

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women in Learning Leadership: Women's leadership for school success in Guinea





1. Background and rationale

This executive summary presents the main findings and policy implications of the report *Women in Learning Leadership: Women's Leadership for School Success in Guinea*. The report is part of the Women in Learning Leadership initiative (WiLL), implemented by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Office of Strategy and Evidence—Innocenti (UNICEF Innocenti), the International Institute for Educational Planning of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (IIEP UNESCO) Dakar, and the Gender at the Centre Initiative, in close collaboration with the Guinean Ministry of Education (MENA-ETPF) and UNICEF Guinea.

WiLL addresses a key challenge in education systems: women remain underrepresented in school leadership, even where they make up a large share of the teaching workforce.

This matters for both equity and education quality. School leaders shape the learning environment, support teachers, manage school resources, engage with communities, and contribute to children's well-being and learning. Increasing women's representation among teachers and school leaders can also help challenge gender stereotypes, raise girls' aspirations and promote more inclusive learning environments.

In Guinea, where women account for 35 per cent of primary teachers but only 7 per cent of primary school head teachers, this challenge is particularly pressing. This gap suggests that women face barriers not only in entering the teaching profession, but also in advancing to leadership positions. These barriers are linked to broader gender inequalities, including lower levels of educational attainment among girls and women, limited access to formal employment, social norms around women's mobility and family responsibilities, and exposure to gender-based violence.

The report analyses women's representation in the Guinean education system, the institutional mechanisms that influence access to teaching and leadership roles, and the characteristics and performance of schools led by women. It aims to inform policy dialogue on how to strengthen women's pathways into teaching and school leadership while also improving education outcomes for children.



2. Objectives and methodology

The report presents findings from the two first phases of the WiLL research in Guinea. It aims to generate evidence on women's representation in education and the conditions under which women access and exercise school leadership. The study combines two main methodological components:

- The first component is an **institutional and policy analysis**. It examines formal rules and informal practices related to teacher recruitment, deployment, training, school leadership appointment and career progression. It draws on official policy documents, government guidelines, sector plans and existing studies. It is complemented by consultations and interviews with education stakeholders – including members of MENA-ETFP, UNICEF and technical partners – and discussions from the WiLL research launch workshop. This component is essential, as administrative data alone cannot explain women's underrepresentation in leadership. It helps identify how recruitment procedures, deployment rules, mobility requirements, informal networks and gender norms can create barriers that affect women's career trajectories.
- The second component is a **quantitative analysis of administrative data**. It is based on national data from the Education Management Information System (SIGE) for the school years 2021/22 and 2022/23, which provide information on school characteristics, teachers, school leaders, infrastructure and enrolment, and allow the calculation of internal efficiency indicators. The report also uses data from the Certificat de fin d'Études Élémentaires (CEE), the primary-school leaving examination, to analyse student admission rates. The quantitative analysis combines descriptive statistics and econometric analysis.
 - **Descriptive statistics** examine women's representation by region, urban or rural location, school type, grade level and staff category. They are also used to compare female-led and male-led schools.
 - The **econometric analysis**, based on multivariate linear regression models, examines whether the gender of the head teacher is associated with student outcomes – specifically promotion rates and CEE admission rates – after accounting for school and staff characteristics. The models control for school infrastructure, school type, location, pupil-teacher ratio, textbook availability, and characteristics of the head teacher and teachers. Specifications include geographical fixed effects at different levels to account for local differences.



Several data limitations must be noted. First, information on head teachers is missing for many schools (for 2022/23, only 57 per cent of schools have information on the head teacher, while 96 per cent have information on teachers). This is particularly the case among private schools and in Conakry, which may bias national estimates. Second, linking SIGE and CEE examination data is challenging given that exam data do not include a unique school identifier. The research team used approximate matching based on school names and locations, which limited the number of schools that could be linked. Finally, the analysis is not causal and while the regression models identify associations, they cannot fully account for unobserved factors such as students' socioeconomic background, school climate, community characteristics or leadership practices.



3. Education and gender context in Guinea

Guinea has made progress in expanding access to education, but major challenges remain. The school-age population is growing rapidly, increasing pressure on infrastructure, teachers and public resources. While the number of schools and teachers has increased in recent years, many schools still lack adequate infrastructure, learning resources and qualified teachers. Rural areas face especially acute constraints, including difficult working conditions and shortages of qualified school staff.

At the primary level, girls account for about 44 per cent of enrolment, indicating that gender parity has not yet been achieved. Girls' participation varies significantly by region and is generally lower in rural areas. It also declines as students progress through the education system. **This reflects multiple barriers, including poverty, early marriage, adolescent pregnancy, domestic responsibilities, insecurity on the way to and within schools, menstrual hygiene challenges and gender norms that prioritize boys' education.**

These inequalities limit women's future representation in education. With fewer girls completing school and progressing to higher levels, the pool of potential female teachers and school leaders remains limited. The report thus frames women's underrepresentation in leadership as the result of cumulative barriers across the life course: from schooling to entry into teaching, career progression and leadership.





4. Recruitment, deployment and leadership appointment processes

The report highlights that institutional processes strongly influence women's opportunities in the education sector.

Teacher recruitment in Guinea includes both civil servants and different categories of contract teachers. According to 2022/23 SIGE data, contract teachers make up about 64 per cent of primary teachers, while 36 per cent are civil servants. Civil servants are recruited through formal procedures, while contract teachers are often recruited locally through less standardized processes. Women are more likely than men to enter teaching through formal recruitment channels – 46 per cent of female teachers are civil servants, compared with 30 per cent of men – suggesting that standardized and transparent recruitment processes may be more favourable to women than informal, network-based local recruitment mechanisms.

However, **women's access to formal recruitment is also constrained.** Civil service recruitment requires specific qualifications, access to information, mobility for exams and participation in training or probationary periods. These requirements can disadvantage women, especially those with family responsibilities or those living in areas with lower female educational attainment.

Deployment and retention also pose challenges. Rural and remote postings often involve difficult working conditions, including poor infrastructure, limited access to services and inadequate roads. These conditions make it harder to attract and retain teachers, particularly women. Family responsibilities and marital mobility can also influence women's postings and career choices.

Head teachers are generally selected among teachers already working in a school or within the same local education delegation. Formal criteria include experience, qualifications and professional competencies. In practice, however, appointments may be influenced by subjective criteria, informal networks or personal connections. This can disadvantage women, especially where they have weaker professional networks or face gender stereotypes about leadership.

The limited pool of female teachers, especially in rural areas, further reduces the number of potential female candidates for leadership roles. Finally, **weak financial incentives for leadership roles may discourage candidates from taking on additional responsibilities, particularly women facing economic and family constraints.**



5. Women's representation in the education system

The report provides a detailed picture of women's representation in the primary education system in Guinea. At the national level, women represent 35 per cent of primary teachers, but only 7 per cent of primary school head teachers, revealing a substantial leadership gap.

Representation also varies geographically. **Women are more present in urban areas**, where they account for around 44 per cent of teachers and 12 per cent of head teachers. In rural schools, they account for only 26 per cent of teachers and 5 per cent of head teachers. Many of the barriers faced by women – mobility, safety, infrastructure and family responsibilities – are indeed more pronounced in rural and remote areas.

Differences also emerge by school type. **Women are particularly underrepresented in community schools**, typically located in rural areas and often facing more challenging environments. Women account for only 9 per cent of teachers and 3 per cent of school leaders in community schools.

The report also shows that **women teachers are more concentrated in early grades** (CP1 and CP2), while men are more likely to teach upper primary grades and multigrade classes. This pattern may reduce children's exposure to female role models as they progress through schooling and may also limit women's visibility and experience in roles perceived as more senior or demanding.





6. Characteristics and performance of female-led schools

Female-led schools differ from male-led schools in important ways, reflecting the distinct contexts in which women and men operate. Schools led by women are less likely to be in rural areas, more likely to have latrines, larger on average in terms of student enrolment, more likely to employ female teachers and slightly more gender-balanced in terms of student enrolment.

The composition of the teaching workforce is a key difference. In schools led by women, female teachers represent about 63 per cent of the teaching workforce, compared with 22 per cent in schools led by men. Female teachers in female-led schools are, on average, older, more experienced and more likely to have civil servant status than female teachers in male-led schools.

These patterns suggest that female-led schools are not randomly distributed: they are more common in relatively more favourable contexts, especially urban areas. Comparisons of performance between female- and male-led schools must therefore account for differences in context, staff composition and infrastructure.

The report examines whether female-led schools differ from male-led schools in terms of student performance, focusing on promotion, repetition and CEE admission rates. While some descriptive differences exist, they do not account for the fact that female- and male-led schools differ in location, staff composition, infrastructure and other characteristics.

The econometric analysis provides a more rigorous comparison. **Once school and staff characteristics are controlled for, there is no significant association between the presence of a female head teacher and either CEE admission rates or promotion rates.** In other words, female- and male-led schools perform similarly on the outcomes measured.

This is a central finding, showing women's strong underrepresentation in school leadership cannot be explained by weaker performance. Instead, it points to structural and institutional barriers limiting women's access to leadership positions.

Other factors show stronger associations with the outcomes considered. Private schools tend to have higher CEE admission rates, higher pupil-teacher ratios are negatively associated with promotion rates, and access to water is positively associated with promotion rates. These findings underline the importance of broader school conditions and resources.

The results should be interpreted with caution. The available data do not capture all dimensions of school performance or leadership quality, including leadership practices, school climate, teacher motivation, student background or community engagement. These aspects will be explored more deeply in the next phase of the WiLL research through primary quantitative and qualitative data collection at the school level.



7. Interpretation and policy implications

The findings point to a clear conclusion: women's low representation in school leadership in Guinea reflects structural, institutional and social barriers rather than differences in observed school performance.

Several barriers operate simultaneously. First, the limited educational attainment of girls reduces the future pool of female teachers and leaders. Second, informal or less standardized recruitment and appointment processes may disadvantage women. Third, rural working conditions – marked by weak infrastructure, safety concerns and limited professional support – pose additional constraints. Fourth, social norms influence women's mobility, confidence, aspirations and recognition as leaders. Finally, the absence of a structured national leadership training pathway limits professional development, particularly for women with less access to informal mentoring and networking opportunities.

Addressing these barriers requires education system-wide action.

- In the **short term**, strengthening transparency and standardization in teacher recruitment and school leadership appointments is critical. A national guide for appointing head teachers could clarify eligibility criteria, reduce discretionary practices and promote merit-based selection. Gender-sensitive measures, such as requiring qualified female candidates to be considered, could help expand women's access to leadership.
- In the **medium term**, improving the attractiveness of teaching and school leadership, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas, is also key. This includes reviewing financial incentives for leadership positions and hardship postings, improving basic infrastructure and creating better working conditions to support women's retention. Structured leadership development pathways for women, including training, mentoring, peer support and professional development for experienced female teachers could help prepare more women for leadership roles.

- In the **long term**, supporting women's leadership requires sustained investment in girls' education. Measures to reduce dropout, prevent early marriage and adolescent pregnancy, improve menstrual hygiene management and strengthen school safety are essential to expanding the future pipeline of women teachers and leaders. Efforts to address gender norms through community engagement, teacher training and awareness campaigns are also important.

Finally, the report highlights the need to **strengthen education data systems**. Better data are essential for monitoring gender equity, understanding career pathways and evaluating policy reforms. Priorities include improving information on head teachers, linking SIGE and exam databases through unique school identifiers, collecting more disaggregated data and strengthening the use of data for policy planning.





8. Conclusion

The WiLL research in Guinea provides new evidence on women's representation in education leadership and the barriers that shape their career trajectories. Women remain severely underrepresented as head teachers, despite their significant presence in the teaching workforce, especially in rural areas and community schools.

The report shows that female-led schools have distinct characteristics, including a higher share of female teachers and slightly better gender parity among students. It also shows that, once school and staff characteristics are considered, female-led schools perform similarly to male-led schools in terms of promotion and CEE admission rates.

This is a key policy finding: it shows that the limited presence of women in school leadership cannot be explained by differences in observed performance. Rather, the evidence points to structural, institutional and social barriers that restrict women's access to leadership roles.

The next phase of the WiLL research will build on these findings through primary quantitative and qualitative data collection in schools. This will help identify the leadership and teaching practices associated with better learning, gender equity and student well-being, and will provide further evidence to inform scalable policy solutions in Guinea.

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