



THEMATIC NOTE 1

Teachers for All: Advancing Equity-based Teacher Deployment in Sierra Leone

Insights for enhancing women's representation

Key takeaways

Sierra Leone's teaching workforce continues to exhibit a persistent gender imbalance across education levels, with women's representation declining sharply in upper primary and secondary education and in rural and hard-to-reach schools. Driving these disparities is a combination of systemic and contextual barriers, including difficult rural working conditions, uneven deployment practices, limited access to affordable and flexible qualification pathways, and gendered norms that shape both deployment and classroom assignment. Women teachers are disproportionately concentrated in urban areas and lower primary grades, limiting their professional progression and undermining equity and learning outcomes in underserved communities.

The following recommendations aim to address these challenges:

1. **Establish and enforce realistic, phased recruitment targets** for women, including regularizing qualified women volunteer teachers and strengthening localized recruitment in the centralized system.
2. **Improve rural teaching conditions through practical, women-responsive incentives** such as transport, housing and childcare support.
3. **Expand the pool of qualified women teachers** through targeted scholarships, flexible and fast-track training pathways, and supported rural pre-service placements.
4. **Reduce gender bias in classroom placement** through guidance and training for head teachers.
5. **Formalize community-based support mechanisms** and promote women's leadership to improve retention, particularly in rural and hard-to-reach schools.



About this note and the Teachers for All research

[Teachers for All \(T4A\)](#) is an applied research initiative, led by UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence - Innocenti, that aims to generate evidence on teacher deployment in sub-Saharan Africa. The research is underpinned by a co-creation process to ensure that its scope and direction align with local priorities. In Sierra Leone, this co-creation began with a multi-stakeholder workshop in November 2023, bringing together the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), the Teaching Service Commission (TSC), civil society organizations, researchers and development partners.

This note – the second in the series on Sierra Leone – presents findings specifically on women teachers in Sierra Leone, building on the companion paper covering primary-level teachers in general. The findings are based on an analysis of national policy documents, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with key informants at the national, district and school levels, as well as data from the 2022 Annual School Census (ASC) and Educational Management Information System (EMIS) (see [‘Research report: Mapping shortages, distribution challenges and teacher workforce factors shaping foundational learning’](#), [‘Thematic research note 2: Managing and formalizing Sierra Leone’s volunteer teachers’](#) and Annex 1 for detailed methodology). It uncovers a gender imbalance in Sierra Leone’s primary teaching workforce which undermines the country’s commitment to enhancing girls’ access to education and explores how the policy landscape intersects with barriers faced by women teachers, offering actionable insights to inform future developments.

Key findings

The primary-level teaching workforce experiences a persistent gender imbalance, with women facing multiple intersecting barriers to entering and remaining in the profession

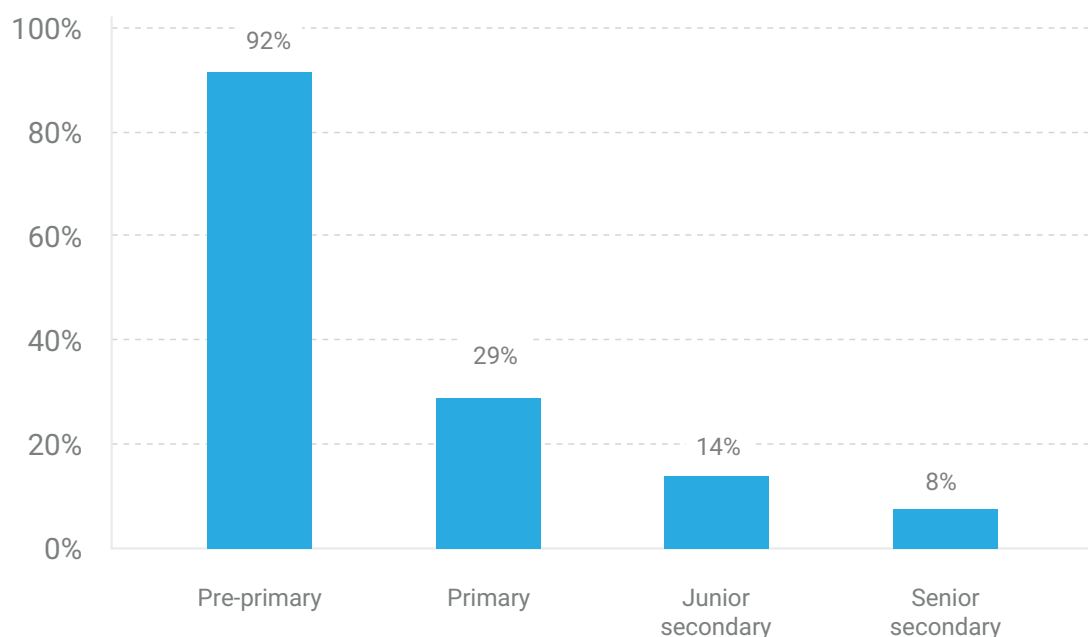
Sierra Leone is recognized for its strong commitment to girls’ enrolment, retention and completion, but the country could advance further if these efforts were complemented by a more gender-balanced teaching workforce. Several recent landmark legal and policy initiatives have underscored girls’ rights to education. These include revoking the ban on pregnant girls attending school and launching the MBSSE Radical Inclusion Policy (2021) to alleviate access barriers for girls and children with disabilities. Additionally, the MBSSE Directorate of Non-Formal Education is working intensively on measures to promote out-of-school girls’ return to schools.¹ Beyond the education sector, other important reforms include the Gender Equality and Women’s

¹ In 2024 alone, up to 3,079 out-of-school girls were returned to school (MBSSE, 2024).

Empowerment (GEWE) Act (2022), which aims at promoting increased equity in the labour market. Despite these efforts, the gender imbalance in Sierra Leone's education workforce remains stark.

Approximately 29 per cent of Sierra Leone's current primary teacher workforce are women (MBSSE, 2022), a proportion that has fluctuated over time but remains close to the level seen in the mid-1970s.² Although this approaches the national GEWE target of 30 per cent, women's representation in the teaching workforce remains far from balanced and is among the lowest in West Africa, with estimates from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) placing the average percentage of women teachers at the primary level in sub-Saharan Africa at 45 per cent (Sierra Leone, 2022a; UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2025). The gender imbalance increases at the upper levels of the education system, with women's representation steadily declining from pre-primary to primary to secondary and higher education roles: national data show that women make up 92 per cent of the pre-primary level workforce, dropping to 29 per cent at the primary level and even further to 14 and 8 per cent at the junior and senior secondary level, respectively (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1: Share of women teachers by education level (2022)



Source: Author's calculation using EMIS data (MBSSE, 2022).

Note: N = 9,700 schools with available data (government-approved).

² Historical data on women's representation in teaching are drawn from UIS, which indicate that the share of women primary teachers in Sierra Leone has slowly increased since 2011, reaching 33.8 per cent in 2024. Data available at: <https://uis.unesco.org/> (accessed 31 October 2025).

Women's underrepresentation in the teaching workforce mirrors trends in the teacher training pipeline. According to Mackintosh et al. (2020b), fewer women enrol in teacher training institutions compared with men. The Gender Parity Index (UIS, n.d.) for students pursuing the Teaching Certificate (TC) for primary education is 0.73, indicating that for every 100 men enrolled, only 73 women are enrolled, signalling a gender gap of 27 per cent. Moreover, women appear more likely to drop out early before completion, as gender parity across training programmes³ declines from 0.69 in Year 1 to 0.53 in Year 3. In addition, women's enrolment in distance learning programmes – an important pathway for teacher training, especially in rural areas – remains disproportionately low compared with men's (Gender Parity Index 0.6).

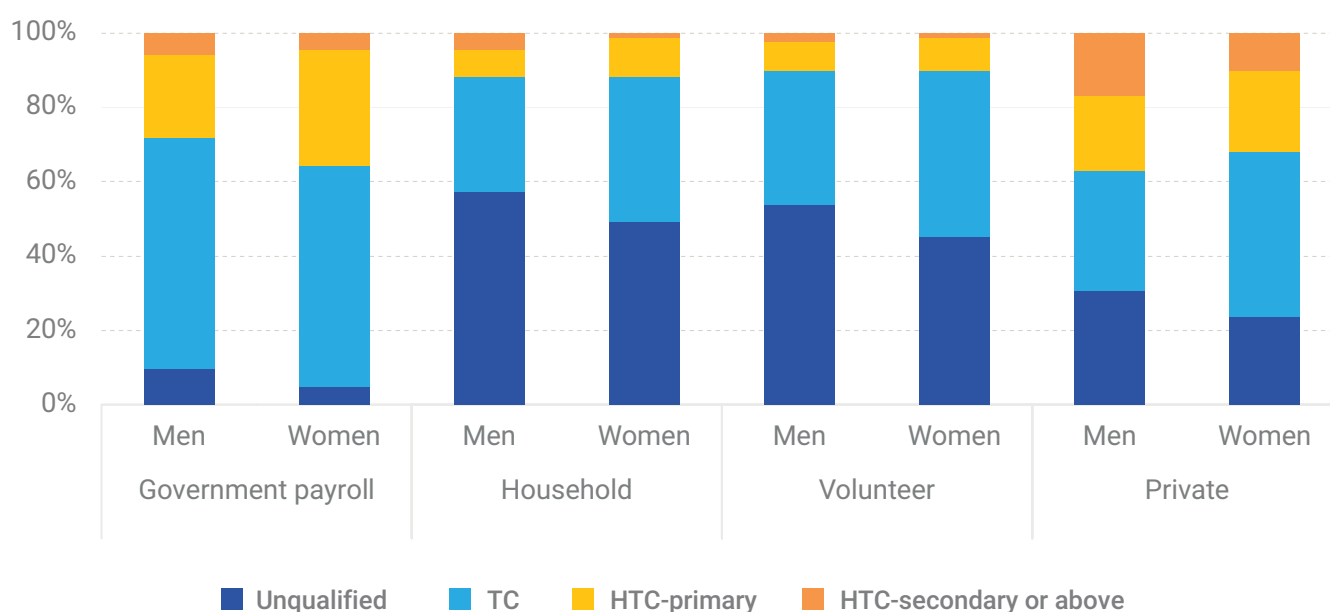
However, the data show that in primary education, women teachers are more qualified than men, regardless of the payroll source (Figure 2).^{4,5} For instance, in the case of government-paid teachers (approximately 40 per cent of the teaching force), women are 6 percentage points more likely to hold a TC or a Higher Teaching Certificate (HTC) compared with men (90 per cent compared with 84 per cent). A similar pattern is observed in the other cases, although the share of qualified teachers is smaller.

3 This includes the TC, the HTC – Primary and the HTC – Secondary programmes.

4 The MBSSE provides teacher payroll support in both government and government-aided schools. Across the education system, teachers on the government payroll who receive a monthly salary make up 40 per cent of the workforce. The remaining 60 per cent of teachers are either paid by households or serve as unpaid 'volunteer teachers' and do not receive a formal salary.

5 TSC regulations state that teachers must be registered and licensed with a TC, HTC – Primary, HTC – Secondary, or a degree in education (e.g., BEd, MEd or degree in another field plus a teaching qualification like a PGDE). The minimum qualification is a TC for primary school, HTC for junior secondary, and a bachelor's degree in education for senior secondary (TSC, 2019; Gutierrez Bernal et al., 2021).

Figure 2: Primary teacher qualifications, by payroll source (2022)



Source: Author's calculations using EMIS data (MBSSE, 2022).

Note: N = 5,764 government-approved primary schools.

A combination of systemic factors, spanning multiple dimensions, exacerbates women's underrepresentation in the teaching workforce

"Female teachers have the challenge of family... How do you balance having to serve as a teacher and having to live up as a responsible mother? Also, I think there is this challenge of the salary. Women have greater and more pressing needs and things to take care of."

Sierra Leone Teachers Union representative

Deeply rooted social norms: Expectations of women dictate the prioritization of family and caregiving responsibilities, limiting their ability to prepare themselves and fully participate in professional life. This tension between professional and caregiving roles is further intensified by low salaries, which make it difficult for many women to balance personal and professional commitments sustainably. Additionally, women in Sierra Leone tend to invest more resources in their children's education than men (Sierra Leone, 2022a), creating additional financial pressure that restricts their capacity to save for and pursue the qualifications needed to enter and progress in their careers. This is especially concerning in the teaching profession, which requires high qualifications both to enter and to progress.

Factors further limiting women's participation in upper primary education settings⁶:



School environment: Concerns about conflict, harassment and violence – both among students and directed at teachers – discourage many women from pursuing teaching positions, especially at upper primary and beyond, where the environment is perceived as less safe and harder to manage. This perception is supported by evidence from Sierra Leone, which shows that gender-based violence in educational settings frequently creates unsafe school environments (Sierra Leone, 2022a; United Nations Girls' Education Initiative and Dalberg, 2023). Women teachers are particularly vulnerable to various forms of violence and abuse in schools. According to UNESCO and UN-Women (2016), this violence stems from unequal power dynamics and entrenched gender norms and includes verbal harassment, bullying and sexual violence, with far-reaching impacts on women pursuing teaching, and harmful consequences for the students and the school.



Cost of additional training required to teach at the upper levels: Teachers interviewed for this study reported that obtaining a primary-level TC is already a significant financial investment. The even higher costs of pursuing advanced qualifications, such as an HTC or a degree required for secondary-level teaching, often discourage women from seeking further advancement. As reported by Mackintosh et al. (2020b), gender parity in Teacher Training College (TTC) enrolment declines significantly as women progress through higher qualification levels like HTC and BEd courses, which are prerequisites for higher-paying teaching roles.⁷ Consequently, many women opt to remain at the primary level, where academic requirements and financial investments are comparatively lower.



Perceived gendered roles and capabilities: Head teachers often take class placement decisions based on their own beliefs about gender roles and personal traits rather than teachers' objective performance indicators such as qualifications and experience and their preferences.⁸ Interviews with primary-level teachers and head teachers revealed a prevailing belief that women are naturally better suited for teaching early grades due to their nurturing abilities.

⁶ T4A respondents note that the patterns described in this section extend from upper primary into secondary education as well.

⁷ Mackintosh et al. (2020b) highlight cost as a key factor but also indicate that women candidates in TTCs also face other barriers, including underrepresentation in STEM subjects, limited access to support services such as scholarships and mentoring, and lower participation in distance learning.

⁸ Although this section focuses on classroom placement in schools, it is important to note that school-level teacher placement in Sierra Leone has also been changing. Historically, head teachers played a significant role in identifying vacancies and shaping where teachers were posted. The introduction of the national matching algorithm has begun to reconfigure how these decisions are made, drawing on centralized data, while local actors, including head teachers, continue to inform the process (Godwin et al., 2025).

This view is widely held among school staff who participated in the study, including women teachers themselves. One woman teacher from Kono District captured a sentiment shared by many respondents: “... women are people that have patient [patience] with kids in the lower classes. We will treat them as our children, that's why we love to be in the lower.” Conversely, men are often considered more suitable for upper-grade and secondary teaching, roles perceived to require greater confidence, stricter discipline and authority. Men are also viewed as less patient with young children, which is seen as disqualifying them from early-grade roles. In this context, women aspiring to advance in an education-sector career not only encounter additional barriers linked to negative perceptions of their competences but also face a lack of women role models (Sierra Leone, 2022a).

“I like to assign female teachers to classes 1, 2 and 3 because female teachers are more patient with children than male teachers. Even at home children spend more time with their mothers than their fathers... That is why we assigned female teachers to foundational classes than the male teachers.”

Male head teacher, Kono District

Women teachers are unevenly represented in rural areas, remote settings and outer districts

Districts further from the capital experience significant and persistent shortages of women teachers. This pattern holds across payroll and non-payroll teachers (see [‘Research report: Mapping shortages, distribution challenges, and teacher workforce factors shaping foundational learning’](#)). In the Western Area Urban District, which includes the capital, Freetown, gender parity has been achieved, with women representing half of the teaching workforce (*Figure 3*). By contrast, in the outer districts of Falaba, Karene or Pujehun only one in six teachers is a woman (represented by lighter colours in *Figure 4A*⁹).

These shortages are also highly localized in districts with certain chiefdoms facing extreme shortages (*Figure 4B*). Nationally, in 10 per cent of chiefdoms, fewer than one in ten teachers is a woman, underscoring their reluctance to work in rural areas, reinforcing the need for policies that address geographic challenges and encourage women teacher placement in distant districts.

9 Sierra Leone’s administrative boundaries include:

Level 0 (Country): Republic of Sierra Leone;

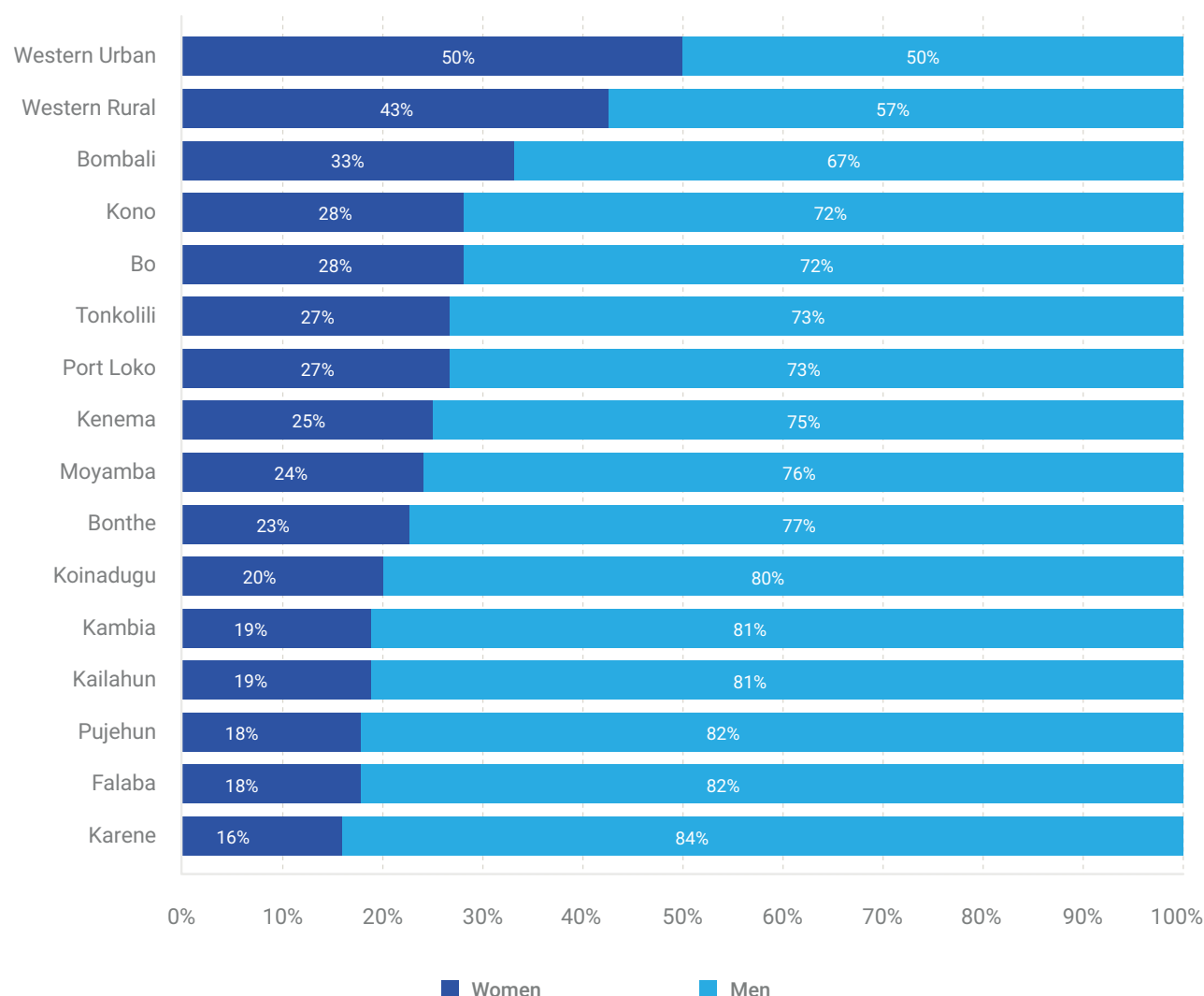
Level 1 (Regions): Five regions (Northern, North-West, Eastern, Southern, Western Area);

Level 2 (Districts): 16 districts;

Level 3 (Chiefdoms): 167 chiefdoms; and

Level 4 (Counties): 1,316 counties.

Figure 3: Share of women teachers in primary schools, by district (2022)



Source: Author's calculations using EMIS data (MBSSE, 2022).

Note: N = 5,764 government-approved primary schools.

Overall, students in rural and remote primary schools are less likely to have a woman teacher and even less likely to have a qualified woman teacher, compared with their urban counterparts. *Figure 5* shows that women's representation declines steadily as schools are located farther from urban centres. On average, remote schools have about half the share of women teachers found in urban settings. Compared with urban schools, those located outside urban centres show a 7-percentage-point drop in the share of women teachers and an 11-point drop in the share of qualified women teachers. These proportions decline steadily with increasing distance from urban areas, reaching as low as 22 per cent and 14 per cent respectively – 18 and 23 percentage points below urban levels (*Figure 5*).

Figure 4A: Percentage of women teachers, by district (2022)

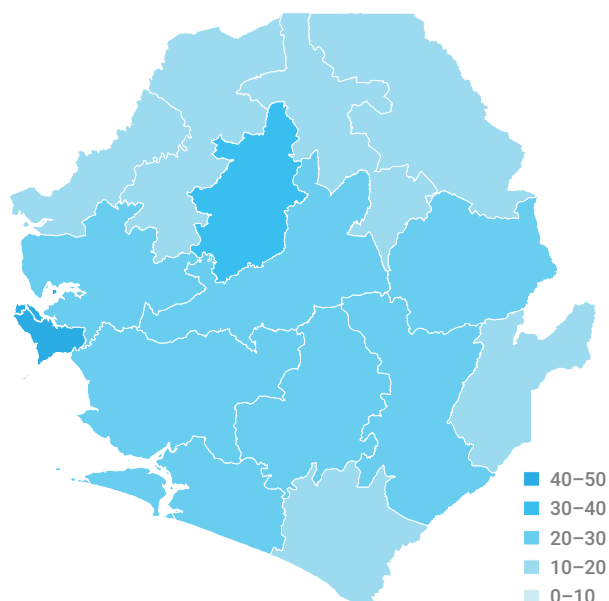
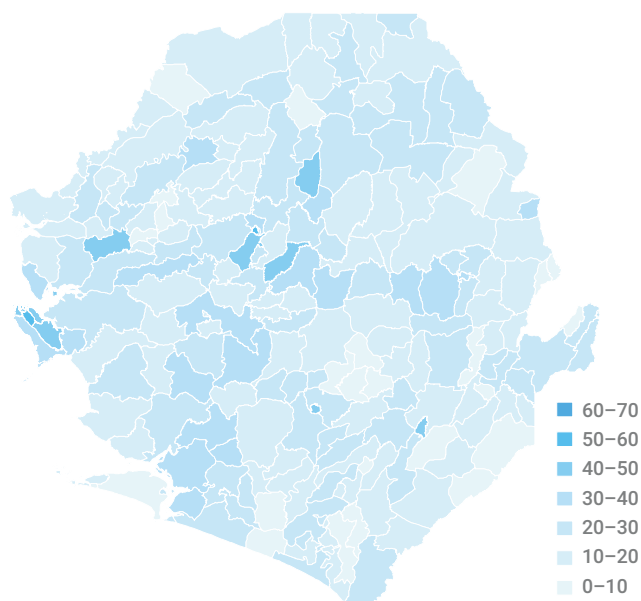


Figure 4B: Percentage of women teachers, by chiefdom (2022)



Source: Authors' calculations using EMIS data (MBSSE, 2022)..

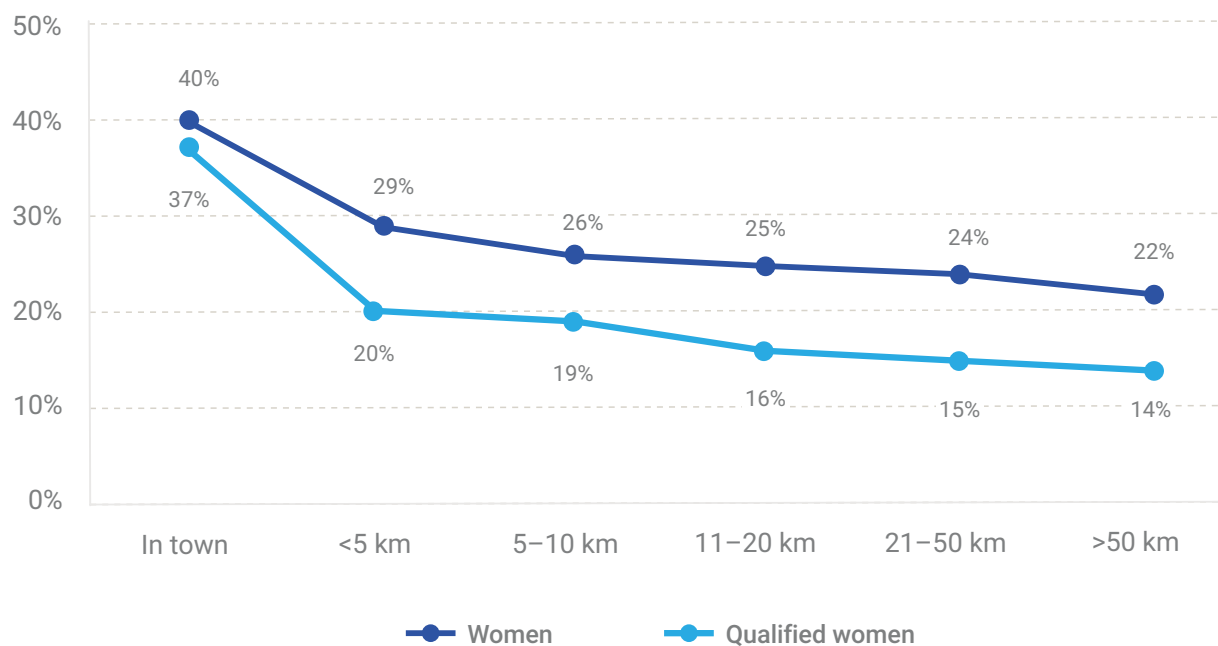
Note: Darker colours indicate a higher percentage of women teachers in the respective district or chiefdom. Includes 5,764 government-approved primary schools.

Regression analysis,¹⁰ holding observable school characteristics constant, confirms this pattern: on average, rural and remote schools employ 0.9 fewer women teachers than urban schools.¹¹ A similar trend appears when looking at qualified women teachers: 37 per cent of women teachers in towns are qualified, compared with 14 per cent in schools located beyond 50 km.

¹⁰ Details are presented in Annex 2.

¹¹ Urban schools are those within 5 km from the district HQ. Rural schools are those between 5 and 50 km from the district HQ, whereas remote schools are those greater than 50 km from the district HQ. In the regressions, the reference category was urban schools (<5 km from the district HQ).

Figure 5: Share of women teachers, by distance from district HQ (2022)



Source: Authors' calculations using EMIS data (MBSSE, 2022).

Note: N = 5,764 government-approved primary schools.

Women's recruitment and retention in rural and hard-to-reach schools are shaped by a complex interplay of push and pull factors at personal, school and community levels

Personal motivations and constraints



Family and marital responsibilities play a pivotal role in shaping where women teachers are able or willing to work.

Women consistently described how aligning their workday with household and childcare responsibilities influences both their entry into teaching and their decisions about school location. Women often prioritize their families' needs, with decisions frequently driven by their husbands' locations in urban areas, where more and better income-generating opportunities and access to higher-quality schools exist for their children. In several cases, women respondents highlighted how familial obligations can limit their mobility to rural areas and/or career progression, aligning with challenges noted in other sub-Saharan studies (such as Stromquist et al., 2017). This creates a tension between personal and professional choices, reducing many women's flexibility to accept postings in rural or hard-to-reach locations. In short, while rural areas may have more available teaching positions, they generally lack the infrastructure and opportunities that urban centres offer, both for teachers and their families.



In some cases, rural postings attract teachers (especially women) because of personal and community ties.

Women who take up teaching roles in rural areas are often motivated by strong personal connections, such as growing up in that community, having family support or a commitment to improving educational opportunities for younger generations. As one MBSSE official in Bo District put it, “The few (women) you see around in those remote communities are either from there, or most of them are already married there, making it relatively easier for them to stay.” Localized recruitment may increase the likelihood that teachers – especially women – accept and remain in rural posts. Head teachers reported that teachers recruited from outside often leave because of transport costs and weak community ties, whereas women with roots or family connections in the area are far more willing and able to remain. While other recent research also shows that proximity to a teacher’s home influences job satisfaction and willingness to stay (EdTech Hub, 2023), the findings here extend this evidence by illustrating how support networks interact to shape women’s placement decisions. Women even described returning to schools in their communities of origin later in their careers, seeking to reintegrate as they approached retirement.



Career security also may come into play as some respondents acknowledged that obtaining a government payroll position can be easier in rural schools.

Yet many teachers, once secured on the payroll, seek transfers to urban areas for greater career and personal opportunities. Research shows that women teachers in primary education tend to transfer more frequently than men, particularly those with qualifications beyond TCs (Espinoza-Revollo et al., 2023). As described by MBSSE in Kono: “The sooner you or she has the pin code [get on government payroll], maybe a year or two, [they] will ask for transfer to here and some may even abandon their [rural] locations without officially doing so.” This dynamic is made more complex by the fact that teachers trained in urban centres are less inclined to return to rural schools, preferring cities where career opportunities, childcare and health services are more accessible.

School environment factors

School characteristics also contribute to shaping the placement and retention of women teachers. Both the qualitative data and regression analysis of EMIS data highlight specific school-level characteristics that are associated with staffing numbers and average

teacher tenure including school approval status, infrastructure quality and the presence of safety and support mechanisms for teachers. These factors offer valuable insights into women teachers' preferences and help explain variations in teacher distribution among otherwise similar schools.¹²



MBSSE-approved schools and payroll inclusion are associated with slightly higher numbers of women teachers, but these factors do not guarantee long-term retention. Schools approved by the MBSSE are more likely to have women teachers, especially in rural and remote areas.¹³ Similarly, schools with a higher share of teachers on the government payroll tend to have more women on staff. While monetary factors – such as payroll inclusion – play a key role in attracting women to rural postings, they may be insufficient for retaining them in the long term (EdTech Hub, 2023). Many women teachers noted that although it may be easier to secure a government payroll position in rural schools, they frequently seek transfers to urban areas, where infrastructure, amenities and professional growth opportunities are more abundant.



In rural and remote areas, schools with better infrastructure may attract more women teachers. While true that schools with better infrastructure tend to have more teachers overall, regardless of gender, when other factors are controlled for, better equipped schools are more likely to attract women. For instance, rural and remote schools equipped with a solar unit – indicating better electricity access – or access to a mobile network tended to have more women than men teachers.¹⁴ Similarly, access to water and sanitation facilities is associated with more women teachers in rural schools with the effect of sanitation facilities being sizeable enough to amount to nearly one additional woman teacher in small rural schools.¹⁵ Interviews with women teachers further highlight the importance of basic amenities and the difficulties of teaching in rural schools with poor infrastructure.

12 Regression analysis draws on 2022 data from ASC. While not causal, this analysis highlights school characteristics that may influence preferences of women teachers across similar schools. Multivariate regression models were run at the school level, with the number of women teachers as the dependent variable, and controls for teacher and school characteristics. Separate models were run for all schools, rural and remote schools, and remote schools only to untangle when trends were driven by rural or remote schools. District-level fixed effects were included to account for location-specific differences. Only coefficients significant at $p < 0.1$ or lower are discussed here. See detailed results in Annex 2.

13 Approved schools have an additional 0.16 women teachers in rural and remote areas and 0.15 in remote areas only, all else being equal.

14 Rural and remote schools with solar power and mobile network access have an additional 0.3 and 0.2 women teachers, respectively, all else being equal.

15 In rural and remote schools, a one-unit increase in the female toilet-teacher ratio is associated with approximately 0.8 additional women teachers, all else being equal.

"We are having this solar [energy], some female teachers will come because of that. Yeah! We have light. Charge our phone. Freezer, drink cold water. Yes! And it's free."

Woman head teacher, Bo District



Redressal mechanisms for sexual and gender-based violence. In rural settings, schools with established mechanisms for redressing sexual and gender-based violence were associated with a slightly higher number of women teachers. While not very large and not necessarily causal, such mechanisms may contribute to the perception of a safer and more supportive school environment, which can encourage more women to accept postings in rural areas. Qualitative data corroborated this interpretation. A representative from the Sierra Leone Teachers Union noted that the implementation of the Teacher's Code of Conduct (TSC and MBSSE, 2019) has significantly improved the school environment: "...it [the Code of Conduct] has improved learning by far. Ministry officials will tell you a lot of things that used to happen are not happening anymore [such as] sexual violence and even the critical element of the corporal punishment."



Head teachers often play a pivotal role in supporting women teachers, but the help they can provide varies widely across schools.

As the primary point of contact, head teachers reportedly frequently facilitate access to financial or logistical assistance, especially for women teachers. Sometimes this is through modest personal contributions, but more often by coordinating with community members to help women teachers secure training opportunities or manage professional challenges. These efforts illustrate that school leaders can play an enabling role, but relying on informal and resource-constrained arrangements places an undue burden on individual schools and produces uneven support across the system. This variation reflects differences in school and community capacity, underscoring the need for more structured and predictable mechanisms so that all women teachers receive equitable and sustainable assistance, regardless of their school's local circumstances.

"Being that I only have a [one] female teacher in my school, whenever she faces these challenges, I add some amount to her stipend to encourage her. I encourage her to do distance education, and I am paying her fees...The additional stipend that I paid the female teacher is for her to take care of herself with medication and personal hygiene... I believe that is what has kept her in this school."

Woman teacher, Bo District

Rural community infrastructure



Infrastructure challenges make rural and remote schools particularly unattractive for women teachers.

While all teachers face difficulties in these settings, the lack of basic amenities can be even more challenging for women, who often juggle additional family and household responsibilities. This issue is reflected in studies on rural-urban dynamics across sub-Saharan Africa (Asim et al., 2019) and in T4A partner countries,¹⁶ which highlight the limited resources and support structures in rural areas as significant deterrents, particularly for women teachers. Specifically, teachers highlighted the following restrictions:



Limited housing and transport: Inadequate housing in rural areas presents significant challenges for women teachers, often forcing them to either undertake long commutes from (peri-) urban homes or live away from their families. This separation can create strain, requiring frequent travel between locations. As one MBSSE representative in Bo District explained, *"In those [rural] communities housing is also a very major factor... you will have to take care of yourself in this community and then you have the rest of the family here in the city. Because you want the best for your children, you definitely have to leave them here in the city and then you go over there [to the rural area] to go and do your job... it's really a very difficult task for them [women], honestly speaking."*

Poor road infrastructure and high transport costs exacerbate these challenges. As a result, balancing work responsibilities with family care becomes overwhelming, discouraging women from staying in or taking up rural teaching positions. Respondents in this study, as well as others (e.g., Mackintosh et al., 2020a), suggest that providing safe, affordable housing and transport support could improve teacher retention in rural areas.

16 Results emerging from the T4A research carried out in [Madagascar](#), [Senegal](#), and [Zambia](#).



Lack of health care: With over half of the health-care workforce concentrated in Freetown (Caviglia et al., 2021), rural communities across the country have limited access to medical facilities, essential medicines and trained health-care professionals. This lack of health-care services increases the burden on women, who may struggle to secure timely medical care for themselves and their children, discouraging them from taking up or staying in rural teaching positions.

“When you go to the [rural] clinic... they say we don't have medicine. Even if you take money, they say there is no medicine. Urban area, they have a lot of pharmacies, but the rural area, there's nothing like that.”

– Woman teacher, Bo District



Fewer income-generating opportunities: Although women teachers already shoulder extensive unpaid responsibilities at home, including household work and childcare, they often find that they still need to supplement their earnings to meet basic household needs. Urban areas offer greater income potential compared with rural areas, as teachers can take on additional jobs or provide tutoring on the side (with the additional benefit that their husbands are also more likely to generate income easier as well). This incentive is particularly strong for teachers who are not on the government payroll, who often rely on these supplementary earnings to support their households (EdTech Hub, 2023). In contrast, rural teachers face limited opportunities for additional income, adding to the challenges of retaining qualified educators in remote areas. Consistent findings from our fieldwork and other research by EdTech Hub (2023) found that rural postings do not appear to be offset by lower living costs: teachers instead reported that salaries do not meet basic needs, transport is costly and informal income opportunities are limited.

“In urban settings, there are lots of opportunities for female teachers like extra classes and private home lessons. So, there are more opportunities in the cities than in the rural areas.”

Male teacher, Kono District



Social isolation: Limited social life and isolation in rural areas make teaching posts less appealing, especially for teachers from outside the community. For women, the lack of support networks and social engagement adds to the existing challenges of working in rural areas, making it harder to feel settled or motivated to remain in these positions.

Community support for teachers varies considerably across locations, with some offering assistance in response to challenges while others offer little or no help.

Such support, while valuable for all teachers, can be particularly important for women, who may face additional financial or social constraints. However, these practices remain largely ad hoc and uneven, underscoring the need for more structured community engagement and awareness programmes to promote consistent and equitable support for teachers across districts.

Targeted interventions should supplement existing policies to realize sustainable progress

Although the government has a broad policy commitment to gender equality, there are currently no specific hiring targets aimed at increasing women's representation in the teaching workforce. Broader civil servant hiring guidelines are set by the GEWE Act and mandate a 30 per cent quota for women candidates (Sierra Leone, 2022b).¹⁷ Although the Sierra Leone Education Sector Plan (2022–2026) acknowledges the gender imbalance in teaching and proposes general strategies to recruit more women to improve educational quality (Sierra Leone, 2022a), concrete recruitment or retention targets for women teachers have not been enforced.

Encouragingly, efforts to formalize more gender-sensitive approaches to teacher hiring and deployment are under way. The 2024 TSC deployment protocol¹⁸ includes provisions aimed at improving gender parity (Frazer, 2024). When the deployment matching algorithm identifies multiple eligible teachers for the same position, women candidates should be prioritized in cases where qualifications and service length are comparable (ibid). In short, the protocol does not establish fixed quotas for women; gender operates only as a selection tiebreaker.

17 The GEWE Act came into effect in June 2023. Beyond the minimum of 30 per cent quota for women in different sectors, it also seeks to establish gender units in all ministries, departments and agencies while promoting gender-responsive budgeting. Additionally, the GEWE Act brings forward significant reforms for women, including 14 weeks of maternity leave, equal pay for women and improved access to financial support and training opportunities.

18 Starting in 2024, TSC started using a data-driven, preference-matching algorithm – combining GIS-based data on school location and need (e.g., P-QTRs) with teacher preferences (location, subject, willingness to stay) and school demands (subject-specialist shortages, demographic needs) – to guide the recruitment and placement of new payroll teachers to schools most in need. See Frazer et al. (2025) for a full description of the 2024–2025 deployment reform and the algorithm-based matching process.

"The last recruitment we were specifically told... if there are three spaces in the primary school, two should be given to females. That was an instruction... and it was an instruction that we obeyed very well... These are discussions we have had so that a policy could be developed."

TSC representative, Bo District

Without specific targets, gender-sensitive rules may be at risk of being applied inconsistently. Prior to the implementation of the 2024 protocol, interviews with TSC representatives indicate that gender balance was promoted in previous recruitments. However, adherence varies as some district officials reportedly followed the guidance while others did not, highlighting a gap in institutionalization.

Sierra Leone needs to increase the eligible pool of qualified women teaching candidates to support the feasibility of enforcing future gender quotas. As gender-sensitive deployment ultimately depends on the supply of women teachers, structural barriers must be addressed early in the pipeline. Teachers noted that many students do not view teaching as an attractive career, often favouring professions seen as higher status or better paid. As one woman teacher from Bo District explained, *"Just go to Class One. Ask them, 'Who wants to become a teacher?' Nobody will raise his or her hand. 'What about a doctor? Nurse?' 'Auntie yes, auntie yes.'"* Targeted interventions such as scholarships, rural-placement incentives and mentoring programmes for women can help rebuild this pipeline by addressing barriers while signalling that women teachers are valued and needed across the country. By combining material support with efforts to elevate the profession's visibility and prestige, such initiatives can attract and retain more women in teaching, strengthening gender balance and supporting long-term workforce motivation.

Policy recommendations

This section synthesizes the key findings from the preceding analysis and connects them to some recommendations for consideration by the MBSSE and TSC to address the persistent gender imbalance in the teaching workforce in Sierra Leone, especially in rural and hard-to-reach areas. Although some of the recommendations will require financial investments, some lower-cost measures are also identified. Given MBSSE and TSC's current budgetary constraints, progress on these initiatives would benefit from advocacy for targeted funding to advance women in the teaching profession.



Key finding 1. There is a persistent gender imbalance in the teaching workforce across education levels. Despite ongoing efforts, the teaching workforce continues to exhibit significant gender disparities, particularly in upper primary and secondary education where women's representation sharply declines.

Recommendation 1. Establish and enforce concrete recruitment targets for women, paired with measures that make full use of the existing pool of qualified and locally rooted women candidates. The 2024 deployment protocol is an important step towards promoting gender-sensitive deployment by prioritizing women teachers during the matching process. However, the absence of concrete recruitment targets leaves the guidance open to subjective interpretation, potentially contributing to uneven implementation. Setting realistic, phased targets can guide district-level recruitment decisions, even where the current pool of qualified women is limited, so long as these targets are linked to strategies that strengthen and mobilize the pool already available.

- a) **Regularize the status of eligible women teachers:**¹⁹ Prioritize the inclusion of qualified women teachers – especially those serving in rural schools – on the government payroll. One opportunity to advance this goal is by targeting the qualified pool of current volunteer teachers for regularization. According to the 2022 EMIS data (MBSSE, 2022), of the 15,702 volunteer teachers nationwide, 55 per cent of women volunteers (2,514 out of 4,592) meet the minimum qualifications for formal teaching roles, compared with 46 per cent of men. These qualified women volunteers represent a valuable yet underutilized resource that can be supported through targeted training and inclusion on the payroll.²⁰
- Regularizing this pool of local women volunteers, many of whom already serve their

19 Regularizing the status means placing eligible volunteer/community teachers on the government payroll and integrating them into the civil service system. This ensures they receive formal recognition, regular pay and the rights and benefits associated with permanent teaching positions.

20 These teachers are trained and qualified: they hold a TC or above. It should be noted that their status with respect to the registration and licensure criteria established by TSC (2020) has not been verified.

own communities, would enhance job security and allow these women to remain in their communities (an incentive for some), potentially reducing turnover and addressing local teacher shortages. However, research indicates that expanding the payroll remains constrained by budget ceilings (see [‘Thematic research note 2: Managing and formalizing Sierra Leone’s volunteer teachers’](#)), meaning that any regularization effort will require predictable financing and clear prioritization within existing fiscal limits.

- b) Integrate localized recruitment strategies into the centralized system.** Mechanisms such as community nomination, district-level screening and prioritizing locally rooted candidates (particularly women) can help narrow gender gaps in underserved districts, where women with community ties are more likely to accept and remain in posts. To support enforcement, district education offices should track gender-disaggregated recruitment and placement data, enabling TSC supervisors to identify gaps and follow up during routine monitoring.



Key finding 2. Rural and hard-to-reach schools face significant challenges in attracting and retaining women teachers.

Poor infrastructure, limited housing and fewer professional and personal opportunities for both teachers and their families make it difficult for rural and remote schools to recruit and retain women teachers.

Recommendation 2. Enhance rural teaching conditions by providing incentives aligned with the priorities of women.

The MBSSE and TSC, in partnership with local authorities, should consider practical measures to improve the conditions and overall job satisfaction for women teachers in rural and remote areas. Long-term measures of this nature are needed to create sustainable conditions that make the teaching profession attractive for women in settings where children require greater support. Combining practical incentives that address multiple challenges simultaneously (such as safety, housing and transport) requires significant investment, but can produce measurable improvements (Béteille and Evans, 2021; UNESCO, 2024).

- a) Transport stipends:** Provide transportation stipends, organized transport services or, where feasible, supply reliable bicycles or motorbikes with maintenance support, to address challenges women teachers face commuting to rural and hard-to-reach schools. Evidence has shown that such mobility interventions improve attendance, retention and service coverage among community health workers and students in comparable low-income settings (Sebele et al., 2024; Fiala et al., 2025),²¹ which could be applicable for teachers as well. These relatively low-cost options could offer quick gains in recruitment and retention, while longer-term investments such as housing support are developed.

²¹ Studies emphasize that transport interventions are most effective when vehicles match local terrain, maintenance and spare-parts systems are budgeted for, and gender-sensitive safety and community engagement measures are included. Effects on retention are strongest where transport support is paired with broader incentives or clear service commitments (Sebele et al., 2024).

- b) **Housing support:** Offer affordable and safe housing near rural schools. Community-based housing initiatives, such as repurposing unused spaces for teacher accommodation, can help reduce costs. Locating housing close to schools enhances safety and convenience, minimizing the burden on women teachers who are separated from their families.
- c) **Childcare support:** Where feasible, consider providing quality childcare options to teachers in rural (or any hard-to-staff) schools. Evidence shows that access to childcare improves women's workforce participation and retention (Devercelli and Beaton-Day, 2020; J-PAL Policy Insight, 2023) and could be a promising strategy to support rural teacher deployment. Even modest, shared arrangements (e.g., collaborating with local councils or community women's groups to establish a small community childcare centre near a cluster of schools) could make rural postings more feasible for women teachers with young children.



Key finding 3. Systemic barriers limit women's ability both to become qualified as primary-level teachers and to obtain the additional credentials required to teach at higher levels. Financial and geographical challenges in acquiring the necessary qualifications deter many women from advancing beyond teaching at the primary level. While addressing rural working conditions can help attract and retain women already in the system, long-term gender parity also requires expanding the overall pool of qualified women teachers.

Recommendation 3. Increase the eligible pool of qualified women teachers through women-targeted scholarships, fast-track training pathways and voluntary rural-based practicum placements. The MBSSE and TSC should collaborate with the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education, polytechnics and teacher training institutes to increase the supply of qualified women teachers, to address the barriers that disproportionately prevent women from pursuing HTC and BEd qualifications. Potential cost-equity measures:

- a) **Women-targeted scholarships:** Provide scholarships that cover tuition and related costs for women, particularly those residing in underserved areas. Combined with measures that prioritize local recruitment for new positions in hard-to-reach areas, this approach could serve as an effective way to help close gaps in areas where women are underrepresented and where additional incentives are needed to attract and retain a qualified workforce.

Some NGOs are actively developing training initiatives of this kind in the country. For example, CODE supported 100 women teacher trainees in Sierra Leone through scholarships that covered tuition, materials and travel expenses, helping remove key

financial and logistical barriers for women to enter teacher training (CODE, 2020). The lessons emerging from these efforts, particularly regarding their achievements and challenges, can serve as a foundation for a broader-scale strategy.

- b) **Flexible, fast-track training programmes:** Develop programmes that accommodate the specific challenges women face, such as balancing family responsibilities or limited access to training institutes, for teachers in the system interested in upgrading their qualifications. These programmes could offer flexible schedules and supportive measures (e.g., remote modules and on-campus childcare) while maintaining established quality standards, serving as short-term solutions to increase women's participation.
- c) **Engage teacher training institutions:** Pilot supported, voluntary practicum placements in selected rural schools. When trainees spend time (e.g., a full term) in the same school, they can potentially build relationships with local staff and communities, gain confidence in working in remote settings, and be more open to rural postings after graduation. However, evidence from sub-Saharan Africa also highlights that poorly supported placements can undermine trainee well-being (African Population and Health Research Center, 2024). Therefore, a gender-responsive design is essential for women trainees in particular to influence future deployment choices: placements should be voluntary and supported (e.g., transport, safety, supervision and accommodation), rather than mandatory.



Key finding 4. Gendered perceptions influence teacher placement at the primary level.

Commonly held beliefs about women's nurturing roles often result in their concentration in lower primary grades, while men are perceived as better suited for teaching upper primary grades. These gendered perceptions shape placement decisions, contributing to inequalities in teacher distribution across grade levels.

Recommendation 4. Develop guidance on classroom placement for head teachers and other middle-tier support actors. TSC, in collaboration with district education offices, should develop clear guidelines for head teachers to ensure that teacher assignments are based on qualifications and expertise rather than gender. Encouraging open dialogue around teacher preferences linked to professional development goals can provide more opportunities for women to teach upper primary grades, reducing the reliance on gendered assumptions in placement decisions.

To support implementation, **gender-responsive training should be integrated for head teachers and other middle-tier support actors** to address stereotypes and foster equitable classroom placement practices. Costs can be minimized by embedding

this training into existing in-service programmes and leveraging peer-to-peer learning or affordable digital tools. Examples of successful experiences can help inform the development of proposals in this regard. In Uganda, the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports together with UNICEF successfully trained over hundreds of teachers face-to-face, then supplemented with SMS follow-ups. An impact evaluation revealed that this approach resulted in improved gender equity attitudes among participants, and demonstrated cost-effectiveness (Chinen et al., 2017).



Key finding 5. Head teachers and community leaders exercise a critical role in supporting women teachers, especially in rural areas where systemic gaps disproportionately affect women. While such support can significantly improve retention and job satisfaction, it is often inconsistent and unsustainable in the absence of formalized structures and policies.

Recommendation 5. Establish structured, community-based teacher support programmes for women teachers and advocate for their increased leadership.

MBSSE and TSC could consider piloting formalized support structures that build on existing grass-roots efforts by head teachers and community leaders, providing more consistent and sustainable assistance to women teachers. Drawing on Ethiopia's General Education Quality Improvement Program supported by the World Bank (2008), which formally engaged community leaders in supporting teachers, Sierra Leone could provide stipends and resources to local networks to complement the efforts already undertaken at school level. Lessons from the General Education Quality Improvement Program (Asgedom et al., 2019) highlight that achieving intended outcomes will require strong coordination, capacity-building for community members, and continuous monitoring to bridge gaps between policy design and on-the-ground implementation.

To strengthen the impact of these measures, **efforts should also aim to increase the number of women in leadership positions.** Evidence from UNICEF's Women in Learning Leadership initiative shows that when women are supported and enabled to take on leadership roles, schools tend to adopt more inclusive management practices, stronger teacher support systems and more positive learning environments (Bergmann et al., 2022). Recent evidence from the initiative in Ethiopia and Guinea shows that schools led by women perform at least as well as those led by men once differences in school characteristics are taken into account, while highlighting the persistent barriers women face in accessing leadership positions (Lépine and Nguyen, 2026; Lépine and Ramos, 2026). Therefore, integrating structured support for women teachers into broader school-leadership and community frameworks may not only aid retention but also help shift school culture and leadership norms in favour of gender equity and quality education.

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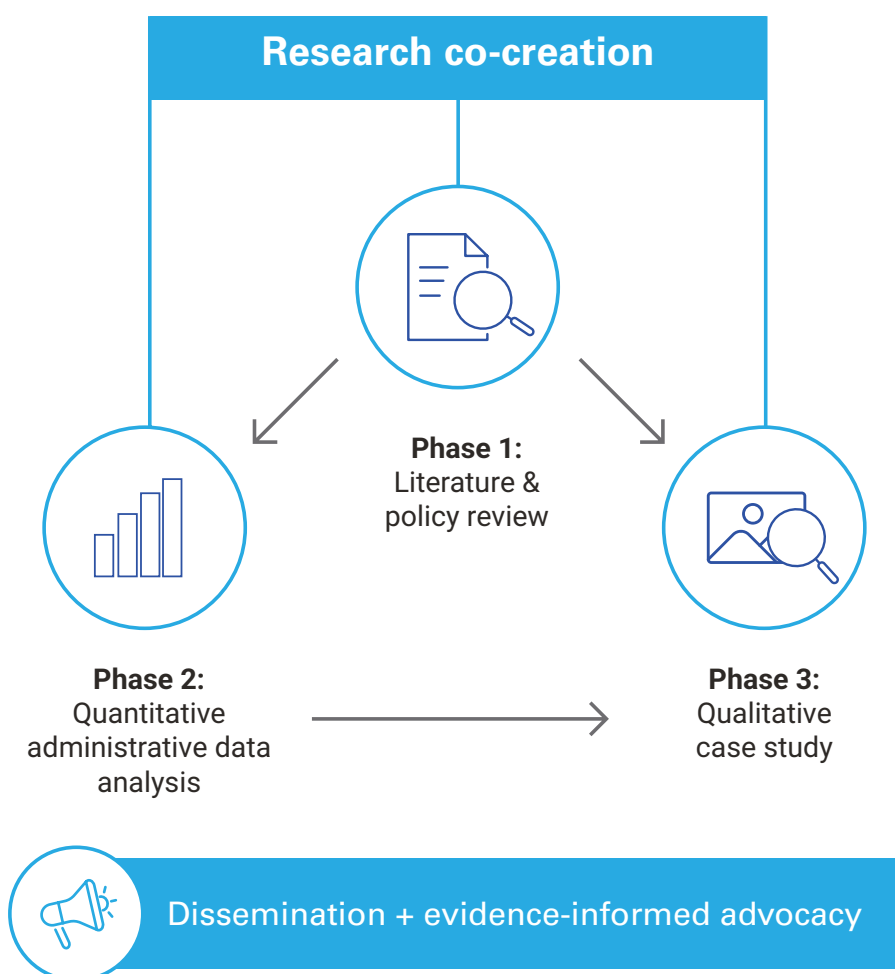
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Annexes

Annex 1 – Methodology: Leveraging qualitative and quantitative data

The Teachers for All (T4A) research relies on a mixed-methods research design underpinned by a co-creation process to ensure the relevance of its scope and direction. A multi-stakeholder workshop was held with MBSSE and TSC officials, civil society organizations, researchers and development partners in November 2023. This consultation collaboratively shaped project objectives and research questions, ensuring the analysis responds directly to MBSSE challenges, policy priorities and the ongoing education reform agenda.

The findings draw on a desk review, quantitative analysis of the Educational Management Information System (EMIS) and examination data to identify patterns in teacher allocation, in addition to key informant interviews and focus group discussions to understand the drivers and dynamics behind teacher deployment challenges. More details on the phases of the research are detailed below.



Phase 1 (Literature and policy review):

The T4A analysis draws on an extensive body of national and international evidence. Key sources include the Sierra Leone Government's policies and frameworks from MBSSE, TSC, the Ministry of Finance and related agencies as well as global guidance and research from organizations, including the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Global Partnership for Education and the World Bank. The review also incorporated recent Sierra Leone-focused studies from EdTech Hub, the Learning Generation Initiative and the Education Workforce Initiative, among others. Together, these sources offer a robust, solid foundation for examining teacher recruitment, deployment and retention across the country, allowing the T4A study to dig deeper and position its findings alongside ongoing efforts in this space.

Phase 2 (Quantitative data analysis):

The quantitative analysis was conducted using 2022 Annual School Census (ASC) data (MBSSE, 2022) in order to produce descriptive statistics and estimate multivariate regressions at the school level. Regressions were conducted using different outcome variables and controlling for contextual variables available in the ASC, including school location, school infrastructure and the teacher profile. However, omitted variables and unobservable characteristics not captured in the models may influence the dependent variable, which should be kept in mind. Annex 2 provides details of the regression analyses presented in this report.

Phase 3 (Qualitative case study):

An explanatory case study was conducted, drawing on a review of policy and planning documents and primary qualitative data collection. Location selection followed data-driven and feasibility criteria, including variation in women teacher representation, the presence of both urban and rural schools, and school road accessibility. From the list of districts that met these criteria, Bo and Kono were selected by members of the T4A project core technical team as suitable sites for fieldwork. In total, 30 pieces of data were collected: 22 semi-structured key informant interviews and 8 focus group discussions. Key informant interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in English and, where needed, in Krio. In total, 52 respondents voluntarily participated at the central, district and school levels across the selected districts.²²

²² The sample size was determined by the saturation point reached during data collection, ensuring that no new information or themes emerged from additional interviews or discussions.

All research protocols and data-collection guides were approved by the Health Media Lab Institutional Review Board and the Office for Human Research Protections, providing ethical assurance for the protection of human subjects in international social and behavioural science research for children, education and vulnerable and high-risk populations, among other topics. The Institutional Review Board application for this research phase was approved on 30 April 2024.

The qualitative component of the study faced some limitations that may affect the scope of the findings. The research was limited to Bo and Kono Districts, which may not capture the full range of experiences of women teachers in other districts of Sierra Leone. In particular, cultural and religious factors in other provinces – such as the North and North-West – may impose additional constraints on women teachers’ willingness or ability to volunteer and perform, suggesting the potential value of further context-specific investigation. Additionally, while efforts were made to accommodate language preferences using Krio, subtle nuances in the translation to English could affect the responses. Finally, as with any qualitative research, reliance on self-reported data may introduce some bias, as participants might have presented their experiences in ways that align with social expectations.

Level	Key actors/respondents	
National	Sierra Leone Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education and Teaching Service Commission	 30 interviews and focus group discussions  52 respondents  2 districts  8 schools
	Sierra Leone Teachers Union	
	Teacher Training Institution	
Subnational	Sierra Leone Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education and Teaching Service Commission – District level	
	City Council Education Departments	
School	Head teachers	
	Teachers	

Annex 2 – Regression results: Factors associated with the number of women teachers in a school

Multivariate regressions, using EMIS data from the academic year 2022 (MBSSE, 2022), were used to analyse the relationships between variations in the number of teachers in primary schools, staff characteristics, available resources and other contextual variables. The regression model estimated was:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \mathbf{School}_i + \beta_2 \mathbf{Teacher}_i + \beta_3 \mathbf{Other}_i + \beta_4 \mathbf{District}_l + \epsilon$$

where:

Y_i represents the number of teachers in school i

$\mathbf{School}_i$ is a set of variables representing school-level characteristics for school i (e.g., infrastructure, enrolment, etc.)

$\mathbf{Teacher}_i$ is a set of variables representing average teacher characteristics in school i

$\mathbf{Other}_i$ is a set of variables representing other contextual information for school i

$\mathbf{District}_l$ are unobserved time-invariant heterogeneities across each district l in which school i is located (district fixed effect)

ϵ is the non-stochastic error term

Multivariate regression analysis was conducted at the school level with robust standard errors and district-level fixed effects, weighted by school size. Regression models were run for separate subsamples: all teachers, women and men teachers separately, teachers in rural and remote areas, teachers in rural schools only, and teachers in remote schools only. The regression models control for contextual variables available in the ASC, such as school location, school infrastructure and teacher profiles. However, they do not control for students' socio-economic backgrounds or home conditions, which is a limitation that must be considered while reviewing the results.

Table 1: Factors associated with the number of teachers in primary schools in Sierra Leone

	All teachers	All women	Women (rural & remote schools)	Women (remote schools only)	Average teacher tenure in a school (years)
School size					
Total pupils	0.010***	0.004***	0.003***	0.003***	0
School type (reference category: Government)					
Community	-0.033	0.077	0.216*	0.217	-0.948***
Mission/religious group	0.134	0.024	0.067	0.013	-0.105
Private	0.976***	0.171	0.351*	-0.221	-0.583*
School location (reference category: Urban)					
Rural	-1.229***	-0.863***			0.363**
Remote	-1.545***	-1.125***			0.555***
Approval status (reference category: Not approved)					
Approved	0.303***	0.228***	0.161**	0.146*	0.294*
Electricity (reference category: No electricity)					
Generator	0.589	0.267	-0.061	0.996	-0.263
Grid	0.240	0.224	-0.044	0.234	-0.373
Solar	0.187	0.180	0.304*	0.266	-0.325
Water access (reference category: No water)					
Borehole	0.571***	0.257***	0.165**	0.187*	0.209
Piped	0.195	0.166	0.008	0.172	0.247
River/tank/other	0.071	-0.036	0.041	0.186	-0.538
Well	0.416***	0.220**	0.141*	0.224**	-0.070
School infrastructure					
Handwashing facilities	0.146	0.017	0.018	0.014	0.074
Male toilet-teacher ratio	0.104***	-0.286***	-0.236***	-0.196***	-0.017
Female toilet-teacher ratio	0.359***	0.667***	0.804***	0.808***	0.087***
School fence present	0.339*	0.145	0.203	0.023	0.072
School feeding present	-0.160	-0.293***	-0.063	-0.075	0.171

Table 1 (Continued): Factors associated with the number of teachers in primary schools in Sierra Leone

	All teachers	All women	Women (rural & remote schools)	Women (remote schools only)	Average teacher tenure in a school (years)
Teacher housing present	0.079	0.064	0.058	0.194	0.273
Mobile network present	0.393***	0.170**	0.185***	0.136*	0.232
Gender-based violence redressal	0.115	0.087	0.120*	0.052	-0.262*
Teacher characteristics					
Share of teachers on government payroll	0.009***	0.007***	0.002*	0.001	0.074***
Share of unqualified teachers	-0.002	-0.005***	-0.003***	-0.002	-0.015***
Total teachers					-0.041
District fixed effects	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Constant	2.831***	1.118***	-0.122	0.039	7.889***
R-squared	0.661	0.723	0.685	0.682	0.446
Schools	7438	7438	5054	1789	7438

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UNICEF, the United Nations agency for children, works to protect the rights of every child, everywhere, especially the most disadvantaged children and in the toughest places to reach. Across more than 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive, and fulfil their potential.

UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti accelerates progress for children by working to ensure that policies and programming are informed by high-quality evidence. As the global custodian of child-related official statistics, it works closely with governments and partners to strengthen national statistical systems. Through world-leading data, research and foresight, it underpins UNICEF's global leadership on children's rights and serves as the organization's hub for setting strategy and monitoring programmes. With the active engagement of young people and other partners, it supports advocacy and dialogue aimed at improving the lives of children everywhere.

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