ENHANCING GENDER INCLUSIVITY IN INDONESIA'S SCHOOL LEADERSHIP PATHWAYS

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ABOUT THE LEARNING CYCLE ON INCREASING WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

This case study is a result of the KIX EMAP Learning Cycle "Increasing Women's Representation in School Leadership". Facilitated by Dr Fenot Aklog and Dr Cathryn Magno, this Learning Cycle ran from 18 September 2024 to 28 February 2025. The course equipped participants with the conceptual and analytical tools for understanding conditions that promote and serve as barriers to the recruitment, development, and retention of women in school leadership roles. Sixteen national teams took part in this Learning Cycle, including Albania, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Indonesia, Kyrgyz Republic, Maldives, Moldova, Nepal, Pakistan (Punjab), Pakistan (Sindh), Philippines, Sri Lanka, Timor Leste, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

DKRPPA   Desa/kelurahan ramah perempuan dan peduli anak (Women-friendly and child-caring villages/subdistricts)

ECCD   Early childhood care and development

ECE   Early childhood education

EMAP   Europe, Middle East and North Africa, Asia and Pacific

GPE KIX   Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange

KKG   Kelompok kerja guru (Teacher working group)

KKKS   Kelompok kerja kepala sekolah (School leader working group)

LPPKS   Lembaga Pengembangan dan Pemberdayaan Kepala Sekolah (Principal Development and Empowerment Institute)

MoHA   Ministry of Home Affairs

MoPSE   Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education

MoRA   Ministry of Religious Affairs

MoWECP   Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection

SPM   Minimum Service Standards/Standar Pelayanan Minimal

NGO   Nongovernmental organisation

PGP   Program Guru Penggerak (Champion Teacher Programme)

TALIS   Teaching and Learning International Survey

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief explores the persistent underrepresentation of women in school leadership roles in Indonesia, identifying key barriers and proposing targeted recommendations to promote gender equity across educational institutions. Despite progress in female participation in education, cultural norms, systemic biases, and structural challenges continue to limit women's access to leadership positions, such as school leaders. The authors identify several barriers, including cultural and social expectations, gender biases in the selection process, geographic assignment and regulatory framework limitations.

Barriers and Constraints

One of the most significant obstacles to women pursuing leadership roles in Indonesia's education system is the deeply ingrained cultural expectation that women be the primary caregivers within the family. This traditional gender role places a heavy burden on women, limiting their ability to take on demanding positions such as school leaders due to domestic responsibilities. These societal norms not only shape family and community expectations but also influence institutional practices, making it more difficult for women to be considered viable candidates for leadership.

In addition to these cultural constraints, female teachers often face direct discrimination during the selection process. Assumptions about potential maternity leave frequently lead to women being excluded from leadership opportunities, as decision-makers favour male candidates perceived as more stable and continuously available.

Moreover, female leaders are often stereotyped as 'too emotional', reinforcing biases that question their suitability for decision-making roles compared to their male counterparts. Another challenge lies in resistance from senior male teachers, who may oppose the promotion of younger, qualified female colleagues, viewing their advancement as a threat to traditional hierarchies. This generational and gender-based tension can create an unwelcoming environment for aspiring female leaders and hinder progress toward equitable representation.

Compounding these issues is the challenge of geographic assignment, as leadership roles often require relocation to remote or rural areas. These postings can severely complicate work-life balance, especially for women expected to manage household duties. The combination of cultural expectations, biased selection processes, seniority-based resistance and logistical difficulties stemming from remote assignments creates a complex and interrelated set of barriers that continue to limit women's access to leadership in Indonesian schools.

Furthermore, current policies governing leadership selection often lack explicit safeguards against gender bias. For example, existing regulations do not prohibit excluding women from leadership positions due to anticipated maternity leave or reproductive roles. Additionally, while some national programmes promote teacher development, female participants are less likely to be assigned as school leaders, suggesting institutional biases embedded in implementation frameworks.

Enablers and Policy Levers

On the other hand, several key enablers have been identified that support women in overcoming barriers to school leadership in Indonesia. The first is peer mentorship, whereby aspiring female leaders gain confidence and visibility through learning from and being supported by other women in leadership roles. This kind of guidance not only provides practical insights into navigating leadership challenges but also serves as a powerful inspiration, showing younger female teachers that leadership is an attainable goal.

Similarly, family support plays a crucial part in helping women manage the demands of both professional and personal life. Encouragement from spouses and extended family members enables female educators to pursue leadership opportunities without feeling constrained by domestic responsibilities.

Finally, institutional and policy support at both the national and district levels contribute to fostering an enabling environment for women in leadership. Initiatives such as family-friendly regulations, inclusive hiring practices and supportive workplace cultures help normalise the presence of female school leaders and signal a broader shift toward gender equity in education. Together, these enablers—peer mentorship, family support and progressive policies—provide a critical foundation for increasing women's representation in school leadership.

Recommendations

This policy brief proposes the following policy recommendations aimed at the national, subnational and community levels:

Central Government

- Integrate gender-responsive training and mentorship into national leadership programmes.

- Revise selection regulations to eliminate bias against maternity leave.

- Align madrasah leadership selection with gender-equitable standards.

- Institutionalise gender indicators within national education standards.

Provincial and District Governments

- Provide childcare allowances and flexible work arrangements.

- Ensure transparent and merit-based selection processes using digital systems.

- Expand professional learning communities focused on female leadership.

Community-Based Organisations and Development Partners

- Promote gender equity through local advocacy and structured mentorship networks.

- Advocate for work-life balance policies at the district level.

- Collaborate with governments to collect and analyse data on female representation.

Monitoring and Evaluation

- Collect gender-disaggregated data and conduct longitudinal studies to track progress.

- Explore intersectional factors (e.g. socioeconomic status, ethnicity) affecting women's leadership access.

Expected Impact: Implementing these recommendations will foster a more equitable, inclusive leadership landscape, enhancing decision-making, student outcomes and institutional performance. Empowering female school leaders also sets a broader societal precedent, inspiring future generations and contributing to national goals of gender equality and sustainable development. This brief emphasises that systemic change—through policy reform, community engagement and cultural shifts—is essential to unlocking the full potential of women in school leadership across Indonesia.

1

INTRODUCTION

With over 280 million people and 1,340 ethnic groups, Indonesia is the fourth largest country by population and one of the most diverse countries, with over 17,000 islands across 1.9 million km² (Indonesia.go.id, 2017; Lubis, 2024; Statistics Indonesia, 2023). The Indonesian people recognise Bahasa Indonesia as their official language, but there are also 652 regional and local languages in the country. With a decentralised governance system, the country has 38 provinces and 514 cities or districts (Amalia & Pratiwi, 2024).

Indonesia has a very complex education service delivery involving two distinct ministries: the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) (previously the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology, or MoECRT) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) (see Figure 1). MoPSE is the primary ministerial agency charged with delivering education and typically leads education reform and policies; it offers a decentralised provision of public education, with district governments responsible for service delivery. Under the MoPSE, the district governments oversee early childhood, primary and junior secondary education, whereas provincial governments oversee senior secondary education, special needs and vocational education. MoRA, by contrast, oversees the religious

instruction in schools of the sixacknowledged religions in Indonesia—Islam, Catholicism/Christianity, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Khonghucu (Confucianism)—and provides centralised oversight of religious schools. There are over 60 million students and over 4 million teachers in over 500,000 schools in Indonesia (MoPSE, 2024a; MoRA, 2025).

Despite making up a significant portion of the teaching workforce in Indonesia, women remain underrepresented in school leadership roles. This gender gap in educational leadership is a central policy concern that reflects broader gender disparities in the Indonesian workforce. This policy brief focuses on the policy regulating and supporting the pipeline and/or recruitment of teachers as school leaders.

The authors conducted several interviews with school leaders to enrich our insights. The informants were three female school leaders from the Special Region of Yogyakarta, the Province of Maluku and the Province of North Maluku who oversaw schools at different levels of education, from kindergarten and primary school to senior high school. Details and further discussion of the interview results are elaborated in the Women in School Leadership: Barriers and Enablers section.

Figure 1: Landscape of education governance in Indonesia
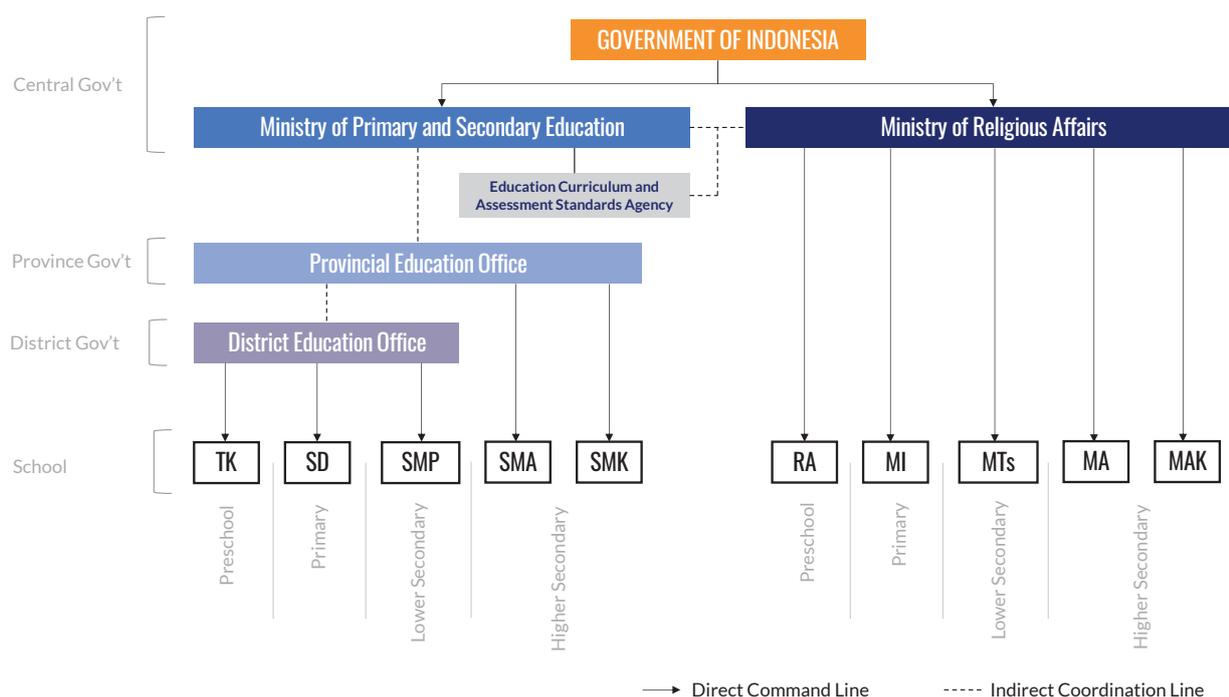
Source: MoPSE, 2024a

2

SCHOOL LEADER POLICIES AND PATHWAYS

2.1 Policies and Pathways

Over the past 20 years, the government of Indonesia has continually enacted policy reforms to regulate school leaders' selection, moving from a strongly political process to one based on competencies and from one that saw school leaders as managers to one that expects them to be instructional leaders (Government of Indonesia, 2003, 2007, 2010, 2018a, 2021, 2022, 2023b, 2024b; Pusat Studi Pendidikan dan Kebijakan [PSKP], 2017). In the 2020–2024 policy, the government includes teacher leadership training called Champion Teacher Programme [Program Guru Penggerak (PGP)] as a prerequisite for school leadership candidacy. Even though the appointment of school leaders remains firmly under the authority of subnational governments, this preservice leadership training gives more nuance to the profile of prospective school leaders. Figure 2 depicts the typical school leadership pathway in Indonesia.

Under MoPSE, however, teachers have to receive a recommendation from existing school leaders to be able to participate in the training. Thus, the appointment of teachers as school leaders depends not only on the preference of the heads of the district but also on their recognition from existing school leaders and their peers (PSKP, 2017).

However, as MoRa exercises centralised oversight of madrasahs, school leaders' selection in madrasahs is not under the authority of subnational governments. The appointment of madrasah leaders also requires teachers to obtain a Madrasah Principal Certificate through training (Government of Indonesia, 2017, 2018b).

To become a school principal, teachers must meet several eligibility criteria, including academic qualifications (a bachelor's degree or equivalent from an accredited institution), possession of teaching and leadership certificates and a minimum of two years of managerial experience in education. Prospective school leaders must also have a good performance appraisal for the past two years, be physically and mentally healthy, have no record of disciplinary or criminal issues and be under 56 years old at the time of application. Additional requirements apply for civil servant teachers, such as holding a minimum rank of penata muda (junior administrative staff) or its equivalent (Government of Indonesia, 2021).

Based on regulations that are currently effective in Indonesia, school leadership positions in government-based schools are regarded as assignments given to teachers who are qualified to be in leadership positions. In general, the selection process to become a school leader involves two main stages: (1) administrative—wherein the regional government conducts the selection process for the administrative aspect; and (2) substantive, assessed by the leadership potential test and conducted by the Principal Development and Empowerment Institute [Lembaga Pengembangan dan Pemberdayaan Kepala Sekolah (LPPKS)]. This process is applicable only for civil servant teachers in education levels that are classified as part of compulsory education, meaning that this route is not open to teachers in private schools or in early childhood education (ECE) institutes, which are not yet included in compulsory education.

Figure 2: Indonesia's school leadership pathway (2020–2024)
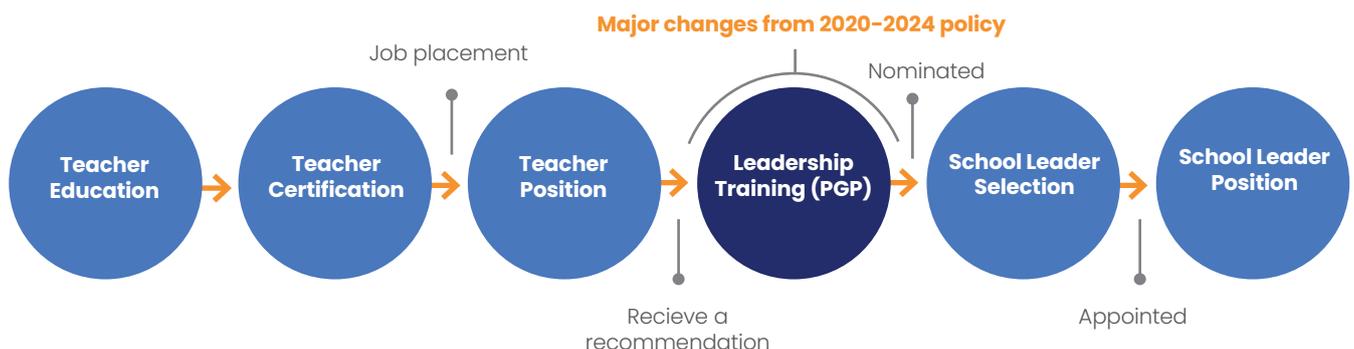
Source: Government of Indonesia, 2003, 2007, 2010, 2018a, 2021, 2022, 2023b, 2024b

On performance, teachers are assessed based on two groups of competencies. The first, practical competencies, include (1) classroom management, (2) application of positive discipline, (3) constructive feedback, (4) attention and concern, (5) expectations for students, (6) interactive activities, (7) interactive instruction and (8) learning instruction. The second group of competencies is behavioural, requiring that the candidate be (1) service oriented, (2) accountable, (3) competent, (4) harmonious, (5) loyal, (6) adaptive and (7) collaborative (Government of Indonesia, 2023a).

In addition to meeting the aforementioned requirements, teachers who aspire to become school leaders must receive a recommendation from the 'team for consideration of the appointment of the principal', comprising a number of people from the regional government who are responsible, including the regional secretary, education authorities, education board and school supervisors (Government of Indonesia, 2021).

The recent policy changes will surely impact the educational landscape in a way that will shape future school leaders as instructional leaders. Nevertheless, since the regulatory framework does not seem to be gender responsive (or was not designed to fix gender imbalances in educational leadership), the extent to which this policy will promote gender equality is still limited. The pathway of school leaders under this reform creates an additional bottleneck. For instance, the scheme of recommendation by existing school leaders as a prerequisite for teachers' leadership training may be affected by gender bias in addition to gender biases in the appointment of a school leader (from the pool of eligible teachers) by local governments.

2.2 The Importance of School Leadership and Women in the Role

A report from Global School Leaders (2024) explains that female school leadership is associated with better educational outcomes for both male and female students. Female leaders are often more collaborative and collegial, fostering stronger pedagogical environments and engaging with teachers and communities more inclusively. The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS; as cited in Global School Leaders, 2024) found that female principals are more likely to demonstrate high levels of instructional leadership than their male counterparts.

This collaborative leadership approach is reflected in the experiences of our informant school leaders. One interviewed principal shared how she fosters a participatory school environment, stating, 'We always start with a staff meeting. I listen to their opinions before making any decisions. I don't want to be the only one leading—teachers and staff should feel that they own the school too' (Informant 1). This shows the role of female school leaders in building collective decision-making structures that strengthen school governance and teacher engagement.

Female school leaders also play a significant role in driving innovation and continued learning among teachers. Some principals establish structured peer-learning models, ensuring that teachers regularly reflect on and improve their teaching practices. As one leader explained, 'Every Thursday, my teachers stop teaching in the afternoon and instead learn from one another. We document our progress and share ideas. This has transformed our teaching culture' (Informant 2). Such initiatives not only improve teacher quality but also create leadership pipelines within schools, demonstrating how female-led institutions cultivate long-term capacity building.

One school leader also emphasised the importance of mentorship and teacher development, ensuring that her teachers were not only prepared to teach but also committed to improving their craft. 'Many of my teachers [in my ECE school] only had high school diplomas when they started. I guided them through structured training and encouraged them to pursue higher education. Now, they are more confident and effective in the classroom' (Informant 3).

Furthermore, female school leaders excel in engaging parents and communities, making schools more inclusive and fostering stronger relationships between teachers, students and families. One principal described her efforts to change the perception of parental involvement in school activities: 'At first, parents thought we only called them for two reasons—if their child had a problem or if the school needed donations. Now, we involve them in initiatives like the Plastic Free campaign, and they actively participate because they see the value in being part of the school community' (Informant 1).

Given these contributions, it is evident that more female school leaders can positively transform school environments. However, if women in leadership have such a strong impact, why are they still underrepresented? What barriers prevent female teachers from advancing into leadership roles? How can policy and institutional frameworks be reformed to better support them?

3

WOMEN IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: IN NUMBERS

In schools under MoPSE, even though females make up 68% of all teachers, only 44% of school leaders are female (Figure 3), and the higher the level of education, the wider the gap. The percentage of female school leaders is higher at the primary level (49%) than in junior secondary (34%), senior secondary (29%) and vocational (27%) schools. This illustrates that, at all levels of education, female teachers are less likely to advance to leadership positions. Unfortunately, historical data on the proportion of female school leaders is not easily accessible to the public, hampering the ability to determine whether there has been an increase in female school leaders. Interestingly, however, our dataindicates that women are better caretakers than their male counterparts at the lower grade levels, especially in ECE, and thus more suitable as principals (Informant 3).

Figure 3: Proportion of female teachers and school leaders under MoPSE by education level
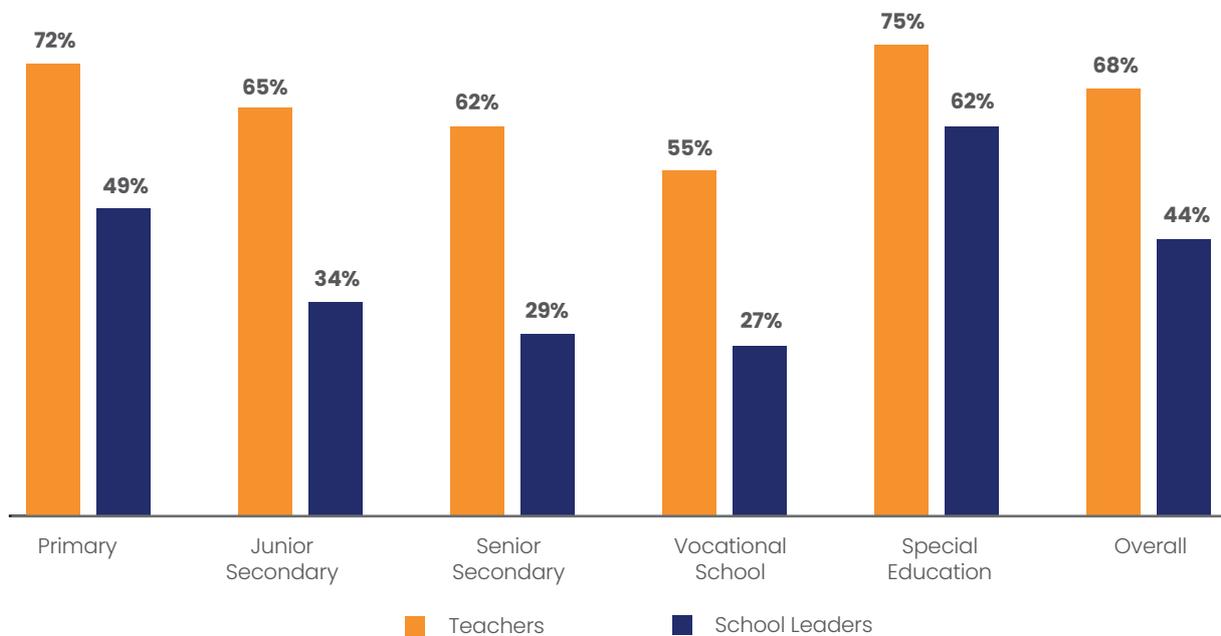
Source: (MoPSE, 2024b, 2024a)

Apart from the low level of representation in female leadership, disparities exist by region in Indonesia. At the primary education level, the western part of Indonesia has a higher proportion of female school leaders as compared to the eastern part (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Distribution of female school principals by province (primary level)
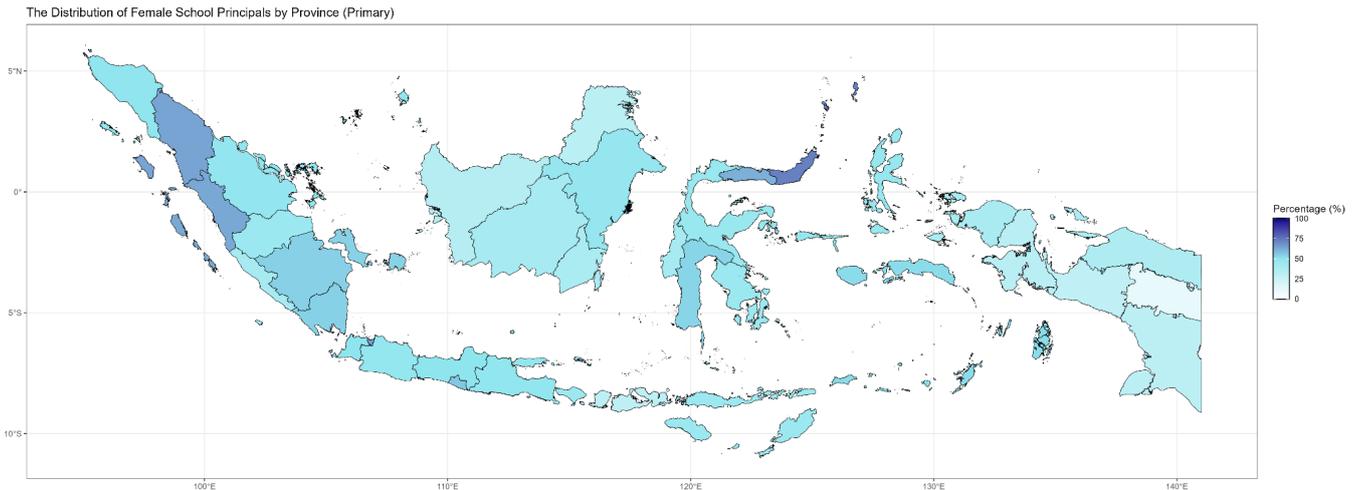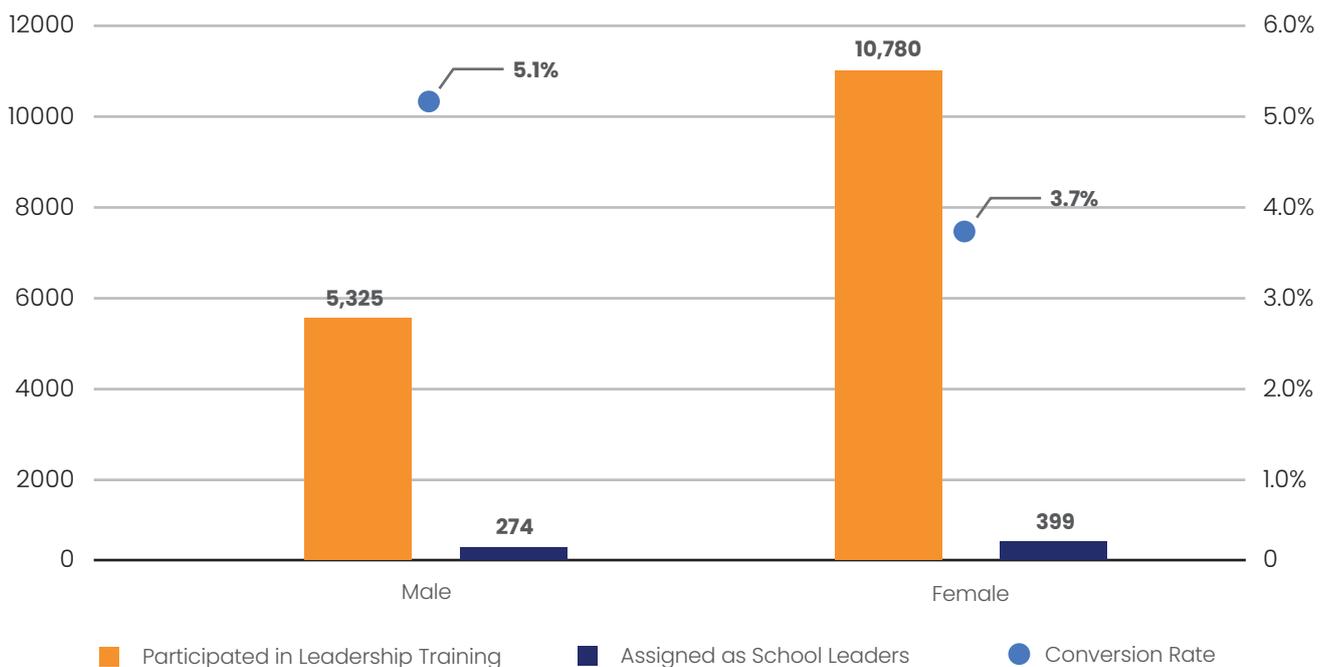

Source: MoPSE, 2024c

A previous regulation on principal assignment (MoPSE Regulation No. 40/2021) states that teachers who aspire to be principals should have a certificate of completion of the PGP (Champion Teacher Programme). The programme itself focuses on enhancing teachers' learning strategies as well as instructional leadership. Only upon obtaining the certificate can teachers fulfil one of the administrative requirements to participate in the selection process to become principals. Figure 5 illustrates the number of teachers who have passed the certification programme by gender compared to the number of teachers who were selected as principals by gender. The data depicted in Figure 5 highlights a notable gender disparity in the transition from teacher leadership training to school leader appointments. While significantly more female teachers (66.94%) than male teachers (33.06%) successfully completed the certification programme, the conversion rate from programme completion to principal appointment remains disproportionately higher for males. Specifically, 5.15% of trained male teachers were appointed as school leaders, compared to only 3.70% of trained female teachers.

Figure 5: Proportion of participants in PGP programme assigned as principals (by gender)

Source: (MoPSE, 2022)

Although female teachers had a higher absolute number of principal appointments (399) compared to male teachers (274), this disparity in conversion rates suggests that female teachers face additional barriers in securing leadership roles, even after fulfilling the same training requirements. This underscores the need for targeted interventions to address structural and systemic biases in the appointment process (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Indonesia's female school leadership pipeline

Major changes from 2020–2024 policy

Job placement

Nominated

| Teacher Education | Teacher Certification | Teacher Position | Leadership Training (PGP) | School Leader Selection | School Leader Position |

Recieve a recommendation

Here remains the bottleneck

Appointed
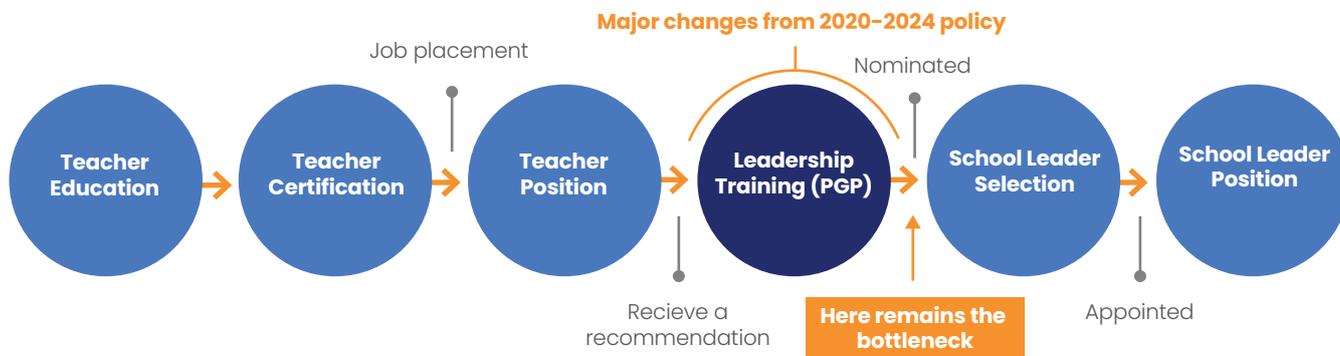
Source: MoPSE, 2022

4

WOMEN IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: BARRIERS AND ENABLERS

4.1   Barriers and Constraints

In a study on women in school and madrasah leadership, Marget et al. (2021) found that female teachers require more time than male teachers to assume school leadership positions. In the provinces of their study, female teachers, on average, took 19.8 years to become principals, while male teachers took 16.1 years, or 3.7 years faster than female teachers. Gibson and Purbo (2020) found that most primary school teachers in Indonesia are qualified women and are not more likely than their male counterparts to leave teaching positions.

Female school leaders in Indonesia face a multitude of challenges, bearing a heavier burden in gaining societal recognition and requiring strategic approaches to overcome these obstacles in the public sphere (Sinarwati et al., 2024). This finding resonates with another study that found at least three principal challenges preventing women from taking educational leadership roles (Margret et al., 2021), namely, the regulatory framework, social norms and reproductive barriers.

Even though the regulations on the appointment of school leaders were not made to discriminate specifically against female candidates, they do not create a level playing field between male and female candidates. For instance, as subnational governments are given the autonomy to manage basic and secondary education, the selection of principals is often influenced by elections and politicians' subjectivity. One interviewed female school leader opined that, in her observation, women's leadership potential was often judged on the basis of their appearance rather than their competence (Informant 1).

The lack of supportive regulations is aggravated by social norms (Margret et al., 2021). In the Indonesian traditional point of view, women are deemed fragile, delicate figures who need to be protected and will always be dependent on men (Airin, 2010). Being a woman principal signifies challenging what constitutes 'appropriate' female behaviour, e.g. women as servants of husbands (Gibson & Purba, 2020). For women, aspiring to be school leaders often conflicts with their families' and communities' expectations. This is evident in women having to work harder to prove their leadership capabilities to gain trust. Additionally, gender biases persist in how leadership styles are perceived; female principals are often described

as 'too emotional', whereas male principals are seen as more stable and wiser in decision-making (Informant 2).

Furthermore, the findings of Margret et al. (2021) reveal that female teachers often miss school leader selections because of maternity leave; participating in the selection means that they must plan well ahead to be nominated. Sometimes, however, the nomination itself is influenced by the authority's bias and assumption that women will have to take maternity leave because of their reproductive role. Beyond maternity leave, seniority-based biases also play a role. Many senior teachers resist the promotion of younger teachers into leadership positions (Informant 2).

Another aspect of a principal's duty outside the selection process discourages women from pursuing leadership positions, and that is the 'assignment' stage, especially when they are assigned to rural areas that are hardly accessible and far from their hometowns. One principal highlighted that family separation due to school assignments is a recurring issue. 'Many teachers, especially women, are placed far from their spouses, causing difficulties in balancing professional and family life' (Informant 1). This concern is especially prominent for women in Indonesia since, culturally, women are expected to bear more responsibility in domestic care (childcare, etc.) (Margret et al., 2021).

4.2   Enablers and Policy Levers

While no formal policies or mentorship programmes—to the authors' knowledge—currently exist to explicitly support women in educational leadership, informal support systems and institutional policies provide pathways for female teachers to advance. Interviews with female school leaders suggest that peer networks, strong family support and community engagement play crucial roles in enabling women to assume leadership positions.

One of the most cited enablers is peer mentorship—learning from and being supported by other female school leaders. One principal said, 'I learned leadership from those before me, whether they were male or female. But having women in leadership showed me that it was possible' (Informant 2). The principal also confessed that she encountered few to no setbacks in obtaining her school leadership position in a state primary school, stating that female leadership is normalised in

her district. Upon further research, we found that the head of the district is a woman (Government of Sleman, 2025), which may relate to the greater acceptance of female school leaders.

Another critical enabler identified in the interviews is the role of family support in women's leadership journeys. Many female school leaders emphasised that having a supportive spouse or family network helped them navigate career advancement without feeling constrained by household expectations. 'My husband fully supported my dream to establish a school. Without that support, balancing work and family would have been much harder' (Informant 3). Similarly, early exposure to leadership through family participation in community activities prepared some women to take on leadership roles. One principal shared, 'My parents were very engaged in community organisations, and that influenced how I developed leadership skills. It became natural for me to take on responsibility' (Informant 2). These findings suggest that changing gender norms at the household level is just as important as policy and institutional reforms in increasing female leadership representation in schools.

At the policy level, the Indonesian government has introduced family-friendly regulations to support teachers, particularly female educators who juggle work and family responsibilities. The regulation on fulfilling children's rights promotes a balanced role between parents and encourages workplace policies that accommodate working mothers (Government of Indonesia, 2024a). However, more targeted interventions—such as structured mentorship programmes for aspiring female principals—could enhance this impact.

Another key policy area is access to quality ECE centres. Providing affordable and accessible childcare would allow more female teachers to pursue leadership roles without being disproportionately affected by caregiving responsibilities. Indonesia's Education Law No. 20/2003 already includes early childhood care and development (ECCD), and Presidential Regulation No. 60/2013 provides a framework for holistic early childhood development (Government of Indonesia, 2013). However, implementation remains uneven across different regions, with many female teachers in rural areas still struggling to balance family and career.

Beyond policy, school leaders themselves can actively support female teachers in leadership development. Some schools already offer flexible working environments that allow female teachers to take maternity leave without fear of career stagnation. As one principal shared, 'Maternity leave is a right. I make sure my female teachers have a support system, so they don't feel pressured to return too soon' (Informant 1).

5

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the persistent underrepresentation of women in school leadership roles in Indonesia, this section outlines targeted policy recommendations aimed at the national, subnational and community levels. The recommended actions are designed to improve equity in selection processes, enhance support systems and institutionalise gender-responsive leadership development across both MoPSE and MoRA school systems.

5.1 Recommendations for the Central Government

- **Integrate gender-responsive training in school leadership programmes.** MoPSE should enhance leadership training programmes by incorporating gender-responsive modules. These should include social-emotional regulation training as recommended by school leaders. 'Women in leadership face dilemmas. Decision-making requires emotional balance. We need more training on social-emotional skills in leadership programmes' (Informant 2). Additionally, mentorship from experienced female leaders should be formalised. 'We need more women leading and mentoring other women in leadership training' (Informant 3).

- **Revise regulations to eliminate gender bias in leadership selection.** Current leadership selection policies should be reviewed to remove biases against women. Many teachers face systemic barriers due to maternity leave policies, which often exclude them from selection processes. 'Maternity leave is a right. But in some places, women don't get selected as leaders, because authorities assume they'll take leave' (Informant 1). MoPSE should establish national guidelines that prohibit the exclusion of female candidates based on assumptions about reproductive roles.

- **Ensure equitable recruitment mechanisms for religious-based schools' leadership.** MoRA should align its leadership selection for madrasahs and other religious-based school principals with gender-responsive policies. Special consideration should be given to mentorship programmes for female candidates in religious schools, where male-dominated leadership persists.

- **Expand grassroots gender equality initiatives.** The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (MoWECP), in collaboration with MoHA and MoPSE, should implement targeted leadership programmes for women at the local level. Schools with a strong culture of peer support for women should be recognised and expanded.

- **Incorporate gender equality metrics in national standards.** The government should institutionalise gender equity indicators in leadership recruitment. MoHA and MoPSE should revise the Education Sector Minimum Service Standards [Standar Pelayanan Minimal (SPM)] to ensure that each region sets clear targets for female representation in school leadership.

5.2. Provincial and District Governments

- **Introduce incentive schemes specifically targeted at female school leaders.** District and provincial governments should introduce childcare allowances and flexible work arrangements for female school leaders.

- **Implement transparent and inclusive selection processes.** Subnational governments should ensure that leadership selection is based on merit rather than personal networks. MoPSE's School Leader and Superintendent Selection System (Sistem KSPS) should be fully utilised to minimise political influence.

- **Encourage professional learning communities for female leadership.** Female-led mentorship initiatives should be expanded within existing teacher and school leader working groups [such as Kelompok kerja kepala sekolah (School leader working group) and Lembaga Pengembangan dan Pemberdayaan Kepala Sekolah (Principal Development and Empowerment Institute)]. Experienced school leaders have emphasised the need for structured mentorship to prepare more women for leadership roles: 'A good leader is one who creates new leaders' (Informant 2).

5.3. Community-Based Organisations and Development Partners

- **Actively support female teachers by fostering a culture that values gender equity.** Parent-Teacher Associations and local groups can play a pivotal role in encouraging and advocating for female leadership in schools. Development partners and Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) should collaborate with local governments to create structured mentorship networks. Existing peer-support initiatives should be expanded to include leadership-focused programmes for female teachers.

- **Advocate for work-life balance policies for female leaders.** Community-based organisations should push for family-friendly policies at the district level, ensuring flexible school placement policies for female school leaders with young children.

- **Collect and analyse data to track progress.** Organisations should work with governments to track the progress of female representation in school leadership, ensuring that policy recommendations are backed by real data.

5.4. Potential Impact

- Integrating gender-responsive modules into leadership training and addressing biases in recruitment and selection processes have the potential to significantly increase the number of qualified female school leaders. This will not only address the current gender gap but also set a precedent for future reforms promoting inclusivity.

- By leveraging the expertise and experiences of female leaders through mentorship and training programmes, schools will benefit from diverse leadership perspectives. Research shows that gender-diverse leadership can enhance decision-making, school management and instructional strategies, leading to improved student outcomes (Global School Leaders, 2024).

- Encouraging gender equity at the grassroots level, such as through the Women-Friendly and Child-Caring Villages [Desa/kelurahan ramah perempuan dan peduli anak (DRPPA)] initiative and parent-teacher associations, will help challenge societal norms and promote broader acceptance of female leadership. This shift in community mindset can create a supportive environment for aspiring female leaders.

- Transparent, merit-based selection processes for school leaders have the potential to reduce political influence, fostering trust in the system. Additionally, incorporating gender-equality indicators into the SPM will institutionalise accountability for gender equity, ensuring sustained progress.

- Incentive schemes, such as childcare allowances and bonuses, have the potential to alleviate some of the systemic and personal barriers faced by female leaders, allowing them to focus on their professional roles. Empowered female leaders will act as role models, inspiring greater participation of women in leadership across other sectors, contributing to economic growth and social equity.

- By collecting and analysing data from development initiatives, stakeholders can better understand barriers to and enablers of female leadership. This evidence-based approach will guide future policy reforms and ensure alignment with national and international gender equity goals.

6

LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

While this policy brief highlights key findings and recommendations to advance gender equity in school leadership, several limitations and gaps in the current knowledge base remain. This section identifies critical areas where additional research, data collection and stakeholder engagement are needed to deepen understanding of barriers and to inform future reforms.

■ The policy brief was developed during the transition period of the cabinet administration (2020–2024). Currently, a new policy was enacted on 8 May, 2025 (MoPSE Regulation No. 7/2025), which was not considered during the development of the policy brief. Therefore, there may or may not be relevant aspects of the policy that were not yet considered. The biggest change in the new policy is that it no longer mandates teachers to have been in the PGP as a selection requirement as aforementioned.

■ While there is anecdotal evidence suggesting lower female representation in madrasah leadership, comprehensive nationwide gender-disaggregated data from MoRA are needed to validate this claim and assess regional disparities.

■ The lack of historical data on the representation of female school leaders limits the ability to evaluate whether existing initiatives have succeeded in increasing gender parity. Longitudinal studies are essential to track progress and inform future policy decisions.

■ Future research should consider how intersecting factors, such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity and disability, impact women's access to leadership roles. This will ensure a more inclusive approach to addressing gender disparities.

■ The authors found that the interviewed school leaders were women who had the benefit of a supportive environment, whether from their families, spouses or communities. Future research should examine the challenges faced by women who lack family backing, face workplace hostility or experience systemic discrimination in leadership selection. However, this pattern among the interviewees also provides a crucial insight: supportive environments play a significant role in enabling female teachers to advance to leadership positions. Instead of viewing this as an exception, it suggests a policy direction—creating systemic interventions that replicate the conditions of 'privilege' these women enjoyed.

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