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OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN DEVELOPING THE PHARMACEUTICAL BUSINESS IN INDONESIA: A CASE STUDY AT PT.XZY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the opportunities and challenges of women's leadership in advancing the pharmaceutical business in Indonesia. The case study at PT.YYZ employed a descriptive qualitative research design with an ethnographic approach, in which one of the researchers was a principal actor in the phenomenon under study. Ethnography was used to understand social and cultural life from the perspective of participants or actors. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, and were strengthened through validation by women leaders in the pharmaceutical sector in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The thematic narrative analysis of the qualitative data concludes that opportunities for women leaders to reach top leadership positions in Indonesia's pharmaceutical industry were initially very limited. However, along with internal demands and external influences, these opportunities have become more open and increasingly supported by gender-equitable policies. The challenges faced by women leaders in advancing the pharmaceutical business in Indonesia remain highly dynamic, particularly because company policies were initially unfavorable to women. In addition, women aspiring to reach top leadership positions must demonstrate extraordinary personal readiness, strong courage, and the support of their spouse and immediate family.

Keywords: women's leadership; pharmaceutical industry; ethnographic research

A. INTRODUCTION

The presence of women in business leadership positions continues to show an increasing trend. Many countries, including Indonesia, have begun to recognize that gender diversity in leadership structures has a positive impact on organizational sustainability, innovation, and the development of a more inclusive work culture. Statistics Indonesia (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023) identifies the proportion of women in managerial positions as an important indicator of gender empowerment in Indonesia. The development of this indicator demonstrates that opportunities for women to occupy decision-making positions are becoming more open, although gender equality in leadership still faces structural, cultural, and systemic barriers.

Research by Pradani, Wirawan, Satria, and Hidayat (2025) indicates that women's leadership not only strengthens organizational sustainability but also plays an important role in encouraging innovation and creating an inclusive culture that supports collective participation. Women's leadership styles, which tend to be empathetic, communicative, and participatory, have been shown to improve cross-team collaboration and strengthen interpersonal relationships in the workplace (Pradani et al., 2025). However, such success is often overshadowed by structural challenges such as gender stereotypes, patriarchal culture, and organizational systems that are not yet fully adaptive to women's needs and experiences. The stereotype that the ideal leader is male, together with social expectations requiring women to balance domestic and professional roles, remains a latent barrier to women's career development.

In addition to cultural barriers, institutional aspects such as transfer policies, Key Performance Indicator (KPI) systems, and performance evaluations are also often insufficiently responsive to the realities of working women. In many organizations, rigid KPIs and poorly defined evaluation protocols can create bias and double standards in assessing women's performance (Wynn & Correll, 2021; Neschen & Hügelschäfer, 2021). Caregiving responsibilities, geographic mobility, and limited work flexibility can also affect women's career development opportunities (OECD, 2023).

These conditions affect women employees seeking to progress to top leadership positions, particularly in the pharmaceutical industry, where company policies at the time did not provide equal opportunities for women. Therefore, this study seeks to identify the opportunities and challenges of women's leadership in advancing the pharmaceutical business and to formulate future solutions based on principles of equity.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

In principle, women's leadership is not fundamentally different from men's leadership, although leadership styles may be influenced by gendered expectations and characteristics often socially associated with women, such as femininity, emotional sensitivity, and relational orientation. Women leaders also frequently need to use informal strategies to maintain their positions and credibility within organizations that remain oriented toward masculine norms. According to Eagly and Carli (2007), women in the workplace often face the phenomenon known as the "double bind," in which they are expected to be assertive and results-oriented like men while simultaneously being required to display gentleness and empathy in order to gain social acceptance. To navigate this condition, many women leaders develop informal strategies such as building internal support networks, relying on non-hierarchical communication, and strengthening solidarity among women in the workplace. These strategies are often not formally documented, yet they play an important role in decision-making, conflict resolution, and the formation of a more inclusive work culture.

Given the importance of Indonesia's pharmaceutical sector, where business growth, regulatory complexity, and competitive intensity continue to increase, the study of leadership, particularly women's leadership, is highly relevant and urgent. The pharmaceutical industry is not merely an economic sector oriented toward financial profit; it is also an integral part of the national health system responsible for ensuring the availability, quality, safety, and efficacy of medicines for society. Therefore, the ability of pharmaceutical companies to adapt to market changes, government policies, and social demands depends greatly on the quality of their leadership. In this context, women leaders play a strategic role because they can contribute more empathetic and collaborative leadership dimensions and a stronger orientation toward balancing business performance with social responsibility.

Gender-sensitive policies are an important foundation enabling women to balance professional demands and domestic responsibilities without losing career-development opportunities (Republic of Indonesia, 2003; OECD, 2023). Beyond structural and policy issues, another challenge faced by women leaders in the pharmaceutical industry is how to formulate effective strategies in a highly competitive and heavily regulated business environment. Indonesia's pharmaceutical sector is now confronted with globalization and ASEAN market integration, which demand operational efficiency, product innovation, and strict compliance with international standards such as Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) and halal certification. In these circumstances, women leaders are required not only to possess strong technical and managerial knowledge but also adaptive capability, social sensitivity, and emotional intelligence in managing multidisciplinary teams and responding to regulatory pressures.

Studies of Indonesia's pharmaceutical industry emphasize the importance of adaptive, collaborative, and innovation-oriented leadership in responding to regulatory demands, raw-material self-reliance, knowledge management, and market changes (Hermawan et al., 2023; Sitorus & Hendratmoko, 2024). In line with this, the implementation of the POAC management functions proposed by George Terry should be integrated with leadership to form POACL so that organizational objectives can be achieved more rapidly, effectively, and efficiently in accordance with the vision and mission of the company, organization, or institution (Hadiningrat et al., 2024). Furthermore, strengthening human-resource quality through education, training, continuous learning, and access to development opportunities constitutes a foundation of organizational competitiveness. Investment in human capacity improves adaptability, productivity, and readiness to respond to changes in the strategic environment (Robbins & Coulter, 2021; OECD, 2023).

C. METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design with an ethnographic approach because one of the authors was directly involved as an actor in the advancement of Indonesia's pharmaceutical industry and could reveal existing challenges and opportunities based on personal experience presented within a scientific

framework. Ethnographic research is an approach intended to understand social and cultural life from the perspective of participants or actors. This approach allows researchers to enter the context of organizational life, interact directly with participants, and interpret the meanings behind behaviors, symbols, and social practices occurring in the field (Rudy C. Tarumingkeng, 2024).

Ethnography does not merely describe social reality; it also interprets the meanings and values hidden behind individual and group actions. In the context of this study, this means understanding how women leaders: (a) interpret their roles in workplaces that remain dominated by masculine values; (b) develop leadership strategies that are adaptive to business demands and pharmaceutical regulations; and (c) navigate barriers such as job transfers, gender-biased performance indicators (KPIs), and the double burden of professional work and domestic responsibilities.

Data were collected through interviews, observation, and documentation. To reduce subjectivity, triangulation of data and sources was conducted, and the findings were validated using the views of women leaders in the pharmaceutical industry through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). According to Krueger and Casey (2020), an FGD is an effective qualitative research method for understanding participants' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes through focused group discussion. The collected data were then analyzed qualitatively using thematic narrative analysis to draw conclusions.

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Opportunities for Women's Leadership in the Pharmaceutical Business

Career opportunities for women in Indonesia's pharmaceutical business had to be created, particularly by women themselves, because at that time the policies of pharmaceutical company PT.XYZ did not apply principles of gender equity. To reach top leadership positions, a woman employee had to prepare herself not only with strong capabilities and professionalism but also with the courage to do something out of the box, for example by being willing to be assigned to any region and to work extended hours in response to demanding performance targets.

Over time, company policies began to change, driven not only by internal pressure but also by external dynamics. Evidence indicates that many women now occupy leadership positions in this pharmaceutical company, including one of the authors of this study. Opportunities to achieve managerial positions and above are now more open; the issue is how women and men interpret and use these opportunities to build leadership careers while achieving the company's targets, vision, and mission. Field practices indicate that women leaders tend to manage professional and personal roles through coordination rather than absolute separation. Time management, communication with family, division of responsibilities, and support from colleagues create a dynamic pattern of balance. Informants did not describe family as an automatic barrier, but as a domain requiring resources, planning, and a support system. When family and organizational support are available, caregiving responsibilities can be managed without reducing professional accountability.

2. Challenges of Women's Leadership in the Pharmaceutical Business

Reaching top leadership in this pharmaceutical company required extra effort because the policies at that time were not gender-equitable. Therefore, women seeking top leadership careers needed courage and effective strategies in addition to personal capability and professionalism. The challenges arose not only from internal factors but also from external factors, including competitors and other environmental pressures. These challenges are even more pronounced in the fast-moving digital era characterized by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA) and by Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible (BANI) conditions, as well as global dynamics arising from humanitarian, food, energy, and water crises that are aggravated by prolonged conflicts and wars.

At present, women's leadership in the pharmaceutical industry has generally progressed compared with the period when the researcher was developing her career and striving to reach top leadership within PT.Kimia Farma Trading & Distribution. Very strong mental resilience was required, together with personal capability and support from a spouse, in this case the husband and immediate family. In general, gender equality within the company remained a significant challenge because the regulations at that time were not favorable to women's interests. Nevertheless, driven by a strong desire to advance, the author succeeded in reaching the managerial level at a time when such positions were reserved for men.

In responding to prevailing policies and gender-based health privileges—including menstrual leave, pregnancy, breastfeeding, and maternity leave—as well as childcare responsibilities, women interpret and manage these matters in their daily working lives. The analysis focuses on three elements: (a) the meanings women assign to gender-based health policies; (b) their experiences in carrying out caregiving responsibilities; and (c) role-management strategies that enable professionalism, targets, quality, and career sustainability to be maintained. Findings were obtained through interviews, observation, documentation, field notes, and FGDs, and were subsequently triangulated so that relationships among informants' experiences, organizational culture, and managerial implications could be clearly identified.

Formal policies become effective only when they are accompanied by workplace practices that do not stigmatize women for exercising legitimate health rights or flexibility. Accordingly, a gap may emerge between the formal space provided by organizational policy and the cultural experiences felt by women in everyday working life.

E. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

1. Conclusion

a. Opportunities for women leaders to reach top leadership positions in Indonesia's pharmaceutical industry were initially very limited. However, along with internal demands and external influences, these opportunities have become more open and increasingly supported by gender-equitable policies.

b. The challenges faced by women leaders in advancing the pharmaceutical business in Indonesia are highly dynamic, particularly because company policies were initially unfavorable to women. In addition, women who aspire to reach top leadership positions must demonstrate extraordinary personal readiness, strong courage, and support from their spouse and immediate family.

2. Recommendation

a. Prospective women leaders should prepare themselves thoroughly and develop strong courage to achieve excellent performance so that they have a greater opportunity to compete successfully with other leadership candidates.

b. Company leaders should formulate policies based on gender equity so that internal organizational dynamics can be utilized effectively to achieve corporate targets, vision, and mission, particularly in the pharmaceutical industry.

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