

INCREASING WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

A PROMISING PATH TOWARDS IMPROVING LEARNING

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The Gender at the Centre Initiative (GCI) was launched in July 2019 by the G7 Ministers of Education and Development in collaboration with multilateral and civil society organizations committed to advancing gender equality in education.

The GCI is being implemented in eight pilot countries: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone and is technically led by IIEP-UNESCO Dakar, the Africa office of the International Institute for Educational Planning.

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Women are under-represented in leadership positions across multiple sectors, including politics, healthcare and business (UN Women, 2021; Krivkovich et al., 2018; ILO, 2020; Stone et al., 2019). The positive impacts of having women in leadership positions have been well documented. For instance, in rural India, having women at the head of the municipal council is associated with an improvement in the provision of public goods such as drinking water and roads (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Municipalities under female leadership in Brazil had lower death and hospitalization rates during COVID-19 (Bruce et al., 2021). However, in the education sector, while there is growing literature on the benefits of female teachers on girls' educational outcomes (Sperling et al., 2015), the challenges and opportunities of female leadership in schools have not been sufficiently studied.

This evidence brief compiles emerging insights on the association between women school leaders' and education outcomes. It also seeks to draw attention

to the low representation of women in school leadership roles and the barriers that hinder women's access to these positions. Finally, this brief highlights the need for further research on gender and school leadership to identify policies and practices that can be implemented to increase women's representation and scale high-quality management practices adopted by women to more schools to advance learning outcomes for children.

EMERGING EVIDENCE ON FEMALE SCHOOL LEADERS AND IMPROVED EDUCATION OUTCOMES

The impact of school leadership on student learning outcomes has been a staple of school effectiveness literature, particularly for high-income countries (Grissom et al., 2021). A clear body of evidence suggests that schools with effective leaders tend to have better student learning outcomes.² School leadership has been shown to be the second most important in-school factor affecting learning, after classroom teaching (UNESCO, 2018). By adopting practices such as creating clear goals for school improvement, developing accountability mechanisms, and providing pedagogical support and feedback to teachers, school leaders indirectly affect student learning by both improving teaching quality and

ensuring the effective management and use of resources (Day et al., 2020; Education Commission, 2019; Leaver et al., 2019; World Bank, 2018).

Emerging evidence from low- and middle-income countries shows a positive association between women school leaders and student performance. On average across 14 Francophone African countries, learning outcomes³ for the sample of students in female-led primary schools are higher than those in male-led ones, for both mathematics and reading (PASEC-CONFEMEN⁴, 2020). The positive differences in learning outcomes in female-led schools are also statistically significant for nine countries in reading⁵ and for six countries in mathematics.⁶ The midline evaluation of the Tusome programme in Kenya finds students in female-led schools have higher scores in oral reading fluency for both English and Kiswahili than students in male-led schools (Freudenberger & Davis, 2017).⁷

UNICEF Innocenti's Data Must Speak research in Lao People's Democratic Republic shows that the most effective schools (i.e. schools that have higher student learning outcomes than other schools in similar contexts with the same resources) are twice as likely to have a female school leader than lower performing schools (UNICEF Innocenti & Ministry of Education, Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2020).⁸ In Mozambique, the 2019 ALDE study⁹ shows that female-led schools have lower dropout rates than male-led schools, although these results may be attributable to the higher concentration of female school leaders in urban and more developed areas of the country (UNICEF, forthcoming). In Togo, primary school exam results and promotion rates are higher for both girls and boys attending schools led by women, even when controlling for a set of contextual and geographical variables; but the effects of female leadership appear to be stronger for girls, helping to reduce existing gender disparities (UNICEF Innocenti & Ministry of Education, Togo, forthcoming).

Beyond learning, women in school leadership may also have a positive association with student well-being. Previous findings show female school leaders reported higher ability to support the well-being of their school community during the COVID-19 pandemic (Global School Leaders, 2021a).

PRACTICES MORE OFTEN ADOPTED BY FEMALE SCHOOL LEADERS

Early analysis suggests that female school leaders may adopt a range of effective practices and behaviours that could be contributing to these improved outcomes. For instance, in Lao People's Democratic Republic, women school leaders create positive teaching and learning environments where teachers and students report being more actively engaged. Compared to students attending male-led schools, students in female-led schools indicate their teachers are significantly more likely to assign homework, check their work, and teach concepts until all students achieve mastery (UNICEF Innocenti & Ministry of Education, Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2020).

Across the 48 countries participating in the 2018 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), female school leaders were more likely than males to report higher levels of instructional leadership, measured through actions such as supporting teachers to collaborate, motivating teachers to improve their skills, and making teachers feel responsible for students' learning (OECD, 2020). A study of 381 urban primary schools in Chile showed that female school leaders were rated higher than their male counterparts in 9 out of 14 teacher management practices evaluated, including giving personalized support to improve pedagogical practices and taking actions to retain quality teachers (Weinstein et al., 2021). Analysis of World Management Survey data from eight countries¹⁰ also indicates that female school leaders are associated with higher-quality management (Martínez et al., 2020).

UNICEF Innocenti's Time to Teach research on teacher attendance in West and Central Africa also suggests that female school leaders are more likely than male school leaders to actively encourage teacher attendance and use sensitization strategies to make teachers aware of how their attendance affects student outcomes (Jativa et al., forthcoming).¹¹ The same research suggests that in female-led schools, parents tend to be more engaged in discussions about their children's behaviour and academic progress (Jativa et al., forthcoming). Previous research has demonstrated that greater parental involvement with the school has a positive association with children's academic outcomes (Brossard et al., 2020; Castro et al., 2015).

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP REMAINS LIMITED

Globally, nearly 7 out of 10 primary and 5 out of 10 secondary school teachers are female.¹² At the primary school level, the proportion of qualified female teachers is higher than that of men, even in low-income countries.¹³ However, in many countries the situation is reversed at the secondary level, where women are less represented than men. Analysis of 27 African countries with available data consistently reveals that the proportion of female teachers in secondary education is notably lower than in primary education (UNESCO, forthcoming). Similarly, a study of Ghanaian primary schools shows bias against female teachers in relation to how their performance is assessed: school leaders are 11 percentage points less likely to rate a female teacher as 'more effective' even when female teachers produce higher student learning outcomes (Beg et al., 2021).

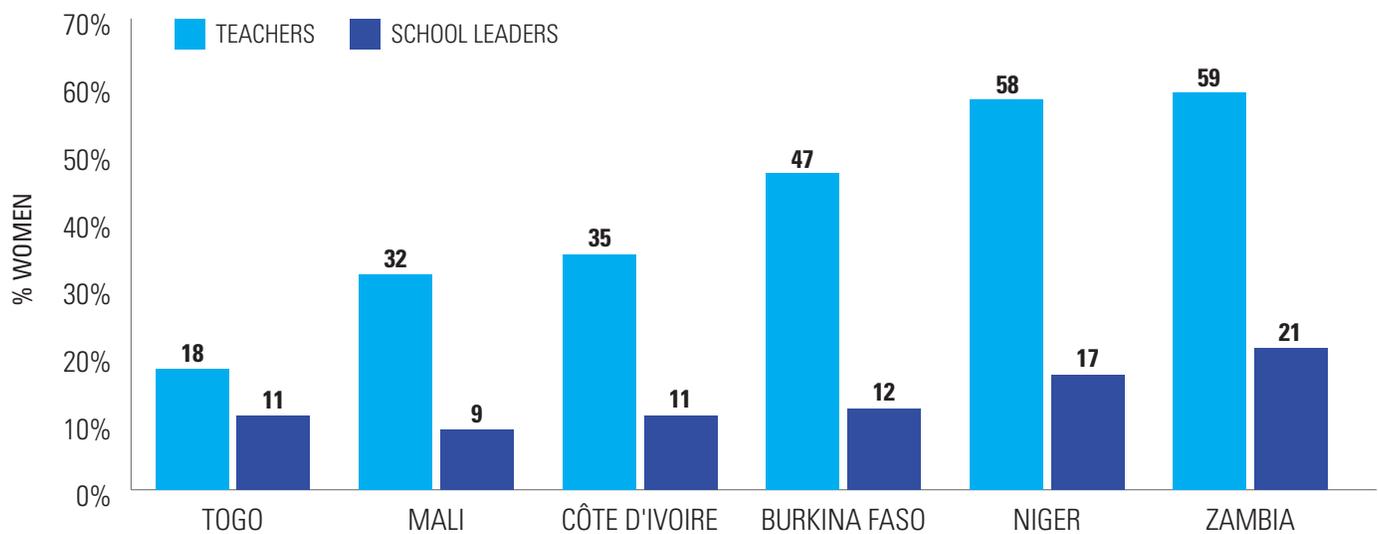
Despite women's increasing representation in the teaching workforce over the last two decades, women remain largely under-represented in school leadership positions. Administrative data from six African countries shows that the share of women among primary school leaders is very low, varying from 9 per cent to 21 per cent (see Figure 1). In Niger, where

female teachers represent over half of the primary education teaching workforce, women account for only 17 per cent of primary school leaders. In Togo, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, only around 1 in 10 primary school leaders are women.

Other research has uncovered similar gender disparities in school leadership. On average, across the 14 Francophone African countries participating in the 2019 PASEC assessment, only 22 per cent of students attended a female-led school (see Figure 2).¹⁴ In Latin America and the Caribbean, women's representation in leadership has also not kept pace with their representation in the teaching workforce. In eight countries, there is a gap of 20 percentage points or more between the share of female school leaders and the share of female teachers, with the largest gaps in Mexico, Chile and Colombia, where fewer than 40 per cent of school leaders are women (Adelman & Lemos, 2021).¹⁵

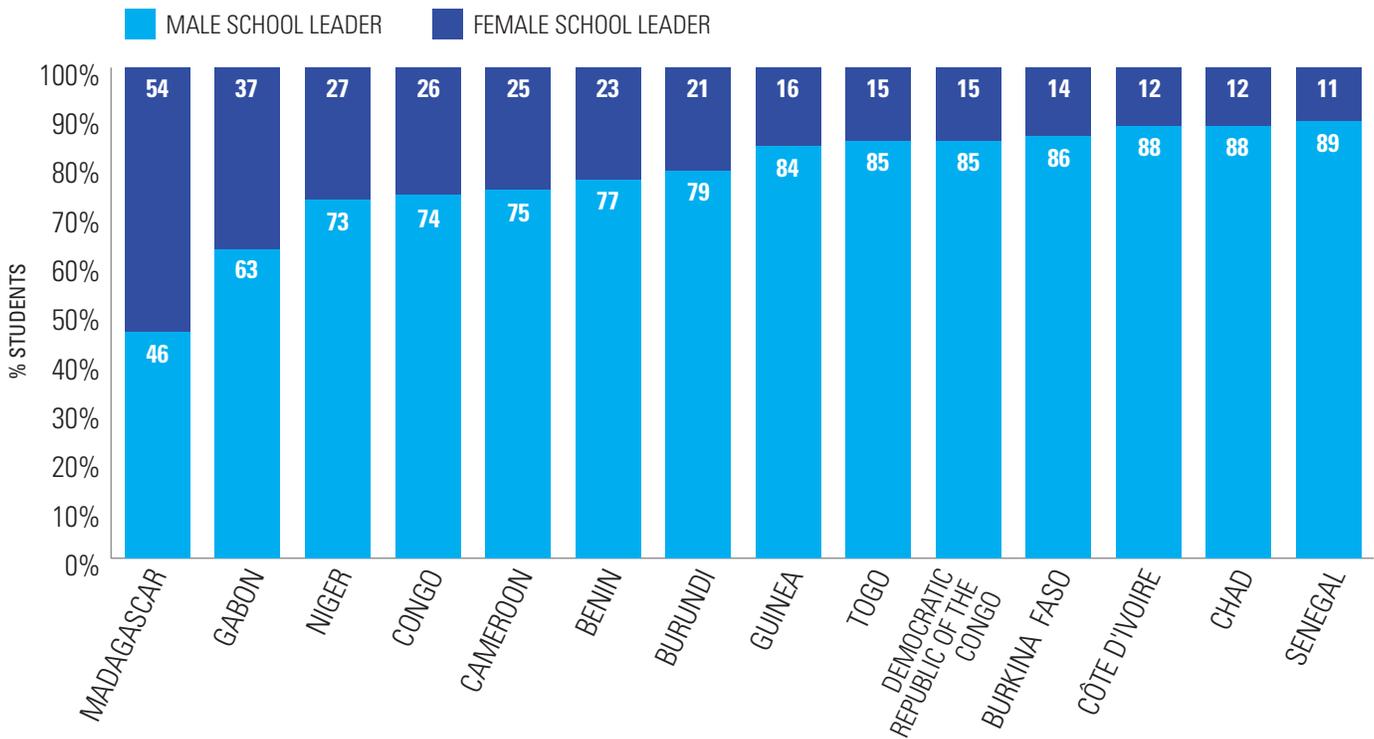
Data from the 2018 TALIS reveals that only 48 per cent of lower secondary school leaders are female versus 68 per cent of teachers (OECD, 2020). A similar trend is observed in the 2020 Global School Leaders survey for India, Indonesia, Kenya and Malaysia, in which only 50 per cent of school leaders identified themselves as women compared to more than 70 per cent of teachers (Global School Leaders, 2021b).

FIGURE 1: Female participation in school leadership and the teaching workforce at the primary school level



Source: Calculations using data from Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) from Burkina Faso (2020/21), Côte d'Ivoire (2020/21), Mali (2018/19), Niger (2020/21), Togo (2020/21) and Zambia (2021).

FIGURE 2: Distribution of students in PASEC-participating countries by gender of school leader



Source: PASEC-CONFEMEN, 2020.

INCREASING WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: A NEED FOR MORE EVIDENCE TO INFORM POLICY-MAKING

The available evidence shows women remain under-represented in leadership roles. Concrete policy and programmatic measures are needed to increase women's participation and advance towards gender equality in school leadership.

Improving data availability and use is a critical step for advancing the agenda on increasing women's representation in school leadership roles. At the global, country and sub-national levels, more systematic data is needed to better understand women's participation in school leadership roles and inform policy and programme design. Data on school leaders' gender collected as part of governments' school censuses is largely underused and some international learning assessments, including PISA, PISA-D, PIRLS and TIMSS, do not currently include questions on the gender of school leaders (OECD, 2016; IEA, 2015; IEA, 2018).

There is also a need to delve deeper into the various contextual, cultural, societal and structural barriers that prevent women from advancing to school leadership roles, and to identify policies and promising practices that will increase the share of female school leaders in a range of contexts. Analysis of existing policies on school leader selection and deployment can help to illuminate structural barriers women may face.¹⁶ Further analysis of the profile of women school leaders, including their level of education and number of years of experience, could provide an understanding of whether promotion is based on merit or other factors. Organizations conducting nationally representative surveys with school leaders and teachers could prioritize the inclusion of gender in their analysis to better understand gender disparities in areas such as access to professional development and training, and pathways for career progression and promotion.

Beyond the policy level, contextual, cultural and societal barriers such as discrimination, risk of violence, poverty and domestic responsibilities should also be carefully considered; they may prevent

women from moving into school leadership roles or inhibit their success once there.

Finally, further research is needed to better understand what behaviours and practices female school leaders adopt that may contribute to improved learning and education outcomes. This is especially true for low- and middle-income countries, where systematic research on the leadership, attitudes and management skills needed to improve learning outcomes remains limited ([Global School Leaders, 2020](#)). This brief illuminates emerging evidence of the relationship between female school leaders and improved outcomes and has begun to explore some practices women may be more likely than men to adopt, including supporting teachers to improve their teaching practice and engaging parents in their children's

learning. However, significant evidence gaps remain around the specific practices used by female school leaders to improve educational outcomes and the measures that can be taken to support scaling these practices to more school leaders, both female and male.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 This brief uses the terminology 'school leader' to broadly encompass school directors, principals, head teachers, headmasters/headmistresses, etc. as these terms may vary in different contexts.
- 2 Across eight high- and middle-income countries, a one-point increase in a school leader's management practices score was associated with a 10 per cent increase in student performance (Bloom et al., 2014). In 65 PISA-participating countries, school leaders moving from the bottom quartile to the top quartile of performance is associated with increases in student learning equivalent to an additional three months of schooling for one year (Leaver et al., 2019). In Latin America and the Caribbean, effective school leaders have been found to improve school efficiency, which was positively associated with higher student learning outcomes (Adelman & Lemos, 2021).
- 3 As measured through a standardized learning assessment administered by PASEC-CONFEMEN.
- 4 Programme d'Analyse des Systèmes Éducatifs de la CONFEMEN (Conférence des ministres de l'Éducation des États et gouvernements de la Francophonie).
- 5 Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Madagascar, Niger, Senegal and Chad.
- 6 Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Madagascar and Senegal.
- 7 The Tusome programme implemented in Kenya aims to improve literacy outcomes by improving teachers' instructional practices and expanding instructional support, improving schools' access to books and learning materials, and strengthening collaboration at the systems-level; the midline evaluation of the programme includes a sample of 204 schools and 4,671 Class 1 and Class 2 pupils.
- 8 Using a total sample of 120 purposively selected schools.
- 9 The Avaliação Longitudinal da Desistência Escolar (ALDE) is a longitudinal assessment of school dropout that follows the same cohort of children over several years.
- 10 Brazil, Canada, Germany, India, Italy, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the USA.
- 11 Results based on a sample of 180 purposively selected schools in nine countries, including Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mauritania, Nigeria, The Gambia and Togo.
- 12 Authors' calculation based on 2019 UIS UNESCO Institute for Statistics data: UIS, 'UIS Statistics' <<http://data.uis.unesco.org/>> [accessed 17 March 2022].
- 13 2019 UIS UNESCO Institute for Statistics data: UIS, 'UIS Statistics' <<http://data.uis.unesco.org/>> [accessed 17 March 2022].
- 14 While not based on a fully representative sample, analysis from Jativa et al., (forthcoming) for nine West and Central African countries shows similar patterns; in the total sample of 180 purposively selected schools, only 20 per cent of school leaders were female, despite 50 per cent of the teachers being female.
- 15 The Tercer Estudio Regional Comparativo y Explicativo (TERCE) assessment is the third regional student assessment conducted in 2013 with the participation of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay; the eight countries referenced include Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay and Peru.
- 16 Promotions from teachers to school leaders might also be linked to systemic issues related to teacher and career development that may be driven by length of service and favouritism instead of merit, motivation and performance (Martin, 2018).

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