and are recognized for leadership in practice (Wagner, 2021).

Situated in Makassar, an important urban and digital hub in Eastern Indonesia, the present study attends to how local dynamics coalesce with global start-up norms to shape



women's leadership experiences. While empirical work in other national contexts reveals recruitment and perception biases that disadvantage female-led ventures, those dynamics can be refracted through region-specific cultural, social, and economic patterns (for example, candidate responses to perceived leader competence or warmth). Such recruitment- and perception-related barriers have tangible implications for team composition, legitimacy, and the resource flows available to female leaders in nascent ventures (Tonoyan et al., 2024).

Beyond recruitment and external perceptions, women leading teams in start-ups often encounter structural and institutional constraints when trying to secure the resources and partnerships vital for growth. Research on accelerator and funding ecosystems shows that participation in support programs is a heterogeneous experience: for some ventures, these channels open status-enhancing opportunities, while for others, they can be ineffective or even limiting. This heterogeneity signals that women leaders must navigate not only gendered expectations but also unequal access to contingent organizational supports that affect their capacity to mobilize teams and scale operations (Hallen et al., 2023).

Leadership within start-ups also interacts with leaders' prior professional trajectories and social capital. Evidence indicates that founders' or managers' previous corporate experience can mediate access to incumbents' resources and relational capital, influencing how quickly and effectively a leader can bring partners or investors on board. For women assuming team-lead roles, such prior career pathways—and the networks they afford or lack—may critically shape everyday leadership practices, authority claims, and opportunities to shape organizational routines and team identity (Balachandran, 2024).

Methodologically, a phenomenological approach prioritizes the textured, first-person meanings that women attach to leading in start-ups: how they interpret moments of influence and marginalization, how they negotiate relational labor within teams, and how they make sense of agency under resource constraints. By centering lived experience, phenomenology allows the study to surface emotion, embodiment, and reflexivity as integral components of leadership—not as epiphenomena, but as constitutive of how leadership is enacted, sustained, and challenged in the daily life of a Makassar start-up.

This study, therefore, seeks to illuminate how women team leaders in Makassar construct and live their leadership: the dilemmas they confront, the strategies they devise to marshal team commitment, and the meanings they ascribe to success and constraint. Because start-ups vary in how they stimulate diffusion of knowledge and shape industry attention, understanding these lived narratives also contributes to broader discussions about how gender, context, and organizational form together affect which innovations and leadership styles are amplified or muted in nascent entrepreneurial ecosystems (Ding et al., 2023; Polidoro & Jacobs, 2024).

2. Literature Review

The landscape of startup leadership is shaped as much by subtle social meanings as by formal roles, and these meanings often color how women's authority is perceived and enacted. Empirical work shows that gendered expectations and stereotypes influence prospective employees' responses to female-led ventures, affecting recruitment and the startup's perceived viability—an effect that can pressure women leaders to perform in ways that align with or resist these expectations (Tonoyan et al., 2024). Such dynamics foreground the daily, interpersonal labor women perform to secure legitimacy, not merely as a managerial burden but as an embodied, relational practice that shapes team formation and retention.

Beyond individual encounters, broader cultural narratives sustain particular ideals of entrepreneurship that can mask structural inequalities. Analyses using Bourdieusian lenses reveal how discourses of meritocracy and work–life balance become doxic presuppositions, enabling some women to navigate entrepreneurial fields while simultaneously reproducing systemic barriers for others (Meliou & Ozbilgin, 2023). This perspective helps explain why visible successes by a few women may be read as evidence of equal opportunity, even where uneven capital endowments and trade-offs persist beneath the surface.

Institutional supports and intermediaries—accelerators, investors, and networks—play an ambiguous role for startups led by women. Research on accelerator outcomes suggests participation can sometimes open doors to higher-status partners, yet effects are heterogeneous and contingent on accelerator quality and signaling dynamics (Hallen et al., 2023). For women team leaders, these uneven returns mean that engagement with formal support structures may generate opportunity but also intensified scrutiny, making access alone an insufficient remedy for persistent legitimacy gaps.

Knowledge production and diffusion within nascent industries further complicate the terrain for startup leaders. Studies indicate that startups can disproportionately spur subsequent innovation through their inventions, but this generative role is shaped by visibility, citation practices, and the startups' ability to protect or share knowledge (Polidoro & Jacobs, 2024). For women leading teams, the way their ventures' knowledge is recognized and disseminated can influence not only technological trajectories but also the reputational capital that undergirds leadership authority in local ecosystems.

At the organizational level, the presence of women across multiple leadership strata can produce reinforcing benefits that extend beyond individual careers. Evidence of gender spillovers shows that gender diversity at strategic levels—boards and executive ranks—can catalyze further appointments and enhance firm performance through mutual reinforcement across roles (Edacherian et al., 2024). This finding underscores that pathways to more equitable leadership are systemic: individual women leaders gain from institutionalized diversity, and their presence, in turn, reshapes organizational norms and expectations.

Finally, community-centered and culturally embedded forms of support reveal alternative routes for women entrepreneurs to create value and sustain ventures. Research on grassroots and indigenous women's networks highlights how collective learning, social capital, and localized value-creation practices can empower women in contexts where formal markets and institutions may be exclusionary (Shrestha et al., 2023). For a phenomenological study of women team leaders in Makassar, attending to these local, relational resources alongside global structural pressures will illuminate how leadership is experienced, negotiated, and reimagined within a distinct socio-cultural and entrepreneurial milieu.

3. Methods

This study adopts an interpretive phenomenological orientation to foreground how women leaders in Makassar's start-up scene make sense of their day-to-day leadership. The design privileges participants' first-person accounts, attending to embodied emotions, relational dynamics, and temporally situated meanings rather than attempting to measure leadership as a set of traits or outcomes. Such a stance allows the researcher to move from rich descriptive accounts toward identifying the essential structures of the phenomenon as lived by participants, and to present findings that are thick, contextualized, and respectful of individual narrators.

Sampling and data collection are purposive and aimed at heterogeneity in leadership trajectories so that the study can surface a range of meanings rather than generalize statistically. I plan to recruit 10–12 women who currently lead teams or have recently done so in Makassar-based start-ups across sectors (technology, services, creative industries), deliberately including those with different exposure to external supports (e.g., accelerator participation, investor relations) because program effects and access vary substantially across contexts and providers (Hallen et al., 2023). Data will be gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews (60–90 minutes), supplemented by short life-history prompts and, where possible, follow-up conversational encounters to deepen reflection. Field notes and participant artifacts (job descriptions, team charters, public bios) will be collected with consent to triangulate accounts and to honor participants' narrative resources.

Analysis will proceed through iterative phenomenological coding to disclose invariant meanings and situated variations, combining close interpretive reading with cross-case synthesis to construct themes that respect both uniqueness and shared textures of experience. I will use analytic memos and reflexive journaling to make explicit my positionality and to track interpretive moves, mindful of how broader gendered norms shape both participants' accounts and my reading of them (for example, how stereotypes and prescriptive norms produce differential attributions about competence and leadership) (Heilman et al., 2023). Qualitative software will support data organization but not replace interpretive judgment. Ethical approval, informed consent, confidentiality through pseudonyms, and participant review of key thematic summaries will be incorporated to cultivate trust, minimize harm, and validate interpretive fidelity.

4. Results and Discussion

The participants consistently characterized leadership as an unfolding practice of negotiation and relational labor rather than a fixed locus of authority. They narrated frequent shifts between assertive decision-making and collaborative sense-making, describing how these oscillations were governed by local social expectations about femininity and professional authority. This dynamic echoed broader accounts of how gendered role prescriptions shape workplace behavior and the penalties women face when enacting counter-stereotypical traits, which make everyday leadership a careful balancing act between perceived competence and social acceptability (Heilman, Caleo & Manzi, 2023) (Heilman et al., 2023).

A salient pattern concerned external legitimacy: women leaders described recurrent moments when investors, clients, or outsider interlocutors assumed men held primary authority, prompting the women to repeatedly assert their decision-making role. To manage these misattributions, they developed pragmatic strategies—foregrounding technical knowledge, demonstrating consistent delivery, and using transparent communication to create verifiable signals of capability. These practical tactics resonate with evidence that institutional intermediaries such as accelerators and status mechanisms produce highly heterogeneous outcomes for startups, meaning women must selectively translate third-party cues into reputational capital while managing the emotional toll of continuous proof of competence (Hallen, Cohen & Park, 2023) (Hallen et al., 2023).

Internally, the social scaffolding of support—both formal and informal—shaped participants' resilience and sense of possibility. Many emphasized that informal networks (family, peer groups, women's circles) provided crucial emotional and instrumental sustenance, while engagement with formal programs such as accelerators yielded mixed returns: some participants gained contacts and confidence, others found program

assumptions insufficiently attentive to gendered realities. This ambivalence mirrors cross-cultural understandings that entrepreneurship and innovation are embedded in local cultural logics; the interaction between globalized support structures and local social norms in Makassar produced uneven benefits for women founders and leaders (Stephan, 2022) (Stephan, 2022).

A recurring moral vocabulary framed how participants defined success: leadership was less about unilateral control and more about creating purposeful, humane work environments. Women described intentionally cultivating empathic management, mentoring, and learning spaces—practices they saw as ethically rooted and strategically effective for team cohesion in volatile start-up settings. Such enactments align with findings that communal leadership behaviors can be highly valued in certain service and hospitality domains and that feminine and masculine enactments may be reconfigured rather than wholly displaced in contemporary leadership practice (Russen, Dawson & Legendre, 2024) (Russen et al., 2024).

The interviews also revealed complex negotiations around work–life boundaries. While many participants reframed domestic responsibilities as complementary resources—enabling empathy, time management, and multi-tasking—these same obligations constrained temporal bandwidth and introduced recurring trade-offs they had to actively mitigate. Several women called for institutional changes (flexible hours, normalized caregiving policies) to reduce hidden labor burdens and sustain long-term leadership engagement. These lived tensions reflect broader mechanisms by which evaluation processes in entrepreneurship can advantage men through subtle gendered expectations and benevolent forms of bias that shape access to resources and recognition (Nguyen et al., 2023) (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Finally, cross-case synthesis highlighted emergent leadership models that neither imitate masculine-coded entrepreneurial archetypes nor retreat into stereotyped communal roles; instead, participants articulated hybrid approaches that combined strategic assertiveness with relational stewardship and narrative work to craft organizational distinctiveness. They used storytelling, patterned rituals, and selective signaling to differentiate their ventures in a crowded market while staying true to values of inclusion and care—practices that accord with theoretical perspectives on how distinctive narratives and category work influence audience responses and organizational distinctiveness in entrepreneurial contexts (Taeuscher, Zhao & Lounsbury, 2022) (Taeuscher et al., 2022). These results suggest that women leaders in Makassar enact a situated, values-centered leadership that negotiates legitimacy through both performance and meaning-making.

4.1. Discussion

4.1.1. Women’s Leadership in Start-ups: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Lived Experience in Makassar, Indonesia

In the evolving landscape of entrepreneurial ecosystems, start-ups are often heralded as egalitarian incubators that disrupt traditional hierarchies and foster innovation-led leadership. However, this very fluidity—characterized by ambiguous roles, rapid pivots, and informal authority structures—can simultaneously reinforce gendered asymmetries, particularly for women assuming leadership roles. While start-ups in global north contexts have received increasing scholarly attention regarding gender dynamics, less is known about how these dynamics unfold in emerging Southeast Asian urban centers like Makassar, Indonesia. Recent empirical syntheses underscore that start-up environments are not neutral spaces; rather, they are deeply embedded in cultural logics that intersect with global entrepreneurial norms to shape how leadership is enacted and recognized (Wagner, 2021). In Makassar—a growing digital hub where collectivist values and gendered social expectations

remain salient—women’s leadership must be understood not as a deviation from a universal model but as a situated practice emerging from the interplay of local relationality and transnational start-up ideologies.

The negotiation of legitimacy constitutes a central challenge for women leading start-ups, as they frequently confront external misrecognition of their authority. Investors, clients, and even team members often default to male-as-leader assumptions, compelling women to engage in continuous performative labor to establish credibility—what Heilman et al. (2023) describe as the “prove-it-again” phenomenon. This dynamic is compounded in settings like Makassar, where institutional supports such as accelerators operate with uneven cultural attunement, offering status-enhancing opportunities for some while overlooking the gendered realities of others (Hallen, Cohen, & Park, 2023). Crucially, access to formal support structures does not equate to equitable outcomes; instead, women must strategically translate programmatic signals into reputational capital while managing the emotional toll of recurrent self-justification. Such findings align with broader critiques of meritocratic narratives in entrepreneurship, which often mask structural inequities by celebrating individual resilience while neglecting systemic barriers (Meliou & Özbilgin, 2023).

Internally, participants in this study emphasized that leadership was less about command and more about relational stewardship. They described cultivating empathetic, inclusive team cultures not as a feminine default but as an ethically grounded and strategically adaptive approach to managing volatility and talent retention. This resonates with emerging research showing that communal leadership behaviors—such as mentoring, active listening, and collective sense-making—are increasingly valued in service-oriented and creative start-ups, challenging the dominance of the “heroic” solo-founder archetype (Russen, Dawson, & Legendre, 2024). In Makassar’s socio-cultural context, where harmony and interpersonal responsibility are culturally prioritized, such practices gain additional legitimacy. Yet this relational labor often remains invisible in formal evaluations of leadership effectiveness, revealing a persistent gap between local enactments of care-based authority and global metrics of entrepreneurial success.

Moreover, the boundaries between professional and domestic life emerged as a contested terrain. While some participants reframed caregiving responsibilities as sources of emotional intelligence and time-management skills, they simultaneously grappled with temporal constraints that limited strategic bandwidth. This duality reflects what (Nguyen et al. (2023) term “benevolent bias”—the subtle assumption that women’s domestic roles naturally equip them for nurturing leadership, yet simultaneously exclude them from high-stakes opportunities requiring uninterrupted availability. The call for institutional accommodations—such as flexible work hours and normalized parental leave—highlights how gender equity in start-ups cannot be achieved through individual grit alone but requires structural recalibrations that acknowledge the embodied realities of women leaders.

Ultimately, the women in this study crafted hybrid leadership models that neither conform to masculine-coded entrepreneurial norms nor retreat into essentialist notions of femininity. Instead, they engaged in narrative work—through storytelling, ritual, and selective signaling—to construct organizational identities that fuse strategic assertiveness with values of care and inclusion (Taeuscher, Zhao, & Lounsbury, 2022). These practices not only enhance team cohesion but also carve out alternative pathways to visibility and legitimacy within Makassar’s entrepreneurial ecosystem. By centering phenomenological experience, this research affirms that leadership is not merely a role to be occupied but a meaning-making process shaped by culture, context, and the everyday negotiations of gendered existence. As

such, it contributes to a growing body of transnational feminist scholarship that insists on the situatedness of innovation—and the leaders who drive it.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study illuminates how women team leaders in Makassar navigate the complex interplay of global entrepreneurial ideals and local socio-cultural expectations to enact a form of leadership that is both adaptive and deeply humanistic. Rather than conforming to dominant, often masculine-coded archetypes of the “disruptive founder,” participants cultivated leadership styles rooted in relationality, ethical care, and narrative agency. Their experiences reveal that legitimacy in start-up contexts is not merely granted through performance or credentials but must be continuously negotiated amid gendered assumptions, institutional gaps, and resource constraints. By foregrounding lived experience through a phenomenological lens, the research underscores that leadership is not a static role but a dynamic, embodied practice shaped by emotion, identity, and context—a finding that challenges universalist assumptions in entrepreneurship literature and calls for more situated understandings of innovation leadership.

These insights carry significant implications for policy, practice, and theory. Accelerators, investors, and ecosystem builders must move beyond tokenistic inclusion and design support structures that are culturally responsive and attentive to the gendered dimensions of legitimacy and resource access. Likewise, organizations—both start-ups and established firms—can learn from the hybrid leadership models emerging in places like Makassar, where strategic vision and communal care coexist as complementary rather than contradictory forces. Theoretically, this study contributes to transnational feminist critiques of entrepreneurship by demonstrating how women do not merely “overcome” barriers but actively reimagine leadership itself through everyday acts of meaning-making, resilience, and ethical commitment. In doing so, they not only sustain their ventures but also expand the very possibilities of what leadership can be in rapidly transforming economies.

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