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### New Voices from the Deep South: Opportunities and the Power of Muslim Women Leaders in Pattani, Thailand

来自南方腹地的新声音：泰国北大年府穆斯林女性领袖的机遇与力量

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#### Abstract:

**Purpose:** This study aims to explore emerging trends in Muslim women's leadership, identify structural and cultural barriers and enablers, and propose context-sensitive strategies to enhance their leadership potential in Pattani Province, Thailand.

**Methodology:** A qualitative research design was employed, involving document analysis and in-depth interviews with 15 key informants from diverse community and organizational backgrounds.

**Main Findings:** The findings reveal a promising transformation: Muslim women are increasingly engaging in public life, supported by growing social acceptance, expanding grassroots networks, and shifting attitudes particularly among the younger generation. These dynamics suggest a gradual erosion of long-standing barriers. Nevertheless, persistent challenges

#### Keywords:

Muslim women,  
Leadership,  
Pattani,  
Gender equality,  
Community development.

**关键词：** 穆斯林妇女、领导力、北大年、性别平等、社区发展

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such as patriarchal norms and the dual burden of domestic responsibilities—continue to constrain their full participation in leadership roles.

**Application:** The study proposes a multi-level approach to strengthen women's leadership: individual-level capacity building through culturally grounded leadership training; community-based initiatives that foster peer support networks and safe spaces for expression; and policy-level reforms to institutionalize support via dedicated leadership centers and gender-responsive budgeting. These recommendations are designed to amplify the voices and agency of Muslim women as key agents of change in Pattani's peacebuilding and development processes.

**Novelty/Originality:** This qualitative study offers a novel examination of Muslim women's leadership in Pattani Province a conflict-affected region shaped by cultural conservatism and gendered constraints. Unlike prior research focused on security or religious discourse, this study centers on women's lived experiences and the socio-cultural shifts enabling their participation in governance, contributing a stakeholder-centered perspective to the literature.

#### 摘要：

##### 研究目的：

本研究旨在 探索穆斯林女性领导力的新兴趋势，识别结构性和文化障碍与推动因素，以及 提出针对具体情况的策略，以提升泰国北大年府穆斯林女性的领导潜力。

##### 研究方法：

采用定性研究设计，包括文档分析和与来自不同社区和组织背景的 15 名关键消息来源进行深入访谈。

##### 主要发现：

研究结果揭示了一个令人欣喜的转变：穆斯林女性正越来越多地参与公共生活，这得益于社会认可度的不断提高、基层网络的不断扩展以及观念的转变——尤其是在年轻一代中。这些动态表明，长期存在的障碍正在逐渐消除。然而，诸如父权制规范和家庭责任的双重负担等持续存在的挑战，仍然制约着她们充分参与领导角色。

##### 应用价值：

本研究提出了一种多层次的方法来增强女性领导力：通过基于文化的领导力培训进行个人能力建设；开展以社区为基础的倡议，建立同伴支持网络和安全的表达空间；进行政策层面的改革，通过专门的领导力中心和性别敏感型预算将支持制度化。这些建议旨在增强穆斯林女性的声音和能动性，使她们成为北大年和平建设与发展进程中变革的关键推动者。

##### 创新性/独创性：

这项定性研究对北大年府穆斯林女性的领导力进行了新颖的考察。北大年府是一个受冲突影响、文化保守主义和性别限制影响的地区。与以往侧重于安全或宗教话语的研究不同，本研究聚焦于女性的生活经历以及促成她们参与治理的社会文化变迁，为相关文献提供了一个以利益相关者为中心的视角。

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the global movement for gender equality has significantly advanced women's leadership, reflected in increasing female representation at national, provincial, organizational, and community levels. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call for the full and effective participation of women in political, economic, and public life, equitable access to resources, and the enforcement of laws that promote gender equality (UN, 2020).

Against this global backdrop, Pattani Province in Thailand's Deep South represents a unique and complex frontier—both geographically and socio-politically. As a predominantly Malay Muslim region, it is characterized by a rich cultural heritage and a protracted ethno-religious and political conflict that has persisted since 2004. This conflict has had profound socio-economic and psychological consequences, particularly for women and children, who have experienced loss, displacement, and prolonged instability (Bangkok Biz News, 2022). In response, many women have transitioned from traditional roles to become heads of households, entrepreneurs, and community leaders, often without adequate institutional support or formal recognition (Kowattanakul et al., 2016; UNDP, 2020).

While Muslim women in Pattani have increasingly engaged in social advocacy (spanning education, community development, and peacebuilding) their access to formal leadership roles remains limited. Structural barriers include patriarchal norms, conservative religious interpretations, restricted educational opportunities, and the burden of unpaid domestic labor (Saengsuwan & Amatyakul, 2021). These challenges are further exacerbated by the lack of supportive networks and institutional platforms that could enable women's leadership to emerge and thrive.

Despite these constraints, new voices are emerging. The appointment of Ms. Pateemoh Sadeeyamu as the first Muslim woman to serve as governor of Pattani in 2022 marks a historic breakthrough. At the same time, grassroots women-led organizations have emerged as key agents of peacebuilding and sustainable development (Asia Global Institute, 2023). These developments signal the emergence of a new leadership paradigm – one grounded in community, faith, and resilience.

This study examines the evolving landscape of Muslim women's leadership in Pattani Province, Thailand. It explores emerging trends, analyzes the interplay of enabling factors and structural constraints, and proposes strategic, context-sensitive pathways to strengthen leadership capacity. Understanding and supporting these transformations is critical not only for advancing gender equity but also for promoting sustainable peace and inclusive governance in Thailand's Deep South.

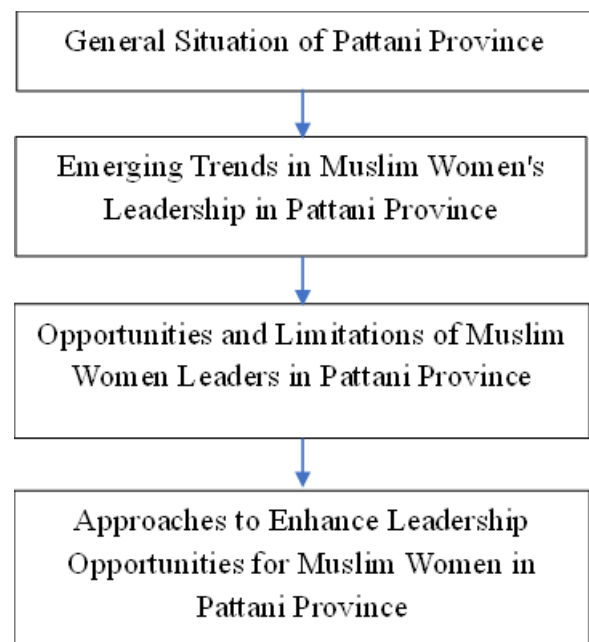
## 2. Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:

- 1) To explore emerging trends in Muslim women's leadership in Pattani Province, with a focus on shifting societal attitudes and the evolution of leadership roles at the community level.
- 2) To examine the opportunities and the structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that affect Muslim women's ability to assume and sustain leadership positions in the region.
- 3) To propose strategic and context-sensitive approaches for enhancing leadership opportunities for Muslim women, taking into account the intersection of religious, cultural, and socio-political dynamics in Pattani Province.

## 3. Conceptual Framework

This research is guided by a conceptual framework that integrates multiple levels of analysis (individual, communal, and institutional) within the unique socio-political and cultural context of Pattani (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study (author's design)**

## 4. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the evolving dynamics of Muslim women's leadership in Pattani Province, Thailand. The methodology combined secondary and primary data collection to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Secondary data were gathered through a systematic review of academic literature, including textbooks, peer-reviewed journal articles, official documents, research reports, and government websites. These sources provided a robust contextual foundation for understanding the socio-political and cultural environment shaping women's leadership opportunities and challenges in the region.

Primary data were collected through in-depth, semi-

structured interviews with 15 key informants selected via purposive sampling. Participants were individuals actively involved in issues related to Muslim women's leadership in Pattani, ensuring a diverse representation of institutional, community, and grassroots perspectives. The sample included:

- 1) One representative from the provincial government (the Governor or a designated delegate),
- 2) One municipal representative (the Mayor of Pattani or a designated delegate),
- 3) Three female community leaders or committee members,
- 4) Five local community members, and
- 5) Five representatives from relevant civil society groups, including leaders of single mothers' networks, women entrepreneurs, and coordinators of women's development funds.

This composition ensured that the study captured insights across multiple levels of leadership and engagement, aligning with a stakeholder-centered approach to understanding social transformation.

The interview guide was designed to elicit in-depth insights into: (1) the socio-political context of Pattani Province, (2) emerging leadership trends among Muslim women, and (3) the key opportunities and constraints shaping women's ability to assume and sustain leadership roles.

Participant selection was guided by three criteria: (1) direct involvement in leadership positions or gender-focused community development initiatives; (2) diversity in institutional affiliation (spanning government, civil society, and grassroots organizations); and (3) the capacity to reflect critically on gender norms and leadership through personal or professional experience. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure representation across urban and rural settings, as well as across generational perspectives, thereby enhancing the contextual richness and analytical depth of the findings.

The findings are intended to inform the design of policy initiatives, capacity-building programs, and grassroots leadership development efforts. The study's practical implications extend to provincial strategic planning, gender-inclusive governance, and the development of future peacebuilding frameworks in Thailand's Deep South.

To enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings, data triangulation was employed, integrating perspectives from multiple sectors, including government, community-based organizations, and civil society actors. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, with a focus on identifying recurring patterns and emergent themes aligned with the research objectives.

## 5. Results and Discussion

The study on opportunities for Muslim women leaders in Pattani Province reveals critical insights into the broader socio-political and economic context that

shapes women's roles and leadership potential in the region.

### 5.1. General Situation of the Pattani Province

Pattani, located in Thailand's southern border region, is characterized by abundant natural resources and a strong tradition of community-based culture and self-reliance. Despite these assets, the province has been affected by a protracted conflict since 2004, known locally in Malay as *Pemberontakan di Thailand Selatan* or more widely as the "Deep South insurgency." This conflict, primarily concentrated in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, has involved sustained violence between state security forces and insurgent groups. From 2004 to 2011 alone, the unrest resulted in approximately 4,500 fatalities and over 9,000 injuries (The Citizen Plus, 2021). The pattern of violence has frequently been indiscriminate and retaliatory, further eroding social cohesion and destabilizing the region.

Muslim women in Thailand's Deep South have borne the brunt of these overlapping crises. In addition to prolonged political unrest, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated poverty and deepened pre-existing vulnerabilities (Tan & Wahid, 2023). Over the past two decades, the impact on women has been severe and multidimensional: more than 3,100 women have become widows, nearly 6,700 children have been orphaned, and hundreds of women and children have lost their lives as a result of the violence. Although the intensity of conflict has declined in recent years, peacebuilding efforts, such as the dialogue held on September 30, 2021, have achieved only limited progress. Consequently, the prospect of sustained peace and security remains distant, particularly for women and children.

The persistent instability has constrained women's ability to participate in social and political life. Many lack access to support networks or platforms for collective empowerment. This marginalization is reflected in the three key challenges.

### 5.2. Systematic Denial of Rights and Limited Access to Decision-Making

Women are often excluded from political and administrative structures that remain male-dominated, particularly at the community level.

1) Lack of social acceptance of women in leadership. Despite significant demographic shifts (driven by male fatalities, legal prosecutions, and drug-related incarcerations) women remain severely underrepresented in leadership roles. Although they constitute the majority in many communities, women hold less than 0.05% of local decision-making positions, highlighting entrenched gender-based disparities.

2) Prevalence of domestic violence. Cultural norms often pressure women to endure abuse in silence, reinforcing their marginalization within both household and community structures (Bangkok Biz News, 2022). This normalization of violence undermines their

autonomy and limits their capacity to engage in public leadership.

3) Cultural and religious interpretations. Conservative interpretations of Islam, particularly within the local socio-religious context, constrain women's visibility and legitimacy in public leadership roles. However, despite these constraints, there is a growing recognition of the importance of economic empowerment and vocational training as critical pathways for advancing women's leadership, especially among vulnerable and conflict-affected populations.

### 5.3. Employment Status of Women in Pattani

The employment landscape in Pattani Province reflects dynamic yet uneven patterns of women's participation in the local economy. According to recent labor force data, the total employed population in the province is approximately 311,909. Within this workforce, several distinct employment patterns emerge. Wage employees constitute the largest group, accounting for 41.48% of the workforce (129,346 individuals), of whom 30.20% (94,173) are employed in the private sector and 11.28% (35,173) in the public sector. A significant proportion (38.49%, or 120,051) are self-employed without hired employees, reflecting widespread informal entrepreneurial activity. Additionally, 17.86% (55,738) work as unpaid family laborers, typically contributing to household-based enterprises, and 2.17% (6,775) operate as employers with formal or informal staff.

When disaggregated by gender, the employment patterns reveal notable differences in the type and nature of women's economic engagement. Among men, 44.5% (78,332) are wage earners, with 34.40% working in the private sector (60,561) and 10.10% in the public sector (17,771).

Among women, the most common form of employment is self-employment without employees, comprising 41.04% (55,745) of female workers. This is followed by wage earners, who represent 37.55% (55,193) of employed women—of whom 24.75% (33,612) are in the private sector and 12.80% (17,402) in the public sector. Additionally, 20.22% (27,647) of working women are unpaid family workers. Women in Pattani are actively contributing to the economy, especially through informal work and microenterprise, yet much of their labor remains unrecognized in formal economic frameworks. The predominance of self-employment and unpaid labor among women reflects not only their economic resilience but also the limited institutional support available to formalize or scale their work.

At the same time, these labor patterns reflect deeper structural challenges. Cultural expectations, patriarchal norms, and the protracted conflict in Thailand's Deep South continue to constrain women's opportunities for leadership, political participation, and decision-making. While women play a central role in sustaining

community livelihoods and informal economic networks, they remain largely excluded from formal leadership roles and governance structures—a persistent marginalization that endures despite their critical social and economic contributions.

In sum, while the employment data highlight women's adaptability and resourcefulness in navigating complex socio-economic conditions, they also underscore the urgent need for policy interventions that formally recognize, support, and institutionalize women's contributions to Pattani's development. Bridging the gap between women's economic participation and their access to leadership remains a critical challenge for achieving sustainable peace and inclusive growth in the region.

Pattani Province has articulated its vision as follows: "Sustainable agriculture, quality halal products, and strong social capital within a resilient multicultural and peaceful society." This vision, championed by Ms. Pateemoh Sadeeyamu, the first Muslim woman to serve as Governor of Pattani (Office of the Pattani Provincial Governor, 2023), reflects her commitment to fostering stability and resilience in local communities. She firmly believes that education is a vital tool (an empowering force and a protective asset) particularly for women in the province.

In line with this perspective, the Pattani Provincial Development Plan (2023–2027) emphasizes human development through education. Specifically, Development Issue No. 2 focuses on social development and the enhancement of human potential across all age groups, promoting livable communities and ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources and the environment. The plan prioritizes well-being, access to quality education—both within and beyond the formal system—and inclusivity through multi-sectoral participation, placing people at the center of development (Minority Rights Group International, 2021).

These development priorities align with the framework of UNESCO Institute For Lifelong Learning (2016), which identifies literacy and education as critical levers for women's empowerment. Educating women not only strengthens their rights and decision-making agency but also contributes directly to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), specifically:

SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

SDG16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Global awareness of gender equality has grown

significantly, reflected in the increasing representation of women in leadership roles at national, provincial, institutional, and community levels. The United Nations has established specific goals for women's empowerment, including ensuring their full and effective participation in society and promoting equal opportunities for leadership across all levels of political, economic, and public decision-making. Therefore, advancing women's development at the community level is not only a matter of equity but also a strategic investment in social progress. It enables women to remain relevant in a rapidly changing world and equips them with the skills necessary to expand into diverse professional and leadership domains.

#### **5.4. Emerging Trends in Muslim Women's Leadership in Pattani Province**

In recent years, several positive trends have emerged that can significantly transform the landscape of Muslim women's leadership at the community level in Pattani Province.

**Trend 1: Increasing the Representation of Women in Administrative Leadership**

Although Muslim women remain underrepresented in administrative leadership, the appointment of women to high-level positions carries significant symbolic and practical importance. A landmark moment occurred in November 2022 with the appointment of Ms. Pateemoh Sadeeyamu as Governor of Pattani, making her the first Muslim woman to hold such a senior position in Thailand's Deep South (Asia Global Institute, 2023). Her appointment has been widely described as a "new force for conflict resolution" and serves as a powerful source of inspiration for women across the region.

Interviews with provincial executives and the Mayor of Pattani reveal that Ms. Pateemoh's leadership emphasizes inclusivity, interfaith dialogue between Muslim and Buddhist communities, and participatory governance. Her leadership style reflects an emerging paradigm that values women's contributions to decision-making, encourages initiative, and supports women's transition beyond traditional domestic roles into public leadership.

Further interviews with female community leaders revealed that, among the 26 communities under the jurisdiction of Pattani Municipality, most include women as members of their community committees. Notably, two communities (Saphan Ma and Umeh) are currently led by women. This reflects a gradual shift in the local social structure, where women are increasingly recognized and trusted in formal leadership roles.

This progress extends beyond the community level. Female leaders are also emerging in the private sector and civil society, including the Chairperson of the Pattani Provincial Industrial Council, the President of the Southern Women's Fisheries Association, and the Chairperson of the Pattani Provincial Women's Development Committee. These women are actively

promoting greater female participation in civic engagement and social development initiatives, serving as role models and institutional enablers of gender-inclusive leadership.

**Trend 2: Growth of Grassroots Women's Networks and Solidarity**

In Thailand's southern border provinces, grassroots women's networks have expanded significantly. Women-led civil society organizations in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat have formed alliances to advocate for peace, human rights, and local development. A prominent example is the "Women for Peace" coalition, which addresses critical socio-political and humanitarian issues in the region. Interviews with community committee members reveal that interfaith cooperation is also strengthening, with Muslim and Buddhist women actively supporting each other's religious and social initiatives. This mutual engagement fosters social cohesion through shared respect and inclusive participation.

These developments indicate that female community leaders are no longer operating in isolation. Instead, they engage in horizontal learning—exchanging knowledge, mentoring peers, and mobilizing for collective action. For instance, successful women entrepreneurs and activists who established cooperatives in one district often provide guidance to counterparts in neighboring communities. This cross-community collaboration enhances advocacy effectiveness and ensures that policy recommendations reflect the diverse experiences and voices of women across the region.

**Trend 3: Policy Inclusion and Public Engagement**  
Historically, Muslim women in Thailand's Deep South were largely excluded from formal peace dialogues and decision-making platforms. However, recent interviews with provincial administrators and the Mayor of Pattani indicate that this is beginning to change. Government agencies now regularly invite women's organizations to participate in public consultations and have formally recognized several women-led groups. This institutional support reflects a growing recognition that women's inclusion is essential for sustainable conflict resolution and long-term peacebuilding.

Moreover, technology and media are playing an increasingly vital role in amplifying women's voices. Social media platforms such as Facebook, along with local community radio stations, are being leveraged by women leaders to promote their initiatives, share success stories, and connect with national and regional women's rights movements. Interviews across multiple groups revealed a gradual shift in male attitudes. Some male religious and community leaders have begun to support women's public engagement, by appointing women to village advisory committees or endorsing women-led development projects. While this shift remains limited in scope, it represents a meaningful step forward; such male allyship can reduce social resistance and enhance the

legitimacy and acceptance of women's leadership within conservative communities.

### 5.5. Opportunities and Limitations of Muslim Women Leaders in Pattani Province

The findings reveal that Muslim women in Pattani Province are experiencing significantly expanded opportunities to assume leadership roles at the community level. A key development is the growing societal recognition of women's contributions to peacebuilding and community development. Both local and international organizations have invested in capacity-building initiatives designed to empower women as grassroots leaders. Notably, EU-funded programs from 2021 to 2023 focused on leadership training, human rights advocacy, and conflict resolution skills, strengthening women's ability to engage in formal and informal decision-making processes (Chinachoti, & Suwatthipong, 2024; Kowattanakul et al., 2016).

A major milestone was the appointment of Ms. Pateemoh Sadeeyamu as the first Muslim woman to serve as governor in Thailand's southern border provinces. This historic achievement reflects the growing acceptance of women in local governance and policy-making. At the community level, findings indicate that several communities now have female leaders or women serving as members of community committees. These developments signify tangible progress toward the broader inclusion of Muslim women in public and administrative roles. Their visible presence in leadership not only affirms their capabilities but also reflects deeper cultural and attitudinal shifts within the Malay-Muslim society, a society that is gradually becoming more inclusive of women's voices and contributions.

These training initiatives have contributed to the development of knowledge, self-confidence, and social networks among Muslim women, fostering a growing pool of capable grassroots female leaders. Interviews with provincial executives, the Mayor of Pattani, and community members revealed a notable shift in attitudes among younger generations of Muslim women. Many now have access to higher education or participate in internships with civil society organizations. Upon returning to their communities, they apply these experiences through social enterprises, educational programs, and volunteer initiatives, demonstrating leadership in the public sphere.

Furthermore, visible female role models, such as leaders of savings groups, community-based enterprises, and local government bodies, are helping to normalize women's leadership and inspire others to pursue similar paths. The increasing recognition of their achievements is reshaping community perceptions, reinforcing the understanding that women's leadership is not only feasible but also instrumental to sustainable community development.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1. Summary of the Results

In summary, these emerging trends (prominent female leadership role models, strengthened grassroots women's networks, policy inclusion, and evolving male attitudes) indicate a gradual shift toward a more enabling environment for Muslim women's leadership at the community level in Pattani. If these developments continue to gain momentum, they could catalyze deeper structural transformation, expanding opportunities for inclusive and gender-responsive governance in the region.

Despite growing opportunities, Muslim women in Pattani continue to face significant structural and cultural constraints. Within the Malay-Muslim cultural framework, women are predominantly perceived in terms of their familial roles, which remain central to social organization. They are expected to serve as caregivers, moral educators, and guardians of religious values. However, in the context of prolonged conflict, many women have assumed the role of household heads, becoming primary breadwinners following the death, disappearance, or forced displacement of their husbands due to political unrest. These women engage in informal economic activities (often without institutional support) demonstrating resilience and adaptability that extend well beyond traditional domestic expectations.

However, domestic responsibilities continue to fall disproportionately on women, even as they assume greater public roles. This dual burden leads to physical and emotional fatigue, limiting their capacity to fully participate in community leadership and development initiatives. Addressing this challenge requires systemic support across multiple levels (families, communities, and the state) through measures such as encouraging men to share household duties, promoting awareness of women's evolving social roles, and expanding access to public services, including childcare and mental health support.

Although Islam is sometimes perceived as a constraint on women's public participation, progressive interpretations of Islamic principles, such as justice (*'adl*), compassion (*rahmah*), and consultation (*shura*), have been leveraged by many female leaders to legitimize their leadership roles. By drawing on the Qur'an and Hadith, these women articulate that their engagement in public life is not only compatible with religious values but also a moral imperative. This scriptural grounding helps to build social legitimacy and challenges dominant patriarchal interpretations within the Malay-Muslim context.

Nonetheless, deeply entrenched traditional norms continue to pose significant challenges. Conservative interpretations of Islam and patriarchal values remain prevalent, constraining women's participation in public life. Women who assume activist or leadership roles are often perceived as violating religious norms, which undermines their social acceptance and credibility within

the community. These perceptions deter many women from engaging in public activities, and even those who do participate frequently encounter limitations on their influence and decision-making authority.

Structural and institutional barriers also persist. There is a lack of formal mechanisms (quotas or institutionalized pathways) for including women in local councils and decision-making bodies. Although active women's civil society networks exist, they often operate independently of state institutions, resulting in their exclusion from policy formulation and outcomes. For example, in previous peace dialogues addressing the southern conflict, no women from civil society were officially represented, despite their direct experience in conflict-affected communities.

Finally, issues of trust and psychological safety remain significant barriers. Women activists report that their intended beneficiaries, such as survivors of domestic or conflict-related violence, are often reluctant to engage or disclose personal experiences due to trauma or fear of social repercussions. As a result, the effectiveness of community-based initiatives is constrained until trust is gradually established through sustained, empathetic engagement. This highlights the critical role of relational capital in enabling meaningful participation and long-term impact.

## **6.2. Recommendations Based on the Research Findings**

1) **Individual Level.** There should be a systematic approach to developing and promoting leadership capacity among Muslim women at the individual level. This includes regular training programs in public speaking, motivation, decision-making, project management, and conflict resolution. These programs should be designed within the religious and cultural context of local communities to ensure relevance and practical application in everyday life. Additionally, targeted efforts are needed to nurture “young women leaders,” particularly among youth, by creating platforms for leadership development at the community level and encouraging their participation in policy processes and public initiatives.

2) **Community Level.** Communities should take a proactive role in creating safe spaces and support mechanisms to advance women's leadership. This includes facilitating the formation of women's groups at the village or subdistrict level—such as “women's networks” or “subdistrict women's councils”—to serve as formal platforms for sharing experiences, collectively addressing challenges, and driving inclusive public initiatives. Collaboration with religious leaders, including Imams and provincial Islamic committees, is essential to promote constructive interpretations of Islamic teachings that affirm women's rights and their participation in public life, in ways that align with Islamic values and local socio-religious norms.

3) **Policy Level.** Government agencies should

adopt proactive, goal-oriented policies to support the role of Muslim women in Thailand's southern border provinces. Specifically, the establishment of a provincial-level Women's Leadership Support Center is recommended. This center would serve as a coordinating body to strengthen human capital and facilitate collaboration among government agencies, religious institutions, local authorities, and civil society organizations. A dedicated fund or targeted budget allocation should also be introduced to support women's development initiatives in education, livelihoods, and civic participation. Furthermore, efforts should be made to contextualize Islamic principles that affirm women's roles within contemporary frameworks, bridging interpretive gaps and fostering sustainable mutual understanding within communities.

## **7. Limitations and Further Study**

**Geographical Expansion.** Future research should extend beyond Pattani to include other provinces in Thailand's Deep South, such as Yala and Narathiwat, to compare the roles and leadership opportunities available to Muslim women across different socio-cultural and political contexts. A comparative analysis would help identify variations and commonalities in cultural norms, institutional support mechanisms, and community dynamics, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive and generalizable understanding of women's leadership development in conflict-affected and culturally conservative regions.

**Exploring Male Attitudes and Influence.** Further research is needed on the attitudes and roles of men, particularly religious leaders, local authorities, and family members, and how they either support or constrain women's leadership advancement. Understanding the perspectives and influence of these key male stakeholders is critical for designing inclusive policies and programs that promote gender collaboration, shared leadership, and sustainable community development. Such studies could inform strategies to engage men as allies in the broader gender equality agenda.

## **Author Contributions**

The author confirms the sole responsibility for the conception of the study, presented results and manuscript preparation.

## **Funding**

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## **Institutional Review Board Statement**

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Research Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Research Participants, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand.

## Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

## Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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