Empowerment Meritocracy

by Zulfa Sakhiyya

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Empowerment vs. meritocracy discourses in Indonesian public universities: The case of female leaders

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the tension between meritocracy and empowerment discourses in Indonesian public universities and its relationship with gender-related leadership representation. The recent emergence of five female rectors signals a change that allows women to undertake leadership roles. We argue that there are two contradictory discourses (i.e., empowerment and meritocracy), which are concurrently visible pertaining to university leadership. The discourse of empowerment promotes gender equity and women's participation in decision making processes in universities in ways that highlight the historically progressive political agenda of empowerment in Indonesian society. In contrast, the discourse of meritocracy refers to achievement on the basis of individual merit, such as ability and talent. This contradiction is explored through interview data that illuminates the changing conditions of leadership representation in the Indonesian university context. This article makes three contributions to the literature. Firstly, it adds to an underresearched area in higher education in Indonesia. Secondly, it provides a different perspective and analysis of the relationship between gender and higher education by considering both local and international culture. Thirdly, the article offers an argument about the corrosive effect of meritocracy in any university, irrespective of geographical location and local culture.

KEYWORDS Gender; higher education; leadership; empowerment; meritocracy; Indonesia

Introduction

This paper examines the tension between meritocracy and empowerment discourses in Indonesian public universities and its relationship with gender-related leadership representation. The case of women's empowerment in Indonesian higher education and the recent emergence of five female rectors in Indonesian public universities signals a major change in women's representation at the highest level of university leadership. We use the notion of "emergence" to describe how new subjects emerge in the masculine

playing field of these universities, despite the absence of systematic efforts for women's empowerment in the sector. Although this emergence might be perceived to have shattered the "glass ceiling"[1] of gendered leadership in the Indonesian public universities, we seek a more critical stance on the representation of women leaders.

There are two contradictory discourses that are used regarding the emergence of the female rectors, i.e., meritocracy and empowerment. We use both discourses to reveal the contradiction in the emergence of women leaders in Indonesian higher education. This is situated within broader discourses of the knowledge economy where different and often contradictory discourses are used together and against each other (Blackmore & Sawers, 2015; Sakhiyya & Rata, Forthcoming; Shore, 2010). We argue that although both discourses are contradictory, they are jostled together in an uncomfortable union. Empowerment in our view refers to the effort and commitment that enable women to participate and represent themselves in decision making processes in university leaderships (Blackburn, 2004; Johnson, 2015; Omwami, 2015; Parawansa, 2005; Wrigley-Asante, 2012). The discourse of empowerment has been around in Indonesia, but has yet not entered in the higher education sector. Accompanying it is the meritocratic discourse that is articulated by those in senior leadership positions, including the female leaders who are the focus of this study. The discourse of empowerment promotes gender equity and women's participation in decision making processes in universities, whereas the meritocracy discourse attributes achievement to one's distinction such as ability and talent. Meritocracy is actually a "myth" where "male support systems are the reality, in the process disadvantaging women who do not take to the former and are excluded by definition from the latter" (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001, p. 162), but it is increasingly valued within the context of the contemporary entrepreneurial university (Blackmore, 2017). These two discourses are inherently contradictory because empowerment discourse work collectively, while meritocracy works individually.

This paper begins with a description of the method adopted for this study. It then traces the trajectory of women's empowerment in Indonesia at a broad societal level. The fifteen-year long attempt at gender mainstreaming in Indonesia has enabled both men and women to contribute to decision making in many areas, which encourages both genders to work together to address gender inequalities. Despite these efforts, the higher education sector, and especially the public universities, remain a masculine domain, in which Indonesia is not alone. Thus, the next section presents an overview of the gendered nature of leadership in higher education in the global context in order to understand the international movement and patterns of higher education management and leadership representation which may influence local contexts. The gap between the political agenda of empowerment and the reality of women's career trajectories leads us to the next section where we

argue for the importance of researching gender in Indonesian public universities to redress the lack of scholarly engagement on this issue in the literature. The one Indonesian publication (Dzuhayatin & Edwards, 2010) on this issue essentialises and blames local culture as hampering the progress of equity, while neglecting the progressive agenda in Indonesia. We then explain the emergence of female rectors in Indonesian public universities to analyze the structural and cultural forces that enable them to attain career growth into senior leadership positions. Then, we discuss the contradiction between empowerment and meritocratic discourses that women encounter throughout their careers in their entry into university leadership. The final section discusses these ideas further and thereby adds to the literature.

Research methods

This article reports a selected sample of findings of a larger three-year qualitative research study of two public universities in Indonesia that are categorized as "top-tier" and "middle-tier" universities. We focus here on the two top tier universities because they represent the traditionally masculine spaces, compared to others in the Indonesian context. We use the institutional categories developed by the Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education in 2016. These comprise five distinct categories of the Indonesian higher education system. The four criteria used to classify a total number of 3320 higher education institutions were research, human resource quality, managerial quality, and student activities (Ministry of Research Technology and Higher Education, 2015). Of these four criteria, the defining norm that really distinguishes the institutions is their research orientation.

The top-tier university was established in 1949 after Indonesia gained its independence in 1945. This status was based on its reputation for research as one of the oldest and largest public higher education institutions in the country, catering to around 50,000 students. The middle-tier university was previously a teacher training college established in 1965 and then given a wider mandate by improving its status to become a state university in 2000. As compared to the former, the latter is relatively small with a student body of around 35,000. It is defined as middle-tier because of its mixed orientation of research and teaching.

Four semi-structured interviews were conducted; one with the first female Rector of the top-tier university and the remaining at the same middle-tier university as follows: one each with the first female Dean, a senior male administrator, and the male Rector. They were considered key figures in the production and reproduction of the culture and structures of the respective universities (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001). Interviews were undertaken in the offices and work places of the respective participants. We refer to them according to their positions and institutional types in order to maintain a

degree of confidentiality and try to maintain the anonymity of the intervie-wees and their institutions. However, we cannot guarantee this because they occupy important positions in public institutions. Our questions were framed in a semi-structured way so that the interviewer could rely on the uniqueness of the participants' responses regarding the efforts they had undertaken and the challenges they faced in climbing the career ladder.

The history of women's empowerment in Indonesian society

Indonesia is a diverse country (Blackburn, 2004) with a population of almost 260 million people, of which women comprise half. The discourse of empow-erment in the country has a strong political lineage that came into promi-nence after the collapse of the authoritarian New Order[2] administration in the late 1990s. Empowerment in this context is always associated with formal governance through policies that deal explicitly with the position of women in Indonesian society and their equal access to and participation in all aspects of society.

During the New Order administration (1966–1998), economic growth and political stability were emphasised. According to the feminist Indonesian writer Suryakusuma, women's roles in society were constructed as wives and mothers whose jobs were to look after the husband and children (1988). She refers to this ideology as State-*Ibuism*—a term coined by her that mixes the English language (State) and Indonesian language (*Ibu-ism*) to mean, literally, an ideology of State-motherhood. According to Suryakasuma, this ideology engineered the definition and social construction of what counted as "good wives" and "good mothers" during this political regime. State-*Ibuism* defines women's roles in several women's organizations (called *Pembinaan Kesejahter-aan Keluarga* or PKK, which means Family Welfare Guidance), at village levels and in public offices. Women were obliged to attend monthly meetings to ensure that a traditional and conservative construction of womanhood was sus-tained. The PKK forums and meetings continue even today (Newberry, 2006), although they are no longer compulsory. The Ministry of Women's Roles at this particular level, therefore, was the regulatory body that did the job of con-structing womanhood in Indonesian society. Suryakusuma further argues that women were depoliticized through mobilization of such a motherhood ideol-ogy to support the development-economic goals of the New Order.

Such political engineering strengthened existing traditional social attitudes and customs. Research demonstrates that women here, as in other Asian cul-tures, are expected to handle all family responsibilities such as maintaining households, raising children and looking after parents (Aiston, 2014; Luke, 2000). Within Indonesian Javanese groups that comprise the largest ethnicity in Indonesia, women are even called "*konco wingking*," which means companion who walks behind someone (Hasibuan-Sedyono, 1998). The collapse of the New

Order in 1998 restored the democratic atmosphere in Indonesia (Budiman, 2011) and challenged the idea of State-*Ibuism*. Restrictions on freedom of expression were no longer imposed and a grass roots movement emerged that brought women's engagement and participation in society into the center of public policy debates (Rosser, Roesad, & Edwin, 2005). This included the rise of a feminist movement in Indonesia along with the wider feminist movement in Asia (Blackburn, 2004). The administration of President Abdurrahman Wahid (1999–2001) viewed the issue of gender equity seriously. He appointed "the first truly feminist Minister for women's affairs" (Blackburn, 2004, p. 107). The Minister undertook the agenda of gender mainstreaming as a means of empowerment. To reflect this, she insisted that her department be renamed "Ministry for Women's Empowerment" in 1999. The change in name of the Ministry aimed to ensure that all government policy became much more gender aware.[3]

Simultaneously, women's groups, civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations developed the proposal to introduce a 30% quota for female candidates among the total number of political party candidates who run for office. "Law number 31 year 2002" dealt with the establishment and legislation of political parties and "Law number 12 year 2003" for the 2004 General Election were passed to ensure the agenda was maintained through policy structures. This quota did not come only from women activists' awareness of the importance of legislation to improve women's representation in politics, but also from an understanding that democracy without the participation of women is not real democracy (Parawansa, 2005). As a result, women's representation in parliament increased by 11% in 2006. The empowerment agenda also partly contributed to the election of the first female Indonesian President, Megawati Soekarnoputri in 2001–2004. Despite this victory many argued that the leadership of Megawati Soekarnoputri was more a result of familial factors rather than a real improvement of women's participation in political life (Dzuhayatin & Edwards, 2010), like those of Indira Gandhi in India, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, Begum Khalidah Rahman in Bangladesh, Corazon Aquino and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo of the Philippines. The empowerment discourse, reflected in representation for policy-making and the presidency, has proven successful in opening a space for women to participate and take part in decision making in the political sphere.

The effort of women's empowerment in Indonesian society, however, has not been fully realized in the higher education sector. Public universities are highly bureaucratized institutions that have inherited, intentionally or otherwise, many of the characteristics of western universities (Gaus, Sultan, & Basri, 2017; Guggenheim, 2012; Nugroho, 2005; Rakhmani & Siregar, 2016; Rosser, 2016) and its leadership has been dominated by men (Dzuhayatin & Edwards, 2010; Mulia, 2014). Rosdiani Rachim, Coordinator of the Women's Leadership Forum for higher education, is concerned that "while the proportion of women faculty members in Indonesian higher education institution

varies between 21% and 72%, only 6%–20% serve in leadership positions within their institutions" (HELM, 2015, p. 3). So, how does this Indonesian story relate to the global landscape of higher education?

Women and senior leadership in the contemporary university

Higher education has historically been a space dominated by male elites (Blackmore, 2002; Read & Kehm, 2016). Contemporary changes in gender representation in both the student and academic staff cohorts have meant that universities have become a more ambiguous site for women. Gender inequity, on the surface, is often considered to be an issue that has been resolved. On the one hand, the university provides possibilities for women through the production and development of postmodernist, postcolonial and feminist critiques; on the other hand, it is also a place of structuring the modernist patriarchal and colonial relations as well as offering potential remedies to this structure (Blackmore, 2002). In other words, universities might be the place for the intellectual discussion and ferment of current issues and theories of social justice and equity, but the underlying historical structures of patriarchal and colonial relations remain largely unaltered.

Leadership in public universities is identified as a masculine domain dominated by men (Blackmore, 2002; Blackmore & Sawers, 2015). While more women are now entering leadership roles in higher education, the gender imbalance in these remains a global issue (Airini, Collings, Conner, Midson, & Wilson, 2011; Aiston, 2014; Bagilhole, 2012; Davidson & Burke, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2012; Odhiambo, 2011). The increasing awareness of women's underrepresentation at the policy making level does not necessarily lead towards equity, especially for leadership in higher education.

The statistical overview on the absence of women in senior leadership and management roles in higher education across the world is alarming. In New Zealand, despite being just as qualified as their male counterparts, in 2014 women made up just 28% of professors and associate professors (Locke, 2016). In Australia, women represented less than 25% of associate and full professors, and occupied less than 10% of the senior leadership positions (Deputy Vice Chancellors and Vice Chancellors) (Fitzgerald, 2012). Denmark shows a similar trend, where the percentage of women professors at the national level recorded in 2006 was 18.4% (Ståhle, 2007). In other developed countries, such as the UK, Germany, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Netherlands, these patterns of low representation in both formal and named positions of leadership are repeated (Enders & De Weert, 2009; Read & Kehm, 2016). The gender imbalance occurs in other parts of the world as well and is even worse in developing countries (Dollar & Gatti, 1999), including Indonesia.

Equally, the statistics on gender representation in Indonesian higher education are a matter of concern as they are in other parts of the world. Although

the university student cohort shows a balance in gender representation: 52.7% women and 47.3% men, as well as the ratio of university lecturers: 57.5% men, and 42.5% women; there are only five women rectors in public universities in Indonesia, as compared to 115 men who are rectors (Directorate of Higher Education, 2016).

The issue of gender and higher education leadership increasingly becomes a matter of important discussion because higher education is a major site of power struggle, symbolic control, cultural practice and identity formation (Blackmore, 2002; Odhiambo, 2011). More specifically, "senior leadership is the sphere where academic and management identities are negotiated and values around the role of the university are decided" (Blackmore & Sawers, 2015, p. 320). The absence or lack of women in senior leadership and management means that women are under-represented in various arenas of critical decision making, including senate committees, university boards, recruitment panels and at executive levels (Morley, 2013). However, the current emphasis on performance in contemporary universities has permeated a new set of different and often contradictory discourses around universities, such as equity, efficiency and effectiveness (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; Blackmore & Sawers, 2015; Shore & Wright, 2017). These discourses are jostled together in an uncomfortable union. Women are positioned in another ambiguous space—while women are encouraged to move into leadership positions, they are stuck in middle management roles given their predominance in stereotypical caring roles (Devine, Grummell, & Lynch, 2011). Bagilhole and Goode argue that despite the equity rhetoric, empowerment for women in universities does not sit easily alongside a meritocratic discourse that refers to "the idea of an individualistic academic career used as a measure of achievement" (2001, p. 161). In this article, we expand the idea of meritocracy and its contradictory relationship with empowerment discourses by examining the case of Indonesian universities.

In this global landscape of the relationship between gender and higher education, the emergence of female Rectors in Indonesian universities serves as a focal point of entry to analyse the intersection between global forces and local culture. This issue deserves special attention in this paper and will be explored in the next section.

The emergence of women leaders in Indonesian higher education

The changing nature of gendered leadership in Indonesian higher education is characterized by the emergence of five female rectors in the public universities (see Table 1).

The profiles of these five rectors are available on Wikipedia as well as in the national newspapers. Their biographies often depict them as "inspiring and successful" women who have been able to climb the career ladder in the

Table 1. The profiles of five women rectors in Indonesian public universities.

Name	Leadership period	Home University	City, Province
Prof. Badia Perizade	2007–2011 and 2011–2015	Sriwijaya University	Palembang, South Sumatra
Prof. Tian Belawati	2009–2013 and 2013–2017	Open University	South Tangerang, Banten
Prof. Dwikorita Karnawati	2014–2017	Gajah Mada University	Jogjakarta, Central Java
Prof. Dwia Aries Tina	2014–2018	Hasanuddin University	Makassar, South Sulawesi
Prof. Ellen Joan Kumaat	2014–2018	Sam Ratulangi University	Manado, North Sulawesi

Source: PDDIKTI (2017).

traditionally masculine space of the public universities. There are at least three factors which have contributed to women's entry into such senior positions in Indonesian public universities: the trend of internationalization, the increasing number of women professors in academia, and the momentum of women's empowerment in higher education provided by the wider discourse that has been part of the policy focus in society since the collapse of the New Order administration. As advancing international partnership becomes a focal point for Indonesian institutions, the emerging pattern of women as rectors and deans indicates individuals who have a history of global engagement via international networks. This role used to be dominated by males (Blackmore & Sawers, 2015) and it was assumed that men rather than women have the required flexibility and mobility in order to engage in these (Devine et al., 2011).

It is important to note that the number of women professors in Indonesian universities in formal academic leadership positions has been growing. In 2016, women comprised 19% of professors and this number almost doubled from 2000. This means more women have become qualified to occupy senior leadership positions and roles. The current regulation issued by the Ministry of Research and Technology and Higher Education on rector appointments noted that the minimum qualification for a rector candidate was a doctoral degree (Minister of Research and Technology and Higher Education, 2016). However, many public universities require or prefer to have rectors who have attained positions of Professor. In addition, they are elected by the senate forum by professors from each faculty who collectively screen, vote and install them. The senate has 65% of the vote, and the Minister of Research and Technology and Higher Education has 35%. Given this procedure, the academic leadership largely corresponds with that of public universities in which the minister represents state control over these universities. This procedure may seem to be a democratic process because the majority stakeholder is the senate, wherein the vote is often divided, which then implies that the minister has a lot of power to choose whoever *he* likes (the ministers have always been male so far). This "democratic" process indicates that the playing field is rigged. This is true not only for assigning senior leadership positions, but also for academic appointments. The current statistical

data on academic positions throughout the country confirms Fitzgerald's (2012) argument that women mostly occupy the "basement" rather than the "tower" within the university structure (see Table 2).

Table 2. Statistics of academic positions in Indonesian higher education by gender in 2016.

Academic Position	Women	Men
Professor	905	3864
Senior lecturer	10,451	20,038
Lecturer	19,835	29,523
Teaching assistant	20,930	25,908

Source: Database of the Directorate of Higher Education, Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education.

As of 2010 there has been shared awareness that despite the 15 year long attempts that have been made for women's empowerment, women have been under-represented in higher education leadership. Slowly they have begun to enter senior leadership positions, a phenomenon that has contributed to increasing awareness about the need to create women's networks for higher education leadership, initiated by woman activists in higher education and non-governmental organizations. This is how the momentum for women's empowerment in higher education was generated. However, despite this, the contradiction between empowerment and meritocratic discourses remains problematic for women's career trajectories.

Articulating the contradictions between empowerment and meritocratic discourses: introducing the participants

This section highlights the contradictory discourses of empowerment and meritocracy that are concurrently visible in the practice of leadership in the Indonesian higher education sector. These were identified and articulated in various ways by our interviewees. They were concerned about the image of the university leadership (being attributed male characteristics), the neutralization of gender with more emphasis on competence and "serendipity" and the assumption that only now are women ready for meritocracy. According to Bagilhole and Goode (2001), serendipity does not acknowledge the relationship between networks and empowerment processes as crucial elements in one's career progress. Comments made by our interviewees refer to the broader contradiction of empowerment and meritocracy. Their articulations demonstrated the tension between the discourse of empowerment and meritocracy evident in the language of those who occupied senior leadership positions in Indonesian universities.

The image of leadership: Heroic vs the details

As an example of such contradictions, one of our participants spoke about the tensions between the discourses of meritocracy and empowerment in stark

reality. She was the first female to become rector in the top tier-university (referred to here as R1). She is an internationally and nationally renowned scholar in a discipline dominated by men. As rector, this woman has reached the pinnacle of academic leadership and has clearly benefitted from the historical discourse of empowerment. The interview with her was undertaken over a period of six hours to accommodate various meetings that she needed to attend around the time. While waiting in the reception room for the interview, the first author was able to witness first-hand the hectic nature of this woman's work. The interview had to be undertaken in three separate parts so that she could perform all her other tasks.

When asked in the interview about the kinds of challenges women faced in leadership roles in the university, this woman rector highlighted the patriarchal culture of Indonesia as perhaps a barrier to women's participation at this level. She replied, "Culture might have its effect … our culture is patriarchal … but I think the opportunities are there [for women]". This was followed by an articulation of the kinds of leadership traits she believed women in the university context in Indonesia needed:

> It's just that women are more meticulous, attend to detail, and easily moved. Sometimes leadership traits are not like that. If I go into too much detail, I will be reminded [by my staff] that leaders do not "do" details (R1, personal communication, September 26, 2016).

In this quote, the Rector identified the stereotype of women being particularly focused on the minutiae instead of bigger visionary ideas expected of a leader in her position. She identified a tendency to go deep into detail, and how this skill is not necesarrily valued by her staff. She continued:

> Well, many problems occur when we forget the details. So there are many contradictions in the concept of leadership, in that leaders do not handle the details and instead focus on the big picture. The important dimension to leadership is to know how to envision and give direction (R1, personal communication, September 26, 2016).

Here she demonstrated that she identified the contradiction inherent in what were expected leadership traits. What is important in this statement, was her articulation of the two traits of leadership she somehow had to straddle. She was aware that as the rector, she was responsible for a type of "heroic" leadership (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; Locke & Wright, 2017). It is about articulating a vision that is conceptual and broad, but has the power and capacity to galvanize people to follow a shared direction about the future of the university. This is about articulating a strong "muscular" notion of leadership that is bold and certain (Blackmore, 2017). "Women can do that," she asserted, "but perhaps because we are perceived as "soft" we are not expected to be bold." She, however, saw the need to be *both* bold and attend to detail, and it is here that we can see the tension between the discourse of empowerment and meritocracy at play.

Throughout the six hours it took to conduct the interview, the meticulous attention to detail this woman paid demonstrated her approach. The first author was privy to many episodes throughout the day where R1 needed to sign and approve various documents that were placed before her. Unlike other male rectors interviewed and observed, R1 read and asked questions about every document before signing her approval. Her attention to detail was so renowned that even before the interview took place, the first author was warned by her staff that she would pay attention to all details and to expect her to ask questions regarding our research study. R1, unlike her male counterparts, never lost sight of the tiniest matter. While saying that attention to detail was not needed, she however did highlight that details were indeed important if problems were to be minimized. As noted above, she warned that "many problems do occur" when these were not taken into account.

For R1 there was no room for error. She had to be "both" visionary and strong, and exceptionally well prepared through her attention to detail. While her male counterparts could clearly afford to ignore these, she was aware that she was judged by different and more demanding criteria, despite her position as an elite member of the university. The need to combine attention to detail while keeping the larger picture in view for R1 meant that she had to work significantly harder. It was as if she knew that she could never be perceived as not knowing everything, whilst simultaneously articulating and heralding the big visionary statements of the university. Here empowerment was clearly on show–she is empowered to be both detailed and visionary but she also articulated the ambivalence of the discourse of meritocracy in that for her. She was judged more stringently than her male colleagues because she had to prove herself that as a woman she was capable of performing as rector. She had to be beyond reproach. She had to labor much harder that her male counterparts because of her leadership position. Being judged on the basis of merit, as meritocracy would have it, therefore means that the criteria for "merit" are anything but egalitarian and are highly gendered.

All about "competence", not gender

Another contradiction between empowerment and meritocracy was evident in our interviews in ways that neutralized the issue of gender by emphasising individual competence. This was seen in the ambivalent view of the interviewees regarding the empowerment they had benefited from while following their individual career trajectories. The first female Rector in the top-tier university acknowledged the significant encouragement she had received from her predecessor prior to being appointed rector. The former rector, who was a high powered individual, had sponsored and supported her candidacy for this position greatly. However, while simultaneously acknowledging such a discourse of empowerment that could have potentially benefitted her and

contributed to her appointment as rector, in her own case she seemed to gloss over its importance. She recounted as follows:

> The previous Rector had a concern that one of the vice rectors should be female. This concern was then taken up by the senate and the University Board of Trustees … there were only two women in the Board of Trustees … Then to run for the rector's election, gender did not matter. It was all about competence (R1, personal communication, September 26, 2016).

This comment is revealing because it demonstrates the extent to which this woman identified herself as one associated with meritocracy rather than empowerment through collegial support. In the end, she seemed to be saying, gender was irrelevant because she was simply the most outstanding candidate to become rector. We are not necessarily making a judgement on this, but are interested in the way that she shifted perspective from her earlier statement about the more stringent criteria whereby she was judged because she was a woman.

The acknowledgement of empowerment by simultaneously highlighting one's own merit demonstrates the tension between meritocracy and empowerment. A more extreme version of this was to completely ignore the empowerment process and a gendered perspective. This view was shared by our second interviewee who was the first female Dean in the middle-tier university (referred to as D2). This interview was conducted without the sort of interruptions that we experienced with R1 and as such, D2 had the space and time to include many personal anecdotes and stories about her background and engagement with academia. Like R1, her field of research and expertise was in a traditionally male-dominated field. Notably, this interviewee refused to acknowledge gender as important in her career trajectory, alongside her strong belief in the notion of meritocracy and a very individualized articulation about her career trajectory. When asked about gender and its relation to any obstacles or challenges, she responded as follows:

> For me, the main challenge is achievement, not gender. I challenge myself to achieve better, not to defeat men … I do not think in simple gender binaries (D2, personal communication, October 16, 2015).

Serendipity

While there might be some truth that gender binaries are too simplistic to understand challenges in achieving senior leadership positions in universities, her statement overlooked the issue. Instead, this participant illustrated Bagilhole and Goode's (2001) analysis of career "serendipity" by saying that competence over-rides any gendered challenges.

> It's serendipity. I myself have never experienced those challenges. I'm not sure if this is because of me or others. Since my undergraduate until today I have never encountered any situations that are gendered (D2, personal communication, October 16, 2015).

Again, the interview with D2 revealed her position that gender is irrelevant. The fact that she may have received support from senior colleagues in advancing her position has also been ignored. Serendipity is, thus, the non-acknowledgement of the relationship between networks and empowerment processes as crucial elements in the progress of one's career. The lack of acknowledgement of empowerment is an extreme version of the contradiction between meritocracy and empowerment as it occurs in universities. While the empowerment discourse has been articulated in the university, meritocracy still dominates the process of career advancement to senior leadership in the narratives of the participants.

Women are now ready for "meritocracy"?

Another contradiction articulated by our interviewees was about women's readiness for engagement in the discourse of meritocracy, as demonstrated in an interview with a male senior administrator, whom we refer to as A2, in the same middle-tier university. In terms of structural position, this male participant held several strategic positions, that is, as Head of the International Office as well as key advisor to the rector and vice rector of international affairs. On behalf of the rector of the middle-tier university (a man), our interviewee explained that this rector actually encouraged women to lead, but it was only recently that there have been enough "qualified" women available in the university.

> Our (male) rector deliberately paved the way to enable women to lead in his era. However, it also coincides with the era where now qualified female leaders are available at our university. So, it is a combination between intention and availability (A2, personal communication, September 17, 2015).

This excerpt suggests the prominence of meritocracy despite a declaration of the "intention" for empowerment. This means that although the discourse of empowerment has permeated the universities, the priority given to the discourse of meritocracy with respect to women requires them to be more individualistic and competitive. Our interview with the male rector (referred to as R2) of this middle-tier university confirmed the predominant myth of meritocracy. This male rector explained the reasons for the appointment of the first female dean in the following statement:

> First, because the new Dean speaks English very well. Secondly, the person has a bold commitment to knowledge and scholarship. Thirdly, habitat recognition. We can be a centre of excellence if we have an international community that recognises us. She is internationally recognised and affiliated to international professional associations (R2, personal communication, September 21, 2015).

R2's comments on the first female dean were concerned with her individual merit and competence. He described her cosmopolitan nature, proven by

her global orientation, the way she was acutely attuned to contemporary global realities and skillful in engaging with other global citizens. This statement articulated the prominent myth of meritocracy over empowerment: only when women were perceived to be ready for merit could they gain "power," regardless of the empowerment agenda. This contradiction not only resulted in confusion, but also ignored the uneven playing field.

Conclusions

Our research findings, therefore, contrasted with the only study of women's leadership in Indonesian higher education (Dzuhayatin & Edwards, 2010) that reveals that the problem of accessing senior leadership roles in public higher education is not about competence or merit, but more about specifically Indonesian cultural barriers. This highlights patriarchal culture as the major barrier in the Indonesian universities. Unlike this, our argument avoids this essentialisation of local culture as the only factor that hampers women in aspiring to leadership in higher education. We argue that such a view runs the risk of essentialising local culture into fixed characteristics and ignores the more progressive developments that it may represent. Therefore, it also negates the importance of other pertinent cultural factors (Blackburn, 2004), in this case the myth of meritocracy (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001).

We argue there is an inherent contradiction that plays out between the encounter of a specifically Indonesian culture (the remnants of State-*Ibuism*) that encompasses traditional gender roles, the progressive agenda of mainstreaming and empowerment, as pursued after the collapse of the New Order regime, and the inherited western patriarchal culture of the modern university that emphasises individualism. Individualistic meritocratic discourse contradicts the collective and progressive elements of the empowerment discourse that has gained momentum in contemporary Indonesia, hampering a more progressive process in favour of meritocratic notions of individual talent and competence (Bagilhole & Goode, 2001; White, Bagilhole, & Riordan, 2012). Our data reveals insights into the effects of these contradictions. Although the discourse of empowerment has permeated the universities, as illustrated by some of our interviewees' comments, the discourse of meritocracy remains dominant in universities and seems to be gaining momentum. This is evident in the comments our participants make about the perceived "masculine" image of university leadership, the neutralization of gender with more emphasis on competence, and the assumption that only now are women ready for meritocracy. These articulations offer a clear illustration of meritocracy as it gets in the way of women's career progression.

Our discussion therefore makes three contributions to the literature. Firstly, it contributes to an underresearched area regarding higher education in

Indonesia. The only existing research in the Indonesian context (Dzuhayatin & Edwards, 2010) goes to the extent of maintaining a mainstream deterministic explanation of gender disparity and locates the problem in local culture. This concern brings us to the second contribution, i.e., while there has been a sub-stantive body of research that discusses the position of women in academia, both in western (Blackmore & Sawers, 2015; Fitzgerald, 2012; Locke & Wright, 2017; Wrigley-Asante, 2012) and developing countries (Aiston, 2014; Morley, 2013), we provide a different perspective and analysis of the relationship between gender and higher education leadership by considering both local and international culture equally. Our data demonstrates that while the local culture (traditional patriarchal culture and remnants of State-*Ibuism*) per-sists, the individualistic meritocracy inherited from the structure and culture of the western university dominates. Both these cultures co-exist and play out in contemporary universities in Indonesia. Thirdly, even if the context is Indone-sian, we offer an argument about the corrosive effect of meritocracy in any university, irrespective of geographical location and local cultures.

Notes

1. There are actually several metaphors that explain barriers and entrapment encountered by women in leadership, such as "leaky pipelines," "ivory base-ment," and "glass cliff"; "glass ceiling" effect is preferred here because it captures the situation that gender is made as barrier for it is stronger at the top of the hierarchy than at lower levels (Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia & Vanneman, 2001), and this barrier is invisible like "glass". This concept of "glass ceiling" has also been used to describe structural and cultural barriers for women in Thailand's higher education system and Southeast Asia (Luke, 1997, 2002).
2. New Order is the English translation of *Orde Baru*. This was the period in which Soeharto ruled (1965–1998) Indonesia and is often labeled as an 'authoritarian developmentalist' regime which prioritized economic development and con-sidered politics as a risk to national stability. Women were "depoliticised and mobilised to support the New Order's developmentalist goals through a series of highly 'interventionist state institutions' " (Suryakusuma, 2012, p. 1).
3. Personal communication.

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ABSTRACT IN BAHASA INDONESIA
Artikel ini membahas tentang perbedaan pandangan antara wacana meritokrasi dan pemberdayaan di universitas negeri di Indonesia serta kaitannya dengan representasi kepemimpinan perempuan. Munculnya lima rektor perempuan menandakan perubahan yang memungkinkan perempuan untuk menjadi pemimpin. Kami mengemukakan argumen bahwa ada dua wacana yang kontradiktif, yakni pemberdayaan dan meritokrasi, yang terlihat berdampingan di ranah kepemimpinan universitas. Wacana pemberdayaan ini mendukung kesetaraan gender dan peran serta perempuan dalam proses pengambilan keputusan di universitas yang menekankan pada "pemberdayaan" sebagai agenda politik yang progresif di masyarakat. Sebaliknya, wacana mengenai meritokrasi mengacu kepada prestasi yang berdasar pada kelayakan individu, seperti kemampuan dan bakat. Kontradiksi ini diteliti melalui data wawancara yang mengilustrasikan representasi kepemimpinan yang selalu berubah di konteks universitas di Indonesia. Artikel ini membuat tiga kontribusi. Pertama, tulisan ini menambah literatur pada area riset yang tak terjamah, khususnya bidang pendidikan tinggi di Indonesia. Kedua, tulisan ini memberikan perspektif dan analisis mengenai hubungan gender dan pendidikan tinggi dengan mempertimbangkan budaya lokal dan internasional. Ketiga, artikel ini menawarkan argument mengenai efek korosif dari meritokrasi di universitas manapun, terlepas dari lokasi geografis dan budaya lokal.

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