GLOBAL EDUCATION MONITORING REPORT

2025

GENDER REPORT

Women lead for learning

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Sustainable Development Goals

Global Education Monitoring Report

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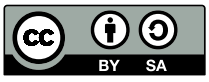

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Photo credit: © UNICEF/UN0646883/Light Oriye*
Caption: Headteacher, Ojo Mujidat, 47, poses for a portrait at the premises of SUBEB Model Nursery/Primary School, Erio-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria a beneficiary of Water. Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facility set up by UNICEF. March 2020. WASH improvement facilities in Schools and communities plays a key role in preventing NTDs.

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Gender Reports of the *Global Education Monitoring Report* series

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The Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action specifies that the mandate of the *Global Education Monitoring Report* is to be 'the mechanism for monitoring and reporting on SDG 4 and on education in the other SDGs' with the responsibility to 'report on the implementation of national and international strategies to help hold all relevant partners to account for their commitments as part of the overall SDG follow-up and review'. It is prepared by an independent team hosted by UNESCO.

The *Global Education Monitoring Report* team is responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in this book and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO nor of its funders and do not commit the Organization. Overall responsibility for the views and opinions expressed in the Report is taken by its Director.

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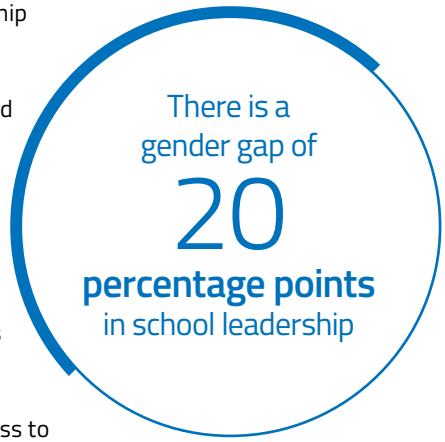
SHORT SUMMARY

Barriers to gender equality in education leadership positions can and need to be overcome

This gender edition, which is part of the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report* on leadership in education, addresses the remaining obstacles for women in their efforts to climb up the leadership ladder in education. Although the teaching profession has been feminized, there are considerable gender gaps in school management, education administration and political leadership positions, a situation illuminated in detail with examples from all over the world.



Gender disparity in education leadership is the result of entrenched stereotypes and biases – conscious or unconscious – on the one hand and on the other institutional processes or professional development mechanisms that are insufficiently supportive.

Research suggests that women leaders display some differences relative to men in their approaches to education leadership, for example the extent to which they emphasize collaboration, build relationships with the community and retain a focus on learning. While there is little to suggest that these differences are universal or immutable, the evidence points to the fact that the lack of equitable opportunities translates to less talent and fewer diverse approaches to leadership, which are a loss to education systems – not to mention the obvious need for equity. This is particularly evident in parts of the world where gender disparities remain large.

This gender edition calls on countries to take a much closer look at gender disparity in education leadership and adopt measures to raise awareness, improve mechanisms and strengthen capacities to address discrimination and bias and thus encourage women who aspire to such careers to pursue them.

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Since wars begin in the minds of men and women, it is in the minds of men and women that the defenses of peace must be constructed

GLOBAL EDUCATION MONITORING REPORT

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Contents

KEY MESSAGES

Gender gaps in education participation have narrowed, on average, but remain high in many regions.

- Gender gaps in secondary completion rates remain wide in sub-Saharan Africa, where the pace of progress over the past decade has been half of that in Central and Southern Asia, the only other region where girls are behind boys.
- In Latin America and the Caribbean, more boys than girls are out of school and the ratio has risen between 2015 and 2023 from 107 to 113 boys for every 100 girls.

Gender gaps are in opposite directions in vocational and tertiary education – and, within tertiary education, between poor and rich countries.

- Gender gaps in higher education vary by country income level: In low-income countries, only 50 women per 100 men participate in adult education, compared to 73 men per 100 women in high-income countries.
- In about 40 countries with data, there are about 80 young men enrolled in university for every 100 young women; and 80 young women enrolled in vocational education for every 100 young men.

Learning outcomes show persistent gender gaps.

- In reading, globally, only 87 boys reach minimum proficiency for every 100 girls; only 72 boys reach minimum proficiency for every 100 girls in middle-income countries.
- In mathematics, where gender parity has been observed for the past 20 years on average, data from the 2023 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study suggest COVID-19 may have disproportionately affected girls. Gaps at the expense of girls were quite wide in Brazil, Chile, England (United Kingdom), Italy and New Zealand

Bullying is increasing faster for girls, who are more vulnerable to cyberbullying.

- Between 2018 and 2022, the prevalence of bullying increased for girls in 34 of 66 countries with data, while for boys it increased in only 22 countries.
- A study of 42 countries found girls are cyberbullied more often than boys, likely because they spend more time on social media.

Most teachers are women but education leadership is predominantly male.

- **Primary education**: In 2019, only 16% of primary school principals in 14 francophone African countries were women, and as few as 10% in Guinea an d 11% in Burkina Faso. In the same year, in Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Malaysia, only 18%, 25% and 41% of grade 5 students, respectively, were in schools with female principals. In contrast, female principals tend to be the majority in many countries in Central and Eastern Europe and in most countries in Latin America.
- **Secondary education**: Globally, 57% of secondary school teachers are women. However, in 70 countries with data, there is a gender gap of 20 percentage points in secondary school leadership positions.
- **Higher education**: Globally, women make up 45% of academic staff but only 30% of higher education leaders. In 2018, Bahrain, Kuwait, Libya, Qatar and Yemen had no female university presidents. Only 2 women were vice-chancellors in 20 public universities in Malaysia and 1 in 46 in Bangladesh in 2020. Only 19% of 'grade A' academic positions in engineering and technology in Europe are held by women.

- **Education ministers**: About 27% of education and higher education ministers were women in 2010–2023. Female ministers' tenures are four months longer than those of their male peers.

When women lead schools, they are more likely to follow inclusive, empowering and collaborative practices.

- **Inclusive**: Female leaders are more likely to prioritize inclusive learning environments, often addressing challenges disproportionately affecting girls, such as access to education, gender-based violence, safe transport, gender-sensitive curricula, sanitation facilities and menstrual health education.
- **Empowering**: According to the 2018 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), women devote more time to curriculum and teaching as well as to parent and student interactions, while male principals are more likely to prioritize administrative tasks and discipline-related duties.
- **Collaborative**: TALIS data also show that more female (36%) than male (28%) principals strongly agreed that a collaborative school culture was important. In Benin, Cameroon, Madagascar, Senegal and Togo, a collaborative culture in female-led schools has been seen to reduce teacher absenteeism.

Female school leaders in low- and lower-middle-income countries have been found to improve learning outcomes.

- According to the 2019 Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems (PASEC) survey, primary schools under female leadership in Benin, Madagascar, Senegal and Togo achieved better outcomes in reading and mathematics, equivalent to an additional year of schooling, than those under male leadership.
- According to the 2019 Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) survey, children in women-led schools gained up to four months of learning in Myanmar, five months in Cambodia, and six months in the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Female politicians tend to prioritize decisions in support of education.

- Women's participation in policy making during the COVID-19 pandemic reduced the length of school closures. An increase in the share of female ministers by 13 percentage points cut the length of school closures by 24%.
- In 19 high-income countries, an increase in female representation in lower houses of parliament of 1 percentage point has been associated with an increase in educational expenditure of 0.04 percentage points of GDP.
- In 191 countries from 1990 to 2020, an increase in the percentage of women in parliaments has been correlated with improvements in educational parity indices.

Stereotypes curb women's ambitions and opportunities.

- Leadership is often viewed as a male trait and women do not always get the support needed to pursue leadership roles. In France, a one-hour talk by female scientists about science careers and gender stereotypes increased grade 12 girls' enrolment in science, technology, engineering and mathematics programmes by 3.4 percentage points.
- School principal hiring decisions risk being gender-biased where selection panels are dominated by men. In the United States, in districts where women held 75% or more of board seats, women secured 48% of superintendent positions, compared to just 33% in districts with the equivalent male majority. GEM Report analysis found that only 11% of countries promote gender parity in the selection of school leaders.
- Women are less likely to access mentoring and targeted leadership training opportunities. Among respondents in an education leadership survey in sub-Saharan Africa, many felt that lack of mentorship (28%), networking opportunities (22%) and training and development opportunities (24%) were among the top barriers to women leadership.

Credit: © UNICEF/UN0825759/Das*

Historic gender disparity in education and learning remains relevant

Gender equality is a cross-cutting priority in the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) on education. Special emphasis is placed on monitoring SDG global indicator 4.5.1, the parity index, which in the case of gender compares the values of education indicators achieved by girls and women relative to those achieved boys and men. The first part of this report summarizes the key findings from the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report* on gender disparity at different levels of education and for different education indicators.

... IN PARTICIPATION AND ATTAINMENT

While gender gaps in enrolment and attendance have narrowed over the years, distinct patterns emerge in boys' and girls' progression through education systems.

In the case of the **out-of-school rate** (SDG thematic indicator 4.1.4), defined over all children, adolescents and youth of school age (roughly 6 to 17 years), there is near gender parity, an achievement observed even in Central and Southern Asia, despite the fact that the region includes Afghanistan, which officially bans girls from secondary education.

In three regions, there are more boys than girls out of school: Eastern and South-eastern Asia, Europe and Northern America, and Latin America and the Caribbean, where there has been a trend of growing disparity with the number of boys out of school rising from 107 to 113 for every 100 girls out of school. Boys in the region are expected to conform with certain masculinity norms, which increases their disengagement from school (UNESCO, 2022).

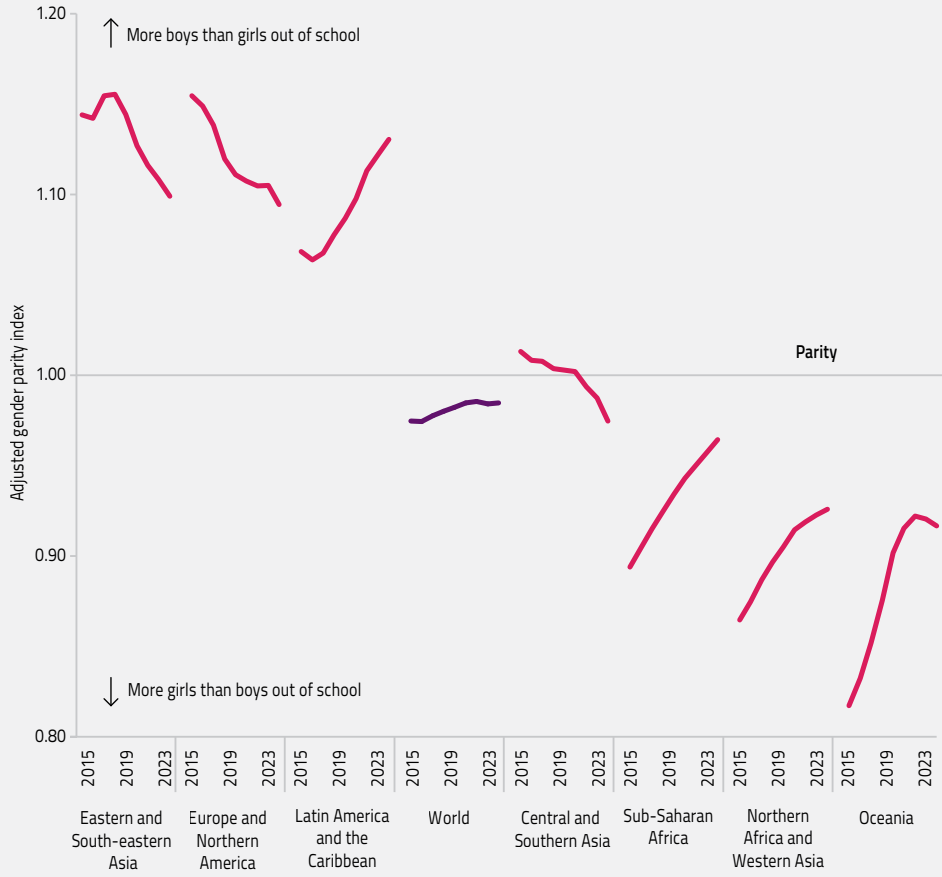
In contrast, there are more girls than boys out of school in the other three regions: Northern Africa and Western Asia, Oceania and sub-Saharan Africa, although the gaps have narrowed significantly since 2015. In Oceania, the number of girls out of school fell from 118 to 108 for every 100 boys out of school between 2015 and 2023 (**Figure 1**).

In the case of the **completion rate** (SDG global indicator 4.1.2), there is gender parity in primary education overall. Nevertheless, disparity has been increasing in sub-Saharan Africa with the number of girls completing primary school for every 100 boys rising from 105 to 108 since 2015. To explain this trend, it is important to remember that the completion rate is defined over the age group of children three to five years older than graduation age and that sub-Saharan Africa has the largest rate of over-age children. Growing disparity reflects the fact that more and more girls are progressing through grades without repeating grades, which means that more of them tend to finish primary school 'on time' compared to boys, i.e. they reach the last grade within three to five years of the official graduation age. In fact, girls have almost achieved parity in lower secondary completion in sub-Saharan Africa, with the ratio rising from 93 to 97 girls completing lower secondary school for every 100 boys from 2015 to 2023 (**Figure 2**).

FIGURE 1.

Globally, gender disparity in out-of-school rates has significantly decreased in recent years

Adjusted gender parity index for total out-of-school rates, 2015–23



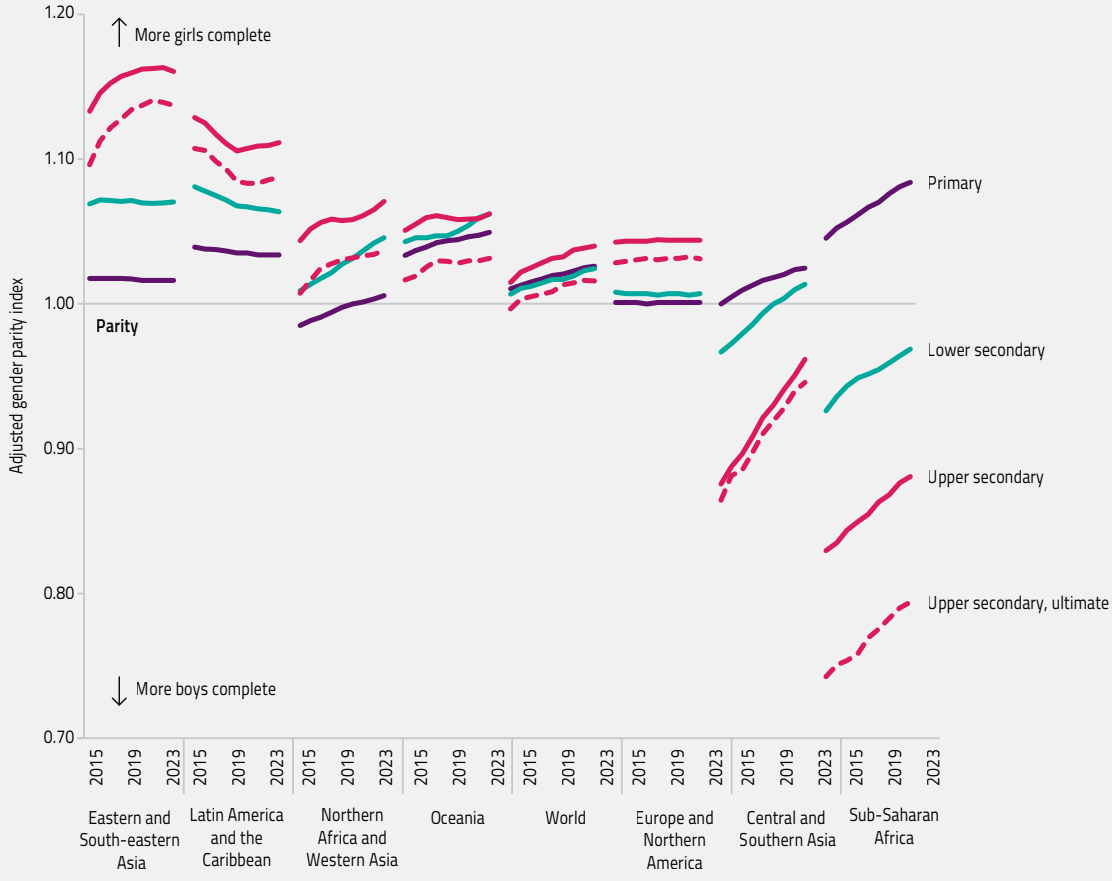
Note: The out-of-school rate is a negative indicator (i.e. the higher its level, the worse the level of educational development). The parity index has, therefore, been reversed to conform with the convention that the parity index is below 1 for the disadvantaged group.

Source: VIEW database.

FIGURE 2.

Central and Southern Asia has made faster progress in achieving gender parity secondary completion than sub-Saharan Africa

Adjusted gender parity index of the completion rate, by region, 2015–23



Source: VIEW database.

The fact that girls are more likely to complete secondary education on time compared to boys can also be observed in the respective gender parity indices of the official completion rate and the completion rate as defined over young people even five years older than the official graduation age. In sub-Saharan Africa, 88 young women complete upper secondary school on time for every 100 young men but ultimately only 79 young women complete upper secondary school for every 100 young men. Young women are under pressure to finish school early to comply with the cultural norms that expect them to marry and have children young. The discrepancy described here is not observed, for example, in Central and Southern Asia, where there has been rapid progress towards parity: within eight years, the number of young women completing upper secondary school for every 100 young men increased from 88 to 96.

These diverse patterns highlight the importance of nuanced analysis. While gender parity has been achieved in some areas, persistent disparities continue to demand targeted policy responses. This becomes more evident when considering the variety of gender disparity patterns within populations. This is highlighted in a review of 15 countries with an out-of-school rate of youth of upper secondary school age of 25% and above. The countries can be split into three groups. In the first group, including Benin and Yemen, there is disparity at the expense of girls both among the poorest and among the richest 20% of the population. In the second group, including Madagascar and Mauritania, there is disparity at the expense of the poorest girls but parity among the richest 20% of the population. Finally, in the third group, including Cambodia and Comoros, there is disparity at the expense of the poorest boys and, often, also of the richest boys (**Figure 3**).

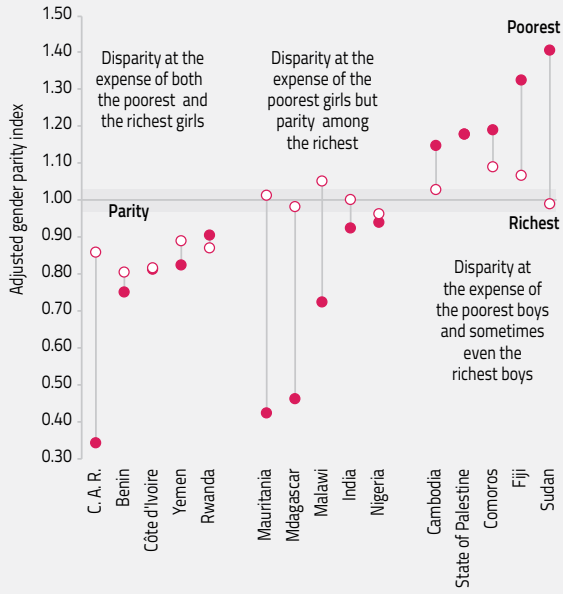
Globally, participation in **tertiary education** has been on the rise. Between 2010 and 2022, the tertiary education gross enrolment ratio increased considerably in most regions, except Oceania, where it decreased, and sub-Saharan Africa, where average enrolment rose by only two percentage points. In contrast, there was a 17-percentage-point increase in Latin America and the Caribbean and a 34-percentage-point increase in Eastern and South-eastern Asia during this period.

Across all regions, gender gaps in enrolment remained stable during the period. In most regions, except for sub-Saharan Africa, the gap is in favour of women. In Europe and Northern America, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Oceania, the gross enrolment ratio for women is at least 20 percentage points higher than that for men (**Figure 4**).

FIGURE 3.

Gender disparity patterns vary between the poorest and the richest and between countries

Adjusted gender parity index of the out-of-school rate of youth of upper secondary school age, 2019–23



Note: The out-of-school rate is a negative indicator (i.e. the higher its level, the worse the level of educational development). The parity index has, therefore, been reversed to conform with the convention that the parity index is below 1 for the disadvantaged group. The featured countries have an out-of-school rate of youth of upper secondary school age of at least 25%.

Source: WIDE database.

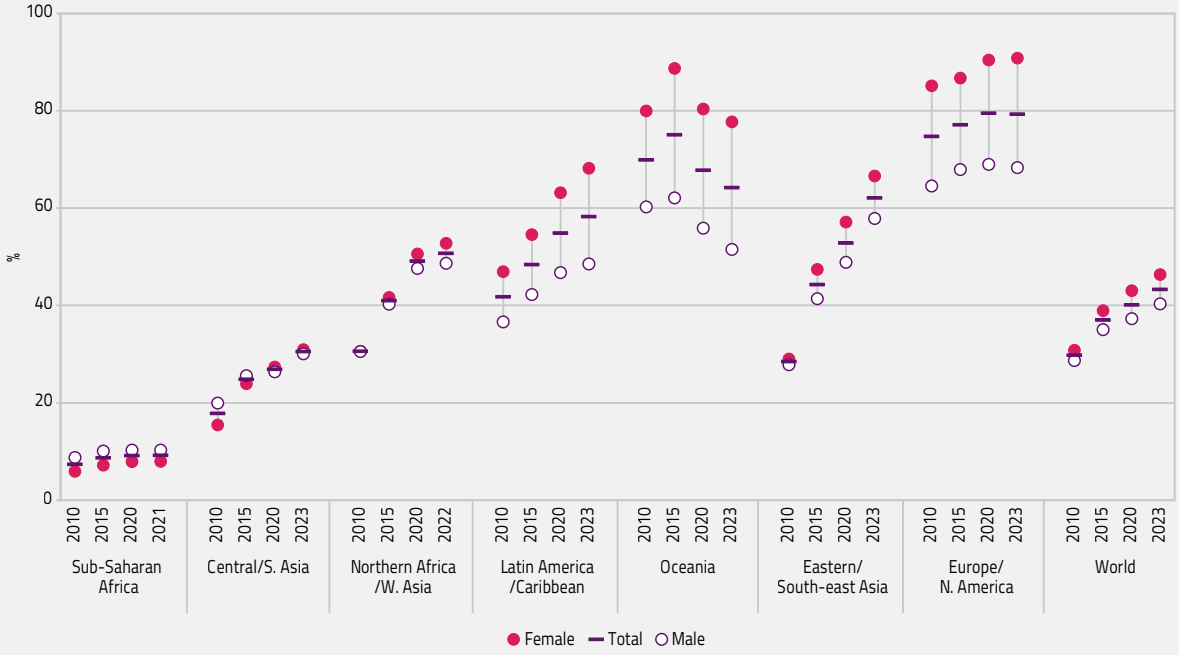
An interesting pattern emerges when comparing the gender parity index of the gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education to participation in **technical and vocational education and training** (TVET) among 15- to 24-year-olds. In most countries with available data, women considerably outnumber men in higher education, while the opposite is true in TVET (**Figure 5**). In Bahrain, for every 100 young men, there are over 140 young women in tertiary education but only 10 in TVET.

In only 8 countries are men more likely than women to participate in both tertiary and TVET and only in 6 countries do women outnumber men in both. Vocational education is often associated with manual labour, technical skills and trade professions such as construction and engineering. Historically male-dominated, these fields are often perceived as less prestigious compared to academic careers, which may contribute to higher male participation in vocational programmes. In contrast, women are more likely to pursue university degrees, which are often seen as pathways to professional, white-collar careers (ETF, 2024).

FIGURE 4.

Gender disparity in tertiary education enrolment has continued unabated

Gross enrolment rate tertiary education, 2010–2021/23

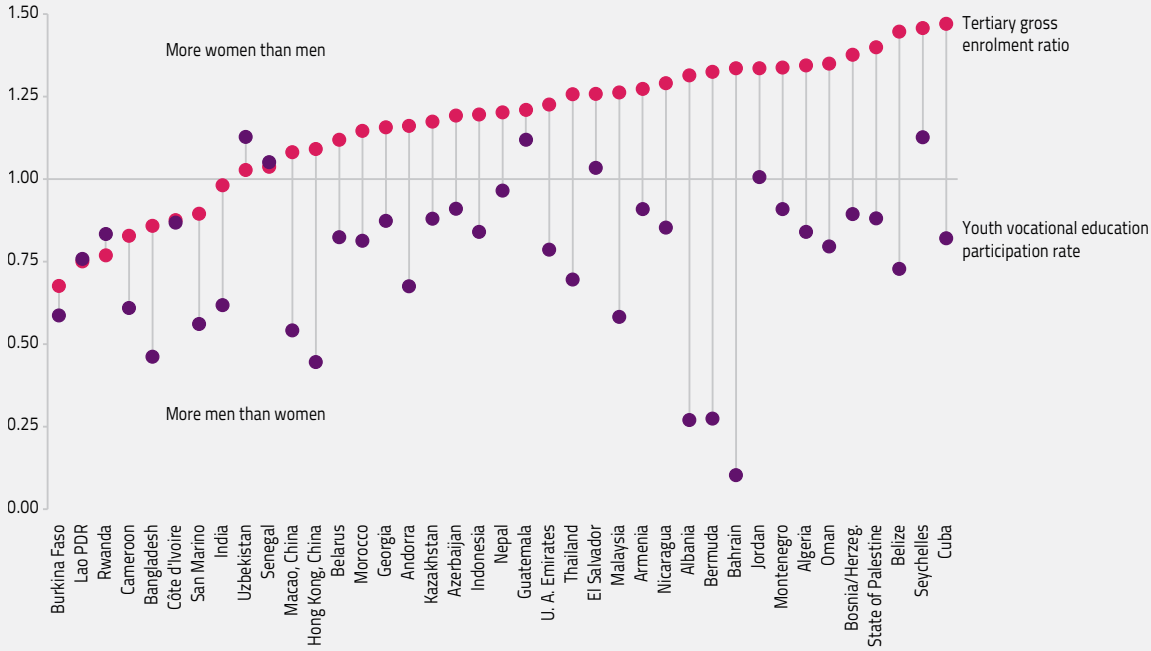


Source: UIS database.

FIGURE 5.

Gender gaps favour women in tertiary education but men in TVET

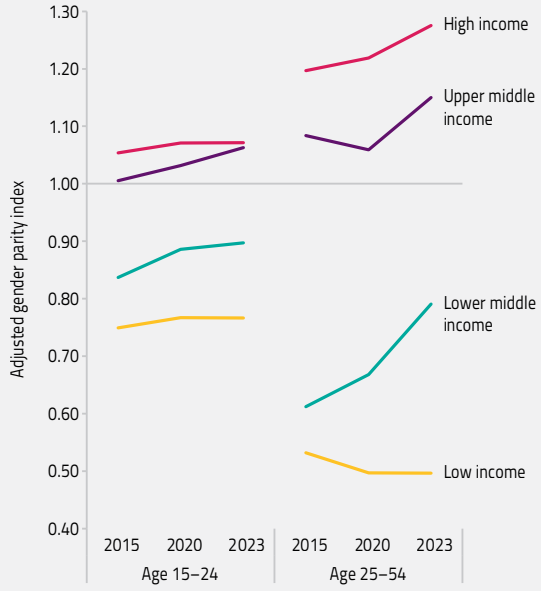
Adjusted gender parity index of the tertiary education gross enrolment ratio and of the youth participation rate (15- to 24-year-olds) in technical and vocational programmes, 2023



Source: UIS database.

In upper-middle- and high-income countries, women participate in **adult education and training** programmes at higher rates than men. The opposite is observed in low- and lower-middle-income countries, where men's participation tends to be higher. In 2023, for every 100 young women (aged 15 to 24) participating in formal or non-formal education or training in high-income countries, there were 93 young men. In contrast, in low-income countries, only 77 young women participated for every 100 young men. This gender gap becomes even more pronounced among adults aged 25 to 54: In high-income countries, 73 men participated for every 100 women, while in low-income countries, only 50 women participated for every 100 men (**Figure 6**).

FIGURE 6.
There is a large gender disparity in adult education and training participation
Adjusted gender parity index of participation rate of youth (aged 15–24) and adults (aged 25–54) in formal and non-formal education and training in the previous 12 months, by country income group, 2015, 2020 and 2023



Source: UIS database.

… IN LEARNING OUTCOMES

Gender disparity in education extends to how boys and girls learn and imagine their futures. From disparities in literacy and numeracy to gaps in science achievement and civic engagement, learning outcomes are shaped by a complex interplay of socioeconomic factors, cultural norms and gender expectations. Understanding these patterns is essential not only for improving academic performance but also for ensuring that education systems foster equal opportunities for participation, leadership and empowerment across all spheres of life.

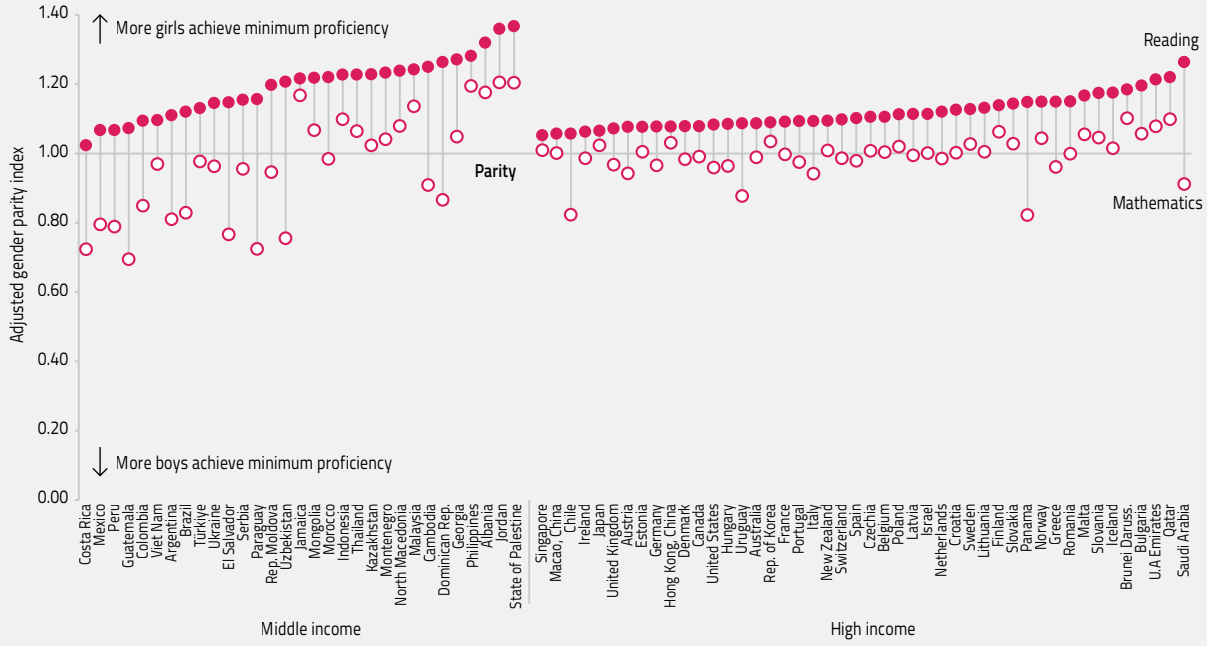
The results of the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed disparity by sex and socioeconomic status in the percentage of adolescents of lower secondary school age that achieve a minimum level of proficiency in reading and mathematics (SDG global indicator 4.1.1b). For the median country that took part in the assessment, there were only 87 males for every 100 females reaching the minimum proficiency level in reading. Gender disparity appears higher in middle-income countries, where only 72 boys achieve minimum proficiency for every 100 girls, than in high-income countries, where the median value is 88 boys for every 100 girls (**Figure 7**).

In mathematics, there is virtual parity, which has been maintained throughout the past four PISA rounds since 2012. While parity is the norm in high-income countries, situations vary in middle-income countries, ranging from disparity at the expense of girls in Latin American countries, such as Costa Rica, Guatemala and Paraguay, to disparity at the expense of boys in a range of countries, including Albania, Jamaica, the State of Palestine and the Philippines. Girls generally outperform boys in Arab countries. One significant factor contributing to this disparity is the generally lower expectations of academic achievement for boys (UNESCO, 2022). Moreover, the high prevalence of single-sex schools in the region has been noted as conducive for learning for girls (Almasri et al., 2023).

FIGURE 7.

Gender differences in reading, which disadvantage boys, are more pronounced in middle-income countries than in high-income countries

Adjusted gender parity index for 15-year-olds who reach minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics, 2022



Source: UIS data set based on the results of the 2022 PISA.

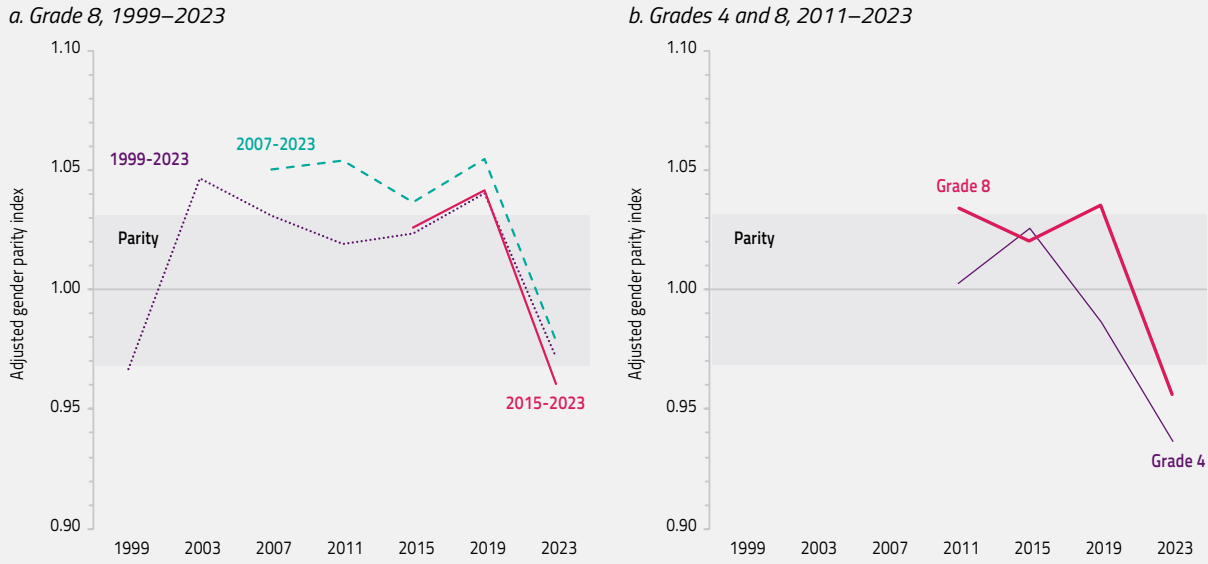
An alternative source of data on mathematics achievement is the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which is administered to students in grade 4 and grade 8. Comparing three groups of countries – those with data in each TIMSS round since 1999 (11 countries, 7 observations each), since 2007 (19 countries, 5 observations each), and since 2015 (29 countries, 3 observations each) – TIMSS data confirm the data from PISA that there has been gender parity in mathematics in grade 8, which is equivalent to the end of lower secondary school from an SDG 4 monitoring perspective (SDG global indicator 4.1.1b). However, all three groups also showed a marked shift in favour of boys after the COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of countries with data in both 2015 and 2023, the average adjusted gender parity index fell from 1.03 in 2019 to 0.96 in 2023, which is below the conventional range associated with gender parity (between 0.97 and 1.03) (**Figure 8a**). A similar shift was also observed for grade 4 students (**Figure 8b**). These findings suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic had a disproportionately negative effect on girls.

A closer look at the 2023 TIMSS results for grade 8 students shows that gender disparity at the expense of girls is quite wide in some countries, with the largest absolute gaps observed in New Zealand (where 59% of boys and 48% of girls achieved the minimum proficiency level), Chile (28% vs 19%), England (United Kingdom) (75% vs. 67%), and Italy (65% vs. 57%), all of which are high-income countries. The largest relative gap was observed in Brazil where just 63 girls achieved minimum proficiency in mathematics for every 100 boys. Disparity between boys and girls is, of course, dwarfed by disparity between countries. The percentage of grade 8 students that achieved minimum proficiency in mathematics ranges from 92% in Japan to less than 1% in Côte d'Ivoire (**Figure 9**), where at most 46% of adolescents reached the last year of lower secondary school in 2023.

FIGURE 8.

Disruptions related to COVID-19 disproportionately affected girls' mathematics achievement

Adjusted gender parity index in the percentage of students achieving a minimum proficiency level in mathematics

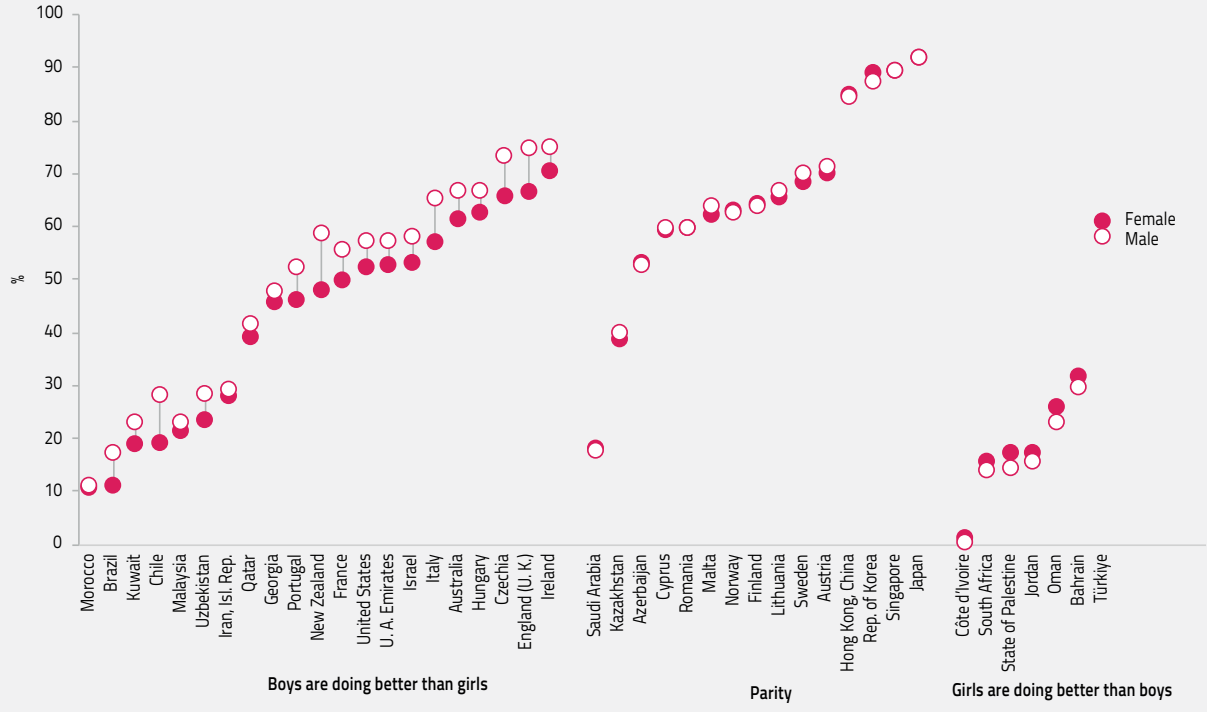


Source: GEM Report team analysis of the TIMSS database.

FIGURE 9.

Girls lag considerably behind boys in mathematics achievement in Chile, England, Italy and New Zealand

Percentage of grade 8 students achieving a minimum proficiency level in mathematics, by sex, 2023



Source: GEM Report team analysis of the TIMSS database.

Gender gaps are also evident in civic education outcomes, particularly in political aspirations and anticipated participation. Girls often grow up convinced that political leadership is predominantly a male activity. They are more likely to expect to vote while boys are more likely to expect to run for office (Barber and Torney-Purta, 2009; Hooghe and Stolle, 2004). The 2022 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), a large-scale learning assessment of grade 8 students in 24 education systems, mostly from high-income countries, found that girls are less likely than boys to expect to actively participate in politics (**Figure 10a**).

In the United States, in an experiment in which children were asked to draw a political leader, the likelihood that girls would draw a man increased with age, from 47% among 6-year-olds to 75% among 12-year-olds, while the percentage of boys who did the same was stable at just above 70% (Bos et al., 2022). Girls are more drawn to social movement activities such as volunteering while boys are more likely to want to participate in violent protests (Hooghe and Stolle, 2004).

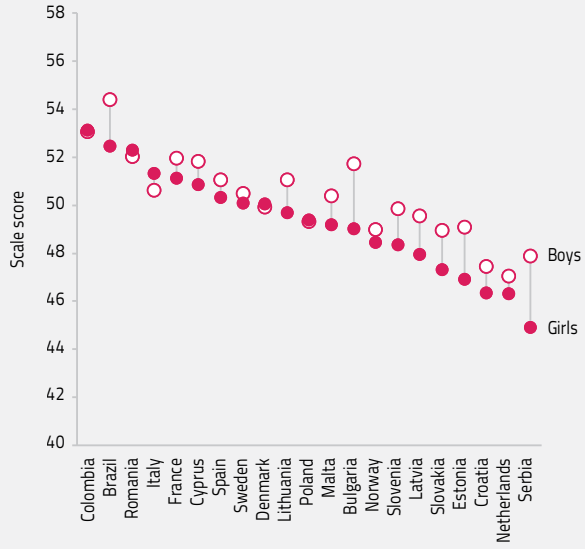
In contrast, girls are more likely to report they would vote in the future (**Figure 10b**), albeit less likely to want to be candidates themselves. The effect persists, even after controlling for factors such as socioeconomic status, immigrant background, school characteristic and political interest (Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2013).

FIGURE 10.

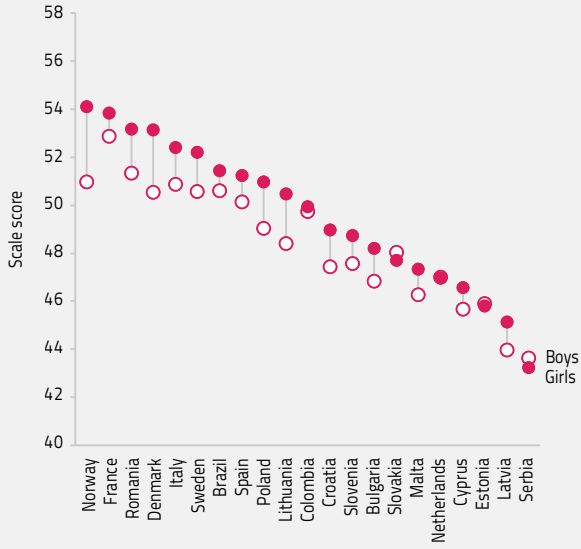
Girls are less likely than boys to expect to actively participate in politics, but more likely to expect to vote and get informed about candidates

Index of expected electoral and active political participation, by sex, grade 8 students, selected upper-middle- and high-income education systems, 2022

a. Expected active political participation



b. Expected electoral participation



Source: 2022 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study.

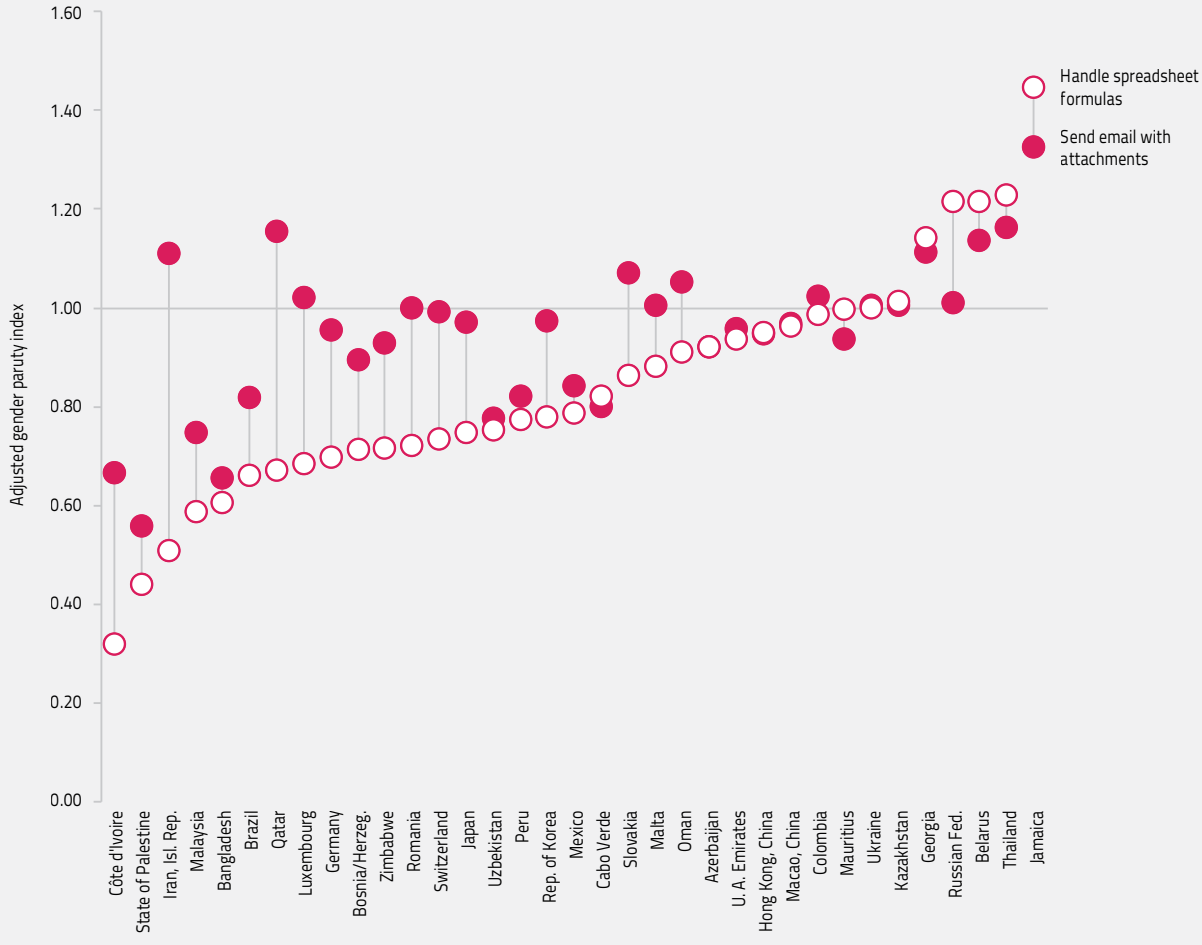
Gender disparities are also evident in digital skills. Globally, only 83 women for every 100 men reported being able to verify the reliability of information online. The largest gender gaps were observed in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Switzerland, with only 59 and 65 women, respectively, per 100 men reporting this skill. Some countries, such as Latvia and the United Arab Emirates, have achieved parity. In Kuwait, the gender balance is reversed, with 80 men for every 100 women able to verify information online.

Gender gaps in skills tend to widen as tasks become more complex. For instance, while 95 women for every 100 men can send an email with attachments, only 84 can use spreadsheet formulas (**Figure 11**). Yet, some countries buck the trend. In Thailand, only 77 men for every 100 women can work with spreadsheet formulas. In Jamaica, just 55 men for every 100 women possess this skill. Despite girls outperforming boys in secondary school information technology exams, men still dominate enrolment and graduation in tertiary-level technology programmes (Jamaica Government, 2018).

FIGURE 11.

Men are more likely than women to have ICT skills as the skill level rises

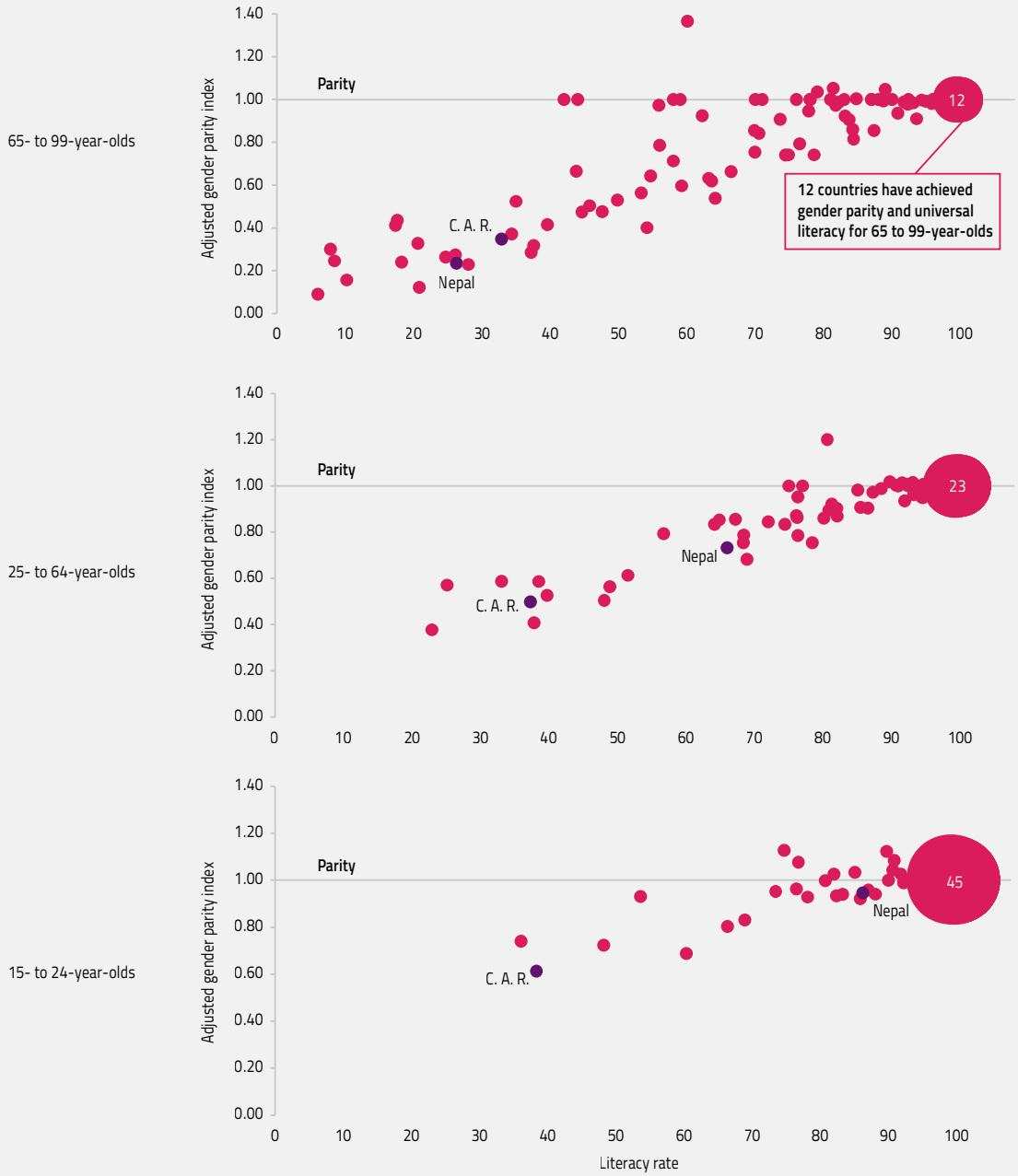
Adjusted gender parity index for the share of adults who have sent an email with attachments and have used basic arithmetic formulas in a spreadsheet, selected countries, 2021 or latest year



Source: UIS database.

Finally, literacy disparity tends to shrink as countries approach universal literacy. In Nepal, gender gaps in literacy close across generations: just 24 elderly women are literate for every 100 elderly men, compared to 73 adult women (25–64) and 98 young women (15–24) per 100 men in each group. However, in countries where literacy remains low, such as the Central African Republic (38% adult literacy), wide gender gaps persist even among the youngest. There, only 61 young women are literate for every 100 young men (**Figure 12**).

FIGURE 12.
Gender disparities disappear at high literacy rate levels
Literacy rate and gender parity index, by age group, 2020–23



Source: UIS database.

... IN WELL-BEING

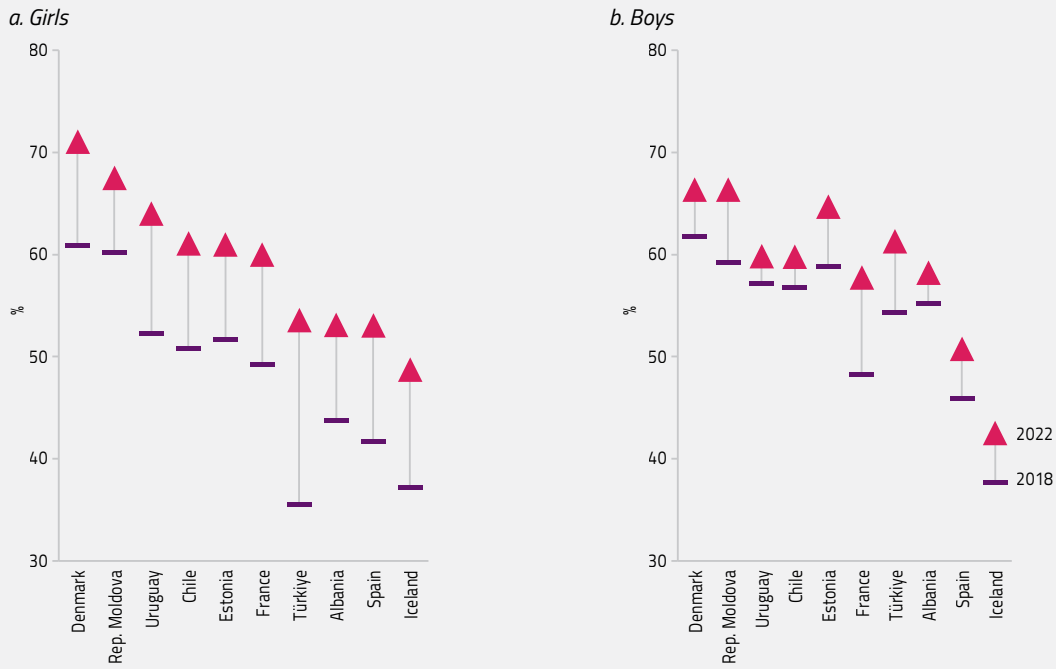
Students' well-being in schools depends not only on academic outcomes but also on a safe and supportive environment free from abusive, harmful and intimidating behaviours. The share of students who have experienced bullying in the past 12 months (SDG thematic indicator 4.a.2) can be tracked through learning assessments. For instance, the 2022 PISA captures various forms of bullying among 15-year-olds. The most commonly reported forms are verbal and relational bullying, including statements such as 'Other students made fun of me' and 'Other students spread nasty rumours about me'.

In most participating countries, the prevalence of bullying is higher for students that are from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background, immigrant and male. However, bullying has been increasing faster for girls than for boys. In 34 of the 66 countries with available data, bullying increased by at least 2 percentage points for girls between 2018 and 2022. The same was true for boys in only 22 countries. In the 10 countries where bullying increased the most between 2018 and 2022, the increase for girls was considerably higher than for boys (**Figure 13**). In Türkiye, the share of 15-year-old girls who experienced bullying increased by 18 percentage points, compared to an increase of 7 percentage points for boys.

The faster increase in the prevalence of bullying for girls aligns with their higher vulnerability to cyberbullying (UNESCO, 2024a). Girls often spend more time on social media than boys. A cross-country study of 31 high-income and 11 low- and middle-income countries found that the relationship between intense social media use and being a victim of cyberbullying was more common for girls than for boys, at least partly due to the greater amount of time they spend online (Craig et al., 2020). In the United Kingdom, girls were more likely to report spending time on social media from the age of 10 and, at age 15, 43% of girls vs 31% of boys reported spending one to three hours a day on social media. Moreover, social media usage was more strongly associated with lower levels of well-being among girls than boys (Kelly et al., 2018).

Girls are also more often targeted by specific types of cyberbullying. Algorithm-driven image-based content can expose girls to inappropriate material, ranging from sexual content to videos that glorify unhealthy behaviours or unrealistic body standards (Lin, 2023; UNESCO, 2024a).

FIGURE 13.
The prevalence of bullying has increased more for girls than for boys
Percentage of 15-year-old students experiencing bullying in last 12 months, by sex, 2018 and 2022



Note: The 10 countries in the Figure are those where bullying prevalence increased the most between 2018 and 2022.

Credit: © UNICEF/UN0832329/Filippov*

Barriers remain to women's equal representation in education leadership positions

Leadership is critical for promoting education access, quality, relevance and equity at all levels – ever more so as national and global challenges are growing in complexity. Education leaders are instrumental in shaping systems and institutions – schools, universities, departments, offices and ministries. Their leadership styles are a combination of personal traits, professional expertise, team characteristics, organizational goals and contexts (UNESCO, 2024a).

Given the variety of leadership styles and desirable outcomes, it is difficult to demonstrate the impact of leadership on education unless the focus is on specific leadership characteristics and results. For example, a robust body of evidence shows that specific school leadership practices may account for 27% of the variation in student performance, the second most important in-school factor that affects learning after classroom teaching (Leithwood et al., 2006). But whether the aim is to improve individual student performance or to solve any of the other education challenges, it is inevitable that different leadership approaches are needed.

Diversity, equity and inclusion are foundations of an education system that responds to social needs. While eliminating disparity in enrolments has received the most attention, ensuring parity in teaching and leadership positions is just as important. The growing feminization of the teaching profession has been a cause of concern in recent years, but large gender gaps in leadership positions have received less attention, mainly because the relevant data are not easily accessible. Parity in leadership is important in principle as a matter of fairness. But it is also important for an education system that wishes to accommodate a variety of perspectives to solve education problems. Women leaders bring key insights that make key differences in several education contexts.

This persistent gender disparity, often referred to as the "leadership gap," not only undermines efforts to achieve gender equality but may also constrain the transformative potential of education. Research suggests that women's leadership tends to be associated with stronger community engagement, greater emphasis on inclusive policies and, in some contexts, better institutional performance.

This second part of the report explores women's representation in leadership positions at all levels of education. It assesses the impact of women's leadership in education and explores whether there are distinct gender differences in the exercise of leadership. Finally, it reviews common barriers to gender parity, before discussing possible steps to improve equity in appointments.

WOMEN ARE UNDER-REPRESENTED IN EDUCATION LEADERSHIP POSITIONS AT ALL LEVELS

While they form the majority of the global teaching workforce, women remain under-represented in education administration, management and leadership positions. However, a global overview is not straightforward because of a lack of gender-disaggregated data on leadership positions. National education management information systems tend to track teachers' professional trajectories

as part of personnel management and decisions related to promotion. While personal information on age and sex is an essential element of such systems, this information is rarely reported outside internal processes to assess inequality in professional careers.

This data gap may be due to a lack of international interest in gender balance in education leadership; in contrast, for instance, there is ample information on the gender balance of members of parliament. The gap may also be explained by the fact that school leaders are seen as teachers and not as distinct professionals, which in turn reflects the relative lack of policy emphasis on education leaders until recently. There are also cases where administrative data systems are still not uniform, for example between public and private institutions (Asadullah, 2024; Galán-Muros and Blancas, 2024).

In recent years, school surveys administered for assessing learning or other quality aspects of schooling have become an unexpected source of information. But overall, data gaps hamper efforts to monitor international progress and to identify challenges to design evidence-based interventions.

... IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Women constitute the majority of the world's teaching force: as of 2023, they accounted for 93% in pre-primary, 68% in primary, 59% in lower secondary, and 52% in upper secondary education. They are only a minority in tertiary education (44%). The predominance of women in pre-primary and primary education has been linked to biased perceptions about gender roles in caregiving and nurturing but also with a gender pay gap in other areas of employment (Startz, 2019). Teaching gives women with specific levels of education higher returns, while similarly educated men enjoy substantially higher returns in other occupations (Carroll et al., 2021).

While these biases have opened doors for many women to enter the teaching workforce, this has not translated into an equal share of leadership positions, except for in early childhood care and education. Evidence is thin but it is clear from the nine OECD countries which were covered in the Starting Strong survey in 2018 that women make up the vast majority of director positions in early childhood centres (OECD, 2019b) (**Figure 14**).

FIGURE 14.
Women are the majority of early childhood education leaders
Distribution of preschool and early childhood centre directors, by sex, selected OECD countries, 2018

Source: OECD (2019).

Among some 70 countries with observations in primary and secondary education, the share of female principals was about 20 percentage points lower than the share of female teachers – and at least 30 percentage points lower in Bhutan, Japan, the Republic of Korea, South Africa, Türkiye and Viet Nam.

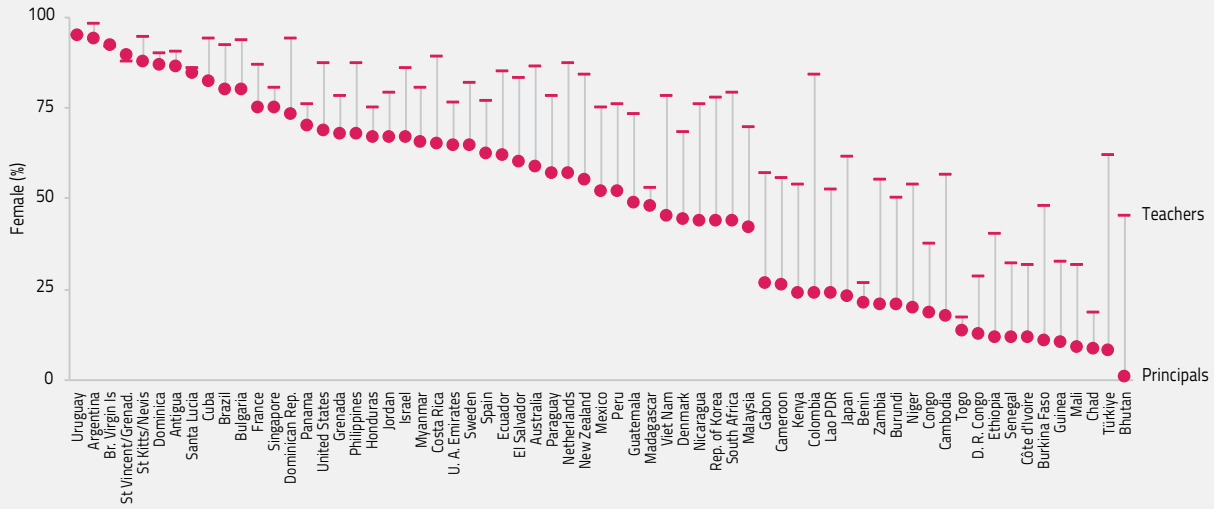
It should be noted that the group of countries with data on teachers and principals is globally representative in analysis on primary education (**Figure 15a**), as the share of female teachers in these countries is 69% and almost identical to the global average. But it is not representative in analysis on secondary education (**Figure 15b**), as the share of female teachers in these countries is 68%, well above the global average of 56%, as low- and lower-middle-income countries are under-represented. While the analysis suggests that the share of women among primary and secondary school principals appears to be about one half, in reality the share of secondary school principals is closer to one third.

FIGURE 15.

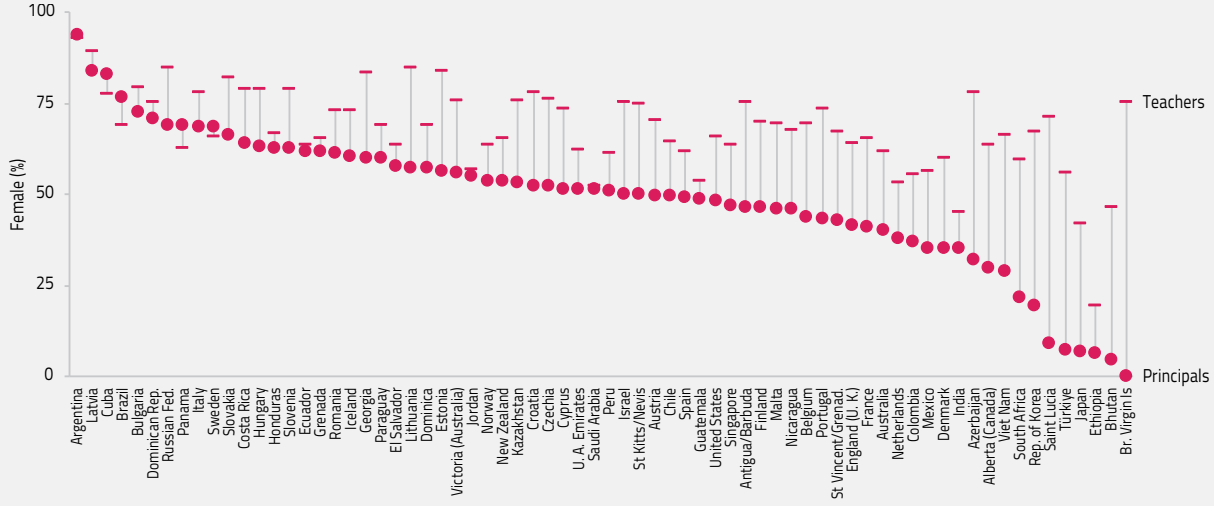
Women are much less likely to be principals than teachers

Share of female teachers and principals, by education level, selected countries, 2023 or latest year

a. Primary



b. Secondary



Sources: GEM Report team based on data from the 2018 Teaching and Learning International Survey, 2019 Programme d'analyse des systèmes éducatifs de la CONFEMEN, 2019 Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics, Young Lives study, TALIS-PISA link data; 2019 ERCE; OECS data; national data; and UIS database.

Countries where women are under-represented in primary education leadership include middle-income countries in South-eastern Asia where, according to the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) survey, the percentage of students enrolled in schools led by women was 18% in Cambodia, 25% in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and 41% in Malaysia.

Disparity is also observed in Southern Asia. In India, women are under-represented as principals in all school categories (Mythili, 2017a). In Pakistan, because of gendered school segregation, women are only eligible to apply for leadership positions only girls' schools (Asadullah, 2024). In Balochistan, headteacher positions in female schools are designated exclusively for women but in 2021 only about 29% of schools were girls' schools (Nadeem, 2024; Zahid, 2021).

It is in sub-Saharan Africa where the most serious under-representation of women is observed. In Eritrea, only 6.5% of primary school principals (and even fewer in secondary schools) were women (Eritrea Ministry of Education and GPE, 2019). In Ethiopia, only 12% of primary school leaders and 7% of secondary school leaders were women in 2021. In the country's Somali region, only two women were principals in 2019 (Education Development Trust, 2022b). In Zimbabwe, women make up 29% of principals and 65% of teachers in primary schools and 16% of principals and 48% of teachers in secondary schools (Moyo et al., 2020). In francophone Africa, according to the 2019 PASEC learning achievement survey, just 16% of primary school principals are women – and as few as 10% in Guinea and 11% in Burkina Faso. Administrative data show that 5% of principals are women in Chad, ranging from 3% in rural areas to 11% in urban areas (Gouëdard et al., 2023). An exception is Madagascar, where 48% of principals are women (Alban Conto et al., 2023).

At the other end of the spectrum, the share of women among lower secondary principals was about equal or slightly above the share among teachers only in Brazil, Jordan, Latvia, Saudi Arabia and Sweden. Analysis for the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report*'s regional edition on Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia found that the share of women as principals was 79% in Albania, 79% in Kyrgyzstan and 80% in the Republic of Moldova (Educational Centre PRO DIDACTICA, 2025; Hoxhallari, 2025; Ivanov, 2025)

… AS UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS, DEANS AND HEADS OF DEPARTMENT

Women are even more under-represented in senior leadership positions in tertiary education, a striking fact given that there are more women than men enrolled at this level of education. It is estimated that, globally, women occupy less than 30% of top leadership roles in higher education and research institutions (Meza-Mejia et al., 2023). In 2025, only 27% of the top 200 higher education institutions were led by women worldwide (up from 25% in 2024) (Times Higher Education, 2024, 2025), even if this is a higher percentage than in the world of global business where just 58 of chief executive officers in the Fortune 500 list of companies are women (Hinchliffe and Ajemian, 2025).

The imbalance is present even in high-income countries. In Europe, fewer than one in five rectors and one in three vice-rectors are women, although the share of female rectors increased by 73% between 2014 and 2022 (European University Association, 2022). Less than one in three heads of higher education institutes, and only 22% of heads of universities that grant PhDs, are women. In Belgium, Croatia, Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Portugal and Slovakia, fewer than 1 in 5 heads of universities were women in 2022, and in Cyprus and Estonia, there were none. Women are also under-represented in higher education boards (38%), including scientific, administrative and advisory boards of research organizations, positions from which they could influence scientific policy and the gender dimensions of the research agenda. Women represented 30% of those with the highest ('grade A') academic positions but just 19% in technology and engineering fields (European Commission, 2025).

In the United States, fewer than one in three presidents of universities and colleges were women in 2022 (Melidona et al., 2023; Schaeffer, 2023), up from less than 10% in 1986 (NCES, 2021). About 40% of all universities have never had a woman president. Only 39% of the provosts and fewer than 30% of board chairs are women (Women's Power Gap, 2023). As in Europe, women remain a minority in provost (25%) and dean (27%) positions in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) colleges. They account for a minority of chairs in mathematics (25%), chemistry (29%), biology (27%) and physics (10%) departments (McCullough, 2019).

In Asia, there also fewer women in leadership positions in higher education. At eight public universities in Hong Kong, China, women accounted for fewer than one in four senior administrative positions (department heads, faculty deans and top management) in 2021, two decades after gender mainstreaming in public services was introduced in 2002. Most of these women occupied the lower ranks of these senior positions. For example, no woman was a provost or president; most were associate deans. Women represented 11% of chaired professors and fewer than 25% of full professors (Li and Kam, 2021).

Only 1 in 46 public universities in Bangladesh (Islam et al., 2023) and 2 in 20 public universities in Malaysia

(Thien et al., 2025) had a woman as a vice-chancellor in 2020. In India, in 189 higher education institutions of national importance, 5% of women were vice-chancellors/directors and 2% were registrars in 2021. In 1,220 universities, 9% were vice-chancellors/directors and 11% were registrars or chief administrative officers (Pandit and Paul, 2023). In 2022, the share of women among vice chancellors was 13% in central, 12% in state, 8% in deemed and 6% in private universities (Shyam, 2022). In Viet Nam, 28% of more than 5,000 leadership positions in universities were held by women in 2019. Women were 8% of presidents or rectors, 15% of vice presidents or vice rectors, 22% of deans or department heads and 36% of vice deans or vice heads (Tran and Nguyen, 2022).

In the Arab States, there also very few women in higher education leadership positions. In 2018, Bahrain, Kuwait, Libya, Qatar and Yemen had no female university presidents, while the share was 3% in Iraq and 13% in Lebanon, Oman and Tunisia (Eleraqi and Salahuddin, 2018; Salahuddin, 2018). In Jordan, no public university had a female president, vice-president or dean, while only 11% of vice presidents were women in private universities (Alshdiefat et al., 2024). In Saudi Arabia, 3% of university presidents, 9% of vice presidents and 8% of deans were women in recent years (Alalfy et al., 2024; Alsubaie and Jones, 2017; Alsubaihi, 2016).

In sub-Saharan Africa, women are highly under-represented in academia. In Ethiopia, women only made up 11% of senior leadership positions in 2021. Only 2 of 46 universities had women as presidents (Adamu, 2023a). In Ghana, only 8% of professors at public universities were women (Mulwa, 2021). In South Africa, women are 19% of higher education institution leaders and 15% of vice-chancellors (Wauru, 2023). In the United Republic of Tanzania, only 2 of 60 universities had female vice-chancellors and in Uganda, there were only 3 female vice-chancellors in 2017 (Kuagbedzi et al., 2022).

... IN SENIOR PUBLIC SECTOR POSITIONS

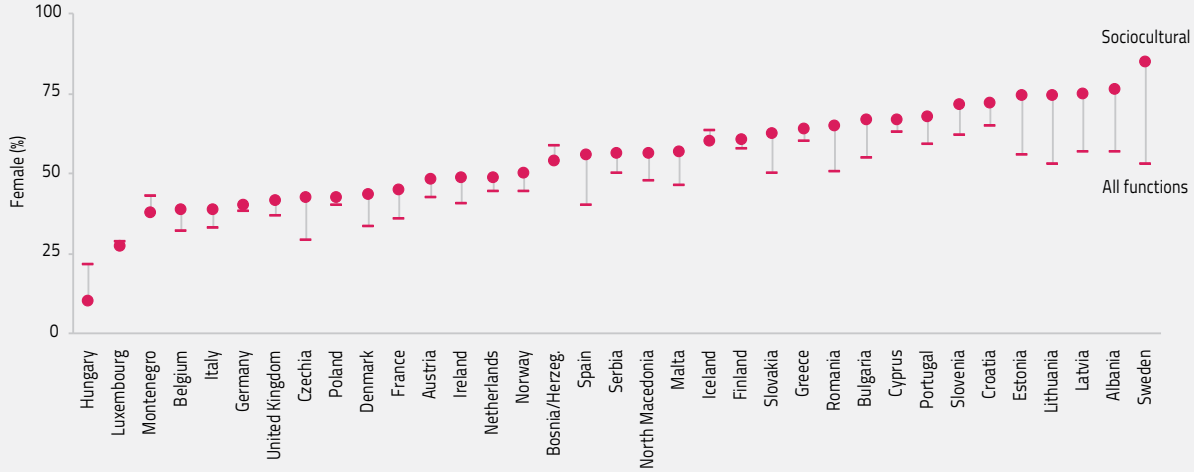
The global report on Gender Equality in Public Administration shows that the share of women in public administrations increased from 44% in 2010 to 46% in 2020, although the share is 52% in education in the 61 countries with data. There are two important dimensions hidden in these averages. First, there are three regions where women are under-represented in public administration: sub-Saharan Africa (38%), Northern Africa and Western Asia (37%) and Central and Southern Asia (32%). Second, women are under-represented in more senior positions, as they make up 38% of managers and 30% of senior managers in about 80 countries with data (UNDP, 2021).

Detailed data on education are difficult to obtain except in a handful of countries. In European countries, women occupy 46% of positions in public administration but 56% of positions in sociocultural functions, one of which is education. The share is highest in Sweden (85%), in the Baltic countries and in Southeastern European countries including Albania, Croatia and Slovenia (over 70%). In contrast, the lowest values are in Hungary (10%) and Luxembourg (27%). They hover around 40% in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom (**Figure 16**).

FIGURE 16.

Women are overrepresented in education public administration in Europe

Percentage of women in public administration, by function, European countries, 2023



Source: European Institute for Gender Equality (2024).

A related study showed that the share of women in these superintendent positions managing public school districts increased from 27.8% in 2018 to 30.4% in 2023 (ILO Group, 2023c). According to the 2024 Superintendent Research Project survey, the percentage of women in school boards has increased from 40% in 1992 to parity in 2024.

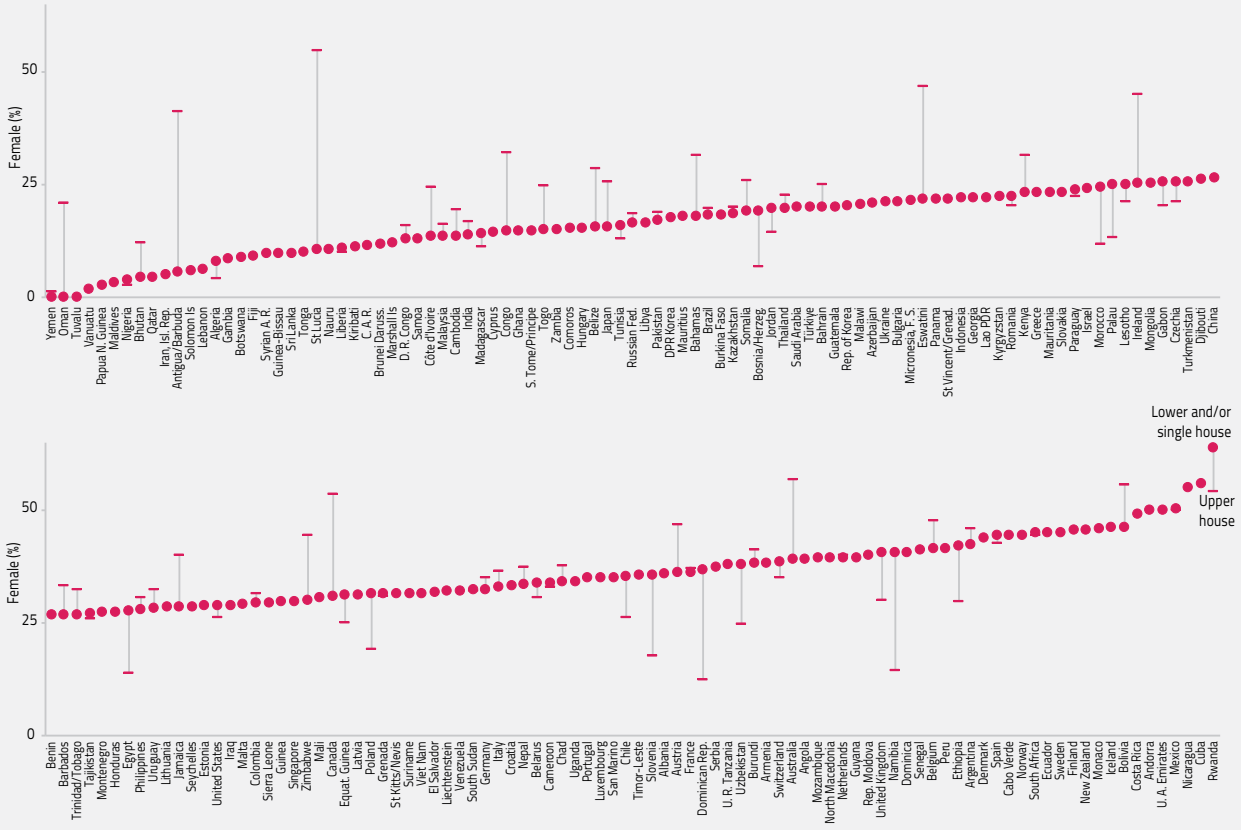
... IN POLITICAL OFFICES

In 2025, women hold 27% of seats in national parliaments, up from 11% in 1995 (IPU, 2025b). Countries with the largest share of women in the lower/single house also tend to have a larger share of women in the upper house. There is major variation in the share of women in parliaments globally. Rwanda holds the highest share at 64%, followed by Andorra, Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua and the United Arab Emirates with shares of 50% or above. In contrast, women are less than 5% of members of parliament in 10 countries: Bhutan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Maldives, Nigeria, Oman, Papua New Guinea, Qatar, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Yemen (IPU, 2025a) (**Figure 17**). Only 22.5% of women hold the posts of presiding officers of parliament or of one of its houses.

FIGURE 17.

Barely a quarter of parliamentarians are women

Percentage of women in parliamentary lower/single and upper houses, 2023



Note: There are no data for Eritrea and Haiti. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Kuwait, Myanmar, Niger and Sudan membership of the IPU has been suspended.
Source: IPU (2024).

Globally, fewer than one in four cabinet ministers are women. Only in nine countries are at least half of cabinet members women: Andorra, Chile, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Nicaragua, Spain and the United Kingdom. At the opposite extreme, nine countries have zero female ministers are Azerbaijan, Hungary, Marshall Islands, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Yemen (UN Women, 2025). Some countries that rank high on global gender equality indices may have low levels of women representatives in cabinets, whether due to party politics, leadership pipelines or historical legacies. In contrast, some countries in Africa and

Latin America, such as Ethiopia, Nicaragua and Rwanda, have made efforts through constitutional mandates or party quotas to accelerate women's participation in government (de Vergès, 2024; Gemechu, 2023; Rwanda National Institute of Statistics, 2021). In India, only 2 out of 30 cabinet ministers are female (India Government, 2024) but a landmark bill in 2023 mandated that one third of legislative assembly seats should be reserved for women (Brechenmacher, 2023).

Mandatory or strongly enforced gender quotas for parliaments or other elected bodies can influence the talent pipeline for future ministers. Women who gain parliamentary experience are more visible to party leaders and heads of government, making them more likely to be tapped for cabinet portfolios. There are quotas or reserved seats for women in parliaments and/or senates in 62% of countries. In the 28 countries with the largest shares of women head of cabinets or ministers, all except Finland, Liechtenstein and Monaco have gender quotas or reserved seats in the legislative assembly (IPU, 2024).

Analysis of a database of 1,412 ministers of education and higher education between 2010 and 2023 from all countries in the world compiled for the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report* shows that 27% of ministers of education have been female. Higher education ministers (21%) are less likely than education ministers (28%) to be women. The lowest share of women ministers was in Northern Africa and Western Asia (7%) and the highest in Europe and Northern America (41%). The share was higher in high-income (36%) than in low-and middle-income countries (22%) and was also more than twice as high in countries ranked in the top third of a liberal democracy index (38%) than in those ranked in the bottom third (16%). Overall, the share of women ministers of education and higher education increased from 23% in 2010–13 to 30% in 2020–23 (**Table 1**).

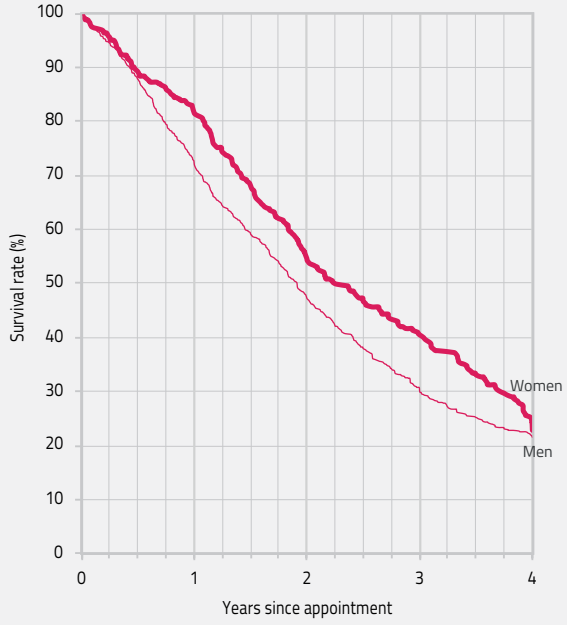
TABLE 1.
Average tenure of education and higher education ministers, by country and individual characteristics, 2010–23

	Age (years)	Female (%)	Postgraduate degree (%)	Experience in education (%)	Complete tenure (days)
World	**53**	**27**	**72**	**23**	**808**
Region					
Central and Southern Asia	52	16	67	17	793
Eastern and Southeastern Asia	57	16	76	16	798
Europe and Northern America	49	41	62	18	734
Latin America and the Caribbean	53	33	72	30	862
Northern Africa and Western Asia	58	7	88	20	765
Oceania	51	20	52	26	881
Sub-Saharan Africa	56	27	85	32	860
Income group					
Low income	55	21	89	29	728
Lower middle income	55	20	72	22	867
Upper middle income	54	24	82	26	784
High income	51	36	59	19	827
Liberal Democracy Index					
Low	54	16	79	23	882
Middle	54	24	80	25	733
Top	51	38	62	18	698
Year of appointment					
2010–13	52	23	71	22	
2020–23	53	30	70	25	

Note: The analysis covers the period 1 January 2010 to 31 December 2023 and includes 1,412 ministers of education from 211 education systems.
Sources: GEM Report team analysis; Neundorf et al. (2023) for the Liberal Democracy Index.

The average tenure for those ministers whose complete tenure is observed in this 14-year period was just under 2 years and 3 months – and female ministers' tenure was on average four months longer than male ministers' tenure. The probability of surviving in this ministerial position is 79% at one year, 49% at two years and 33% at three years. For women, the probability of surviving is higher than for men, at 81% (vs 72%) at one year, 54% (vs 47%) at two years and 40% (vs 30%) at three years (**Figure 18**).

FIGURE 18.
Women are likely to stay longer as education ministers than men
Probability that an education minister is still in office, by time elapsed since appointment and sex, 2010–23



Note: The analysis covers the period 1 January 2010 to 31 December 2023 and includes 1,412 ministers of education from 211 education systems.
Source: GEM Report team analysis.

The higher prevalence of women in education ministries than in other ministries is also confirmed by a separate global analysis, which showed that it was also more likely to find women as ministers in portfolios such as women and gender equality (87%), family and children affairs (71%) and social inclusion or development (56%) – domains stereotypically associated with socially constructed female roles – than transport, defence or home affairs (13%) (UN Women, 2024, 2025), which are perceived to be closer to the centre of political power (Dowding and Dumont, 2015; Nyrup and Bramwell, 2020).

The assignment of women to such portfolios is also related to persisting stereotypes that consider men better suited for top portfolios. In the United States, only 18% of adults see a female president as important in their lifetime, while 64% said this is not too or not at all important or that the president's gender doesn't matter. Only 53% believe that there are too few women in high office in politics (Menasce Horowitz and Goddard, 2023). Responses to a survey of G7 citizens conducted as part of the Reykjavík Index for Leadership showed that 36% of those in Germany and Japan were very comfortable with having a woman as head of government, with the highest share (60%) observed in Canada and the United Kingdom (Verian Group, 2024).

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS CONTRIBUTE TO IMPROVED EDUCATION AND SOCIAL OUTCOMES

Female education leaders have been found to have a positive influence on a range of education and other social outcomes in many contexts.

Improved education outcomes – the role of principals. In countries with few women in school leadership positions, it is frequently observed that those who are appointed as school principals are associated with improved student learning outcomes. Various reasons may explain this finding, which have not been sufficiently explored in research. The key question is whether female school leaders are on average better instructional leaders than men or whether these effects could be explained by some selectivity effect. For example, if women are discriminated against in principal appointment decisions, it may be the case that women who do get appointed are indeed better than their average male peer. A related explanation may be that women are more likely to be appointed in urban schools than in worse performing rural schools.

Analysis of data from the 2019 PASEC learning assessment in 14 francophone African countries found that primary schools under female leadership in Benin, Madagascar, Senegal and Togo had much higher learning outcomes in reading and mathematics than schools led by men, equivalent to one additional year of schooling (or by 0.3 of a standard deviation). In Kenya, English and Kiswahili oral reading fluency scores were higher in female-led than male-led schools (Freudenberger and Davis, 2017).

In Benin and Madagascar, the average grade promotion rate was one percentage point higher in schools led by a woman; in the case of Benin the effect was observed in both private and public schools, and was even higher in rural schools (Alban Conto et al., 2023). In Ghana, female-led lower secondary schools achieved higher grades than male-led

schools (Abonyi et al., 2022). In the country's northern region, female principals had a positive and significant influence on student grades in the Basic Education Certificate Examination (Duorinaah and Alhassan, 2021). In Mozambique, dropout rates were lower in schools headed by women (Alban Conto et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2024a).

Analysis of SEA-PLM data suggest that primary schools led by female principals had higher student scores in Cambodia (by 0.24 of a standard deviation), the Lao People's Democratic Republic (by 0.26) and Myanmar (by 0.16). Under certain assumptions, women-led schools saw children gain up to five extra months of learning in Cambodia, six months in the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and four months in Myanmar (Gouëdard and Ninomiya, 2024). In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, highly effective schools are twice as likely to be led by female principals than schools with average or low effectiveness. Teachers in schools with female principals were more likely to review student work, assign homework and persist in instruction until all students had understood the material, compared to their counterparts in schools with male principals (Lao PDR Ministry of Education and Sports et al., 2021)).

Inclusion and diversity. Female leaders in education can serve as visible role models, especially in motivating girls to pursue their aspirations, overcome obstacles and challenge entrenched gender stereotypes. For example, young women are often more likely to envision themselves in leadership or STEM fields, which are traditionally dominated by men, when they see women already thriving in those roles. In the United States, higher education institutions with female provosts have higher percentages of female deans and professors (Fuesting et al., 2022). In France, a one-hour talk by female scientists about science careers and gender stereotypes increased grade 12 girls' enrolment in STEM programmes by 3.4 percentage points (Breda et al., 2020).

Female leaders frequently drive policies and practices that promote more equitable learning conditions. For instance, they advocate for dedicated resources and support systems to address challenges disproportionately affecting female learners, such as menstrual hygiene and gender-based violence. In rural India, an analysis of the impact of a 1993 law, which reserved leadership positions for women, found that, by the time two election cycles had passed, the gender gap in parental aspirations had fallen by 20%, the gender gap in education had been eliminated, and girls had fewer household chores (Beaman et al., 2012).

Staff development. Women who hold school leadership positions have been found to encourage collaboration and professional development among teachers. They prefer a distributed leadership approach, seeking inputs from diverse stakeholders. This preference for collaboration tends to reduce conflict, foster a sense of shared responsibility, and spark innovative teaching methods. In Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Madagascar and Niger, schools led by women were more likely to keep track of teacher attendance. In Benin, Cameroon, Madagascar, Senegal and Togo, female-led schools reported lower teacher absenteeism (Alban Conto et al., 2023). Throughout Western and Central Africa, female principals have been proactive in encouraging teacher attendance as a condition for improved student learning (Játiva et al., 2022). In South Africa, female school leaders have been credited with creating safer and more collegial learning environments, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for staff members (Zuze, 2023a).

Policy and structural change. Women in education system leadership positions have been found to influence national reforms on funding allocations, teacher recruitment, curriculum design, inclusive policies and child-friendly disciplinary measures, which underscore the potential broader societal impact of gender balance in political leadership. In Germany, municipalities with a higher percentage of female councillors have shown a tendency to prioritize and accelerate the expansion of public childcare services (Hessami and Baskaran, 2020). In Ethiopia, female leadership in the education ministry was associated with educational equity–oriented reforms, with an emphasis on rural girls and STEM programmes (Nkengmeyi, 2019).

Female political leaders were associated with shorter school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kambhampati and Garikipati, 2020). This association with shorter school closure held even after accounting for infection rates and other local conditions. An increase in the share of women ministers by about 13 percentage points was associated with a 24% lower probability of school closures. These governments focused on other tools to curb virus transmission, balancing public health goals with the socioeconomic and educational implications of keeping children at home. In Germany, women make up one third of parliamentarians but asked two thirds of school closure questions (Danzer et al., 2024).

Improved educational outcomes – the role of legislators. An increase in the share of female legislators is positively associated with higher public expenditures on education. Across 19 OECD countries, a 1 percentage point increase in female representation in lower houses is associated with a 0.04 percentage point increase in educational expenditures as a share of gross domestic product (GDP) (Chen, 2021). Countries where women hold influential positions in government allocate more resources to primary education. A 1% increase in the number of legislative seats held by

women is associated with an increase of 0.03 percentage points in primary education expenditure as a share of GDP (Sullivan, 2021). The introduction of gender quotas in parliamentary representation in 139 countries has also been associated with reduced military expenditure and increased health and, to a somewhat lesser extent, increased education expenditure (Clayton and Zetterberg, 2018).

Cross-country analyses also show a robust relationship between women's representation in national legislatures and gender parity in education. In 191 countries from 1990 to 2020, an increase in the percentage of women in parliaments has been correlated with improvements in educational parity indices. The impact of women's representation varied by quota type. Countries that implement reserved seat quotas, which guarantee a fixed number of seats for women, demonstrated stronger positive effects on education parity than those that use candidate quotas, which require political parties to field a minimum percentage of female candidates. An increase of 1 percentage point in female representation through reserved seat quotas was associated with increases of approximately 0.5 percentage points in primary education parity and up to 1.8 percentage points in tertiary education parity (Acheampong et al., 2024).

In Afghanistan, prior to the regime chance in 2021, the introduction of a gender quota drove a 30% enrolment increase to public universities for women from districts with a low socioeconomic status (Najam, 2024). In 16 states in India, an increase in female legislators increased the likelihood of individuals attaining primary education in urban areas, but not in rural areas, suggesting that the effect may be mediated by urban–rural disparities, resource allocation or local cultural factors (Clots-Figueras, 2012). In Europe, mandated quotas in academia over the period 2003 to 2018 increased the representation of women on academic boards, contributing to greater equality in academic staff and in senior professorship positions (Forman-Rabinovici et al., 2024)

Greater focus on women's issues. Increased participation of women in governance leads to the enactment of policies that prioritize child health, nutrition and women's economic opportunities (Duflo, 2012). In France's lower house of parliament, female legislators are more likely to focus on childcare issues, while their male peers focus on military issues. The introduction of a quota in 2001 mandating female representation in larger electoral districts increased legislative activity on women's issues and reduced amendments related to the military. Female legislators are not only more active, but also concentrate more on women's issues than party dictates, out of personal, identity-driven priorities (Lippmann, 2022).

In Argentina, gender quotas significantly increased female representation in legislatures, leading to more policies addressing women's issues. Female legislators were more likely than their male peers to sponsor and support bills on childcare, reproductive rights and domestic violence (Barnes and Jones, 2018). Data from local elections in the German state of Bavaria, drawing on information from 224,000 candidates and childcare provision records between 2006 and 2017 found that the election of an additional female councillor accelerated the provision of public childcare by approximately 40%. (Walenta-Bergmann, 2023). In India, women in leadership roles in 265 village councils led to more investment in women's priorities like water and education (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004).

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP STYLES EXIST BUT ARE NOT IMMUTABLE

How women and men lead in education is influenced by several factors, including societal norms and expectations, interpersonal relationships, geography and professional networks (Eagly and Carli, 2003; Powell, 2012; Stead and Elliott, 2009). Although leadership approaches and styles do not fall strictly along gender lines, research has tried to explore gender-related differences in some contexts, which have implications for organizational culture, decision-making processes and institutional effectiveness (Hallinger et al., 2016; Shaked et al., 2018a).

Those who argue that there are distinct gender characteristics in the conduct of leadership point at the more frequent display of nurturing and cooperation by women leaders compared to men's relatively more common displays of assertiveness and dominance (Eagly and Carli, 2003, 2004). Empirical research has focused on the extent to which women's leadership is more democratic (rather than autocratic or directive) (Bass and Stogdill, 1990; Eagly and Carli, 2003; Gastil, 1994); relationship-oriented (rather than task-oriented) (Chliwniak, 1997; Northouse, 2015); and transformational (rather than transactional) (Avolio et al., 1999; Eagly et al., 2003).

Analysis of 2018 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) data by sex has suggested that women devote relatively more time to curriculum and teaching and to interactions with parent and students, while men prioritize administrative or discipline-related tasks (**Figure 19**). Another analysis of TALIS data has suggested that female principals spend more time than their male peers on student-centred leadership (Gümüş et al., 2024).

FIGURE 19.

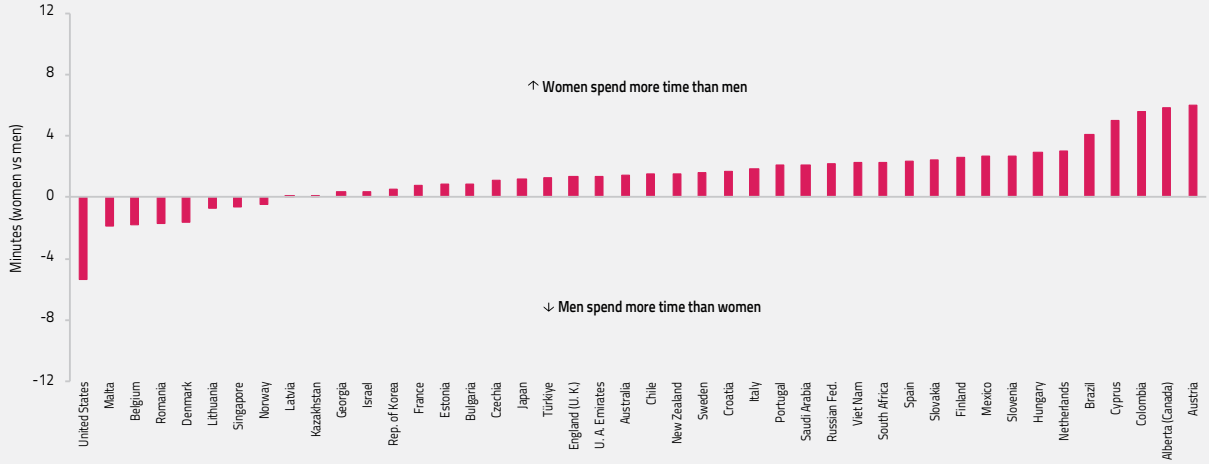
Female school leaders spend more time than their male peers on the curriculum and on human interactions

Difference in time lower secondary school principals reported spending on selected activities by sex, selected upper-middle- and high-income countries, 2018

Administration

Curriculum and teaching

Interactions with students and parents



Source: GEM Report team analysis of TALIS data.

Not all studies on leadership behaviours by sex agree with these conclusions. Even in the TALIS data, there are exceptions to the general tendency for women to spend more time than men on learning and interaction tasks. Some studies emphasize individual traits over gender differences (Cuadrado et al., 2012). Others identify few, if any, differences between male and female leadership practices (Van Engen and Willemsen, 2004).

Even if differences exist, policy imperatives can standardize how male and female leaders enact their roles. For example, in systems with stringent accountability requirements based on standardized testing, men and women may display more directive styles to meet performance targets (Johnstone et al., 2009; Lock and Lummis, 2014). In Sweden, female principals tend to adopt a distributed leadership model that involves teachers more in decision-making. But while past research highlighted that female leaders are frequently expected to adopt a more supportive role whereas male leaders are more commonly perceived in managerial terms (Franzén, 2009), more recent research shows that men's and women's leadership styles are converging due to strong policy support for collaborative practices (OECD, 2021b).

As described above, discriminatory stereotypes remain, although there has been progress towards eliminating them. A meta-analysis of stereotypes in the United States found that the percentage of people who believe that leadership competences are equal between men and women has risen over the past 70 years, while among those who perceived a difference in competence, more expressed a view favouring women (Eagly et al., 2020). A study of over 43,000 documents found that appointing women as leaders was linked to changes in organizational language. When women take on leadership roles, they become increasingly associated with leadership traits such as independence and confidence. These gains in agency do not diminish communal qualities like kindness and caring, allowing women to be perceived as both competent and likable. Increasing female representation serves as a strategy to address gender stereotypes and alter perceptions of women's competence and warmth in leadership (Lawson et al., 2022).

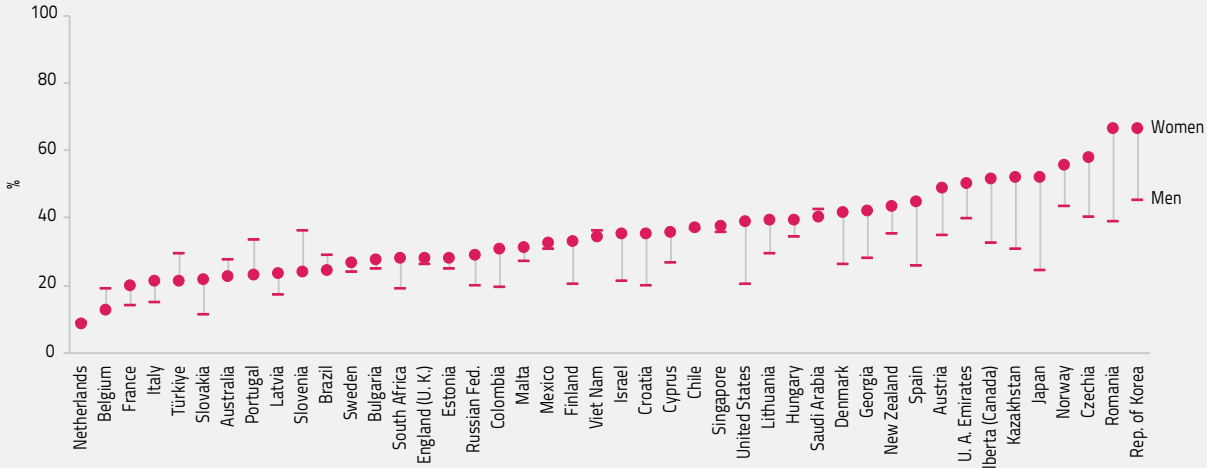
... IN BEING PARTICIPATORY RATHER THAN DIRECTIVE

Collaboration is key to creating professional learning communities, encouraging peer feedback and enhancing teamwork. About half of education systems explicitly require principals to foster teacher cooperation (UNESCO, 2024c). Collaboration fosters interactions and helps build trusting relationships with teachers. Some studies have suggested that women prefer collaboration, inclusion and participation (Valerio, 2009), while men tend to emphasize structure, hierarchy, performance and control (Eagly and Johnson, 1990). Women tend to apply more democratic and consensus-building methods, in contrast to directive and authoritative approaches more typically associated with male leadership (Carless, 1998). It has been argued that adopting a distributed leadership approach may help women appear as 'invisible leaders' to protect themselves. The idea of being an authority and making decisions unilaterally may make some women uncomfortable because their exercise of authority may be perceived as negative (Falabella et al., 2022). Analysis of 2018 TALIS data for this report show that more female (36%) than male (28%) lower secondary school principals strongly agreed that a collaborative school culture was important (**Figure 20**).

FIGURE 20.

Female principals are more likely to agree on the importance of a collaborative school culture than male principals

Share of lower secondary school principals who agreed that a collaborative school culture characterised by mutual support was important, by sex, selected upper-middle- and high-income countries, 2018



Source: GEM Report team analysis of TALIS data.

In Chile, female leadership leaned towards a distributed and participatory type of leadership, with a focus on collaborative work with the entire educational community and on monitoring and accompanying teachers and students for continuous improvement of educational processes (Valenzuela et al., 2023). Another study of female school principals showed that they demonstrated a caring approach in their interactions, management and administration, balancing individual and collective needs and promoting the well-being of their communities (Sáez and Salinas, 2024).

In Pakistan, a study of female school principals suggested that they were primarily democratic leaders, effectively utilizing the knowledge, expertise and creative inputs of their teams while maintaining decision-making authority (Saddique and Raja, 2023). Similar findings have been reported in Indonesia for female school principals in primary (Ristiana et al., 2024) and secondary schools (Rohyatun et al., 2020). Data from the 2019 SEA-PLM survey suggested that female principals in the Lao People's Democratic Republic focused more on engaging and empowering teachers (UNICEF, 2024b). In an urban school district in the United States, analysis of principals' data registered in a daily log suggested that female principals spent a higher proportion of their time than male principals working with others (Sebastian and Moon, 2017a).

Collaboration extends beyond the school walls. Female principals are often better at forging alliances with families and external partners, which is particularly valued in contexts where community engagement is vital for improving attendance and reducing dropout rates (Bartanen et al., 2024). Women's success as educational leaders often hinges on effective networking. Engaging with other schools and colleagues helps build empowering networks and raises awareness within and beyond school communities (Muzvidziwa, 2015).

... IN ORIENTATION TOWARDS RELATIONSHIPS RATHER THAN TASKS

Women's leadership has also been characterized as relational (Stead and Elliott, 2009). Successful school administration practices align closely with female leadership attributes which can influence communication such as nurturing, empathy, intuition, compromise and care (Growe and Montgomery, 1999). Women leaders have strengths in interpersonal communication and providing encouragement and support to colleagues (Eagly and Carli, 2007). As described above, female principals are more likely than their male peers to spend time interacting with parents and students according to the 2018 TALIS. Similar findings emerge from PASEC learning assessment data in Benin, Congo, Madagascar and Niger (Alban Conto et al., 2023) and in the United Arab Emirates (Al-Taneiji, 2012).

In Côte d'Ivoire, female principals emphasized communication in their relations with people (Oyeniran and Lili, 2020). In Rwanda, analysis of female secondary

school leadership practices showed they helped teachers overcome challenges by being open and accessible, providing encouragement, showing appreciation for good work and making time to listen (Nuwatuhaire et al., 2023). In Saudi Arabia, female academic leaders rated strong communication as the second-most important attribute that enables them to negotiate with and convince others (Abdullah Dahlan, 2023). In the United States, women superintendents emphasized the use of soft language in their communications to build relationships and implement the district's vision as essential leadership qualities (Bernal et al., 2017).

Socioemotional skills are seen as crucial for successful leadership, including providing emotional support beyond work duties. Listening, empathy, teamwork and conversation are important tools for achieving effective leadership for women school principals in many countries including Chile (Falabella et al., 2022; Valenzuela et al., 2023), Pakistan (Saddique and Raja, 2023) and Türkiye (Mert, 2021). Such skills are also important components of resilience, which enable growth, adaptability and the ability to drive change in risky environments (Setlhodi and Ramatsui, 2024).

… IN BEING TRANSFORMATIONAL – AND LEARNING-FOCUSED – RATHER THAN TRANSACTIONAL

A clearly articulated and compelling vision provides a cohesive purpose and enhances internal communication, guiding collective decision-making, helping staff assess what practices align with the education institution's purpose, and informing the changes needed for effective administration (Bush, 2007). To enact such leadership, education leaders must know the context and identity of their institutions. By virtue of having an advantage in building good interpersonal relationships and being accessible and supportive to staff, women leaders may be well placed in some contexts to set and communicate a clear vision.

In Pakistan, research on female leadership has shown that transformational, vision-oriented leadership is associated with increased levels of trust, better interpersonal connections and innovative behaviour among staff. The trust of staff in their leader mediates the positive relationship between women's leadership and the propensity for innovation within organizations (Bilal et al., 2021). A study of principals' time spent on nine different domains of leadership in the United Kingdom showed that female principals spent a higher proportion of their time working with others in planning and setting goals (Sebastian and Moon, 2017b). In the United States, a survey on the competencies of college presidents showed that women were more likely than men to indicate that demonstrating a commitment to equity, transparency in communication and decision-making, and weighing the consequences of decisions on different groups, were very relevant. Women presidents were also more likely (74%) than men (60%) to manage change effectively via short- and long-term strategic planning (Academic Search, 2024).

Women have been found to be more likely to engage in instructional leadership. A meta-analysis of 28 studies on teachers' and principals' perceptions showed small but statistically significant gender differences in instructional leadership (Hallinger et al., 2016). A systematic review of school leadership and gender in 54 African countries found that women are more likely than men to exhibit effective instructional leadership qualities alongside being collaborative, caring and collegial leaders (Bush et al., 2022). In Burundi, Cameroon, Guinea and Madagascar, female-led schools were more likely to offer remediation classes to students in their last grade of primary school (Alban Conto et al., 2023). In Indonesia (Asri et al., 2021) and Viet Nam (Nguyễn et al., 2018), female principals were found to be more engaged in supervising, evaluating instruction and coordinating the curriculum than men principals.

In Chile, a national survey of urban primary schools found that female principals received significantly more favourable evaluations from teachers in 9 out of 14 leadership practices (Weinstein et al., 2023b). In Israel, female principals relied more on their instructional experiences and knowledge, whereas male principals relied on the formal authority of regulations and their decision-making skills (Shaked et al., 2018a, 2019). In Türkiye, teachers perceived female school principals as frequently demonstrating transformational leadership behaviours, moderately engaging in transactional leadership, and rarely exhibiting laissez-faire practices (Tozlu and Hoşgörür, 2024). Data from the 2019 SEA-PLM survey suggested that female primary school principals were less likely to directly monitor student attendance and more likely to focus on high-value tasks, such as evaluating teacher practices (UNICEF, 2024b).

Transformational leadership requires a strong ethical foundation and a rethinking of conventional power dynamics to engage individuals not merely as subordinates but as peers with values, aspirations and agency (Burns, 2010). Principals are expected to safeguard ethical standards, integrity and accountability. For women leaders, integrity-based leadership can serve to counteract any residual bias that questions women's authority or professional acumen. An emphasis on ethical standards can help them challenge and change gender norms – and to promote greater equity and fairness in educational settings.

However, the notion that leadership is a process of social influence clearly exposes the challenges for women to set and communicate a vision. If the source of influence is the position a person has in a formal organizational structure or the recognition and respect accorded to a person due to their professional or social acceptance in a group, discrimination and unequal power dynamics puts female leaders in a challenging situation. A compelling vision and transparent communication can mitigate biases and spotlight women's capacity not only to lead large and diverse teams effectively, as in Eswatini (Mabuza, 2025), but also to shift community and teacher mindsets toward gender equity, as in Ghana (Brion and Ampah-Mensah, 2021). However, where discrimination against women has been deeply entrenched, women may struggle to fulfil this role (Alemu, 2024).

WOMEN STILL FACE CONSIDERABLE OBSTACLES IN ACCESSING EDUCATION LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Women's under-representation in education leadership positions – at the institutional, administrative and political level – means that education systems lose out on talented candidates. Several factors cumulatively undermine their advancement, including adverse societal and cultural norms (such as values, negative stereotypes and beliefs, family responsibility expectations and a lack of role models); institutional and structural barriers (such as appointment and selection processes and childcare or other family-friendly policies); and fewer development opportunities (such as a lack of mentoring and training opportunities) (Bush et al., 2022).

Studies suggest that gender disparities in leadership roles stem primarily from demand-side factors, such as institutional biases and hiring preferences, rather than a lack of aspiration (Martínez et al., 2021). Disparities in the average seniority or years of service before promotion, day-to-day working conditions, vulnerability to burnout, and access to professional development opportunities shape both the number of women who ultimately attain leadership positions and the effectiveness and longevity of their leadership once appointed. For example, in the United Kingdom, a woman has a 1 in 14 chance of becoming a headteacher and a man has a 1 in 6 chance (Jones, 2017). Among respondents in an education leadership survey in sub-Saharan Africa, sociocultural expectations (33%) and gender stereotypes (20%) were among the top barriers to women leadership. Lack of mentorship (28%), networking opportunities (22%) and, in tertiary education, access to training and development (24%) were other key concerns (ESSA, 2021).

This section explores the key obstacles that impede women's progression into leadership positions, from societal expectations and institutional cultures to deficits in mentorship and data. It also highlights opportunities, including policy interventions such as gender quotas and training programmes. Drawing on country examples, this section suggests that leadership opportunities can be broadened through various measures.

SOCIETAL NORMS DETERMINE HOW LEADERSHIP ROLES ARE PERCEIVED AND ALLOCATED

Stereotypes and biases can limit women's leadership ambitions (Cha et al., 2023). Gender stereotypes are harmful, yet people are socialized to believe them. They shape expectations about roles and behaviours. Descriptive stereotypes define how women and men are typically perceived, and often attribute traits like confidence and assertiveness to men (Bye et al., 2022; Martínez et al., 2021). Prescriptive stereotypes dictate societal expectations, reinforcing the idea that women *should* be nurturing and thereby undermining their professional ambitions (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Biases stemming from both stereotypes can affect hiring, promotion and the evaluation of women in leadership positions (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023; Manzi et al., 2024)).

Leadership is often culturally perceived as a male trait, leading to subconscious biases that question women's authority, decision-making capabilities (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Valerio, 2009) and ability to become leaders (Arar and Oplatka, 2016). Male and female principals in Pakistan believed men were better decision makers (Aziz et al., 2017). The bias that men are naturally better decision makers is reinforced by school governance structures and institutional frameworks (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023). Some have argued that the feminization of teaching diminishes its status, enabling men to claim the leadership roles in education (Foschi, 2000). Women leaders do not always get necessary community support and have to prove their capability as leaders (Grant, 2005; Msila, 2013). Consequently, when women seek to move beyond classroom teaching, they may contend with a lack of support for leadership development and face scepticism about their managerial skills.

Several examples are captured in research literature in sub-Saharan Africa, including in Eswatini (Dlamini et al., 2024), Ethiopia (Kelkay and Asrat, 2020) and Lesotho (Komiti and Moorosi, 2020). In Zimbabwe, negative cultural attitudes have undermined women's access to principalship in rural schools (Shava et al., 2019) and to heads of department positions in higher education (Shava et al., 2023). Around the world, there is social

pressure for women to sacrifice their career advancement for men's benefit (**Box 1**), notably in the Arab States where the pressures are also linked to religious beliefs that present a common concern for aspiring women leaders, such as in Saudi Arabia (Vogel et al., 2021b). In Melanesian societies, leadership is traditionally male-dominated and reinforced by religious and colonial structures (Maezama, 2019). In Honiara, Solomon Islands, only one in six school principals are female (Iromea, 2020).

BOX 1.

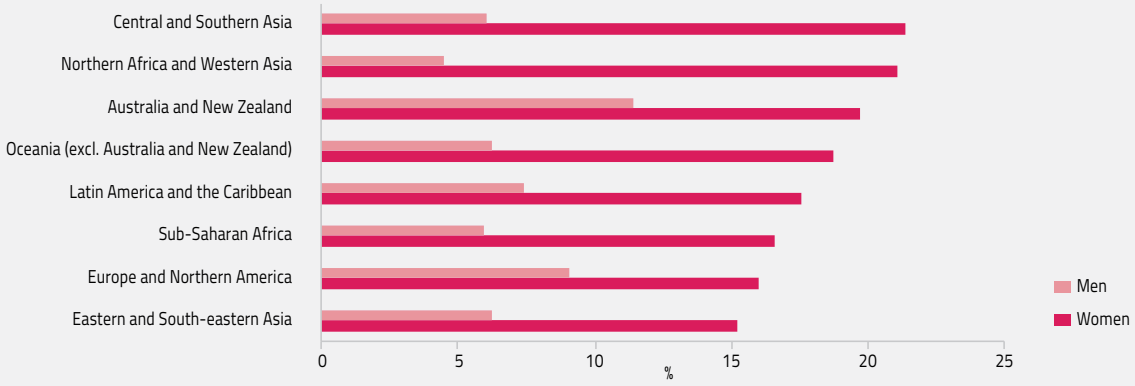
Caring and family responsibilities can keep women out of leadership roles

Women bear more family responsibilities due to social expectations and gender roles, shouldering an unequal amount of domestic and caregiving duties (Hanna et al., 2023). Globally, unpaid care and domestic work takes nearly three times as large a share of women's 24-hour day (17.8%) as of men's (6.5%) (**Figure 21**). Unpaid care and domestic work amount to an aggregate 9% of global GDP, equivalent to USD 11 trillion in purchasing power parity terms. This 'second shift' or 'double burden' can impede professional advancement into roles that demand significant time, visibility and networking, especially at higher levels of education (Islam et al., 2023) and political responsibility (Fox and Lawless, 2014; Maguire, 2018).

FIGURE 21

Women allocate three times as much time as men on unpaid care and domestic work

Percentage of time spent in unpaid care and domestic work, by region and sex, 2023



Source: Hanna et al. (2023).

In Benin, women are viewed primarily as stay-at-home mothers, which limits their education leadership opportunities (Kakai et al., 2021). In the United Republic of Tanzania, family responsibilities and a lack of transparent recruitment procedures deter women from applying for senior leadership. In rural settings, negative societal perceptions and inadequate support further limit women's leadership opportunities, contributing to the under-representation of women in community secondary school leadership (Mbepera, 2015).

In China, family and caring duties, along with gender stereotypes and societal influence on identity, roles and leadership, impeded the improvement of gender balance, despite national policies and laws to address the issue (Wang and Gao, 2022). In Japan, deeply rooted cultural expectations around femininity and motherhood can discourage women from seeking principalship or superintendency positions. Japanese women held 24% of vice principal positions and 19% of principal positions in 2022 (The Mainichi, 2024). In Türkiye, the balance between work and family roles was often described as difficult by school principals and vice-principals (Bayram and Günbey, 2024).

In the Canadian province of Alberta, women tend to enter department head, assistant, associate, vice-principal and principal roles at an older age than men. Being 'out of the system' limited their chances for promotion to leadership roles, while having children reduced their promotion to superintendent positions. Employers hold stereotypes for women with family responsibilities and assume they have less time for leadership roles than men or women without children (Essiomle et al., 2024). In England (United Kingdom), the share of females in school leadership positions who were part-time increased from 9% in 2010 to 15% in 2020, while the share of males stayed the same at 3%. Female teachers and part-time teachers were also significantly less likely to be promoted to senior leadership and headship (Department for Education, 2022). Female primary school deputy or assistant headteachers express career aspirations to be headteachers but change as family circumstances change and role pressures rise (Lynch, 2021).

These norms not only limit women's willingness to put themselves forward (Bowles et al., 2005; Bowles and McGinn, 2005) but also subject them to scrutiny when they assert leadership qualities (Bye et al., 2022; Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023), as their behaviours may contradict some gender stereotypes (Rudman and Phelan, 2008; Rudman and Glick, 1999, 2002). In some countries, women leaders have to carefully balance 'masculine' qualities, such as assertiveness, opinion-sharing, dissent and negotiation with 'feminine' qualities, such as being reserved and accommodating (Vogel and Alhudithi, 2023; Zheng, 2020). Language can also exacerbate bias against women in professional settings by framing their credentials in less advantageous terms (Bolden-Barrett, 2018; Madera et al., 2019). Resumes, references and recommendation letters may emphasize traits like approachability and friendliness instead of job-relevant skills and expertise (Hebl et al., 2018). This tendency to describe women in more relational terms rather than ones focused on competency can hinder their access to roles for which they are fully qualified (Hebl et al., 2018; Storage et al., 2016).

Some studies attribute women's under-representation in leadership positions to low self-esteem, which in turn hinders confidence and assertiveness (Mberia, 2017; Mythili, 2017b). Positive self-perception is a critical factor in fostering leadership (Gerzema and D'Antonio, 2013). In the United States, women with eight years of programming experience were found to have the same confidence in their skills as their male peers with less than one year of experience (Khadka, 2016). Internalizing societal expectations and norms surrounding gender roles can make women uncomfortable identifying themselves as powerful (Feenstra et al., 2022), doubtful about their leadership capabilities (Dlamini et al., 2024) and more hesitant to pursue higher positions (Duevel, et al., 2015).

In the United States, a study found that women were twice as likely as men to follow job application guidelines, but 22% less likely to think they would be hired, thinking they did not meet all the requirements (Mohr, 2014). In Japan, women leaders frequently perceive their roles as less legitimate compared to subordinate roles – but their male peers do not do this (Cha et al., 2023). A study in the US state of Pennsylvania showed that gender explained 27% of the variance in interest for the position of a superintendent. Males were 30% more likely to aspire for those roles than women. Even when interested, just 40% of aspiring women had previously applied to such jobs (Gullo and Sperandio, 2020). A survey of 2,100 principals in the US state of Texas found that men were 17% more likely than women to seek promotion to superintendent (Maranto et al., 2018b).

In higher education, men tend to underplay the risks associated with assuming department chair roles, benefiting from the sponsorship of senior male figures who facilitate their advancement. In contrast, female chairs typically describe their journey into leadership as the result of extensive preparation and deep professional commitment, driven by a desire to implement meaningful change. They are generally more aware of the potential risks involved in such roles and less likely to have received institutional sponsorship from senior leadership (Hobgood and Draucker, 2022).

Conversely, women leaders may struggle to be accepted. Female headteachers in Kenya reported that they were fully accepted as leaders only after 'hard work and sacrifices' (Choge, 2015). In Viet Nam, 68% of university staff reported they were willing to work with a female leader while 14% did not accept a woman as their immediate leader. Women leaders appeared less favoured by subordinates than male leaders, indicating a lack of institutional support and acceptance (Tran and Nguyen, 2022).

A tool proposed to summarize these challenges, the Kaleidoscope Career Model, illustrates how women adjust their careers between authenticity (alignment of personal values with organizational demands), balance (work and non-work relationships), and challenge (stimulating and autonomous work). These parameters are similar for men and women early in their careers but diverge over time, influencing late-career outcomes (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan and Carraher, 2022), as 'balance' concerns become more prominent at transitional points (Elley-Brown et al., 2015).

INSTITUTIONAL AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS ARE SIGNIFICANT OBSTACLES

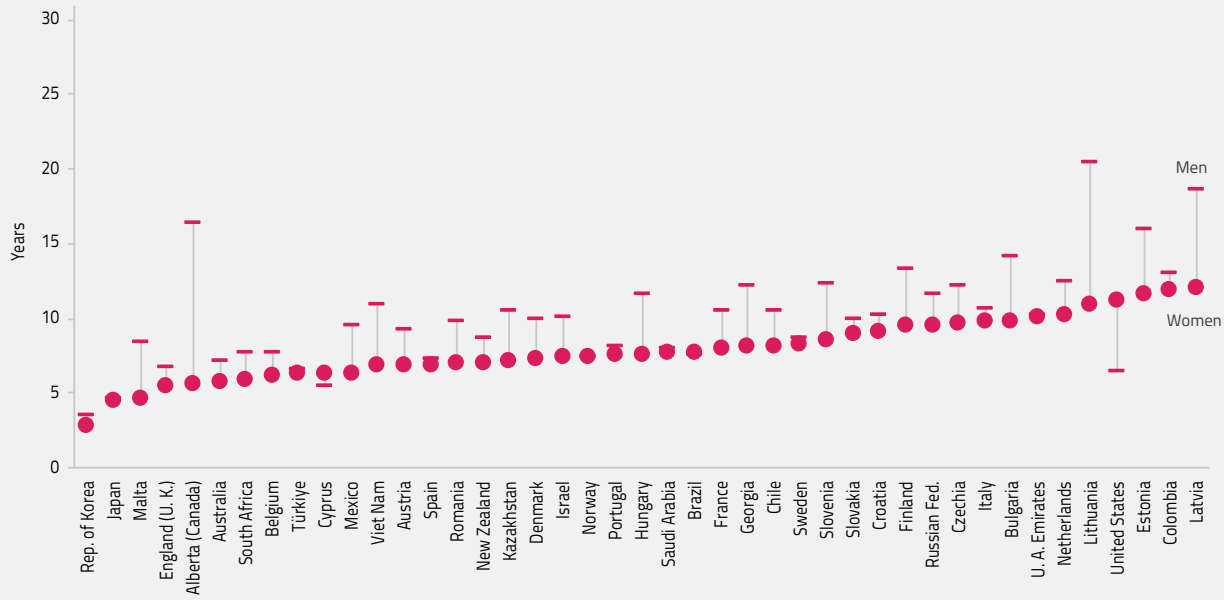
Recruitment and selection processes may not support women's efforts to access education leadership positions and overcome any obstacles they encounter. Empirical evidence consistently shows that women enter education leadership roles later than men. They accumulate more years of classroom teaching or mid-level administration before being promoted to school- or system-level leadership roles compared to men. Analysis of 2018 TALIS data from 44 education systems by sex suggests that on average women have a longer tenure than men as lower secondary school teachers by 1.1 years and a shorter tenure as lower secondary school principals by 2.2 years (**Figure 22**).

FIGURE 22.

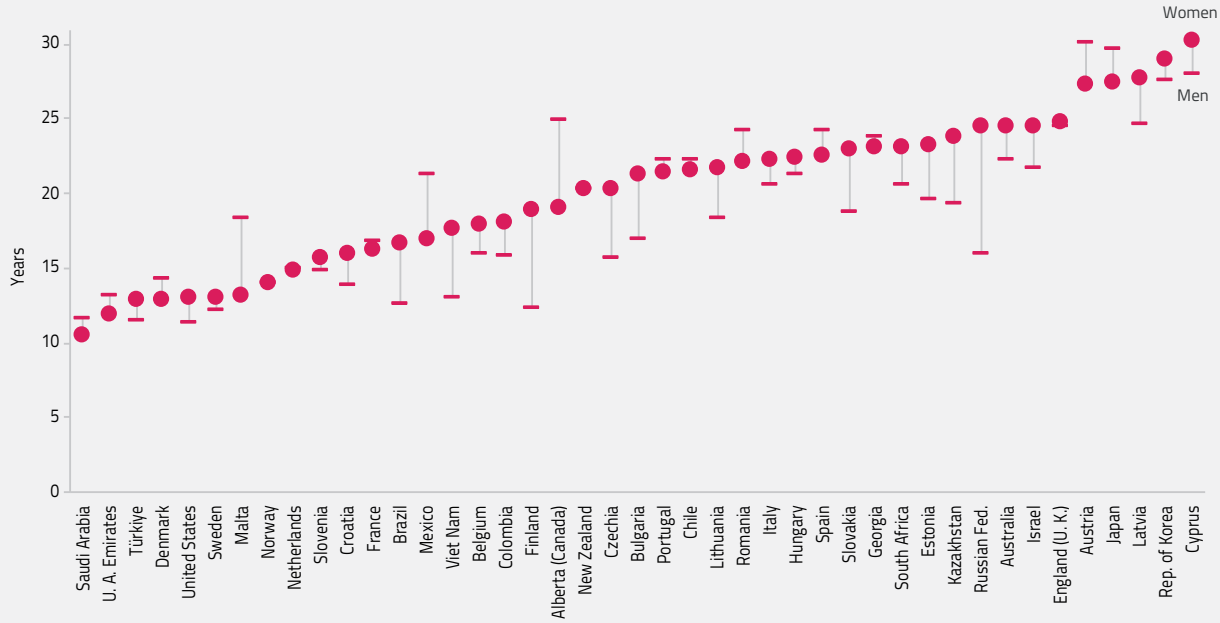
Women accumulate fewer years than men as principals

Average years of tenure in lower secondary education by sex, selected upper-middle- and high-income countries, 2018

a. Principals



b. Teachers



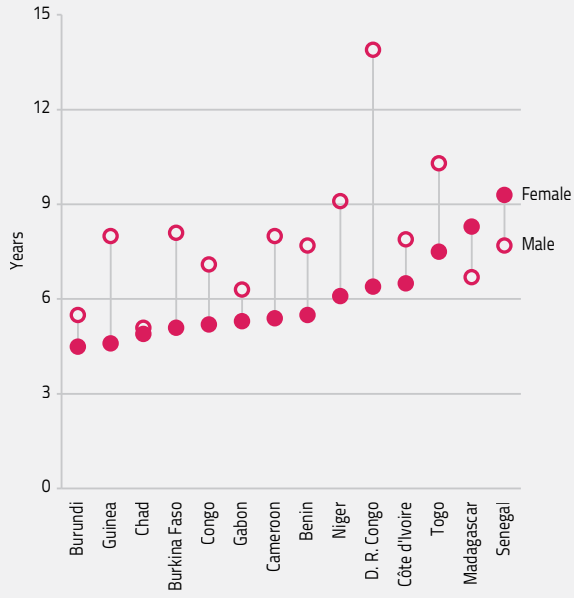
Source: 2018 TALIS database.

In the United States, men typically start as primary and lower secondary school principals with 1.62 years less experience than women and as secondary school assistant principals with 1.25 years less experience than women. Even if women have one year longer seniority before promotion into assistant principalship, they are less likely to be promoted into secondary school principal positions than men. Women candidates spent 5.6 years as assistant principals compared to 4.9 years for men (Bailes and Guthery, 2020). Women are twice (31%) as likely as men (16%) to have previously served as curriculum specialists. Yet men become principals on average after 10.7 years of teaching experience compared to 13.2 years for women (Maranto et al., 2018a). Moreover, women spend more time in the classroom and in intermediate leadership roles than their male counterparts before attaining superintendency roles (Robinson et al., 2017).

Similar challenges have been observed in other countries. In Australia, female teachers require 2.7 more years to reach principal roles and have shorter careers as principals (Thompson and Stokes, 2023). In Chile, men (32%) have held other management positions immediately before becoming principals more often than women (24%), while women (11.5%) are more likely to fall into the lower salary bracket than men (5.2%), at least partly because they are more likely to have contracts with fewer hours (Figueroa et al., 2024). In South Asia, gatekeeping of certain posts, such as headships in co-educational schools, effectively privileges men and forces women to wait longer for more scarce opportunities in girls-only schools (Asadullah, 2024; Gill and Khokhar, 2024). In francophone Africa, according to the 2019 PASEC learning achievement survey, women have on average a shorter tenure as principals than men by 2.4 years (**Figure 23**). In Zimbabwe, male teachers with shorter tenures are more frequently earmarked for principalship than women with equivalent or greater experience (Moyo and Perumal, 2020).

Conscious or subconscious gender biases may play a role in hiring or promotion decisions. Lack of gender diversity in hiring committees and of standardized recruitment procedures can affect equitable leadership opportunities. Male dominance of selection panels has been mentioned as an issue in Bangladesh (Islam et al., 2023). In Indonesia, it has been reported that the appointment of principals is more due to personal connections to district officers than individual competencies or qualifications, believed to be at the expense of female candidates (Gaol, 2021).

FIGURE 23.
In francophone Africa, female principals have less school management experience than men
Number of years of school management experience, francophone African countries, 2019



Source: Alban Conto et al. (2023).

But it is difficult to prove bias. Competition should lead to more equitable leadership selection (Martínez et al., 2021). Chile offers such an example where biases may be revealed. Public schools have an open competition to select principals, which in principle should eliminate bias, but the final decision belongs to the mayor, which introduces a political element to the process. In contrast, the process is in the hands of the school owner in subsidized or private schools. Women are under-represented in management positions in public schools and overrepresented in subsidized and private schools (Muñoz, 2021). In the United States, in districts where women held 75% or more of board seats, women secured 48% of superintendent positions, compared to just 33% in districts with the equivalent male majority (ILO Group, 2023c).

LACK OF DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES IS ANOTHER KEY BARRIER

The lack of structured mentoring and targeted leadership training may also impede women's progress into leadership roles. Gender biases and stereotypes and microaggressions add to the challenges women principals experience early in their leadership roles (Spillane and Lee, 2013). Unpreparedness to address these persistent challenges can significantly impact women's health and well-being.

Analysis of data from the Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey over a 10-year period found that 1 in 3 school leaders frequently experienced symptoms of burnout, and almost 1 in 8 frequently experienced stress. Women were more likely to experience burnout than men. Primary school leaders and those in their early careers were more at risk (Arnold et al., 2023). The Irish Post-Primary Principals and Deputy Principals Health and Well-being Survey suggested that female school leaders consistently reported a higher incidence of bullying (38%) than male peers (31%), and the gap has been increasing. They also faced more threats of physical violence (15% vs 7%) (Rahimi and Arnold, 2024). In the United Kingdom, a survey of state-funded school principals after the COVID-19 pandemic found that most women principals were affected and described themselves as 'sinking' (Greany et al., 2022). In the United States, evidence collected through interviews with female school principals of urban charter schools in Los Angeles revealed that in addition to covert sexism in daily interactions with different stakeholders, the lack of skills, knowledge and information made their learning curve very steep (McManus, 2018).

Often, women face a shortage of mentoring opportunities (Bynum and Young, 2015; Copeland and Calhoun, 2014; Phillips, 2023). In South Africa, newly appointed female principals reported discrimination, insubordination, disrespect and sabotage (Nel and Govender, 2023). These challenges can compound for women as societal norms deprive them of essential guidance through connections and network development opportunities that are available to men (Chanda and Ngulube, 2024). In Viet Nam, informal networking events, which are less accessible to women due to family obligations and cultural norms (Everitt, 2024), negatively influence women's career advancement in higher education (Maheshwari, 2023; Phuong et al., 2023). Without robust support systems, women frequently rely on alternative networks to navigate structural and cultural obstacles. In Türkiye, family support is important for women principals to overcome the difficulties faced (Bayram and Günbey, 2024).

A critical juncture in the leadership pipeline occurs when teachers assume middle management posts, such as department heads or vice-principals. These positions could serve as stepping stones, providing hands-on experience in areas like budgeting, curriculum oversight and staff management. They also enable potential leaders to gain visibility in institutional networks, which can be crucial for securing future promotions. However, women frequently struggle to access these roles. Eligibility criteria for middle management positions prioritize non-teaching experience that men are more likely to have, or may require applicants to relocate, which can be difficult for women constrained by family obligations. Long commuting distances or family relocation were some of the factors mentioned by women for not having pursued superintendency careers in the US state of Pennsylvania (Sperandio and Devdas, 2015).

Even when women do secure middle-management appointments, they may face a 'glass cliff' (Cook and Glass, 2013), a term used to describe a situation in which women find themselves in precarious leadership roles with high risk of failure, for instance in institutions undergoing a crisis or chronic under-resourcing (Ryan et al., 2016). A survey found that 69% of companies chose a female leader during a crisis (Bruckmüller and Branscombe, 2011). Although these roles help women to accumulate leadership experience, the likelihood of their poor performance, given limited support, may reinforce negative stereotypes about women's leadership capabilities. These discouraging outcomes can reinforce biases among decision makers, who subsequently may overlook female candidates for higher positions.

STRATEGIES ARE NEEDED TO EQUALIZE EDUCATION LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Interventions to equalize gender representation in educational leadership can be developed to address insufficient awareness of gender biases and inequality, improve processes and support aspiring female leaders. Approaches need to tackle individual factors (aspirations and confidence), organizational factors (information and hierarchies) and cultural factors (norms and stereotypes).

… BY RAISING AWARENESS

Standardized protocols for evaluating applications as well as blind selection processes can help minimize gender bias in hiring procedures (Gaol, 2021; Martınez et al., 2021). Specific training can support those who are involved in recruitment for leadership roles, such as school board members and administrators (Shakeshaft, 1989; Skrla et al., 2000). Such training can address various

forms of gender bias, equip participants with strategies to counteract these biases, and introduce methods for fostering unbiased interactions, providing tools to avoid bias in hiring decisions (Kahn, 2018). Reviewing implicit or unconscious gender biases and stereotypes could facilitate more informed behaviours across school personnel and ensure that every aspect of the recruitment process is fair and objective, focusing exclusively on whether candidates are really fit for the job (Lee and Mao, 2023). In New Zealand, the Ministry of Education introduced systematic training on cultural responsiveness, bias recognition and inclusive decision making to shift organizational norms (Stone et al., 2021). In South Africa, during the process to appoint school principals, the interview committee must adhere to equity, redress and representation principles from the 2022 Personnel Administrative Measures (SouthAfrica Department of Basic Education, 2022b).

School governance boards play a central role in shaping institutional culture, as they frequently determine hiring priorities. In some US states, local boards have been encouraged or, in some cases, mandated to adopt diversity goals and to undergo training in unconscious bias. By fostering awareness among board members, these initiatives aim to reduce patterns of excluding or discounting female applicants for leadership roles. Increasing gender diversity at the board level is therefore a promising strategy for achieving greater gender parity in leadership appointments (ILO Group, 2023b; Maranto et al., 2018b). Including multiple women in the final selection pool is another strategy to counteract biases (Johnson et al., 2016; Martínez et al., 2021). Ensuring that more than one woman has been shortlisted is claimed to increase the chances that a woman will be hired by fostering a culture where diverse leadership becomes the norm rather than the exception (Johnson et al., 2016).

Another route to tackling gender discrimination is through awareness campaigns. In the United States, Women Leading Ed represents the largest non-profit network devoted to empowering women to reshape education leadership (Women Leading Ed, 2025). The Women's Legislative Network of the National Conference of State Legislatures is the professional development organization that includes every female state legislator in the country's 50 states, territories and the District of Columbia aiming to promote the participation, empowerment and leadership of women legislators (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2023).

Engaging community members in discussions about the value of female leadership can be transformative. Radio campaigns can showcase successful women leaders to help shift public opinion. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, *Leadership au féminin*, a show of Radio Media + CI, presents stories about women in various roles to communicate the idea that women and men are capable of performing the same roles in society (Farm Radio International, 2022). Campaigns can weaken cultural biases and encourage women to see themselves as potential leaders (BBC,2018).

... BY CREATING AN ENABLING POLICY ENVIRONMENT

Some countries, notably in sub-Saharan Africa, have adopted legislative or policy mechanisms to boost women's representation in leadership roles. One of the most direct strategies to address gender imbalances in leadership is the implementation of affirmative action policies. According to the PEER profiles compiled for the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report*, 11% of countries try to promote gender diversity in school leader selection through measures that range from affirmative action to equal employment opportunities legislation.

Examples of affirmative action in education include Ethiopia, where the government introduced a target for 30% of all government-funded positions to be held by women, including school leaders (Melka and Warkineh, 2022). This policy has been supported by the Strategic Plan for Female School Leaders (Ethiopia Ministry of Education, 2023). Administrative instructions for the principal selection process in the city of Addis Ababa stipulate that priority goes to female candidates if they tie with male candidates (Addis Ababa Administration Public Service and Human Resource Development Bureau, 2012; Ethiopia Ministry of Education, 2014). Togo has specific provisions in its 2020–2030 Education Sector Plan aimed at increasing the number of female school principals (Education Development Trust, 2022a; Togo Government,2020).

Affirmative action has been more effective for political positions than in education. In Burundi, according to the revised electoral code, at least 30% of positions are reserved for women; 34% of elected administrators were women in 2023 (UN Women, 2023). Ghana's Affirmative Action Law envisages a minimum of 40% women representation in politics, boards and decision-making bodies. Namibia introduced a 30% gender quota in 1992 to ensure women's representation in decision-making positions. In 2025, the country elected its first female president and vice president, while 50% of cabinet members are women.

As a result of a parliamentary quota, Rwanda has the highest percentage of women in legislative bodies in the world (61%), as well as a comparatively large share of female ministers. However, despite a Girls' Education Policy, which set a target of equal gender representation among principals (Rwanda Ministry of Education, 2008), only 1 in 5 public school leaders – and 1 in 10 private school leaders – were female in 2017 (Cheriyan et al., 2021). By 2022, fewer than 3 in 10 school leaders were women (Hakizimana, 2022). In Zambia, the 2015 Gender Equity and Equality Act, supported by the 2023 National Gender Policy, mandates that public and private entities should work toward achieving at least 50% representation of women in decision-making bodies.

In Kenya, the 2017 Policy on Appointment and Deployment of Institutional Administrators mandates gender balance in leadership appointments, ensuring that women are fairly represented across institutional roles. Liberia's 2022 National Teacher Training Management Policy and 2022/23–2026/27 Education Sector Plan seek to incentivize the recruitment, retention and promotion of female leaders. Nigeria's 2021 National Policy on Gender in Education, along with its Implementation Guide, emphasizes gender-equal leadership appointments with an ambitious target of achieving balanced representation in post–basic education leadership by 2030. This policy also promotes gender-responsive practices in recruitment and promotion.

Outside Africa, a 2000 law in Colombia requires that at least 30% of top decision-making positions in the public service, including in educational institutions, should be held by women. In Iraq's Kurdistan Region, the 2022 education law emphasizes the importance of qualifications, competence and gender balance in selecting directors and assistant principals. Jordan's 2018–2022 Education Strategic Plan prioritized interventions to increase women's representation in education ministry leadership roles with regular monitoring and reporting. In Nepal, the 2016–2023 School Sector Development Plan explicitly prioritizes increasing women's participation in school leadership roles. In Viet Nam, the 2016 Gender Equality Action Plan focuses on increasing the number of women in leadership positions in education. Legislative changes granting autonomy to universities (Oanh et al., 2018) have significantly improved women's chances of reaching leadership positions (Maheshwari, 2023).

In the Pacific, the 2020 Handbook of School Management in Fiji and the 2021–2031 National Policy on Gender Equality and Equal Rights of Women and Girls in Samoa advocate for gender-sensitive recruitment practices and more female education leaders. In Vanuatu, the 2005–2015 Gender Equity and Education Policy and the 2018 Reviewed Gender Equity in Education Policy set specific targets for female representation, aiming for women to account for 40% of primary and 20% of secondary school principal positions.

Information is also important for ensuring public scrutiny. In Denmark, the 2000 Gender Equality Act requires public institutions to report regularly on their gender balance, aiming for a minimum 60/40 split between men and women in key leadership positions. Equal employment opportunity policies can also foster balanced leadership. Austria mandates that evaluation committees for school head appointments consider gender and diversity as integral components of the selection criteria, in line with the Federal Equal Opportunities Act. In France, the 2021–2023 National Action Plan for Professional Equality aims for senior positions to be filled by men and women in a balanced way, as required by law. In Ireland and Malta, legal frameworks guarantee that recruitment for educational leadership is conducted in a gender-sensitive manner to ensure equal opportunities.

Quotas alone cannot dismantle entrenched biases and can even reinforce cultural expectations about women's roles and capabilities. In Lesotho, women elected through quotas were less recognized in plenary debates than their elected counterparts, which had a negative influence on their legislative power (Clayton, 2014, 2015). Besides a stigma of incompetence (Dorrough et al., 2019), women selected through gender quotas can be subject to peer sabotage and severe backlash (Leibbrandt et al., 2017). In the Netherlands, female professors preferred career development policies over quotas for fear of being stigmatized (Willemsen and Sanders, 2007).

… BY TRAINING ASPIRING AND INCOMING FEMALE LEADERS

Apart from facilitating the entry of more women into leadership roles, it is important to ensure that, once in these positions, women are supported through robust networks, mentorship and training.

Networking can be powerful in supporting women's careers and roles. It involves building and nurturing connections that offer distinct perspectives, potential opportunities and essential support (Banoğlu et al., 2023; Sánchez-Moreno et al., 2023). For female principals, a robust network functions as a vital source of advice in navigating leadership obstacles. A study conducted among women in different managerial roles concluded that 80% used networking as a key factor to support their

careers. Of those, 90% joined boards and 81% secured higher paying jobs. Over 70% of women in leadership roles used networking to achieve key organizational goals, such as implementing frameworks (84%), leading successful projects (82%), improving processes (76%) and saving money (74%) (Connley, 2023). In Ireland, for example, a network grew up from a workshop addressing barriers to education leadership for women and building 'bridges', summarized as 'confidence, culture and childcare', aiming to support women in their journey through leadership with workshops and face-to-face meetings (McBride, 2023).

In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education created Female Principal Support Networks to support women in senior management education roles (South Africa Department of Basic Education, 2013). In 2022, in collaboration with the Eastern Cape Department of Education, it launched the Eastern Cape Provincial Support Network for Women Leaders to encourage women in leadership positions to form networks to advance their careers (South Africa Department of Basic Education, 2022a). In the United States, the National Association of Secondary School Principals has set up a network hub to help women share challenges and opportunities and 'support each other personally and professionally' (NASSP,2023).

Mentoring is an informal relationship, often unstructured and generally between peers. Women who have mentors at the workplace are more likely to be promoted, ask for more challenging assignments, and aspire to senior leadership positions than women who do not (Lean In and McKinsey & Company, 2024). Both having a mentor and the extent of mentoring received are linked to receiving higher salaries (Welsh and Diehn, 2018).

Effective mentoring is a key factor in attaining leadership positions (Dunbar and Kinnersley, 2011; Phillips, 2023; Sperandio, 2015) and remaining in them (Smetana et al., 2018). It can help clarify the 'system', i.e. the administrative hierarchy, and reduce feelings of isolation. It can help newcomers develop confidence, understand budget cycles and navigate male-dominated boards. In Western Australia, being 'tapped' or directly encouraged to pursue leadership, particularly during their deputy principalship, is a key enabler for leadership roles among women (Outtrim et al., 2023). In England (United Kingdom), three out four women school leaders indicated that their previous headteacher was the most important person supporting them (Coleman, 2007). In the United States, mentorships with experienced female superintendents have been found to be essential for learning, growth and successful integration into leadership circles (Howard et al., 2017).

In addition to positive mentoring relationship features such as trust, open communication, connecting and nurturing young colleagues, the match between mentors and mentees is important. While women benefit from mentoring, they benefit even more when the mentor is a woman (Broadhurst et al., 2021; Copeland and Calhoun, 2014). Research in sub-Saharan Africa highlights the importance of pairing aspiring female principals with experienced women leaders who can impart practical know-how, moral support and crucial political insights (Moorosi, 2014; Mwaura, 2024). However, the under-representation of women in senior leadership positions mean that many mentors are men (Copeland and Calhoun, 2014).

Training programmes are critical for successful leadership (Bush, 2018; Day et al., 2020). Even initial teacher preparation programmes can encourage teachers to follow a career path into school leadership, creating a talent pool. Bridging the gap between current skills and those needed for leadership roles is crucial for women (Bush et al., 2022). Among women that participated in a leadership training programme in sub-Saharan Africa, 91% found that it improved their leadership (ESSA, 2021).

Universities, such as the African Leadership University and the University of Ghana, have established capacity-development initiatives to bolster women's career planning and leadership development (ESSA, 2021). In South Africa, the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business 'Developing Women in Leadership' programme focuses on self-awareness, interpersonal connections and relationship management skills for aspiring women leaders. The HERS-SA programme advances leadership in higher education through career development workshops and networking opportunities with women academic leaders. Few programmes emphasize critical attributes such as character, ethics and self-assessment that underpin transformative leadership or incorporate key elements like mentoring (Mastercard Foundation, 2018). Yet professional development programmes that target women educators seeking leadership roles, with an explicit focus on gender dynamics, have shown promise in multiple contexts (Lee and Mao,2023).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The pathway to educational leadership for women is frequently described as a pipeline that gradually narrows as a result of cultural stereotypes, institutional biases and logistical barriers. Although women form the backbone of the teaching workforce in numerous countries, their potential to shape policy and practice is constrained by both explicit and implicit discrimination in selection processes, lack of supportive structures, and societal beliefs that undervalue women's capabilities beyond nurturing and instructional functions.

Addressing these issues calls for recognizing women's legitimacy as leaders; monitoring gender disparity in leadership; reforming institutions to include transparent hiring and promotion frameworks; and investing in capacity development. Approaches such as quotas, workplace policies that accommodate caregiving responsibilities and leadership development programmes have begun to yield tangible improvements, yet must be supported further to generate deep and lasting change. By improving the pipeline flow that carries women from classroom teaching to administrative and policymaking positions, stakeholders enhance the capacity of education systems to deliver on their promise of equality and quality for all. In this pursuit, empowering women leaders is not simply a matter of justice but a strategic imperative for educational transformation.

Accordingly, this report proposes three broad sets of recommendations for women's leadership in education, in relation to the 'ladder' to ascend to higher positions of leadership:

Find where the ladder is broken. *Track women's progression towards education leadership.*

- Monitor and assess each rung of the leadership pathway to pinpoint where women face barriers or drop off.
- Publicize where the rungs are weak or broken to expose the systemic biases hindering women's ascent to leadership.

Fix the broken ladder. *Repair systemic flaws.*

- Add missing rungs with positive discrimination measures for gender parity in education leadership, like quotas.
- Repair weak rungs by providing training for recruitment and promotion panels to shift mindsets and mitigate gender bias in decision making.
- Cultivate organizational cultures that support women's retention and advancement, and promote flexible work schedules to accommodate diverse responsibilities.

Offer a helping hand up the ladder. *Guide women's ascent to leadership positions.*

- Actively support women's aspirations through coaching and structured mentoring with experienced female leaders.
- Develop the capacity to implement effective school leadership practices.

While presented as separate, the interventions must be integrated. Quotas for leadership roles should be coupled with professional development that equips women with the managerial and policy expertise they need to excel in these positions. Efforts to expand mentoring networks should intersect with community engagement initiatives that challenge stereotypes about female authority. Ministries of education can partner with teacher unions and civil society organizations to ensure inclusive recruitment, transparent promotion pathways and the necessary resource allocation. Where possible, partnerships with academic institutions can institutionalize leadership training modules for aspiring women educators, bridging gaps between theory, policy and practice.

2025 GENDER REPORT

Women lead for learning

The 2025 Gender Report offers an updated assessment of progress towards gender parity in education. As a companion edition to the 2024/5 *Global Education Monitoring Report* on leadership and education, the report also explores persisting gender disparities in access to leadership positions in primary, secondary and tertiary education institutions, in education administration and in politics.

The report observes differences in leadership styles by gender, with women more likely to exercise leadership practices that are based on collaboration, closer relationships with the school community, and a greater focus on learning. These differences are neither universal nor immutable – and may well be the result of gender biases and stereotypes that provide the context for women's choice of leadership practices. In several cases, particularly in countries with entrenched gender biases, there is evidence that women leading schools bring a fresh perspective and create more equitable schools for every student, schools that are thriving. The presence of more women in parliaments and cabinets is also associated with decisions that prioritize education.

Ultimately, effective educational leadership transcends gender. The report calls for countries to foster leaders, regardless of gender, who champion vision, instruction, collaboration and teacher support. Embracing these core dimensions is the key to unlocking the transformative power of education and achieving genuine gender equality across the entire education system.

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