

Women in Learning Leadership

Advancing gender-responsive education using evidence in Ethiopia

Contents

Key messages	ii
1. Introduction	3
1. The Women in Learning Leadership initiative	3
2. Methodology and research stages	6
2. Background	10
1. Organization of the education system in Ethiopia	10
2. School and school staff characteristics	12
3. Most pressing education challenges	17
4. Challenges related to girls' education	18
5. Current education programmes and policies	20
3. Recruitment and training of teachers and principals	22
1. Teacher recruitment and training	22
2. Principal selection and training	26
4. Women's representation in the Ethiopian education system	30
5. Barriers to women's representation	35
6. Characteristics of women-led schools	38
1. Descriptive statistics	38
2. Regression analysis	40
3. Findings	43
7. Conclusion and policy recommendations	46
8. Abbreviations	50
9. Bibliography	51
10. Annex	55
Acknowledgements	59
About us	60

Key messages



Women in Ethiopia are significantly underrepresented in school leadership: they account for only about 7 per cent of school principals, despite representing around 41 per cent of the teaching workforce. This gap persists even though female and male teachers have, on average, similar qualifications, and women reach senior teacher ranks in similar proportions to men. This suggests that the low representation of women in leadership cannot be explained by performance differences.



Women's representation in leadership varies across contexts: it is higher in urban areas than in rural areas and differs substantially across regions.



Schools led by women tend to be smaller and to have relatively better infrastructure and resources, and a higher share of women teachers.



Regression analyses suggest that once school characteristics and context are considered, schools led by women and men perform similarly in terms of promotion and dropout rates, and show a similar proportion of girls enrolled in Grade 8. However, schools with a higher proportion of women teachers show lower dropout rates and higher promotion rates for both girls and boys, and a higher proportion of girls in Grade 8, although the estimated associations are modest in value.



The analysis highlights barriers in career progression, leadership preparation, recruitment practices and the attractiveness of leadership roles, which contribute to limiting women's advancement in school leadership positions. These barriers are linked to gender norms, as well as structural and systemic challenges in the recruitment process of teachers and principals.



Strengthening women's representation in school leadership requires targeted policy action, including increasing the attractiveness of leadership roles along with gender-equitable support; strengthening female leadership pipelines through training and mentoring; improving transparency and consistency in recruitment and promotion processes; improving working conditions, especially in rural areas; and supporting girls' education.



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1. The Women in Learning Leadership initiative

Women in Learning Leadership (WiLL) is a research initiative carried out jointly by UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti (UNICEF Innocenti), the International Institute for Education Planning (IIEP) – UNESCO Dakar and the Gender at the Centre Initiative. It studies the role of women in leadership positions in education, particularly school leaders, and the challenges related to women's representation in the sector. It also aims to identify effective management practices for school success and gender equality, and disseminate the best management practices with local partners. The WiLL initiative in Ethiopia is implemented jointly with the UNICEF Ethiopia Country Office and the Ethiopian Ministry of Education (MoE). It is made possible through funding from the International Development Research Centre's Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange programme and UNICEF regular resources.

Effective leadership is a key aspect of a good learning environment.

The Global Education Monitoring Report 2024/25 highlights that leadership matters for education, and that effective school leaders have the potential to bring out the best in teachers and to ensure a safe school and an inclusive environment. School leaders play a key role in the education system and work across different spheres of influence, potentially impacting student behaviour and achievement, teacher development, community relationships and the school climate more generally. While more research is needed to understand the impact of principals on different outcomes and across different contexts, recent studies support the view that students learn better in schools led by more efficient principals, and there is evidence that principals can also influence outcomes such as student absenteeism.¹

Recent research indicates that women leaders perform just as well as men, if not better.

WILL research in Madagascar has shown that women-led schools have higher promotion rates for girls, as well as a higher success rate in end of primary school examinations (IIEP-UNESCO, 2024c). In Benin, the presence of a female principal is associated with a higher student retention rate and higher learning, especially for girls (Albán Conto et al., 2024). Similar results have been found by Data Must Speak research in Lao People's Democratic Republic, Madagascar and Zambia (UNICEF 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). In a study based on 14 countries participating in the PASEC² 2019 exams, 8 countries showed better performance in reading by students attending women-led schools and 6 showed better performance in maths by students attending women-led schools. Differences in performance between the two types of school were not statistically significant for the remaining countries (PASEC, 2020; Albán Conto, Guilbert and Devignes, 2023). While more research is needed to understand the reasons explaining these trends, WILL qualitative research in Chad found that education stakeholders appreciate women's collaborative and participatory leadership style (Di Paolo, Charpentier and Tameza, 2025).

Some studies also found that the positive influence of having a woman leader in the school could extend to other educational indicators: a study on school dropout in Mozambique showed that schools led by women

1 See Anand et al. (2023) for a recent literature review; also Bartanen (2020), Bloom et al. (2015) and Leaver, Lemos and Scur (2019).

2 PASEC (Programme d'Analyse des Systèmes Éducatifs de la Confemén) is a large-scale international assessment programme conducted every five years by the Conference of Ministers of Education of French-speaking States and Governments (Confemén).

had lower dropout rates, while a study on teacher attendance in West and Central Africa showed that teachers in schools led by women were more likely to report that their principals discouraged absenteeism (Ortiz Correa et al., 2022; Játiva et al., 2022). Finally, there is also evidence that female school leaders could improve outcomes for girls by increasing their aspirations and reducing negative gender stereotypes (Beaman et al., 2012).

However, women are largely underrepresented in school management positions in sub-Saharan Africa, even in countries where female representation in the teacher workforce is relatively high. Recent education management information systems (EMIS) data show, for example, that the percentage of female principals does not exceed 12 per cent in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali or Togo (Bergmann, Albán Conto and Brossard, 2022). WiLL research shows this is also the case in Chad and Guinea, where the share of schools led by women does not exceed 5 per cent and 7 per cent, respectively (Gouédard, Ramos and Tameza, 2023). This suggests that in addition to facing barriers to accessing teacher positions, women also face specific barriers to accessing leadership positions.

Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of better understanding women's representation in education; the characteristics of women-led schools and how they perform; and understanding the challenges and enablers women face in accessing and succeeding in school leadership positions.

The WiLL research in Ethiopia begins by analysing the challenges women face in accessing and succeeding in school leadership positions and examining women's representation in the education sector and the characteristics and performance of women-led schools. It then identifies management practices associated with better educational outcomes and gender parity, and explores how these practices differ between schools led by women and those led by men. Finally, the research aims to inform the development of a scale-up strategy to institutionalize and disseminate the effective school leadership practices identified. The different stages of the research are described in the next section.

2. Methodology and research stages

The main research questions addressed by the WiLL research are presented in *Figure 1*. To address these questions and examine additional relevant aspects, the research uses a mixed-methods, multiphase approach organized in four key steps (*Figure 2*).



Phase 1 of the research examines the national policy and institutional framework around teacher and principal recruitment and appointment in Ethiopia, to characterize the environment in which school leaders operate, examine the barriers women face in accessing and succeeding in these positions, and identify potential solutions to address these barriers. This analysis draws on a review of existing literature, official documents and government guidelines, and is complemented by interviews and discussions with key informants.



Phase 2 focuses on analysing existing EMIS data to characterize the representation of women in teaching and school leadership positions, examine the characteristics of women-led schools and understand differences between schools run by women and those run by men.



Phase 3 consists in a collection of primary quantitative and qualitative data from a sample of schools across the country to identify effective management and pedagogical practices that support student learning, gender parity and student well-being; understand how these practices differ between schools led by women and those led by men; and identify barriers and enabling factors affecting the implementation of these practices.



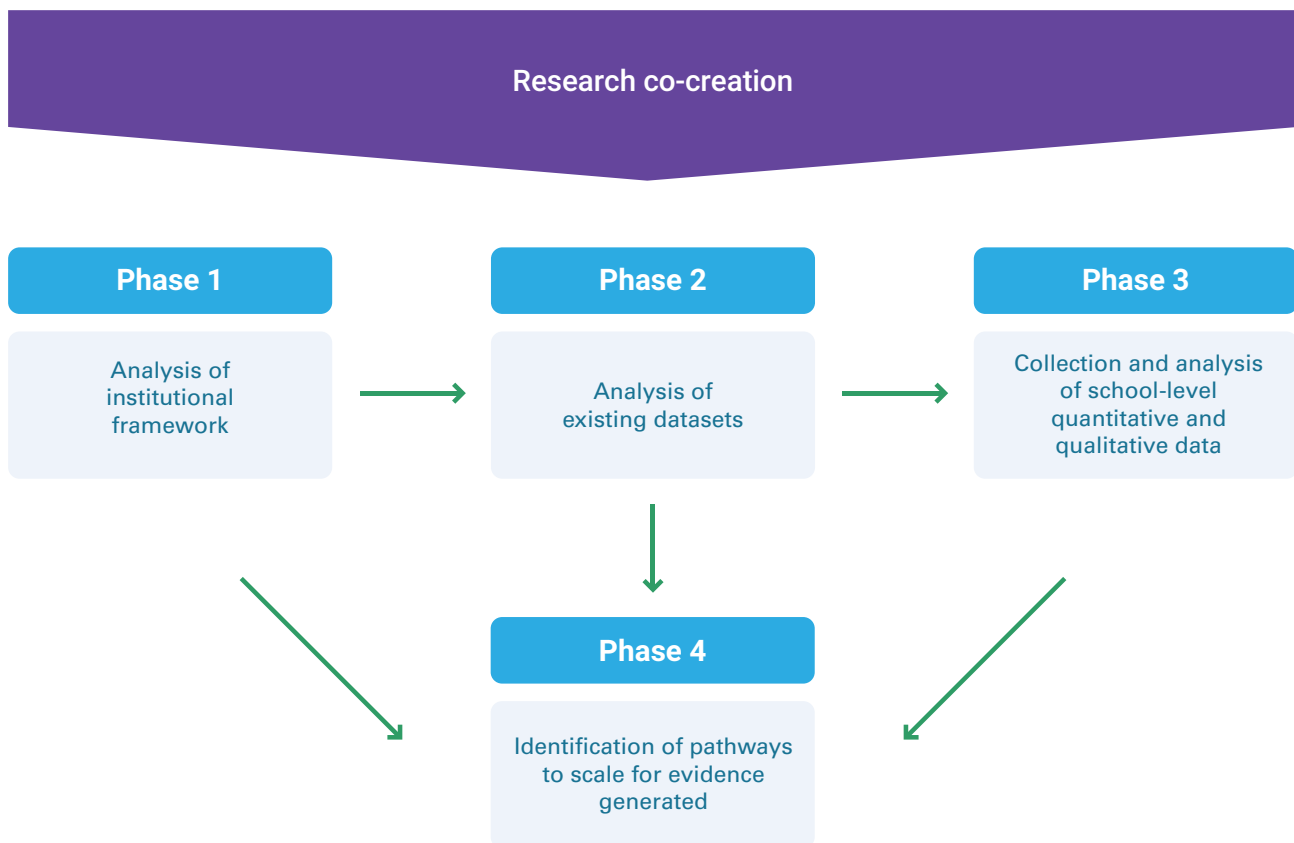
Phase 4 identifies levers at the policy, system, school and community levels to support the adoption and dissemination of the practices identified in Phase 3 and to strengthen women's representation in the education sector. These findings inform the development of a national scale-up strategy.

The WiLL research agenda in Ethiopia is co-created and implemented with the MoE. A consultative team formed by local key partners working in the education and gender sectors has been appointed to provide general strategic guidance on carrying out the research and ensuring that its objectives are aligned with national priorities. In parallel, a smaller technical team has been appointed to implement the research and closely monitor its progress.

Figure 1: WiLL main research questions



Figure 2: WiLL research phases in Ethiopia



This report summarizes results from Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the research.³ It provides an institutional analysis of teacher and principal recruitment, placement and training, based on an extensive review of policy documents, legal frameworks, administrative guidelines and academic papers, as well as consultations with local partners and key informant interviews with experts at the MoE and Regional Education Bureaus (REBs). It also presents a secondary analysis of EMIS data on school and school staff characteristics in Ethiopia, as well as women's representation in the education sector. Finally, it presents a regression analysis examining the factors associated with different measures of school performance, including the gender of the principal. The statistics presented in this report come from National EMIS Data from 2015 and 2016 in the Ethiopian calendar, equivalent to the 2022/23 and 2023/24 school years, which provide information for all regions except Tigray.⁴ The study covers both public and private primary schools (grades 1–8, corresponding to primary and middle school under the new system).

³ Phase 3 findings will be presented in a subsequent report.

⁴ Given the security situation, EMIS data were not collected in Tigray in 2022/23 and 2023/24.

Section II provides background on the organization of the education system in Ethiopia, as well as on school and school staff characteristics, current educational challenges and existing policies, including those related to girls' education. **Section III** examines the recruitment and training of teachers and principals, identifying potential barriers to women's representation and career progression within the education sector. **Section IV** explores women's representation in the Ethiopian education system. **Section V** briefly discusses the barriers to women's representation and how the next phases of the WiLL research will contribute to deepen this analysis. **Section VI** looks at the characteristics of women-led schools through descriptive statistics and regression analysis, comparing women- and men-led schools while controlling for differences in school context, infrastructure, staffing and other relevant characteristics. Finally, **Section VII** concludes and provides a set of policy recommendations.





CHAPTER 2

Background

1. Organization of the education system in Ethiopia

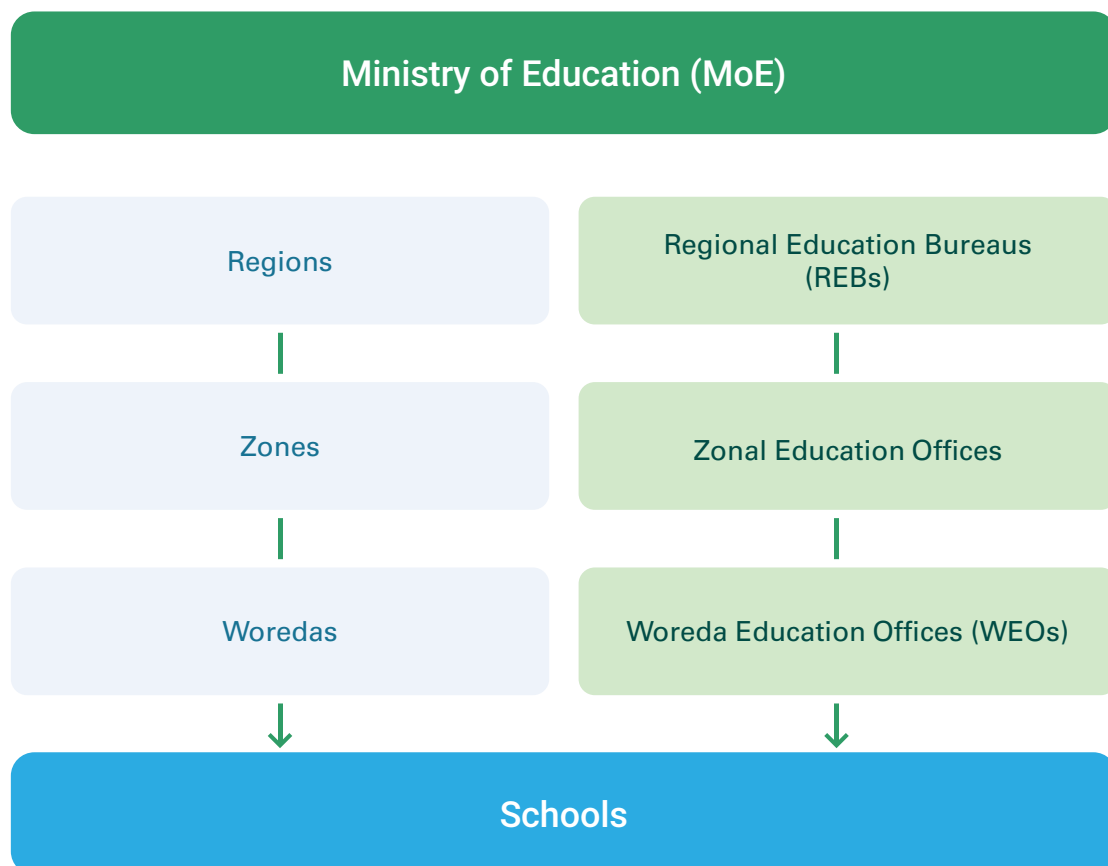
The education system in Ethiopia operates under a decentralized governance framework, in which REBs and Woreda Education Offices (WEOs) have significant responsibilities (*Figure 3*). The MoE sets national education policy and standards, oversees the secondary education curriculum and leads quality improvement initiatives. At the regional level, REBs manage primary education curricula, implement general education policies, coordinate teacher training through Colleges of Teacher Education (CTEs) and supervise WEOs, schools and local education structures. WEOs are responsible for administering primary education – managing budgets, recruiting teachers, appointing school leaders and ensuring policy implementation. Schools are responsible for instructional delivery, teacher development and community engagement. Decentralization reforms have

progressively expanded woreda-level authority over operational and staffing decisions. Zonal Education offices are present in some regions and act as an intermediate level between WEOs and REBs.

This decentralized framework can have important implications for women’s access to leadership positions within the education sector.

As WEOs play a central role in teacher recruitment, promotion and the appointment of school leaders, local decision-making processes can substantially shape access to leadership opportunities. While decentralization may allow recruitment decisions to better reflect local needs, it also introduces variation in how policies are implemented across woredas. In particular, the degree to which gender-equity policies are prioritized and implemented may vary across woredas depending on local institutional capacity, administrative practices and social norms.

Figure 3: Education governance in Ethiopia



Until recently, the primary education system in Ethiopia comprised 8 grades in total, divided into two cycles (grades 1-4 and grades 5-8). A school reform is currently being implemented, with the aim of introducing a new organization (commonly referred to as '6-2-4') where primary education will comprise grades 1-6, middle-level education will comprise a cycle of two years (grades 7-8) and secondary education will comprise grades 9-12 (see *Table 1*). In the 2023/24 school year, 96 per cent of schools offered grades 1 to 4 and 61 per cent of schools offered all grades from 1 to 8, according to EMIS data.

Table 1: General education system in Ethiopia

Old system		New system	
Pre-primary	Ages 4-6	Pre-primary	Ages 4-6
Primary	1st cycle: Grades 1-4 2nd cycle: Grades 5-8	Primary	Grades 1-6
		Middle school	Grades 7-8
Secondary	1st cycle: Grades 9-10 2nd cycle: Grades 11-12	Secondary	Grades 9-12

2. School and school staff characteristics

The indicators presented in this section are based on EMIS data for 2023/24, which do not include Tigray due to the unavailability of data. As a result, the averages reported are not nationally representative and should be interpreted with caution.

In 2023/24, Ethiopia had 33,072 schools in total excluding the Tigray region. These schools are mostly rural (78 per cent) and public (91 per cent), with a high correlation between location and type of school: in rural areas, fewer than 1 per cent of schools are private, while this figure rises to more than 25 per cent in urban areas. **Schools generally face poor infrastructure and lack sanitation facilities:** less than 30 per cent of schools have electricity and only 31 per cent have a functioning water supply (see *Table 2*). Most schools (61 per cent) have separate toilets for boys and girls but only 19 per cent have a dedicated girls' hygiene room. **Urban schools have considerably better infrastructure compared with rural schools** (*Figure 4*): nearly 70 per cent

have electricity, compared with less than 20 per cent for rural schools, while 62 per cent have a functioning water supply compared with 22 per cent of those in rural areas.

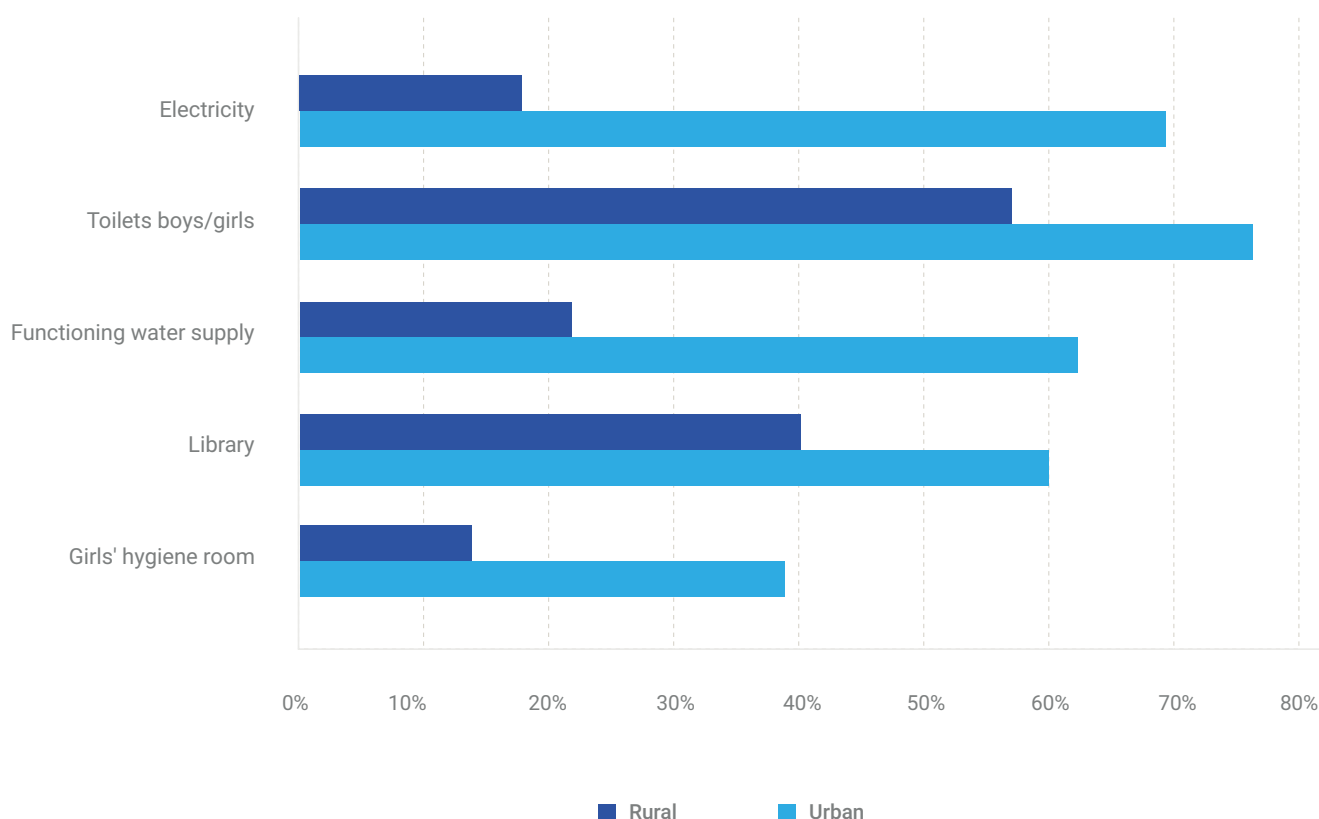
These challenging infrastructure conditions may reinforce existing gender gaps and contribute to the low representation of women in school leadership positions and in the education sector more broadly, particularly in rural and remote areas. Poor access to electricity, water and gender-sensitive sanitation facilities can make working conditions less attractive and more challenging for women.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of primary schools in Ethiopia (2023/24)

	Total
% Rural	78
% Public	91
% School grant	6
% Strategic plan	89
% Functioning water supply	31
% Electricity	29
% Toilets boys/girls	61
% Girls' hygiene room	19
% Functioning handwash	19
% Library	44
% Pedagogical centre	47
% Girls	47
Pupil-teacher ratio	44
Total schools	33,072

Source: 2023/24 EMIS data

Figure 4: Primary school characteristics by urban and rural location (2023/24)



There are over 33,000 schools in Ethiopia, excluding Tigray. Schools have 515 students on average and tend to have large classes, with a national average of 44 pupils per teacher. This masks significant regional differences, however, with the pupil–teacher ratio ranging from under 20 in Addis Ababa, where nearly 60 per cent of schools are private, to just under 80 in Somali (*Figure 5*). Girls represent 47 per cent of enrolled students on average, with moderate variations across regions (percentages range from 43 per cent in Somali to 50 per cent in Addis Ababa: see *Figure 6*). With a few exceptions, the percentage of girls enrolled is higher in urban areas, indicating higher barriers to girls' education in rural settings.

These regional and rural–urban disparities are also likely to have implications for women's working conditions and representation in school leadership positions. In areas where schools face larger class sizes, higher pupil–teacher ratios and lower girls' enrolment, women leaders may encounter more challenging working conditions and stronger social and institutional barriers to career progression. Conversely, better resourced and urban areas may offer more supportive environments for women's recruitment and advancement into leadership roles.

Figure 5: Pupil-teacher ratio by region (primary schools, 2023/24)

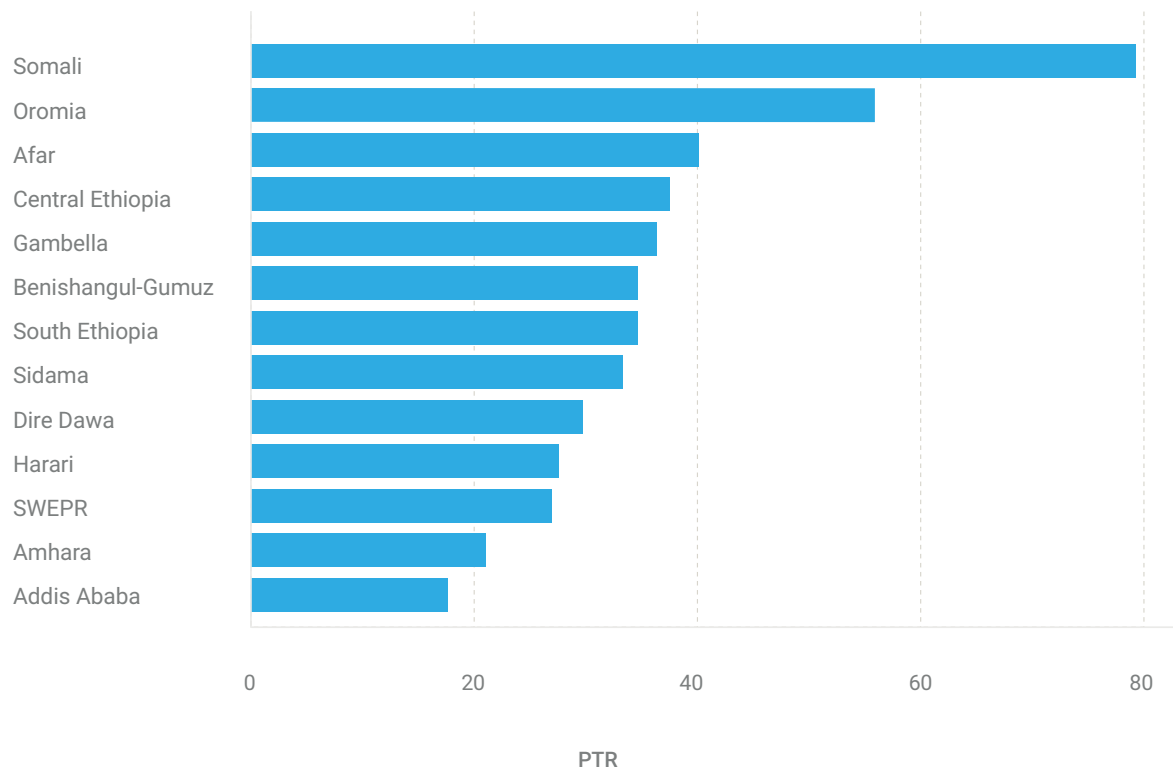
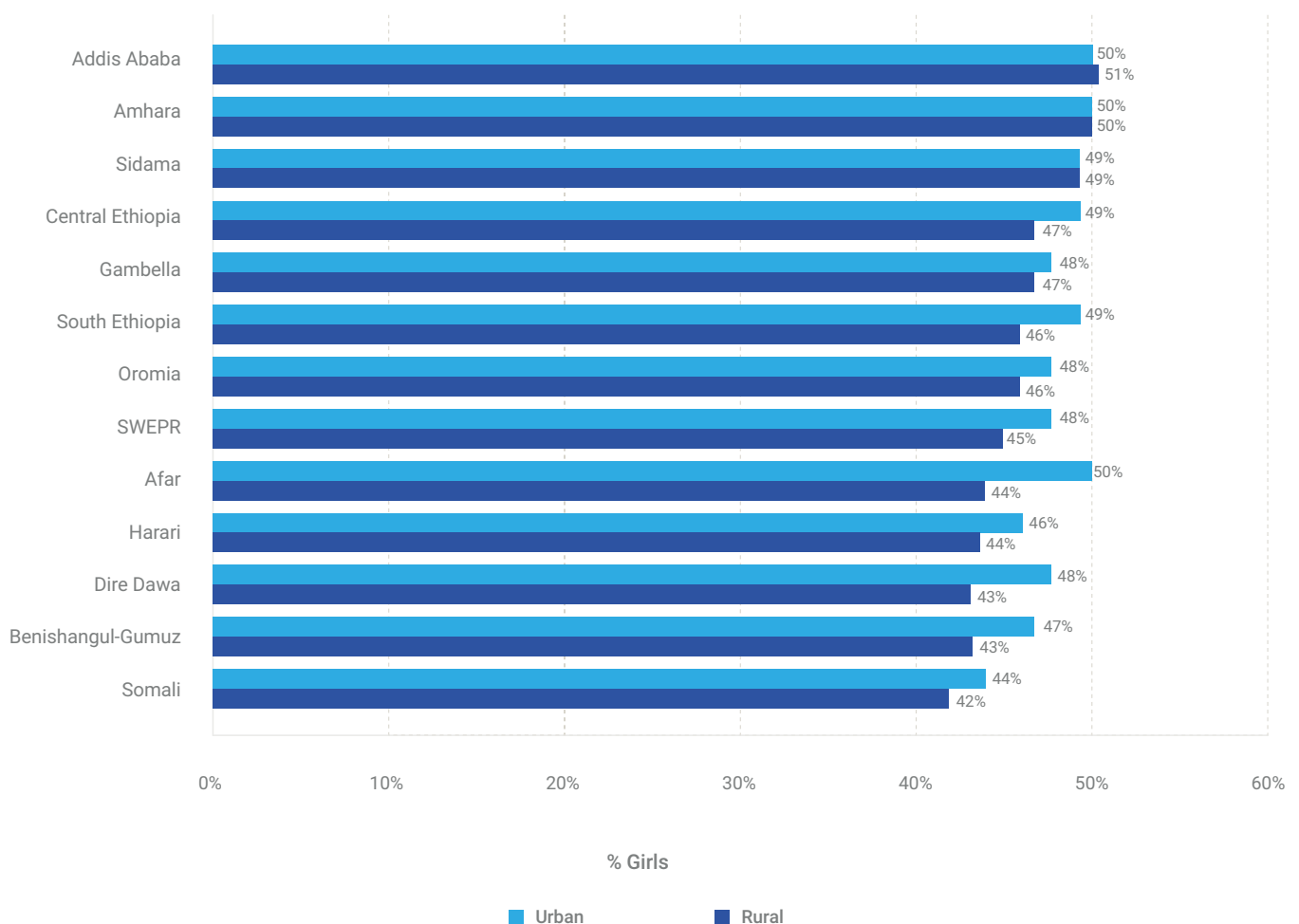


Figure 6: Girls' enrolment by region and location (primary schools, 2023/24)



Ethiopian schools are staffed by 509,717 teachers, 31,930 principals and 11,785 vice-principals - an average of 15 teachers per school (see *Table 3*). **About 30 per cent of schools have one or more vice-principals**, their presence being positively correlated with the size of the school.⁵

The proportion of female teachers is relatively high compared with other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, at 41 per cent, although only 7 per cent of schools are led by women. Statistics disaggregated by gender and the representation of women in the education sector are discussed in more detail in Section IV. A notable difference can be seen in the proportion of school staff holding a degree according to their position: while 70 per cent of principals hold a higher education degree, this is the case for only 22 per cent of teachers.⁶ Most school staff are under permanent contracts, independent of their status.

Table 3: School staff characteristics in Ethiopian primary schools (2023/24)

Principals/Vice-principals	
% Schools led by women	7
Avg. age (Principal)	42
Avg. age (Vice-principal)	42
% w/ Higher education degree (Principal)	70
% w/ Higher education degree (Vice-principal)	68
% w/ Permanent contract (Principal)	96
% w/ Permanent contract (Vice-principal)	97
Total Principals	31,930
Total Vice-principals	11,785
Teachers	
Avg. teachers per school	15
% Female	41
Avg. age	40
% w/ Higher education degree	22
% w/ Permanent contract	94
Total teachers	509,832

Note: About 0.2 per cent of schools are led jointly by men and women. Individuals with a higher education degree are those holding a Bachelor's, Master's, PhD or equivalent degree. Source: 2023/24 EMIS data.

⁵ Only 4 per cent of schools with fewer than 100 students have a vice-principal, but more than 60 per cent of schools with over 500 students have one.

⁶ The remaining teachers and principals may have a diploma or certificate, not equivalent to a higher education degree.

3. Most pressing education challenges

Ethiopia has seen significant progress in school enrolment over the last two decades, with the primary gross enrolment ratio (GER) rising from 52 per cent in 2000 to 113 per cent in 2020 according to UNESCO statistics. This trend has come to a halt in recent years, however, with the GER dropping to around 84 per cent between 2022 and 2024 related to challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic, conflicts resulting in school closures and climate change (UNICEF, no date). **As of the end of 2024, it was estimated that over 9 million children were still out of school** due to conflict, displacement and climate-related shocks, and that over 10,000 schools had been damaged. **In this context of instability and disruption, effective school leadership becomes particularly important for maintaining school functioning and supporting teachers and students.**

Many students do not complete school or transition to higher levels.

According to World Bank statistics, the completion rate for primary education in 2024 was 54 per cent for girls and 55 per cent for boys, and just over 21 per cent for both genders for lower secondary education.⁷ These challenges start early, with young students facing challenges upon starting school: more than 20 per cent of students drop out before even completing grade 1 (World Bank Group, 2022). Research shows that the Ethiopian education system is characterized by slow progression, with widespread grade repetition and temporary or permanent dropout. These patterns disrupt normal advancement through the school system, resulting in many students becoming over-aged for their grade and eventually leaving school. Girls are particularly affected by these dynamics, as this increases their likelihood of getting married before finishing school (Young Lives, 2020; Woldehanna et al., 2021).

Students also face challenging learning conditions in school.

EMIS data for 2023/24 show that only a third of schools have a functioning water supply and a fifth have a dedicated girls' hygiene room. Crowded classrooms also make learning conditions challenging, and while the pupil-teacher ratio is below the national standard of 50, it remains high at 44 pupils per teacher in primary education according to the same data. In addition, many teachers lack the necessary skills and motivation to teach. Both pre-

⁷ World Bank Group, Gender Data Portal. Available at <<https://genderdata.worldbank.org/>>.

service and in-service teacher training are often insufficient with regard to classroom demands, and teaching effectiveness remains low: according to a study from the World Bank, only 6 per cent of grade 4 teachers were found to be proficient in the content they taught and fewer than 20 per cent demonstrated satisfactory pedagogical skills in 2022. Teacher absenteeism is high, and teachers face generally challenging working conditions and low remuneration (World Bank Group, 2022).

These challenging learning conditions translate into poor learning for students. According to the World Bank, the rate of learning poverty in Ethiopia was 90 per cent in 2022, meaning that 90 per cent of children at age 10 are unable to read and understand a short, age-appropriate text, adjusting for the number of out-of-school children (ibid.). Similarly, the 2019 National Learning Assessment showed that grade 4 students were only able to answer 30 per cent of the questions in English and 40 per cent of maths questions correctly.

Overall, these challenges underscore the importance of school leadership in constrained settings, where principals play a critical role in managing limited resources, maintaining teacher and student motivation, engaging the community and ensuring that schools continue to operate effectively despite infrastructure and staffing constraints. These demanding conditions are also likely to significantly influence the accessibility and attractiveness of leadership positions for women, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas.

4. Challenges related to girls' education

Despite notable progress in enrolment, girls in Ethiopia continue to face multiple barriers that hinder their access to and successful completion of education. These barriers – which can be attributed to a range of institutional, socioeconomic and cultural factors – are rooted in the same gender norms and constraints that shape women's pathways into school leadership. Understanding the challenges and barriers related to girls' education is therefore essential to comprehending the broader environment in which women leaders operate. At the same time, women school leaders are often seen as important agents of change, with the potential to challenge gender norms from within school, serve as a role model for girls and foster school environments where girls feel safe, supported and encouraged to learn.

According to the Education Statistics Annual Abstract (ESAA) 2023/24, the national Gender Parity Index (GPI) at the primary level stands at 0.93 for primary education, meaning that for every 100 boys enrolled, there are only 93 girls. In regions such as Somali and Afar, it is just below 0.8.

Traditional gender roles, low parental aspirations and early marriage undermine girls' education.

The Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey 2016 estimated that around 40 per cent of young women aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18. Although child marriage is believed to have declined in recent years, it remains prevalent in all regions of the country (Marshall et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2016). Early marriage limits girls' ability to attend school, related to factors such as childbirth and childcare responsibilities, household responsibilities and husbands' disapproval (Raj et al., 2019). **Household responsibilities and economic hardship also restrict girls' participation.** Poverty intersects with gender norms to intensify girls' domestic workloads, often resulting in absenteeism and reducing their chances of progressing and completing schooling (Pankhurst, Tiumelissan and Chuta, 2016; Raj et al., 2019).

School-related gender-based violence (GBV) makes schools unsafe for many girls.

The available studies suggest that the prevalence of GBV is high in Ethiopia, particularly in secondary school, which severely impacts the physical and mental health of girls and translates into higher absenteeism, poor school performance and dropout (Beyene et al., 2021; Altinyelken and Le Mat 2018).

Girls from marginalized communities face further barriers to education.

According to the sixth Education Sector Development Programme for 2020/21 to 2024/25 (ESDP VI), Ethiopia is the second largest refugee-hosting country in Africa and girls from refugee, displaced, pastoralist and impoverished backgrounds contend with insecurity, mobility and poor infrastructure, all of which limit access and retention. This is also the case for girls with disabilities. Among female refugees, the primary school GER dropped from 55 per cent in 2018/19 to 41 per cent in 2023/24, compared with 79 per cent and 52 per cent for boys respectively (ESAA 2023/24).

Finally, many schools lack adequate and inclusive facilities, including gender-sensitive water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services such as private toilets, clean water and spaces for menstrual hygiene management

(Ethiopia and GPE Partnership Compact, 2023). EMIS data for 2023/24 show that only 19 per cent of schools had a dedicated girls' hygiene room. The availability of gender-responsive school environments – including adequate sanitation facilities – can play an important role in improving girls' attendance, retention and well-being at school. In this context, school leaders have an important role in fostering inclusive school environments and prioritizing gender-responsive practices within them.

While the barriers described previously affect girls' education, they also have longer-term implications for women's career trajectories within the education sector. Interrupted schooling and lower educational attainment reduce women's opportunities to enter the teaching profession and progress into leadership positions, thereby contributing to the underrepresentation of women in school leadership roles.

5. Current education programmes and policies

In response to existing challenges, the MoE has increasingly framed gender equality and school leadership as priorities for improving education quality, although in practice, these commitments have not always translated into concrete changes in women's representation in leadership positions.

ESDP VI sets out key priorities for the education sector, including objectives that are directly relevant to girls' education and women's leadership, namely promoting inclusive pedagogy, establishing a girls' education fund, improving WASH facilities, designing gender-responsive career paths and reviewing recruitment guidelines to improve women's placement in school leadership roles.

These commitments have been reinforced by more targeted strategies to promote gender equality. The Gender Strategy for the Education and Training Sector (2014) set objectives aimed at ensuring gender equality in the education sector by 2030, including increasing women's competencies and the share of female leaders at all levels of the education and training sector. Building on the Gender Strategy, the **National Strategic Plan to Increase Female Representation in School Leadership** (2023) set out strategic goals to achieve gender equality in education that include

improving policies and guidelines for the recruitment and placement of female leaders and teachers in the system, committing to a gender-sensitive budget allocation, enhancing community awareness and creating safe environments for female teachers and school leaders. The **Guidelines for the Recruitment and Selection Process of Pre-Primary and Primary Education Candidate Teachers** (2017) further stipulates that female applicants need to be prioritized and 30 per cent of primary school positions must be reserved exclusively for women. The existence of reserved positions for women suggests that the main barriers may lie less in women's entry into the teaching profession than in subsequent processes of career progression, placement, promotion and appointment to leadership roles.

Despite this relatively extensive policy framework, women remain significantly underrepresented in school leadership positions, highlighting a disconnect between policy commitments and outcomes in practice. An important question concerns the consistency with which these measures are implemented. The decentralized structure of education governance in Ethiopia means that the application of gender-related policies is likely to vary considerably across regions and woredas, depending on factors such as administrative capacity, local social norms, recruitment practices and accountability mechanisms. This may partly explain why strong policy commitments have not yet translated into substantial increases in women's representation in school leadership.



CHAPTER 3

Recruitment and training of teachers and principals

1. Teacher recruitment and training

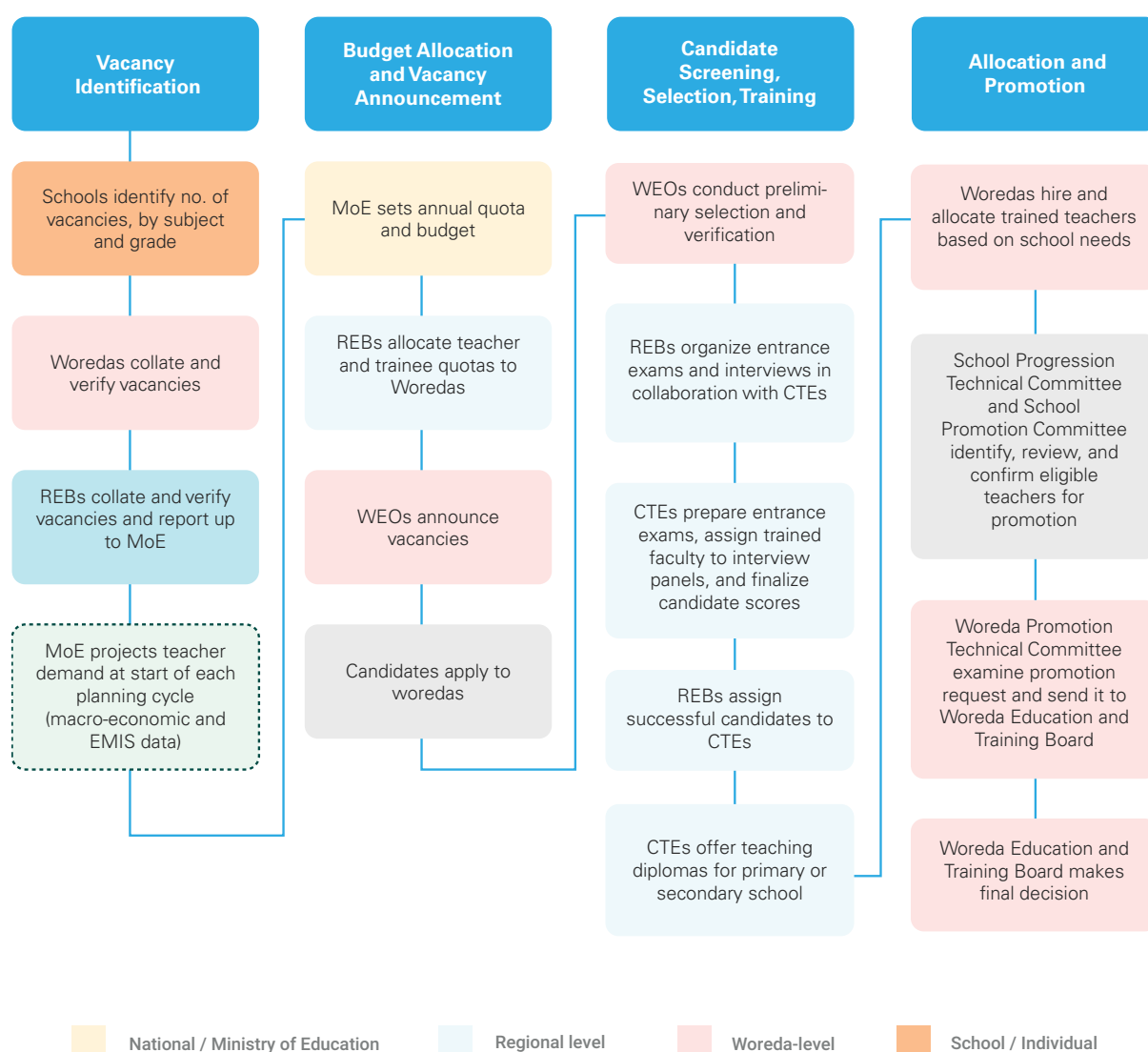
Teacher recruitment, training and assignment

Teacher recruitment is managed through a decentralized process in which candidates are selected before receiving specialized teacher training (Figure 7). Teacher needs are first identified at the school level and submitted to WEOs, then verified by REBs before the MoE sets annual teacher quotas and budgets. REBs subsequently allocate quotas to woredas, designate examination centres and coordinate with WEOs to oversee candidate registration and selection. At the local level, WEOs announce vacancies, register applicants and organize entrance exams and interviews in collaboration with CTEs. The selection process includes both a written examination and an interview. While this decentralized structure may allow recruitment processes to better reflect local needs, it also introduces stages where subjective criteria and local discretion can shape recruitment

outcomes. Interview-based assessments may be influenced by prevailing gender norms and perceptions of leadership, potentially affecting women's access to teaching positions and later, career progression opportunities.

Selected candidates are then assigned to CTEs for either a primary-school teaching diploma or a Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching (PGDT) for secondary teaching. Primary teachers undertake a three-year diploma at one of 39 CTEs, where they can follow a Cluster Programme (broad-based, aimed at teaching grades 1–4) or a Linear Programme (subject-specialized, aimed at grades 5–8). Secondary teachers are required to hold a Bachelor's degree in a subject relevant to the secondary school curriculum and further complete a one-year PGDT. According to EMIS data, only about 5 per cent of primary school teachers did not have the minimum required qualification in 2023/24, suggesting that formal qualification gaps are relatively limited.

Figure 7: Teacher recruitment, training and allocation steps



Eligibility criteria for teacher training requires candidates to be at least 18 years old, to have completed Grade 12 with a minimum score of 50 per cent on the national examination, and to have an average transcript score of 50 per cent or above from grades 9 to 12. Candidates must also provide two letters of recommendation and have medical clearance. For primary school positions, an affirmative measure requires that 30 per cent of posts be reserved exclusively for women. **While these measures can help improve women's access to teaching careers, it does not appear to be sufficient to ensure progression and access to leadership roles, where the main bottleneck seems to persist.** This reinforces the idea that barriers to women's advancement may lie less in entry into the profession and more in subsequent career progression.

The allocation of trained teachers is managed at the woreda level, based on school-level needs. Once teacher requirements are identified, the School Progression Technical Committee and School Promotion Committee review and confirm eligible candidates for placement or promotion. Requests are then examined by the Woreda Promotion Technical Committee and forwarded to the Woreda Education and Training Board, which holds final decision-making authority. These local processes play an important role in shaping teachers' career trajectories, through placement decisions, promotion opportunities and assignments to remote locations. As these decisions involve a degree of local discretion, they may also influence women's progression within the system. Gender norms and perceptions regarding women's leadership capacity, mobility or family responsibilities may affect women's access to certain postings and advancement opportunities.

Teacher categories and career progression

Public school teachers and school leaders are classified as civil servants and follow a structured seven-level career ladder (see *Table 4*, with statistics disaggregated by gender shown in *Table 10*, Section IV) (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2019). Teachers usually begin at the Beginner or Junior level depending on their qualifications and can progress up to Senior lead teacher rank. Career progression (promotion) is not automatic and is determined by years of experience, performance evaluations and other requirements, such as participation in training and school activities/projects, and the establishment of a professional development plan. Reaching the top level typically requires a minimum of 17 years of service. While this structure

is intended to support professional advancement, the combination of promotion criteria and long-service requirements may disadvantage women disproportionately, particularly in contexts where caregiving responsibilities, career interruptions or more limited access to training and professional development opportunities can affect progression over time.

In addition, poor implementation of evaluation criteria and limited capacity among school leaders undermine the fairness and credibility of the promotion system (Yimam, 2019), potentially reinforcing existing challenges affecting women's career progression. Contract and community teachers, meanwhile, are not civil servants and cannot benefit from the teacher career ladder – although they represent a minority and have been used mostly to compensate teacher shortages (ibid.). According to 2023/24 EMIS data, contract teachers represent 4 per cent of the total.

Table 4: Teacher pathway (2023/24)

	Teacher rank	Share (%)
1	Beginner teacher	12
2	Junior teacher	23
3	Teacher	19
4	Senior teacher	11
5	Associate lead teacher	8
6	Lead teacher	8
7	Senior lead teacher	8

Note: Teachers marked as having no title or an undefined title account for 11 per cent of total teachers. Source: 2023/24 EMIS data.

Wages, benefits and working conditions

As in several other countries, the teaching profession in Ethiopia is affected by challenging employment conditions, including low nominal wages, limited benefits and difficult working conditions (ibid.). Teacher salaries remain uncompetitive relative to other fields, while the career structure offers relatively modest salary increments, even at senior levels. These conditions may reduce the attractiveness of the profession overall and can also affect retention and motivation over time.

While these challenges impact both men and women, the limited financial incentives associated with career progression may interact with broader structural barriers affecting women within the education system, including unequal access to promotion opportunities and professional development. Together, these factors may contribute to persistent challenges in attracting, retaining and advancing qualified female teachers into leadership positions.

2. Principal selection and training

Roles and responsibilities

The role of principals in Ethiopia is defined by the National Professional Standard for Principals (2013). School principals are expected to lead across three core domains: school vision and community leadership, instructional leadership and administrative leadership. Their responsibilities include managing school operations, overseeing teacher performance and professional development, reporting learning outcomes, organizing extracurricular activities and fostering a safe, inclusive environment in collaboration with the parent-teacher association. In recent years, the workload and complexity of a principal's duties appear to have increased due to several factors, including expanded school-level responsibilities resulting from decentralization, growing school size, resource constraints and the need to manage diverse stakeholders (Gurmu, 2019; 2023). This growing workload may disproportionately discourage women from pursuing or remaining in leadership roles, as it adds to household and caregiving responsibilities.

Principals can be supported by one or more deputy principals (or vice-principals) who share pedagogical and/or administrative responsibilities. Beyond their administrative function, vice-principal positions can play an important role in the leadership pipeline, offering candidates for future leadership positions the opportunity to gain management experience before stepping into principal roles. However, these roles are relatively scarce. While guidelines suggest that schools with fewer than 1,000 students should have one vice-principal, those with 1,000–2,999 students should have two and those exceeding 2,999 students should have three (Gurmu and Fetemer, 2023); in practice shortages mean just under a third of schools have one or more vice-principals (2023/24 EMIS data). This may have consequences for career progression for women, limiting opportunities to accumulate the experience, visibility and professional networks often associated with advancement into principal positions.

Eligibility criteria, appointment and training

Candidates must hold at least a Bachelor's degree to work in leadership at the primary and middle school levels, and a Master's degree at the secondary level. In addition to academic qualifications, candidates must also have reached a Lead Teacher level to be considered for either vice-principal or principal positions (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2017b). In 2019, following a Directive from the Civil Service Commission's Job Evaluation and Grading initiative, the minimum in-service requirement for becoming a school principal was increased from 3 to 14 years (Gurmu, 2023), in an effort to improve consistency and transparency across public service jobs. While the intent was to standardize and professionalize leadership appointments, this change considerably narrowed the pool of eligible candidates. This represents a major institutional barrier to women's leadership: given that women's careers are more frequently interrupted by maternity leave, caregiving responsibilities and other domestic demands, a 14-year threshold is likely to affect their eligibility for principal positions disproportionately.

Formally, school principals are appointed by WEOs with limited involvement from schools (Gurmu, 2019). The selection process is designed to include a written examination, a strategic plan development and presentation, and an oral interview, each weighted in the final score. A recruitment committee – comprising education officials, union representatives and a gender specialist – oversees the final decision. Under civil service guidelines, female candidates and those with disabilities receive additional points, and female candidates are prioritized in the case of a tie.⁸ School leaders must undergo requalification every five years and can be reassigned as teachers if they fail (UNESCO, no date). In practice, however, there is evidence that these formal procedures are not always followed consistently, with political affiliation and personal networks playing a role in selection outcomes (Gurmu, 2019). This could partly explain why although the formal selection process appears favourable to women, it has not translated into higher female representation in leadership positions.

8 The Government of Ethiopia released the Federal Civil Servants Proclamation No. 1064/2017 (FDRE, 2017) as part of a reform aimed at standardizing public service jobs through nationwide, cross-sectoral job evaluation and grading to assign similar remuneration to comparable jobs.

Another important feature of the process is that candidates are appointed to leadership positions before receiving formal training (Gurmu, 2023).⁹ School leadership training in Ethiopia is primarily delivered through the Postgraduate Diploma in School Leadership, a one-year programme with selection formally based on written examinations and interviews (Gurmu and Oumer, 2023). In practice, low demand for the programme means most applicants are admitted, while dropout rates remain high. This suggests that leadership training is weakly valued, limiting its effectiveness in preparing qualified school leaders.

The fact that school leaders are appointed before receiving training may also reduce the pool of female candidates, as women may be less likely to enter competitive selection processes without prior access to training that builds leadership skills and confidence. In contexts where women already face structural disadvantages, the requirement to assume leadership roles before receiving adequate preparation may create further barriers, especially for those balancing professional responsibilities with significant domestic and social expectations.

Attractiveness, financial incentives and support

One major challenge related to the appointment of principals is the **low attractiveness of the position, which may have implications for women**. Limited financial incentives – principals' salaries are only marginally higher than those of teachers with similar experience – combined with substantially heavier workload and expanded responsibilities, make the role less appealing to potential candidates, especially women who often carry additional household and caregiving burdens. These constraints are further compounded by the training and experience required for the role, as principals frequently report insufficient institutional support and inadequate preparation (Gurmu and Oumer, 2023), further narrowing women's entry into the leadership pipeline.

9 More recently, the Ministry of Education, with technical support from the United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office's TARGET programme, introduced the National School Leadership Training programme for secondary school leaders, which adopts a more practice-oriented and peer-supported approach: see <www.globalpartnership.org/node/document/download?file=document/file/2024-08-program-document-system-transformation-girls-education-accelerator-grants-ethiopia.pdf>.

According to the World Bank, only 50 per cent of principals reported having received management training and about 60 per cent reported having received in-service training in 2022. Finally, although formal selection criteria emphasize merit, selection practices are often not consistently followed, with political considerations influencing appointments (Gurmu, 2019), disadvantaging women who typically have less access to informal networks of influence.



CHAPTER 4

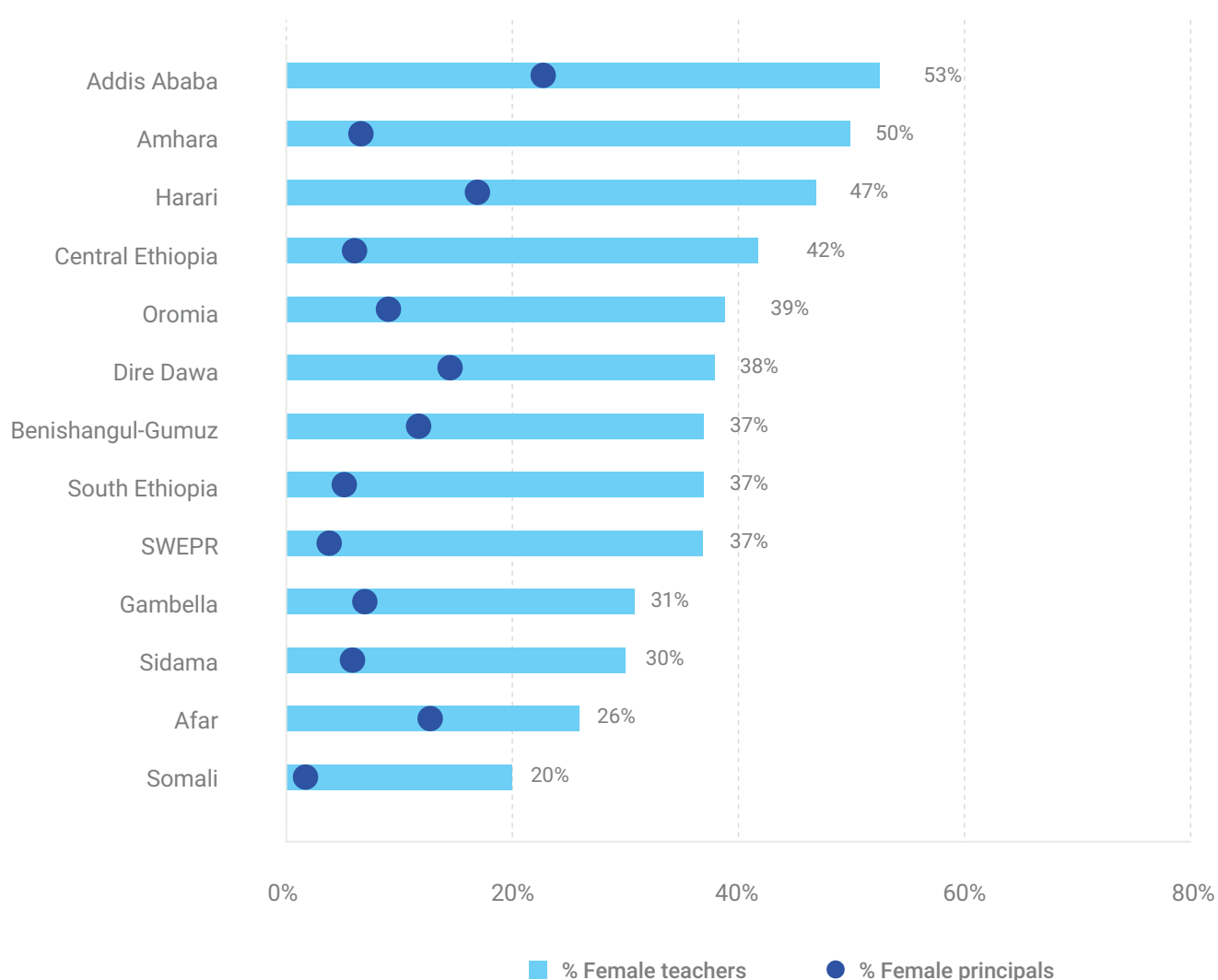
Women's representation in the Ethiopian education system

At the national level in Ethiopia, only 7 per cent of schools are led by women, despite women representing 41 per cent of the teacher workforce. Women are somewhat better represented in vice-principal roles, where they make up almost 25 per cent of these positions, although fewer than 30 per cent of schools have one or more vice-principals (mostly larger schools). However, there is considerable regional variation in these figures (*Figure 8*). In Addis Ababa (where more than half of the schools are private), half of teachers (53 per cent), and 23 per cent of principals are women. Meanwhile in Somali, for instance, women represent only 20 per cent of the teaching workforce and fewer than 2 per cent of principals.

As expected, there is a relatively strong positive statistical correlation ($r=0.55$) between the share of female teachers and the share of female principals at the regional level (*Figure 9*). This means that in most cases, the probability of a woman being appointed as principal increases as the

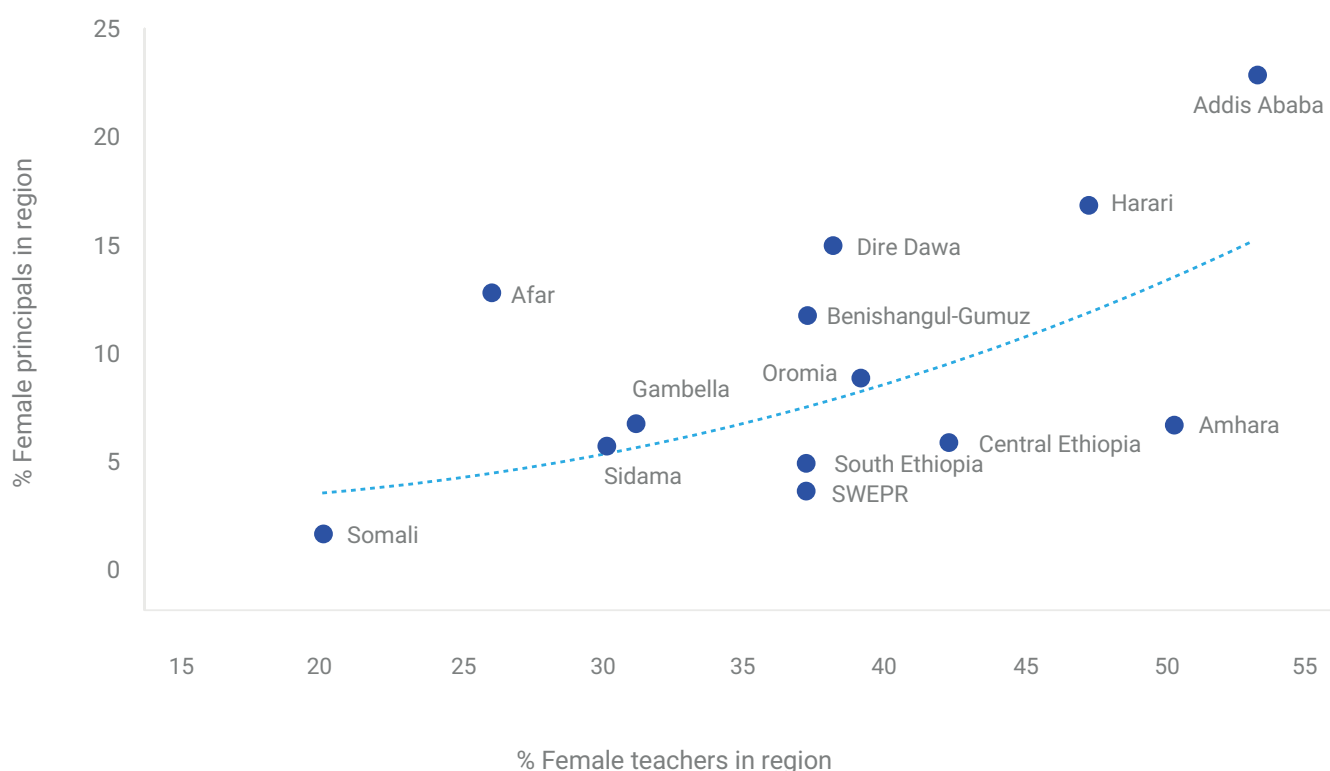
pool of female teachers increases. However, some regions stand out as exceptions. This is the case of Afar, for example, where 13 per cent of schools are led by women despite only 26 per cent of teachers being female. Amhara, conversely, has only 7 per cent of female principals despite half the teachers being female.

Figure 8: Proportion of women teachers and principals by region (2023/24)



Source: 2023/24 EMIS data

Figure 9: Correlation between the share of female teachers and principals (2023/24)

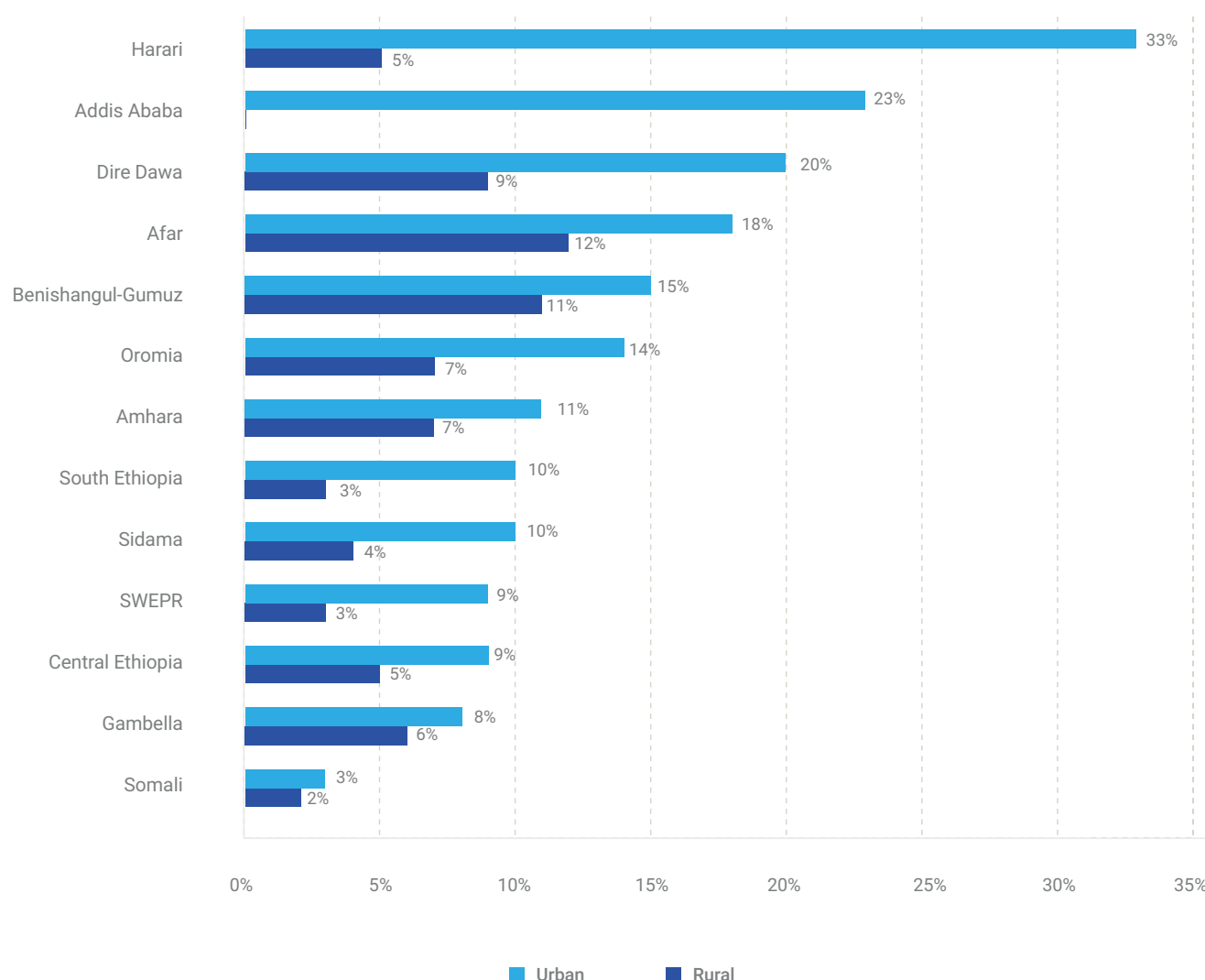


Note: calculations are based on 2023/24 EMIS data. The trendline represents the overall relationship between the share of female principals and the share of female teachers across regions. Regions located above the trendline (e.g., Afar) have a higher share of female principals than would be expected based on their share of female teachers. Conversely, regions below the trendline (e.g., South Ethiopia) have a lower share of principals than expected.

Unsurprisingly, women are likelier to be in urban schools across regions (Figure 10), which also have a higher concentration of private schools.¹⁰ At the national level, women are twice more likely to lead a school in urban areas (12 per cent) compared to rural areas (6 per cent), with 31 per cent of woredas and 6 per cent of zones registering not a single school led by a woman.

¹⁰ Twenty-seven per cent of schools in urban areas are private, compared with fewer than 1 per cent in the case of rural schools.

Figure 10: Percentage of women principals in urban and rural areas, by region (2023/24)



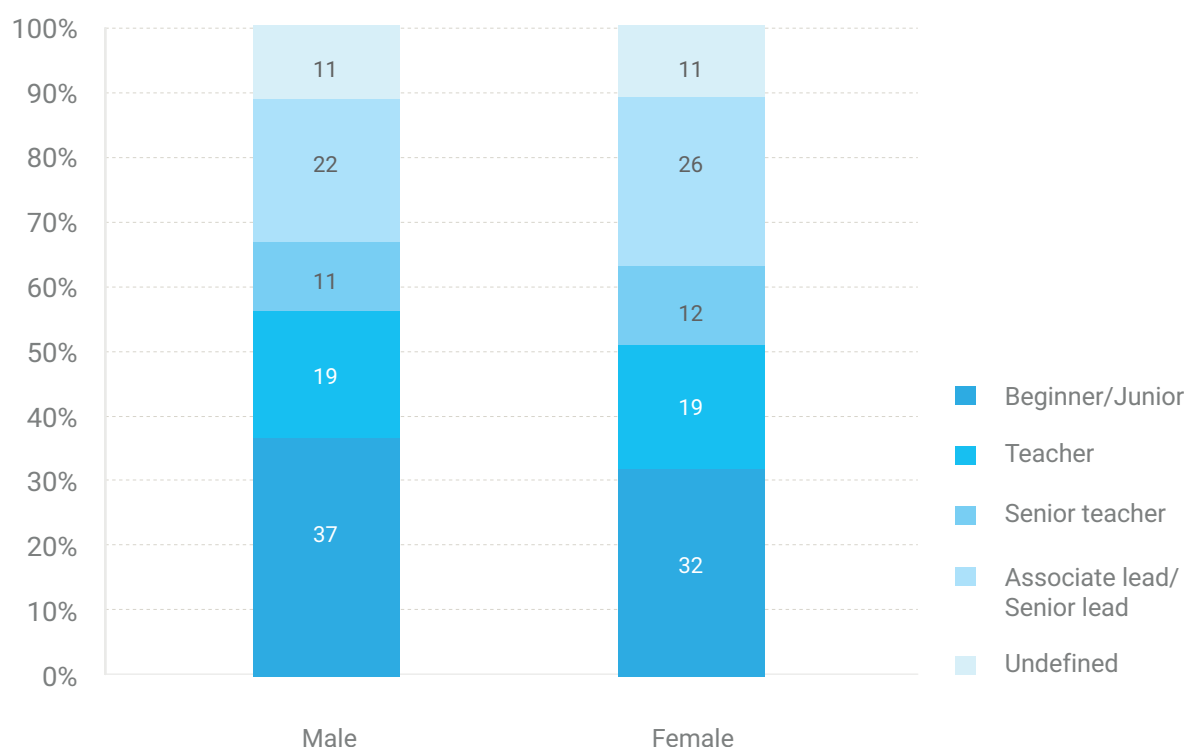
Source: 2023/24 EMIS data

As noted in the previous section, teachers typically follow a seven-step career ladder: Beginner teacher, Junior teacher, Teacher, Senior teacher, Associate lead teacher, Lead teacher and Senior lead teacher. EMIS data show that women and men are distributed similarly across categories (*Figure 11*).

With respect to other characteristics, female and male teachers have similar age profiles and are equally likely to hold a permanent contract. The main difference emerges in qualifications. While similar shares of women and men teachers hold a higher education degree (22 per cent and 23 per cent respectively), women principals are 7 percentage points more likely to have a higher education degree, a difference that is statistically significant (see *Table 5*). These results are consistent with previous statistics, suggesting that differences in school

leadership representation are unlikely to be explained by age or contract status alone. If anything, the higher qualification levels observed among women principals may indicate that women need stronger credentials than men to reach leadership positions.

Figure 11: Distribution of teachers by ranks and gender (2023/24)



Note: Based on 2023/24 EMIS data. To improve visibility, the Beginner and Junior teacher categories have been aggregated, as have the Associate lead teacher, Lead teacher and Senior lead teacher categories.

Table 5: Characteristics of principals and teachers by gender (EMIS 2023/24)

	Principals		Teachers	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
% Higher education	76	69	22	23
Age	41	42	40	40
% Permanent contract	95	96	94	94

Source: 2023/24 EMIS data



CHAPTER 5

Barriers to women's representation

Gender gaps in the education sector are linked to broader gender inequality, including labour market disparities and a general lack of opportunities for women in society.

Ethiopia has made notable progress in advancing gender equality thanks to a wide range of legislation and policy reforms to promote gender equality, but significant challenges remain (African Development Bank Group and Government of Ethiopia, 2024). According to the 2024 Global Gender Gap report, Ethiopia ranked 79 among 146 countries on the gender parity index, ahead of most African countries included in the analysis. This is a marked improvement from a decade ago, when the country ranked 124 out of 145 countries. However, while Ethiopia ranks relatively high in terms of gender parity for political empowerment (31/146) and health and survival (66/146), it performs worse with regard to educational attainment (136/146) and economic participation and opportunity (118/146).

Women in Ethiopia are less likely to pursue education and participate in the labour market than men, and more likely to engage in informal employment. According to the World Bank Gender Landscape for Ethiopia (2025), data from 2023 indicate that 57 per cent of women participate in the labour market, compared with 78 per cent of men. Women are also more likely to work in the informal sector (54 per cent versus 41 per cent of men) according to the 2021 Ethiopian Labour Force and Migration Survey. World Bank data also show that the gap in adult literacy rates between men and women (20 percentage points, with rates at 59 per cent for men and 40 per cent for women) is larger than the average gap in sub-Saharan Africa.¹¹ Similarly, gender gaps in agricultural productivity, entrepreneurship and wages are also well documented (World Bank, 2019).

Furthermore, **GBV is prevalent in Ethiopia**, exposing women to severe physical and psychological harm – an issue that has been exacerbated by recent conflicts (UN Women Africa, 2023; Kibret et al, 2024). Data from the World Bank from 2018 indicated that 27 per cent of women were subjected to physical and/or sexual violence during the previous year (World Bank Group, 2025). According to the 2023 Afrobarometer survey, GBV is the most important women's rights issue that Ethiopians think their government should address. Such violence contributes to disrupting girls and women's education and skill development, limiting their opportunities to enter, remain in and progress in the workforce.

Evidence on the barriers faced by women in leadership positions in Ethiopia remains limited. Nevertheless, **existing studies highlight several factors that hinder women's access to leadership roles in both the education and business sectors.** These include challenges associated with balancing personal responsibilities with leadership duties, low self-confidence and aspirations, lack of financial resources and negative gender stereotypes, among others (Bahiru and Mengistu, 2018; Adamu, 2023; Ayenalem and Taye, 2025; EMAH Social Development Consulting, 2022). In the education sector more specifically, barriers include gender biases regarding the role of girls and women in society, biases in appointment and transfer procedures, and insufficient support (Melka et al., 2022).

¹¹ World Bank Group, Gender Data Portal. Available at <<https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/ethiopia>>.

Additional challenges women face include the lack of role models throughout their training and career trajectories – including in teacher training colleges and universities – and lower confidence in pursuing positions of authority or power, shaped by prevailing gender norms (Dagneu, Yirdaw and Asrat, 2020). Taken together, these challenges can interrupt or delay women’s education and professional progression at different stages of their lives.

Despite the many challenges faced by women, some of these studies show that progress is being made, and legislative measures – including concrete affirmative action policies – have been taken by the government to support women’s advancement. According to the World Bank, in 2022/23, women held 41 per cent of ministerial-level positions and 41 per cent of seats in national parliaments. However, women’s representation in leadership roles varies across levels of administration (national versus regional) and across branches of government (UNDP, 2024).

The WiLL research, and this report in particular, seek to contribute to this agenda by generating evidence on the factors that shape women’s access to and success in school leadership positions. The next phase of the research, focused on primary quantitative and qualitative data collection at the school level, will further deepen this analysis and help identify opportunities to strengthen more gender-equitable leadership pathways within the education system.



CHAPTER 6

Characteristics of women-led schools

1. Descriptive statistics

Schools led by women and men differ in several statistically significant ways, as described below. Schools led by women in Ethiopia are smaller and more likely to be in urban areas than those led by men (see *Table 6*).¹² Nearly twice as many women-led schools are private compared with male-led schools. Women-led schools also have better infrastructure on average: they are more likely to have electricity (38 per cent of women-led schools versus 28 per cent of men-led schools), access to water (42 per cent versus 30 per cent), and a girls' hygiene room (24 per cent versus 19 per cent). Schools led by women also have a lower pupil–teacher ratio (PTR) than male-led schools (36 compared with 44), a higher share of women teachers and a higher share of

¹² Only 0.2 per cent of schools report being led by both a man and a woman in 2023/24; these are not included in the comparisons between women and men-led schools.

teachers with a higher education degree. The proportion of girls enrolled is slightly higher in women-led schools compared to men-led school.

Figure 12 shows the main differences in the observed characteristics of women- and men-led schools in Ethiopia.

Table 6: Characteristics of schools according to the gender of the principal (2023/24 EMIS)

Principal(s)' gender	Male	Female
<i>School characteristics/Infrastructure</i>		
% Rural *	80	66
% Private *	6	11
% School grant	6	6
% Strategic plan	90	90
% Functioning water supply *	30	42
% Electricity *	28	38
% Toilets boys/girls	62	60
% Girls' hygiene room *	19	24
% Functioning handwash *	18	29
% Functioning library *	40	38
% Functioning pedagogical centre	44	42
Pupil-teacher ratio *	44	36
<i>School staff characteristics</i>		
Avg. teachers per school	15	15
% Female teachers *	34	47
% Teachers w/ higher education degree *	15	22
<i>Student characteristics</i>		
Avg. students per school *	528	471
% Girls *	47	48

Note: Statistics based on 2023/24 EMIS data. Asterisks indicate variables for which the differences between women and men-led schools are statistically significant the 5 per cent level.

Figure 12: Summary of characteristics of women-led schools



**Women-led schools
are more likely to...**



**They are also more
likely to have...**

Be urban

Be private

Be smaller

Access to water and electricity

Lower pupil-teacher ratios

Higher % of women teachers

Higher % of teachers with higher education degree

Note: all differences presented are statistically significant at the 5 per cent level.

2. Regression analysis

To better understand whether the gender of the school leader is associated with student outcomes, the report conducts an **econometric regression analysis that compares women- and men-led schools while accounting for differences in school context, infrastructure, staffing and other relevant characteristics.**

School leadership may influence student outcomes through several channels, including leadership practices (such as teacher management and pedagogical leadership), the overall school climate, relationships with the school community, the creation of an inclusive learning environment and potential role model effects (for example, women school leaders could shape girls' aspirations).

To examine these relationships empirically, an equation taking the form $Y = f(x_1, x_2, x_3, \dots, x_n)$ is estimated, where Y stands for the outcomes or dependent variable and the variables $x_1, x_2, x_3, \dots, x_n$ stand for the independent or explanatory variables of the model, which include the

gender of the principal. The variables included in the model are described in more detail below. This analysis is based on EMIS data for the 2022/23 and 2023/24 school years (2015 and 2016 Ethiopian calendar).

Outcome variables. Three alternative outcomes are used in the regression analysis: **promotion rates**, **dropout rates** and the **proportion of girls in grade 8**.

In the absence of standardized test scores, **promotion rates** – defined as the share of students in a given grade who advance to the next grade in the following year – are a widely used proxy for student progression and learning, as they reflect the extent to which students successfully complete a grade and advance through the education system.¹³ **Dropout rates** are calculated using promotion and repetition rates, as they are not directly recorded in EMIS. Dropout rates provide an important complementary indicator of how effectively the education system retains students, capturing the share of students who leave before completing a given level. Both promotion and dropout rates are calculated at the grade level based on the two consecutive years of EMIS data available (2022/23 and 2023/24).¹⁴ Finally, the **proportion of girls in grade 8** is used as a proxy for gender parity in access and retention. This reflects the cumulative effects of gender disparities in progression, retention and transition across earlier grades.

As highlighted in Section II, many students in Ethiopia do not complete school or transition to higher levels, with these challenges emerging early in the education cycle. In this context, student progression and retention – captured by promotion and dropout rates – represent critical bottlenecks in the education system. At the same time, girls face multiple barriers that prevent them from successfully completing their education, stemming from institutional, socioeconomic and cultural factors. The proportion of girls in grade 8 therefore serves as a key indicator of persistent gender disparities in completion of basic education. Taken together, these outcomes are central to assessing both education system effectiveness and progress towards gender equality in Ethiopia.

13 Centralized data on student test scores were not available to the research team at the national level. In addition, concerns regarding data quality and the lack of consistent standards across regions limit the comparability of these measures.

14 As the number of students who dropped out was not available, the dropout rate is calculated as a residual using the formula $Dropout\ rate + Promotion\ rate + Repetition\ rate = 100\%$. Promotion, repetition and dropout rates are only calculated up to grade 7, as data for grade 9 were not available. These estimates are close to those provided by ESAA 2023/24, with somewhat higher repetition and dropout rates.

School leadership is expected to play a critical role in influencing these indicators, particularly in resource-constrained and unstable settings. Decisions taken at the school level affect how effectively resources are used, how supportive the learning environment is and how schools respond to risks of student disengagement and dropout. Principals can shape teacher attendance, motivation and instructional quality, which contribute to improved learning outcomes and, in turn, increase the likelihood of promotion while reducing repetition-related dropout. Furthermore, school leaders play an essential role in implementing policies related to girls' education and in addressing gender biases among teachers and communities. These efforts are key to increasing the proportion of girls who remain in school through grade 8.

Promotion, repetition and dropout rates between 2022/23 and 2023/24 are shown in *Table 7*. The results show relatively similar patterns between boys and girls in terms of promotion, repetition and dropout rates across primary grades in Ethiopia, although girls perform slightly better on most indicators. The sharp increase in repetition rates in grade 7 for both boys and girls may indicate bottlenecks linked to exam pressure or limited preparedness for the next stage of education. Dropout is relatively high in grade 1 (22 per cent for boys and 21 per cent for girls), which can be related to low school preparedness, and while it declines slightly in later grades, it remains substantial. This shows that although gender gaps in progression are relatively small, the Ethiopian education system continues to face broader challenges related to student retention and progression.

Table 7: Promotion, repetition and dropout rates by grade and gender (percentage)

	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7
Promotion rate – boys	74	78	79	79	74	77	76
Promotion rate – girls	75	79	80	81	77	78	79
Repetition rate – boys	6	6	7	7	6	6	17
Repetition rate – girls	5	5	6	7	6	6	18
Dropout rate – boys	22	18	16	17	21	19	15
Dropout rate – girls	21	17	16	16	19	18	13

Source: Authors' calculation using 2022/23 and 2023/24 EMIS data

Despite the relevance of these three outcomes for understanding student progression and gender parity, **they face important limitations**. Many Ethiopian schools implement automatic promotion, although practices are inconsistent and vary according to teachers and schools (Ahmed and Mihiretie, 2015).¹⁵ As a result, promotion rates may not always be a reliable measure of student performance and can be influenced by school-level repetition and promotion policies. Since dropout rates are not directly observed but calculated as a residual from promotion and repetition rates, they face similar limitations. Finally, **the proportion of girls in grade 8**, can be influenced by factors such as demographic trends and local attitudes towards girls' education.

Explanatory factors. These variables are selected based on their relevance for explaining the outcome variables considered, as well as their availability and reliability in the Ethiopian context. These include school type, location and availability of infrastructure, principal and teacher characteristics, and total student enrolment, an indicator measuring the prevalence of conflicts and violent events¹⁶ and location controls (region or zone fixed effects) to capture unobserved geographic, administrative and contextual differences across areas. Variables measuring family background and characteristics are unfortunately not available in EMIS data.

3. Findings

Promotion and dropout rates

Results for the models using promotion and dropout rates as dependent variables are shown in the Annex in *Tables A.1* and *A.2*, respectively. Each outcome (promotion and dropout) is estimated separately according to the gender of students, to assess whether the estimated effects are driven primarily by girls, boys or both.

The regression estimates indicate that the presence of a female principal is not statistically associated with either promotion or dropout rates. By contrast, a higher proportion of female teachers is associated with modest improvements in student outcomes, particularly for girls. Specifically, a

¹⁵ According to EMIS data, 37 per cent of schools have average promotion rates of 90 per cent or more for grades 1–4 (Figure 1.A in Annex).

¹⁶ This is measured using data from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), aggregated annually at the woreda level.

10-percentage point increase in the share of teachers is associated with an increase of 0.2 to 0.4 percentage points in girls' promotion rates (see *columns 1 and 3, Table A.1*).

Teacher and principal qualifications are also positively correlated with student outcomes. Schools in which principals and teachers hold at least a higher education degree tend to have slightly higher promotion rates and lower dropout rates, with stronger associations observed for girls than for boys.

Schools located in rural areas have, on average, promotion rates about 3 percentage points lower and higher dropout rates compared to urban schools. Private schools show comparable promotion rates to other schools, but higher dropout rates (2–3 percentage points), possibly reflecting student selection mechanisms.

School infrastructure also seems to be relevant. Access to water and electricity, the availability of separate toilets for boys and girls, and the presence of a library are all associated with higher promotion rates and lower dropout rates for both boys and girls. Finally, more challenging learning conditions – captured by higher pupil–teacher ratios – are associated with worse outcomes. Introducing zone fixed effects yields broadly similar results, although some coefficients decrease in magnitude, suggesting that models with region fixed effects may partly capture unobserved local characteristics.

Proportion of girls enrolled in grade 8

Results using the proportion of girls enrolled in grade 8 are shown in *Table A.3* in the Annex. As in previous models, the gender of the school principal shows no significant association with the proportion of girls enrolled in grade 8, suggesting that female and male-led schools have similar shares of girls in this grade once school and school staff characteristics are accounted for. By contrast, the share of female teachers in schools is positively and significantly associated with the share of girls in grade 8, although the estimated coefficients are modest. In the specification using Zone fixed effects (*Table A.3, column 2*), a 10-percentage point increase in the share of female teachers is associated with a 0.4-percentage point increase in the share of girls in grade 8. This finding underscores the potential role of female teacher representation in supporting girls' retention through school.

Beyond gender, the results suggest that the qualifications of both principals and teachers matter: schools where principals and teachers hold higher qualifications tend to have a higher proportion of girls enrolled in grade 8.

Finally urban schools and those equipped with libraries, pedagogical centres and girls' hygiene rooms also have a higher proportion of girls making it to grade 8, highlighting the role of a supportive learning environment in sustaining girls' progression through school.

Overall, these results suggest that **schools led by men and women do not perform significantly differently** when considering promotion and dropout rates. There are also no statistically significant differences with regard to the proportion of girls enrolled in grade 8, when taking school characteristics into account. **However, schools with a higher percentage of female teachers show lower dropout rates and higher promotion rates for girls, and a higher proportion of girls in grade 8.** While these results deserve further exploration to understand the channels through which female teachers may affect girls' outcomes, a few important caveats should be noted. First, the available data only partly explain student promotion, dropout and the percentage of enrolled girls in grade 8. Other unobserved variables (such as students' characteristics and socioeconomic background, school environment and/or community characteristics) may also affect outcomes but are not observable in the data. As such, the fact that a statistically significant correlation is observed between two variables does not necessarily imply that there is a causal relationship between them. Other factors, such as the length of time a principal has been working at a given school, may also affect these relationships.



CHAPTER 7

Conclusion and policy recommendations

Women representation in leadership roles is currently very low in Ethiopia, with only 7 per cent of schools led by women, despite women representing 41 per cent of the teaching workforce, and female and male teachers having broadly similar qualifications on average. Although women manage to reach senior teacher ranks in similar proportions to men, their share in school leadership positions drops considerably.

This pattern suggests the presence of important barriers in career progression, leadership preparation, appointment processes and the attractiveness of leadership roles. **While many women are able to enter the teaching profession – often supported by affirmative measures – the main constraints emerge at later stages.** Gender norms, combined with limited opportunities for accumulating training and experience, non-compliance with formal nomination procedures and insufficient financial

incentives, restrict women's advancement. Long-service requirements further compound these challenges, contributing to limiting women's access to leadership positions.

As in other countries where WiLL research has been conducted (Benin, Chad, Guinea and Madagascar), schools led by women in Ethiopia also differ from those led by men in several observable characteristics. They are more likely to be urban and private, and have more chances of having access to water and electricity. They also tend to have a higher percentage of women teachers, teachers with a degree and lower pupil–teacher ratios.

Regression analysis results suggest that, after accounting for several observable characteristics, schools led by women do not show significantly different promotion, dropout or grade 8 girls' enrolment outcomes compared with schools led by men. However, the findings point to a positive association between the share of women teachers and girls' education outcomes, including lower dropout, higher promotion and a higher proportion of girls enrolled in grade 8.

While the barriers and enablers related to women's access to leadership positions will be further explored in the next phase of the research through quantitative and qualitative data-collection exercises, a few key policy recommendations can be put forward based on the findings presented in this report:



Increase the attractiveness of the principal and vice-principal positions, while ensuring that incentives and support measures are designed with explicit gender-equity considerations in mind. The limited attractiveness of the principal's position may restrict the pool of candidates for school leadership, as principals face a heavy workload and high responsibilities, but low support and incentives. However, increasing the attractiveness of these positions may not automatically translate into higher representation of women if men are better positioned to access more desirable leadership roles. Measures such as improving the relevance of principals' training, strengthening both monetary and non-monetary incentives – particularly for those working in rural and remote areas – and providing more support for principals, for instance through structured mentorship systems, professional networks and platforms for peer exchange, should therefore be accompanied by transparent, gender-responsive selection and monitoring mechanisms.



Strengthen female leadership pipelines. Strengthening support and guidance for women at each stage of the career path from teacher to principal could help address barriers to women's progression into leadership roles. This could include targeted mentoring, leadership preparation, access to relevant training and clearer information on promotion and appointment processes. Minimum in-service year requirements should also be reviewed from a gender-equity perspective, with consideration given to targeted flexibility or complementary support measures where these requirements disproportionately limit women's access to leadership positions.



Make the recruitment process for principals more transparent and less reliant on political appointments and social networks. One of the top barriers for women moving into leadership positions is more limited access to professional networks and sponsorship opportunities (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2025), while evidence suggests that women are generally more likely to benefit from open and competitive selection processes. Increasing the transparency of the recruitment process is therefore crucial. Selection criteria, scoring procedures, and final appointment decisions should be clearly documented and monitored, including through gender-disaggregated data. Experience and training requirements for candidates should also be carefully formulated to ensure a balance between maintaining a strong pool of applicants and selecting candidates with the necessary skills and competencies.



Improve training and support for principals, with a particular focus on women and those in rural and marginalized areas where barriers are greatest. Improving pre-service and in-service training, alongside targeted mentorship and peer support for women, can help build confidence, strengthen leadership skills and ultimately improve women's retention and career advancement. Flexible and accessible training modalities should be offered to principals in remote locations who face long travel distances to attend in-person training. In addition, measures that support working mothers – such as childcare provision and flexible work arrangements – should be considered to reduce practical barriers to women's participation in leadership training and leadership roles. Finally, establishing professional networks for women in education can further help female leaders to share experiences and resources.



Improve data usage and harmonization across regions to monitor the representation of women and provide transparent reporting. This should include tracking women's progression across the leadership pipeline, including teacher recruitment, promotion, access to training, vice-principal roles, principal appointments and retention. The appointment and promotion of women should also be included in existing performance indicators and regularly reported using gender-disaggregated data.



Supporting girls' education, particularly in rural areas and regions with low female representation is also crucial to maintain a sufficient pool of female teachers and principals and create a virtuous cycle. This can be achieved through a combination of measures involving:

- Challenging gender norms and harmful stereotypes that hinder girls' education, including those related to early marriage, teenage pregnancy and gender-based violence. This can be done through community engagement, pedagogical activities, curriculum adaptation, teacher training and other targeted interventions.
- Preventing and responding to gender-based violence both in and outside schools, including through clear reporting mechanisms, referral systems, and safe school programmes and policies.
- Raising parents' and communities' awareness of the value and long-term benefits of educating girls, including for girls' future employment and leadership opportunities.
- Integrating gender-responsive approaches into teacher and school leadership training, including gender-sensitive management, gender-inclusive pedagogy and safe school practices.
- Investing in school WASH facilities to create safer, more inclusive learning and working environments for girls, female teachers and women school leaders.

Abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data
CTE	Colleges of Teacher Education
ESDP	Education Sector Development Programme
EMIS	Education Management Information Systems
ESAA	Education Statistics Annual Abstract
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
GBV	Gender-based Violence
GEPD	Global Education Policy Dashboard
GER	Gross Enrolment Rate
IIEP	International Institute for Education Planning
MoE	Ministry of Education
PASEC	Programme d'Analyse des Systèmes Éducatifs de la Confemen (Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems)
PGDT	Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching
PTR	Pupil–teacher Ratio
REB	Regional Education Bureau
WiLL	Women in Learning Leadership
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WEO	Woreda Education Office

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Annex

Tables A.1 and A.2 present results from multivariate regression analysis, based on an equation taking the form $Y_{ijt} = f(x_{it1}, x_{it2}, x_{it3}, \dots, x_{itn})$. Y_{ijt} designates the outcome variable for school i , grade j and year t (promotion rates or dropout rates) and $x_{it1}, x_{it2}, x_{it3}, \dots, x_{itn}$ stand for the independent or explanatory variables of the model for school i and year t (school, location and school staff characteristics). Regressions are based on EMIS data for the 2022/23 and 2023/24 school years (2015 and 2016 Ethiopian calendar). For each outcome, two different equations are estimated, one for girls and one for boys. In addition, two alternative specifications (using regional and zone fixed effects) are presented.

Table A.1: Regression model results – Promotion rates

	Promotion rates		Promotion rates	
	Girls (1)	Boys (2)	Girls (3)	Boys (4)
Rural	-2.807***	-2.966***	-3.029***	-2.961***
Private	0.139	0.904	-0.476	-0.138
School grant	0.548	0.886**	0.642	0.804*
Strategic plan	0.362	-0.311	-0.085	-0.749*
Water supply	0.762***	0.764***	0.771***	0.688***
Electricity	1.274***	1.302***	1.449***	1.294***
Toilets boys/girls	0.588**	0.485**	0.524**	0.589**
Handwash	0.822***	0.758***	0.446*	0.607**
Girls' hygiene room	0.251	0.217	-0.282	-0.068
Library	1.506***	0.922***	0.725***	0.349
Pedagogical centre	0.718***	0.391*	0.350	0.288
PTR	-0.046***	-0.038***	-0.044***	-0.037***
Female principal	2.097	3.489*	1.534	1.534
Principal w/ degree	0.816***	0.112	0.990***	0.420*
% female teachers	0.046***	0.018***	0.023***	0.010*
% teachers w/ degree	0.071***	0.067***	0.063***	0.060***
% permanent teachers	-0.018***	-0.013**	-0.010*	-0.007
School enrolment (total)	-0.002***	-0.001***	-0.001***	-0.001***
No. of violent events in Woreda	-0.031	0.001	-0.085**	-0.056
Constant	78.650***	81.159***	82.922***	81.920***

Promotion rates			Promotion rates	
	Girls (1)	Boys (2)	Girls (3)	Boys (4)
Region fixed effects	Yes	Yes	No	No
Zone fixed effects	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	132,538	132,859	132,538	132,859
R-squared	0.065	0.049	0.092	0.076

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Notes: Regressions based on grade-level observations using data for 2022/23 and 2023/24. Models (1) and (2) use region fixed effects, and models (3) and (4) use Zone fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the school level. Extreme values for promotion rates (<0 or >100), which represent 21 per cent of observations, are corrected so that promotion rates fall between 0 and 100. The number of violent events at the woreda level includes battles, violence against civilians and explosions, and comes from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED).

Table A.2: Regression model results – Dropout rates

Dropout rates			Dropout rates	
	Girls (1)	Boys (2)	Girls (3)	Boys (4)
Rural	2.337***	2.542***	2.469***	2.431***
Private	2.543***	2.483***	2.385***	2.692***
School grant	-0.975**	-1.351***	-0.810**	-1.009***
Strategic plan	-0.481	0.273	-0.045	0.667*
Water supply	-0.491**	-0.536**	-0.540***	-0.527**
Electricity	-1.561***	-1.762***	-1.652***	-1.699***
Toilets boys/girls	-0.430**	-0.393*	-0.444**	-0.542***
Handwash	-0.400*	-0.388	-0.379	-0.592**
Girls’ hygiene room	-0.589**	-0.531**	-0.193	-0.350
Library	-1.367***	-0.808***	-0.912***	-0.562***
Pedagogical centre	-1.041***	-0.751***	-0.627***	-0.553***
PTR	0.047***	0.041***	0.046***	0.041***
Female principal	-2.026	-4.102**	-1.284	-2.020
Principal w/ degree	-0.814***	-0.285	-1.265***	-0.912***
% female teachers	-0.039***	-0.016***	-0.023***	-0.013***
% teachers w/ degree	-0.073***	-0.074***	-0.062***	-0.064***
% permanent teachers	0.003	-0.002	0.000	-0.003
School enrolment (total)	0.001**	0.000	0.000	0.000
No. of violent events in Woreda	0.021	0.005	0.078***	0.063**
Constant	21.864***	19.935***	18.515***	20.116***

Dropout rates			Dropout rates	
	Girls (1)	Boys (2)	Girls (3)	Boys (4)
Region fixed effects	Yes	Yes	No	No
Zone fixed effects	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	132,538	132,859	132,538	132,859
R-squared	0.070	0.062	0.094	0.090

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Notes: Regressions based on grade-level observations using data for 2022/23 and 2023/24. Models (1) and (2) use region fixed effects, and models (3) and (4) use Zone fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the school level. Extreme values for dropout rates (<0 or >100, which represent 16 per cent of observations, are corrected so that promotion rates fall between 0 and 100. The number of violent events at the woreda level includes battles, violence against civilians and explosions, and comes from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED).

Table A.3 present results from multivariate regression analysis, based on an equation taking the form $Y_{ijt} = f(x_{it1}, x_{it2}, x_{it3}, \dots, x_{itn})$. Y_{ijt} designates the outcome variable for school i and year t (the proportion of enrolled girls in grade 8) and $x_{it1}, x_{it2}, x_{it3}, \dots, x_{itn}$ stand for the independent or explanatory variables of the model for school i and year t (school, location and school staff characteristics). Regressions are based on EMIS data for the 2023/24 school year (2016 Ethiopian calendar). Two alternative specifications (using regional and zone fixed effects) are presented.

Table A.3: Regression model results – Proportion of girls enrolled in grade 8

Proportion of girls enrolled in Grade 8		
	(1)	(2)
Rural	-0.661**	-0.822***
Private	0.764	1.425**
School grant	0.831**	0.494
Strategic plan	1.025***	0.955***
Water supply	-0.320	0.085
Electricity	-0.212	0.221
Toilets boys/girls	0.667***	-0.030
Functioning handwash	0.466*	0.158
Girls' hygiene room	0.693***	0.479**
Library	1.944***	0.877***
Pedagogical centre	1.080***	0.490**
PTR	-0.049***	-0.043***

Proportion of girls enrolled in Grade 8		
	(1)	(2)
Female principal	-0.600	-0.038
Principal w/ degree	0.965***	0.745***
% female teachers	0.081***	0.043***
% teachers w/ degree	0.032***	0.016***
% permanent teachers	-0.026***	-0.024***
School enrolment (total)	0.001***	0.002***
No. of violent events in woreda	0.003	-0.013
Constant	45.226***	47.344***
Region fixed effects	Yes	No
Zone fixed effects	No	Yes
Observations	17,854	17,854
R-squared	0.173	0.267

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Notes: Regressions based on data for 2023/24, based on school-level observations. The proportion of girls enrolled in grade 8 ranges between 0 and 100. The number of violent events at the Woreda level includes battles, violence against civilians and explosions, and comes from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED). Model (1) includes fixed effects at the Region level, and model (2) includes fixed effects at the Zone level.

Acknowledgements

Women in Learning Leadership (WiLL) is a joint research project between the UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti (UNICEF Innocenti), the International Institute for Educational Planning – UNESCO and the Gender at the Centre Initiative. In Ethiopia, WiLL is implemented by UNICEF Innocenti in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the UNICEF Ethiopia Country Office.

This research is made possible through funding from the International Development Research Centre's Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Information Exchange programme and UNICEF regular resources.

This report was written by Andrea Lépine (Education Researcher, UNICEF Innocenti) and Nguyen Nguyen (former intern, UNICEF Innocenti), with contributions from Isabella Di Paolo (Education Researcher, UNICEF Innocenti), Mulunesh Tsegaye Bezu (Education Researcher, UNICEF Ethiopia) and the national technical team of the WiLL initiative in Ethiopia. The report was coordinated and supervised by Sonakshi Sharma (former Education Research Specialist, UNICEF Innocenti) and Carolina Albán Conto (Research Manager, UNICEF Innocenti).

The authors would like to thank the technical team from the Ethiopian Ministry of Education and the consultative team for their valuable contributions. The authors thank colleagues from UNICEF Ethiopia who provided essential support throughout this research: Tiye Feyisa (Education Specialist), Eden Meshesha (Education Officer) and Azmera Kassahun Yibeltal (Gender Programme Specialist).

Finally, the authors thank the reviewers who provided important comments and suggestions to improve this report: Meseret Kassahun Desta (Programme Management Specialist, United Nations Office for Project Services – Development and Special Initiatives/Preventing Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment), Eyerusalem Azmeraw (Project Officer, UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa) and Azmera Kassahun Yibeltal (Gender Programme Specialist, UNICEF Ethiopia).

Layout design: Afternorth

Copy editing: Strategic Agenda

Photography:

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Special thanks to Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX), the FDRE Ministry of Education, Gender at the Center Initiative (GCI), and UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP-UNESCO). We are grateful for their continued partnership and commitment to child rights.



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Suggested citation

Lépine, A., Nguyen, N., *Women in Learning Leadership: Advancing gender-responsive education using evidence in Ethiopia*, UNICEF Innocenti, Florence, August 2026.

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