

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women in Learning Leadership: Advancing gender-responsive education using evidence in Ethiopia





1. Background and rationale

This executive summary presents the main findings and policy implications of the report *Women in Learning Leadership: Advancing gender-responsive education using evidence in Ethiopia*. The report is part of the Women in Learning Leadership (WiLL) initiative, 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 Ethiopian Ministry of Education and UNICEF Ethiopia.

WiLL addresses a central 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.

This issue is particularly pressing in Ethiopia, where only 7 per cent of schools are led by women, despite women representing 41 per cent of the teaching workforce and female teachers having broadly similar qualifications and seniority as male teachers. This gap suggests that women face barriers not only in entering the teaching profession, but also in advancing to leadership positions. These challenges stem from barriers in career progression, leadership preparation, appointment processes and the attractiveness of leadership roles. They are closely linked to gender norms, combined with a range of contextual factors and systemic challenges in the recruitment process of principals that disproportionately affect women and contribute to preventing them from advancing in their careers in the education sector.

The report analyses women's representation in the Ethiopian 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 present evidence and inform policy dialogue on how to strengthen women's pathways into teaching and school leadership while also improving educational outcomes for children.



2. Objectives and methodology

The report presents findings from the two first phases of the WiLL research in Ethiopia. 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:

- First, an **institutional and policy analysis** examines teacher recruitment, deployment, training, career progression and school leadership appointment processes. This analysis draws on official policy documents, government guidelines, academic papers and existing studies. It is complemented by consultations with stakeholders 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.
- Second, the report conducts a **quantitative analysis** based on administrative data from the Education Management Information System (EMIS) for the 2022/23 and 2023/24 school years. These data provide information on school characteristics, teachers, school leaders, infrastructure and enrolment, and allow the calculation of internal efficiency and gender parity indicators. The quantitative analysis combines descriptive statistics and econometric analysis. **Descriptive statistics** provide a detailed picture of women's representation across regions, location and school type, and compare female- and male-led schools. The **econometric analysis**, based on multivariate linear regression models, examines whether the gender of the school principal is associated with key student outcomes: promotion rates, dropout rates and the proportion of girls enrolled in grade 8. The models control for school infrastructure and resources, school type, location, the number of violent events at the woreda level using Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), pupil-teacher ratio, and characteristics of school principals and teachers. Specifications include geographical fixed effects at the Region and Zone levels to account for local differences.

Some data limitations should be noted. First, data for the Tigray region are not available for the years considered; as a result, the descriptive statistics presented are not nationally representative. In addition, many Ethiopian schools implement automatic promotion, meaning that promotion rates may not always provide a reliable measure of student performance and can be influenced by school-level repetition and promotion policies. Dropout rates are not directly observed in EMIS data but are instead calculated as a residual from promotion and repetition rates and therefore are subject to similar limitations. Furthermore, the proportion of girls in grade 8 may be influenced by factors such as demographic trends and local attitudes towards girls' education. Finally, the analysis is not causal; 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 Ethiopia

Ethiopia has seen significant progress in expanding school enrolment; however, many children remain out of school due to conflict-related school closures and climate-related shocks. Additional challenges persist within the education system, including difficult learning conditions, inadequate infrastructure, sanitation facilities and learning resources, and a shortage of qualified teachers. These constraints often lead to overcrowded classrooms and teachers who lack sufficient skills or motivation. As a result, many students do not complete their education or transition to higher levels. The education system is characterized by slow progression and widespread temporary or permanent dropout, and low learning outcomes. In this context, effective school leadership is particularly important for maintaining school functioning and supporting both teachers and students.

Despite the progress in enrolment, girls in Ethiopia continue to face multiple barriers to accessing and completing education, driven by a combination of institutional constraints, socioeconomic pressures and gender norms. Girls represent 47 per cent of enrolled students on average, with some variation by region and lower participation in rural areas. Challenges such as early marriage, domestic responsibilities, poverty, school-related gender-based violence and inadequate school infrastructure limit girls' attendance, progression and learning outcomes. These persistent barriers also have long-term implications for women's participation and advancement in the education sector, including their representation in leadership roles.





4. Recruitment, deployment and leadership appointment processes

The report examines how institutional processes shape women's opportunities within the education system. **Teacher recruitment and management in Ethiopia are highly decentralized**, with Regional Education Bureaus and Woreda Education Offices playing a key role in recruitment, deployment and promotion decisions. While this structure can enable recruitment processes to better reflect local needs, it also introduces points where subjective criteria and local discretion may influence outcomes, potentially influencing women's career progression.

Although affirmative measures help support women's entry into the teaching profession, advancement to leadership positions remains constrained. Teachers follow a structured career ladder based on experience, performance and qualifications; however, long service requirements and cumulative criteria may disproportionately affect women, particularly in contexts where career interruptions and limited access to professional development are more common.

The teaching profession is characterized by low pay, limited benefits and challenging working conditions, which reduce its attractiveness and affect retention. While these constraints affect all teachers, they can reinforce existing barriers for women, contributing to persistent gaps in career progression and leadership representation.

On the other hand, **the role of principal involves a heavy workload, substantial responsibilities and relatively limited incentives.** At the same time, the limited availability of vice-principal positions reduces support for principals and constrains leadership pipelines. Combined with gaps in the implementation of formal selection procedures and the influence of local networks, **these factors create barriers to advancement, particularly for women.**

Moreover, the increase in minimum in-service requirements to become a school principal represents a major institutional barrier to women's leadership and is likely to significantly narrow the pool of eligible candidates, given that women's career paths are more often interrupted.



5. Women's representation in the education system

The report provides a detailed overview of women's representation in the primary education system in Ethiopia. At the national level (excluding Tigray), **women account for around 41 per cent of teachers but only 7 per cent of school principals**, revealing a significant leadership gap. Women are somewhat better represented in vice-principal roles (where women make up almost a quarter of these positions), although less than 30 per cent of schools have one or more vice-principals.

Men and women are relatively evenly distributed across the different stages of the teacher career ladder, but this parity does not extend to leadership positions, highlighting persistent barriers to women's progression.

Women principals are more common in urban areas, where private schools are concentrated and where working conditions tend to be more favourable. They are twice as likely to lead schools in urban areas (12 per cent) as in rural areas (6 per cent). In addition, female principals tend to have higher levels of formal education than their male counterparts, suggesting that women often face higher qualifications thresholds to access leadership roles.





6. Characteristics and performance of female-led schools

Schools led by women and men differ in several significant ways, reflecting the distinct contexts in which women and men operate. Schools led by women in Ethiopia are more likely to be located in urban areas and to be private. On average, these schools tend to be smaller and better resourced, with greater access to infrastructure such as water, electricity and dedicated hygiene facilities for girls. They also have lower pupil–teacher ratios than male-led schools, a higher proportion of female teachers, and a higher share of teachers holding a higher education degree.

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.

To assess whether the gender of the school leader is associated with student outcomes, the report conducts an econometric analysis comparing female- and male-led schools in terms of promotion rates, dropout rates and the proportion of girls enrolled in grade 8, while controlling for differences in school context, infrastructure, staffing and other relevant characteristics. School leadership could play an important role in shaping educational outcomes – particularly in resource-constrained and unstable settings – by influencing how resources are used and the quality of the learning environment.

Once school and staff characteristics are taken into account, **the analysis finds no significant association between the presence of a female principal and the outcomes considered.** This is a key finding, showing women’s strong underrepresentation in school leadership cannot be explained by weaker performance.

By contrast, the analysis suggests that a higher proportion of female teachers is associated with modest improvements in student outcomes, particularly for girls, suggesting that female representation in the teaching workforce may play an important role in supporting girls’ education. Teacher and principal qualifications are also positively correlated with student outcomes.

Urban schools, and those providing more favourable learning environments – such as access to water and electricity, separate toilets for boys and girls, and a library – are associated with higher promotion rates and lower dropout rates for both boys and girls. Similarly, lower pupil-teacher ratios are associated with improved outcomes.

A few important caveats should be noted. First, the available data only partially explain variations in student promotion, dropout and the percentage of girls enrolled in grade 8. Other relevant factors may influence these outcomes but are not captured in the data. In particular, leadership practices, school climate, teacher motivation, student socioeconomic background and community engagement are not observed. 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 the conclusion that women's low representation in school leadership in Ethiopia reflects structural, institutional and social barriers rather than differences in observed school performance.

Addressing these barriers requires coordinated action across the education system:

- **Increasing the attractiveness of the principal position is key, while designing incentives and support measures that incorporate gender-equity considerations.** Strengthening both financial and non-financial incentives, improving training and expanding support systems such as mentoring and professional networks can make leadership more appealing, while ensuring gender-responsive selection and monitoring mechanisms.
- **Strengthening female leadership pipelines.** Providing targeted support to women throughout their careers – through mentoring, training and clearer information on promotion processes – can facilitate progression, while reviewing in-service requirements to ensure they do not disproportionately limit women's access to leadership roles.
- **Improving the transparency of principal recruitment.** Reducing reliance on political appointments and social networks can help create fairer opportunities by establishing more transparent, merit-based processes, with clearly defined and monitored selection criteria.
- **Enhancing training and support for principals,** particularly for women and those in rural areas could also improve retention and advancement. Expanding access to flexible and accessible training and mentorship, along with measures such as childcare support and flexible work arrangements, may help reduce barriers to women's participation.
- **Strengthening data systems and monitoring.** Better data are essential for monitoring gender equity, understanding career pathways and evaluating policy reforms. Improving the use and harmonization of data to track women's progression across the leadership pipeline is also critical.
- **Supporting girls' education is also key to sustaining the pipeline over time.** Addressing gender norms, early marriage and gender-based violence; raising community awareness; integrating gender-responsive practices into training; and investing in safe, inclusive school infrastructure can contribute to improving girls' access, retention and future leadership opportunities.



8. Conclusion

The WiLL research in Ethiopia provides new evidence on women's representation in education leadership and the barriers that shape their career trajectories.

The report shows that female-led schools differ in context but perform similarly to male-led schools in terms of promotion rates, dropout rates and the proportion of girls enrolled in grade 8 once school and staff characteristics are taken into account. This is a key finding, indicating that the leadership gap cannot be explained by performance differences. Instead, the evidence points to structural barriers that limit women's access to leadership positions. Addressing these barriers is essential for promoting gender equity and strengthening education systems.

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 Ethiopia.



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