ENHANCING GENDER INCLUSIVITY IN INDONESIA'S SCHOOL LEADERSHIP PATHWAYS

GPE KIX EMAP Learning Cycle 6

Indonesia Team:
Anggi M. Nasution
Hanna Raisya
Fathiyya Nur Rahmani
Fransisca Nuraini
Indra Susanto
Hermanto Waruwu

Authors

Anggi M. Nasution: An Innovation, Impact and Knowledge Consultant at Save the Children Indonesia, Anggi has a solid foundation in International Development and Social Innovation. He holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Geneva and a master's degree from University College London (UCL). While currently focused on the education sector, he applies his expertise in policy analysis, data-driven program development, and innovation processes to advocate for inclusive education for all.

Hanna Raisya: Hanna is a researcher and policy analyst at Centre for Education and Policy Studies or Pusat Studi Pendidikan dan Kebijakan (PSPK) an independent policy research institute specializing in education. Known as Hanna, she joined the organisation after graduating from Teachers College, Columbia University. With expertise in curriculum design and policy evaluation, Hanna conducts research to develop evidence-based policy evaluation and recommendations while providing consultation to policy-makers based on her expertise in education, curriculum and teaching.

Fathiyya Nur Rahmani: Fathiyya is a researcher and policy analyst at Centre for Education and Policy Studies or Pusat Studi Pendidikan dan Kebijakan (PSPK) an independent policy research institute specializing in education. With a background in psychology and a master's in Educational Measurement from the University of Pennsylvania, she brings her expertise in data analysis, psychometrics, and policy evaluation. Her work ranges from developing assessments to crafting evidence-based recommendations and analyzing large-scale education data, using insights to support equitable policies and improve learning outcomes.

Fransisca Nuraini Krisna: Senior Policy Analyst at the Center for Educational Standards and Policy, Agency for Educational Standards, Curriculum, and Assessment, Indonesian Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE). Known as Sisca, she has led the Policy Analysis and Advocacy Team since 2021, focusing on priority policy evaluations and the development of the Education Report Card (Rapor Pendidikan), which provides data-driven insights for schools, local governments, and the public.

Indra Susanto: Indra Susanto is an experienced English Language Teaching (ELT) professional who holds a Master of TESOL from Monash University, Australia. He is currently a University Lecturer at St. Paul Catholic University of Indonesia, where he teaches language skills and components, conducts ELT research, and manages the language laboratory. Indra is a recipient of the Most Active Graduate Award during his undergraduate, and later on was awarded with the prestigious LPDP Scholarship to pursue his Master's.

Hermanto Waruwu: A junior statistician at the Center for Education Standards and Policy, Agency for Educational Standards, Curriculum, and Assessment, Indonesian Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE). Since earning his master's degree in Sociology and Social Policy from the University of Gadjah Mada and the University of Melbourne in 2022, he has contributed to several evaluation studies, including evaluations of national education standards, new student admission policies, and operational assistance for school performance.

Executive Summary

This policy brief explores the persistent underrepresentation of women in school leadership roles in Indonesia, identifying key barriers and proposing targeted recommendations to promote gender equity across educational institutions. Despite progress in female participation in education, cultural norms, systemic biases, and structural challenges continue to limit women's access to leadership positions such as school leaders. The authors identified several barriers, including cultural and social expectations, gender biases in the selection process, geographic assignment, and regulatory framework limitations.

Barriers and Constraints

One of the most significant obstacles to women pursuing leadership roles in Indonesia's education system is the deeply ingrained cultural expectation that women are the primary caregivers within the family. This traditional gender role places a heavy burden on women, limiting their ability to take on demanding positions such as school leaders due to domestic responsibilities. These societal norms not only shape family and community expectations but also influence institutional practices, making it more difficult for women to be considered viable candidates for leadership.

In addition to these cultural constraints, female teachers often face direct discrimination during the selection process. Assumptions about potential maternity leave frequently lead to women being excluded from leadership opportunities, as decision-makers favour male candidates perceived as more stable and continuously available.

Moreover, female leaders are often stereotyped as "too emotional," reinforcing biases that question their suitability for decision-making roles compared to their male counterparts. Another challenge lies in the resistance from senior male teachers who may oppose the promotion of younger, qualified female colleagues, viewing their advancement as a threat to traditional hierarchies. This generational and gender-based tension can create an unwelcoming environment for aspiring female leaders and hinder progress toward equitable representation.

Compounding these issues is the challenge of geographic assignment, where leadership roles often require relocation to remote or rural areas. These postings can severely complicate work-life balance, especially for women expected to manage household duties. The combination of cultural expectations, biased selection processes, seniority-based resistance, and logistical difficulties stemming from remote assignments creates a complex and interrelated set of barriers that continue to limit women's access to leadership in Indonesian schools.

Furthermore, current policies governing leadership selection often lack explicit safeguards against gender bias. For example, existing regulations do not prohibit excluding women from leadership positions due to anticipated maternity leave or reproductive roles. Additionally, while some national programs promote teacher development, female participants are less likely to be assigned as school leaders, suggesting institutional biases embedded in implementation frameworks.

Enablers and Policy Levers

On the other hand, several key enablers have been identified that support women in overcoming barriers to school leadership in Indonesia. First, peer mentorship, where aspiring female leaders gain confidence and visibility through learning from and being supported by other women in leadership roles. This kind of guidance not only provides practical insights into navigating leadership challenges but also serves as a powerful inspiration, showing younger female teachers that leadership is an attainable goal.

Closely linked to the former is the role of family support, which plays a crucial part in helping women manage the demands of both professional and personal life. Encouragement from spouses and extended family members enables female educators to pursue leadership opportunities without feeling constrained by domestic responsibilities.

Finally, institutional and policy support at both national and district levels contributes to creating an enabling environment for women in leadership. Initiatives such as family-friendly regulations, inclusive hiring practices, and supportive workplace cultures help normalise the presence of female school leaders and signal a broader shift toward gender equity in education. Together, these enablers—peer mentorship, family support, and progressive policies—form a critical foundation for increasing women's representation in school leadership.

Recommendations

This policy brief proposes the following policy recommendations aimed at national, sub-national, and community levels:

Central Government:
1. Integrate gender-responsive training and mentorship in national leadership programs.
2. Revise selection regulations to eliminate bias against maternity leave.
3. Align madrasah leadership selection with gender-equitable standards.
4. Institutionalise gender indicators within national education standards.

Provincial and District Governments:
5. Provide childcare allowances and flexible work arrangements.
6. Ensure transparent and merit-based selection processes using digital systems.
7. Expand professional learning communities focused on female leadership.

Community-Based Organizations & Development Partners:
8. Promote gender equity through local advocacy and structured mentorship networks.
9. Advocate for work-life balance policies at the district level.
10. Collaborate with governments to collect and analyse data on female representation.

Monitoring and Evaluation:
11. Collect gender-disaggregated data and conduct longitudinal studies to track progress.
12. Explore intersectional factors (e.g., socioeconomic status, ethnicity) affecting women's leadership access.

Expected Impact: Implementing these recommendations will foster a more equitable, inclusive leadership landscape, enhancing decision-making, student outcomes, and institutional performance. Empowering female school leaders also sets a broader societal precedent,

inspiring future generations and contributing to national goals of gender equality and sustainable development.

This brief emphasises that systemic change—through policy reform, community engagement, and cultural shifts—is essential to unlocking the full potential of women in school leadership across Indonesia.

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Acronyms

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MoPSE	Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education
MoRA	Ministry of Religious Affairs
PGP	*Program Guru Penggerak* (Champion Teacher Program)
LPPKS	*Lembaga Pengembangan dan Pemberdayaan Kepala Sekolah* (Principal Development and Empowerment Institute)
TALIS	Teaching and Learning International Survey
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ECCD	Early Childhood Care and Development
MoWECP	Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection
MoHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
MSS/SPM	Minimum Service Standards / *Standar Pelayanan Minimal*
KKG	*Kelompok Kerja Guru* (Teacher Working Group)
KKKS	*Kelompok Kerja Kepala Sekolah* (School Leader Working Group)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
DKRPPA	*Desa/Kelurahan Ramah Perempuan dan Peduli Anak* (Women-Friendly and Child-Caring Villages/Sub-Districts)

1. Introduction

With over 280 million people and 1,340 ethnic groups, Indonesia is the 4th largest country by population, one of the most diverse countries with over 17,000 islands across 1.9 million km^2 (Indonesia.go.id, 2017; Statistics Indonesia, 2023; Lubis, 2024). The Indonesian people recognise Bahasa Indonesia as their official language, but there are also 652 regional and local languages in the country. With a decentralised governance system, the country has 38 provinces and 514 cities or districts (Amalia & Pratiwi, 2024).

Indonesia has a very complex education service delivery among two different ministries: Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (hereafter 'MoPSE'—previously 'Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology' or MoECRT) and Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) (see Figure 1). MoPSE is the primary ministerial agency charged with delivering education and typically leads education reform and policies; it has a decentralised provision of public education with district governments responsible for service delivery. Under MoPSE, the district governments oversee early childhood, primary and junior secondary education, while provincial governments oversee senior secondary education, special needs and vocational education equivalent to the latter. MoRA, on the other hand, oversees the religious education of 5 acknowledged religions in Indonesia that is being taught in schools, namely: Islam, Catholicism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Khonghucu studies whilst having a centralized oversight of religious schools. There are over 60 million students and over 4 million teachers in over 500 thousand schools in Indonesia (MoPSE, 2024a; MoRA, 2025).

Figure 1: Indonesia's Governance in Education Landscape
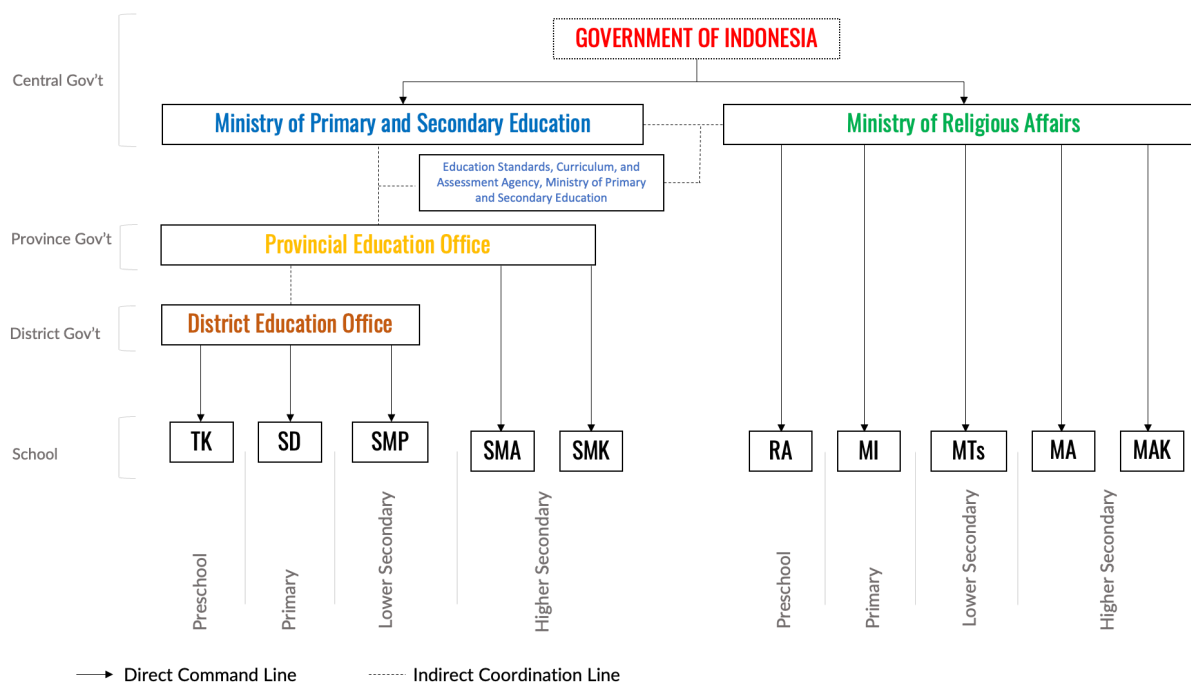
Despite making up a significant portion of the teaching workforce in Indonesia, women remain underrepresented in school leadership roles. This gender gap in educational leadership is a central policy concern that highlights broader gender disparities in the Indonesian workforce. This policy brief will focus on the policy regulating and supporting the pipeline and/or recruitment of teachers as school leaders.

The authors conducted several interviews with school leaders to enrich our insights. Informants are three female school leaders from the Special Region of Yogyakarta, the Province of Maluku and the Province of North Maluku, overseeing schools of different levels of education; from kindergarten, primary school to senior high school. Details and further discussion of the interview results will be elaborated in further section (Women in School Leadership: Barriers and Enablers).

2. School Leader Policies and Pathways

2.1 Policies & Pathways

Over the past 20 years, the government of Indonesia has continuously delivered policy reforms to regulate school leaders' selection; from one that heavily political, to one that is based on competencies; from one that considered school leaders as managers to one that expects them to be instructional leaders (Government of Indonesia, 2003, 2007, 2010, 2018a, 2021, 2022, 2023b, 2024b; PSKP, 2017). According to the 2020-2024 policy, the government has included teacher leadership training called Program Guru Penggerak (PGP) (Champion Teacher Program) as a prerequisite for school leadership candidacy. Even though the appointment of school leaders is still heavily the authority of subnational governments, this pre-service leadership training gives more nuance to the profile of prospective school leaders. Figure 2 depicts the typical school leadership pathway in Indonesia.

Under MoPSE, to be able to participate in the training, however, teachers should receive a recommendation from existing school leaders. This makes the appointment of teachers as school leaders depend not only on the preference of the heads of the district but also on their recognition from existing school leaders and their peers (Ibid.).

On the other hand, as MoRa has a centralized oversight over madrasahs, school leaders' selection is not the authority of subnational governments. However, the appointment of madrasah leaders also requires teachers to have 'Madrasah Principal Certificate' through training (Government of Indonesia, 2017, 2018b).

To become a school principal, teachers must meet several eligibility criteria, including academic qualifications (a bachelor's degree or equivalent from an accredited institution), possession of teaching and leadership certificates, and a minimum of two years of managerial experience in education. Prospective school leaders must also have a good performance appraisal for the past two years, be physically and mentally healthy, have no record of disciplinary or criminal issues, and be under 56 years old at the time of application. Additional requirements apply for civil servant teachers, such as holding a minimum rank of *penata muda* (junior administrative staff) or equivalent (Government of Indonesia, 2021).

Based on regulations that are currently effective in Indonesia, school leadership positions in government-based schools are regarded as an assignment that is given to

teachers who are qualified to be in leadership positions. In general, the selection process to become a school leader involves two main stages: 1) administrative — where the regional government carries out the selection process for the administrative aspect and 2) substantive aspect — assessed by the leadership potential test) and conducted by the Institute for Development and Empowerment of School Principals (LPPKS). This process however, is only applicable for civil servant teachers in education levels that are classified as part of the compulsory education level. This means that this route is not applicable for teachers that are teaching in private schools as well as any early childhood education institute as it has yet been included as a part of compulsory level education.

Figure 2: *Indonesia's School Leadership Pathway (2020-2024)*
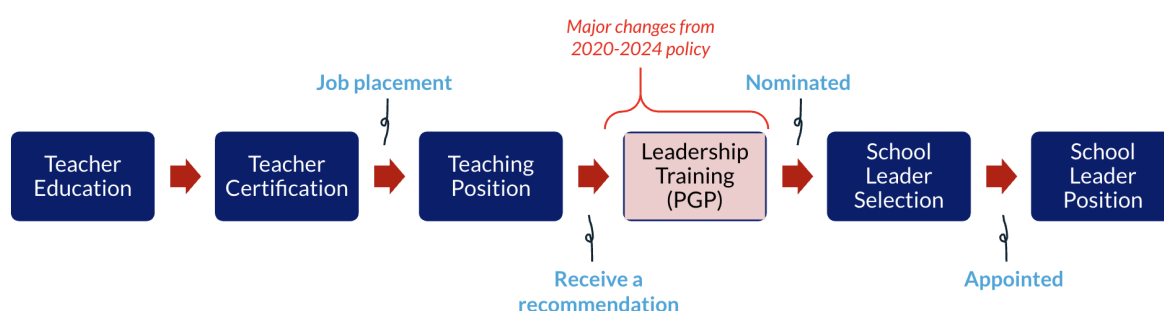
On performance, teachers are assessed based on two groups of competencies. First, practical competencies, which include: (1) classroom management; (2) positive discipline application; (3) constructive feedback; (4) attention and concern; (5) expectations for students; (6) interactive activities; (7) interactive instructions; and (8) learning instructions. The second group of competencies is behavioural, encompassing: (1) service oriented; (2) accountable; (3) competent; (4) harmonious; (5) loyal; (6) adaptive; and (7) collaborative (Government of Indonesia, 2023a).

In addition to having to fulfil the aforementioned requirements, teachers who aspire to become school leaders must also receive recommendation from the "team consideration of the appointment of the principal" consisting of a number of people from the regional government who is responsible as the regional secretary, education authorities, education board and school supervisors (Government of Indonesia, 2021).

The policy reform will surely impact the educational landscape in the way that will shape future school leaders as instructional leaders. Nevertheless, since the regulatory framework does not seem to be gender-responsive (or was not designed to fix gender imbalances in educational leadership), the extent to which this policy will promote gender equality is still limited. The pathway of school leaders under this reform creates an additional bottleneck. For instance, the recommendation scheme by existing school leaders as pre-selection for teachers' leadership training may be affected by gender bias, in addition to gender biases on the appointment of a school leader—from the pool of eligible teachers—by local governments.

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2.2 The Importance of School Leadership and Women in the Role

A report from Global School Leaders (2024) explained that female school leadership is associated with better educational outcomes for both male and female students. Female leaders are often more collaborative and collegial, fostering stronger pedagogical environments and engaging with teachers and communities more inclusively. The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (as cited in Global School Leaders, 2024) found that higher levels of instructional leadership are more likely to be demonstrated by female principals than their male counterparts.

This collaborative leadership approach is reflected in the experiences of our informant school leaders. One interviewed principal shared how she fosters a participatory school environment, stating, "*We always start with a staff meeting. I listen to their opinions before making any decisions. I don't want to be the only one leading—teachers and staff should feel that they own the school too*" (Informant 1). This represents the role of female school leaders in building collective decision-making structures that strengthen school governance and teacher engagement.

Female school leaders also play a significant role in driving innovation and continuous learning among teachers. Some principals establish structured peer-learning models, ensuring that teachers regularly reflect on and improve their teaching practices. As one leader explained, "*Every Thursday, my teachers stop teaching in the afternoon and instead learn from one another. We document our progress and share ideas. This has transformed our teaching culture*" (Informant 2). Such initiatives not only improve teacher quality but also create leadership pipelines within schools, demonstrating how female-led institutions cultivate long-term capacity building.

One school leader also emphasised the importance of mentorship and teacher development, ensuring that her teachers were not only prepared to teach but also committed to improving their craft. "*Many of my teachers [in my ECE school] only had high school diplomas when they started. I guided them through structured training and encouraged them to pursue higher education. Now, they are more confident and effective in the classroom*" (Informant 3).

Furthermore, female school leaders excel in engaging parents and communities, making schools more inclusive and fostering stronger relationships between teachers, students, and families. One principal described her efforts to change the perception of parental involvement in school activities: "*At first, parents thought we only called them for two reasons—if their child had a problem or if the school needed donations. Now, we involve them in initiatives like the 'Plastic Free' campaign, and they actively participate because they see the value in being part of the school community*" (Informant 1).

Given these contributions, it is evident that more female school leaders can positively transform school environments. However, if women in leadership have such a strong impact, why are they still underrepresented? What are the barriers that prevent female teachers from advancing into leadership roles? How can policy and institutional frameworks be reformed to better support them?

3. Women in School Leadership: In Numbers

In schools under the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE), even though females make up 68% of all teachers, only 44% of school leaders are females (Figure 3). The gaps are wider, the higher the level of education. The percentage of female school leaders is higher at the primary level (49%), compared with the junior secondary (34%), senior secondary (29%) and vocational (27%) schools. This illustrates that, at all levels of education, female teachers are less likely to advance to leadership positions. Unfortunately, historical data on the proportion of female school leaders is not easily accessible to the public. Therefore, the observation of whether there is an increase in female school leaders is limited. There is however an interesting finding in how in the lower grade levels, especially in early childhood education (ECE). In ECE, it is perceived that women are better caretakers compared to their male counterparts, thus more suitable principals (Informant 3).

Figure 3: Proportion of Female Teachers and School Leaders by Education Level under MoPSE (MoPSE, 2024b, 2024a)
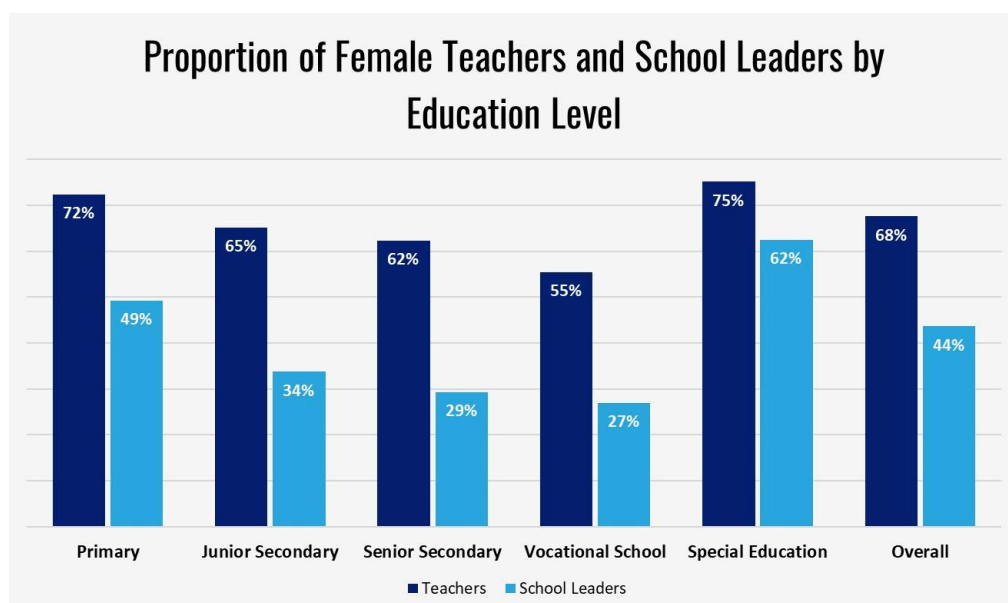

Apart from the low level of representation for female leadership, disparities also occur in regions in Indonesia. At the primary education level, western part of Indonesia has a higher proportion of female school leaders as compared to the eastern part of Indonesia (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: *The Distribution of Female School Principals by Province (Primary) (MoPSE, 2024c)*

The Distribution of Female School Principals by Province (Primary)
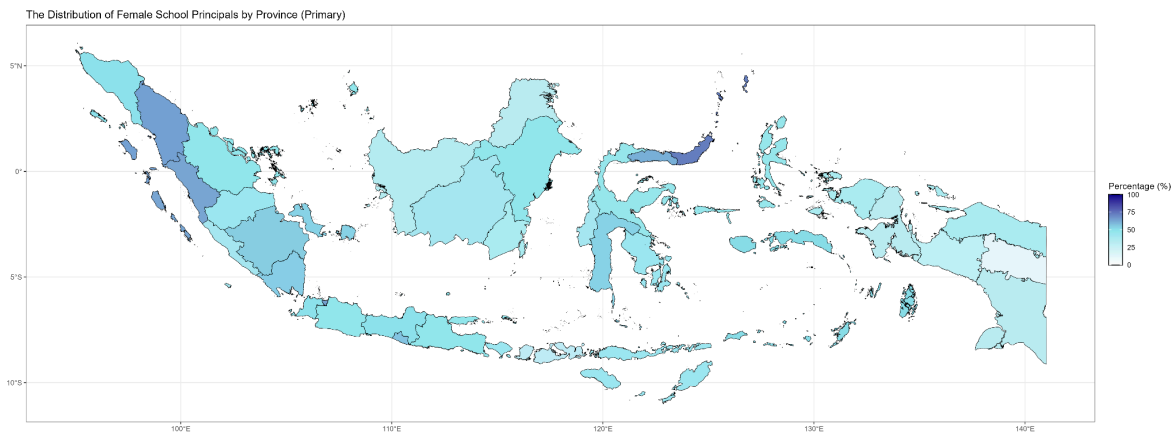
Figure 5: *Proportion of Teacher Professional Development Program (PGP) participants to Assigned as Principals (by gender) (MoPSE, 2022)*

Teacher Leadership Training Program vs School Leader Appointment
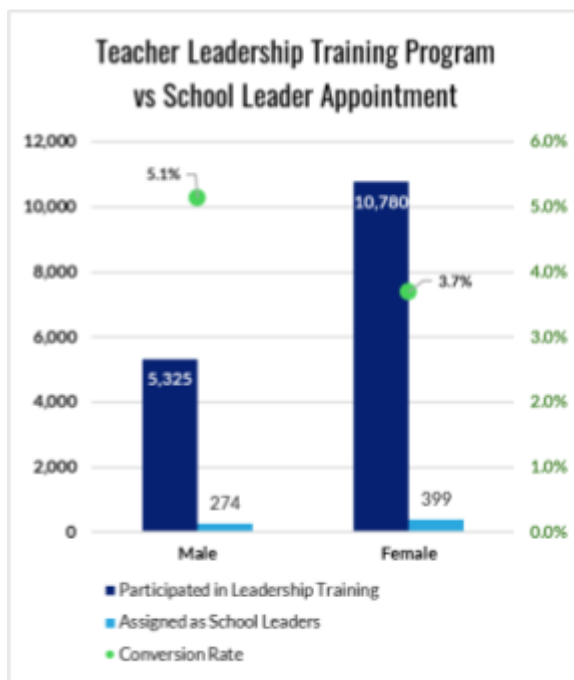
Previous regulation about principal assignment (MoPSE Regulation No. 40/2021) states that teachers who aspire to be principals should have a certificate of completion of the Champion Teacher Program or Program Guru Penggerak (PGP). The program itself focuses on enhancing teachers' learning strategies as well as instructional leadership. Only then, can teachers fulfil one of the administrative requirements to participate in the selection process to become principals. Figure 5 below illustrates the number of teachers that have passed the certification program by gender compared to the number of teachers that were selected as principals by gender. The data depicted in Figure 5 highlights a notable gender disparity in the transition from teacher leadership training to school leader appointments. While significantly more female teachers (66.94%) than male teachers (33.06%) successfully completed the certification program, the conversion rate from program completion to principal appointment remains disproportionately higher for males. Specifically, 5.15% of trained male teachers were appointed as school leaders, compared to only 3.70% of trained female teachers.

Although female teachers had a higher absolute number of principal appointments (399) compared to male teachers (274), this disparity in conversion rates suggests that female teachers face additional barriers in securing leadership roles, even after fulfilling the same training requirements. This underscores the need for targeted interventions to address structural and systemic biases in the appointment process (See Figure 6).

Figure 6: Indonesia's Female School Leadership Pipeline
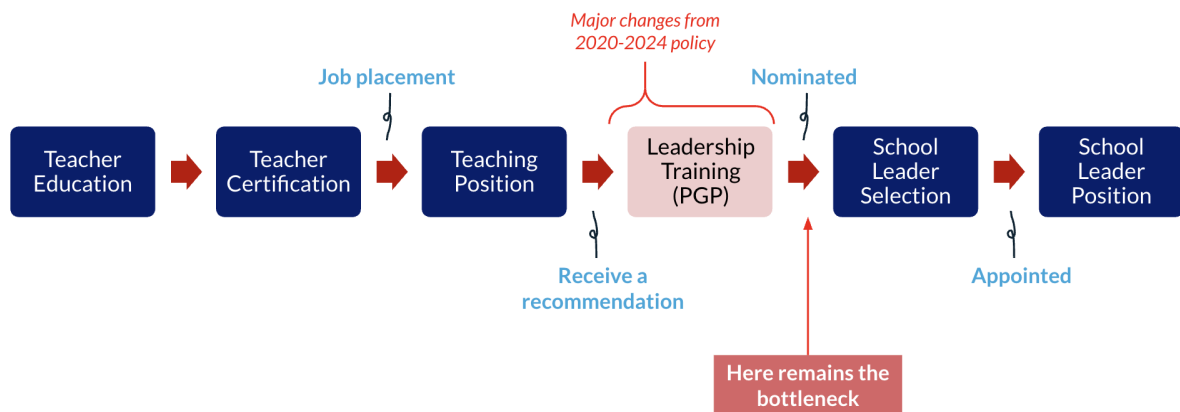
4. Women in School Leadership: Barriers and Enablers

4.1 Barriers and Constraints

In a study of women in school and madrasa leadership, Marget et al. (2021) found that female teachers require more time to assume school leadership positions compared to male teachers. In the provinces of their studies, female teachers, on average, need 19.8 years to become principals, while male teachers need 16.1 years, or 3.7 years faster than female teachers. Gibson and Purbo (2020) found that the majority of primary school teachers in Indonesia are qualified women, who are not more likely than their male counterparts to leave teaching positions.

Female school leaders in Indonesia face a multitude of challenges, bearing a heavier burden to gain societal recognition and requiring strategic approaches to overcome these obstacles in the public sphere (Sinarwati, Hafid, and Mardyawati, 2024). This finding resonates with another study that found at least three principal challenges preventing women from taking educational leadership roles (Margret et al., 2021), namely, regulatory framework, social norms, and reproductive barriers.

Even though the regulations around the appointment of school leaders were not made to specifically discriminate against female candidates, the former do not create a level playing field between male and female candidates. For instance, as sub-national governments are given the autonomy to manage basic and secondary education, the selection of principals is often influenced by elections and politicians' subjectivity. One interviewed female school leader, noted that she finds that the leadership potential of women is often judged based on their appearance before their competence (Informant 1).

The lack of supportive regulations is aggravated by social norms (ibid.). In the Indonesian traditional point of view, women are described as fragile and delicate figures and need to be protected and will always be dependent on men (Airin, 2010). Being a woman principal signifies challenging what 'appropriate' female behaviour constitutes, e.g., women as servants of husbands (Gibson and Purba, 2020). For women, aspiring to be school leaders often conflicts with their families' and communities' expectations. This is evident in how women must work harder to prove their leadership capabilities to gain trust. Additionally, gender biases persist in how leadership styles are perceived–female principals are often described as 'too emotional', while male principals are seen as more stable and wiser in decision-making (Informant 2).

Furthermore, the findings from Margret, et al., (2021) reveal that female teachers often miss school leaders' selections because of maternity leaves. Participating in the selection means that they have to plan well ahead to be nominated. However, sometimes, the nomination itself is influenced by the authority's bias and assumption that women will have to take maternity leaves because of their reproductive role. Beyond maternity leave, seniority-based biases also play a role. Many senior teachers resist the promotion of younger teachers into leadership positions (Informant 2).

Aside from the selection process, another aspect of a principal's duty is found to discourage women from pursuing leadership positions, and that is the "assignment" stage, especially when they are assigned to rural areas that are hardly accessible and far from their hometowns. One principal highlighted that family separation due to school assignments is a recurring issue. *"Many teachers, especially women, are placed far from their spouses, causing difficulties in balancing professional and family life"* (Informant 1). This concern is especially prominent for women in Indonesia since culturally, women are expected to bear more responsibility in domestic care (childcare, etc.) (Margret, et al., 2021).

4.2 Enablers and Policy Levers

While no formal policies or mentorship programs—as far as the writers are aware—are currently in place to explicitly support women in educational leadership, informal support systems and institutional policies provide pathways for female teachers to advance. Interviews with female school leaders suggest that peer networks, strong family support, and community engagement play a crucial role in enabling women to take leadership positions.

One of the most cited enablers is peer mentorship—learning from and being supported by other female school leaders. One principal described *"I learned leadership from those before me, whether they were male or female. But having women in leadership showed me that it was possible"* (Informant 2). The former also confessed that she had little to no setbacks from accessing her school leadership position in a state primary school. She said that female leadership is normalised in her district. Upon further research, we found that the head of the district is a female (Government of Sleman, 2025). This might have been related to the greater acceptance of female school leaders.

Another critical enabler identified in the interviews is the role of family support in women's leadership journeys. Many female school leaders emphasised that having a supportive spouse or family network helped them navigate career advancement without feeling constrained by household expectations. "*My husband fully supported my dream to establish a school. Without that support, balancing work and family would have been much harder*" (Informant 3). Similarly, early exposure to leadership through family participation in community activities prepared some women to take on leadership roles. One principal shared, "*My parents were very engaged in community organisations, and that influenced how I developed leadership skills. It became natural for me to take on responsibility*" (Informant 2). These findings suggest that changing gender norms at the household level is just as important as policy and institutional reforms in increasing female leadership representation in schools.

At the policy level, the Indonesian government has introduced family-friendly regulations to support teachers, particularly female educators who juggle work and family responsibilities. The regulation on fulfilling children's rights promotes a balanced role between parents and encourages workplace policies that accommodate working mothers (Government of Indonesia, 2024a). However, more targeted interventions—such as structured mentorship programs for aspiring female principals—could enhance this impact.

Another key policy area is access to quality early childhood education (ECE) centers. Providing affordable and accessible childcare would allow more female teachers to pursue leadership roles without being disproportionately affected by caregiving responsibilities. Indonesia's Education Law No. 20/2003 already includes ECCD, and Presidential Regulation No. 60/2013 provides a framework for holistic early childhood development (Government of Indonesia, 2013). However, implementation remains uneven across different regions, with many female teachers in rural areas still struggling to balance family and career.

Beyond policy, school leaders themselves can actively support female teachers in leadership development. Some schools already create flexible working environments that allow female teachers to take maternity leave without fear of career stagnation. As one principal shared, "*Maternity leave is a right. I make sure my female teachers have a support system so they don't feel pressured to return too soon*" (Informant 1).

5. Recommendations

To address the persistent underrepresentation of women in school leadership roles in Indonesia, this section outlines targeted policy recommendations aimed at national, sub-national, and community levels. The recommended actions are designed to improve equity in selection processes, enhance support systems, and institutionalise gender-responsive leadership development across both MoPSE and MoRA school systems.

5.1 Recommendations for Central Government

a) **Integrate Gender-Responsive Training in School Leadership Programs**. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) should enhance leadership training programs by incorporating gender-responsive modules. These should include social-emotional regulation training, as recommended by school leaders. "*Women in leadership face dilemmas. Decision-making requires emotional balance. We need more training on social-emotional skills in leadership programs*" (Informant 2). Additionally, mentorship from experienced female leaders should be formalized. "*We need more women leading and mentoring other women in leadership training*" (Informant 3).

b) **Revise Regulations to Eliminate Gender Bias in Leadership Selection**. Current leadership selection policies should be reviewed to remove biases against women. Many teachers face systemic barriers due to maternity leave policies, which often exclude them from selection processes. "*Maternity leave is a right. But in some places, women don't get selected as leaders because authorities assume they'll take leave*" (Informant 1). The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) should establish national guidelines that prohibit the exclusion of female candidates based on assumptions about reproductive roles.

c) **Ensure Equitable Recruitment Mechanisms for Religious-Based Schools' Leadership**. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) should align its leadership selection for madrasah and other religious-based school principals with gender-responsive policies. Special consideration should be given to mentorship programs for female candidates in religious schools, where male-dominated leadership persists.

d) **Expand Grassroots Gender Equality Initiatives**. The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (MoWECP), in collaboration with MoHA and MoPSE, should

implement targeted leadership programs for women at the local level. Schools that have a strong culture of peer support for women should be recognized and expanded.

e) **Incorporate Gender Equality Metrics in National Standards**. The government should institutionalise gender equity indicators in leadership recruitment. MoHA and MoPSE should revise the Education Sector Minimum Service Standards (MSS/SPM) to ensure that each region sets clear targets for female representation in school leadership.

5.2. Provincial and District Governments

a) **Introduce incentive schemes specifically targeted at female school leaders.** District and provincial governments should introduce childcare allowances and flexible work arrangements for female school leaders.

b) **Implement Transparent and Inclusive Selection Processes.** Sub-national governments should ensure that leadership selection is based on merit, rather than personal networks. MoPSE's School Leader and Superintendent Selection System (Sistem KSPS) should be fully utilized to minimize political influence.

c) **Encourage Professional Learning Communities for Female Leadership**. Female-led mentorship initiatives should be expanded within existing teacher and school leader working groups (KKG and KKKS). Experienced school leaders have emphasised the need for structured mentorship to prepare more women for leadership roles. "*A good leader is one who creates new leaders"* (Informant 2).

5.3. Community-based Organisations and Development Partners

a) **Actively support female teachers by fostering a culture that values gender equity**. **Parent-Teacher Associations** and local groups can play a pivotal role in encouraging and advocating for female leadership in schools. Development partners and NGOs should collaborate with local governments to create structured mentorship networks. Existing peer-support initiatives should be expanded to include leadership-focused programs for female teachers.

b) **Advocate for Work-Life Balance Policies for Female Leaders.** Community-based organisations should push for family-friendly policies at the district level, ensuring flexible school placement policies for female school leaders with young children.

c) **Collect and Analyze Data to Track Progress.** Organisations should work with governments to track the progress of female representation in school leadership, ensuring that policy recommendations are backed by real data.

5.4. Potential Impact

a) Integrating gender-responsive modules in leadership training and addressing biases in recruitment and selection processes has the potential to significantly increase the number of qualified female school leaders. This will not only address the current gender gap but also set a precedent for future reforms promoting inclusivity.

b) By leveraging the expertise and experiences of female leaders through mentorship and training programs, schools will benefit from diverse leadership perspectives. Research shows that gender-diverse leadership can enhance decision-making, school management,

and instructional strategies, leading to improved student outcomes (Global School Leaders, 2024).

c) Encouraging gender equity at grassroots levels, such as through the Village/Urban Village Friendly for Women and Children (DKRPPA) initiative) and Parent-Teacher Associations, will help challenge societal norms and promote broader acceptance of female leadership. This shift in community mindset can create a supportive environment for aspiring female leaders.

d) Transparent and merit-based selection processes for school leaders have the potential to reduce political influence, fostering trust in the system. Additionally, incorporating gender-equality indicators into the Minimum Service Standards (MSS/SPM) will institutionalize accountability for gender equity, ensuring sustained progress.

e) Incentive schemes, such as childcare allowances and bonuses, have the potential for alleviating some of the systemic and personal barriers faced by female leaders, allowing them to focus on their professional roles. Empowered female leaders will act as role models, inspiring greater participation of women in leadership across other sectors, contributing to economic growth and social equity.

f) By collecting and analyzing data from development initiatives, stakeholders can better understand barriers and enablers to female leadership. This evidence-based approach will guide future policy reforms and ensure alignment with national and international gender equity goals.

6. Limits & Further Areas of Investigation

While this policy brief highlights key findings and recommendations to advance gender equity in school leadership, several limitations and gaps in the current knowledge base remain. This section identifies critical areas where additional research, data collection, and stakeholder engagement are needed to deepen understanding of barriers and to inform future reforms.

a) The policy brief was developed during the transition period of the cabinet administration (2020-2024). Currently a new policy has been enacted on 8th of May 2025 (MoPSE Regulation No. 7/2025) which was not taken into account during the development of the policy brief. Therefore there may or may not be relevant aspects from the policy that was not yet taken into account. The biggest change in the new policy, is that it no longer mandates teachers to have been *guru penggerak* as a selection requirement, as aforementioned.

b) While there is anecdotal evidence suggesting lower female representation in madrasah leadership, comprehensive nationwide gender-disaggregated data from MoRA is required to validate this claim and assess regional disparities.

c) The lack of historical data on the representation of female school leaders limits the ability to evaluate whether existing initiatives have succeeded in increasing gender parity. Longitudinal studies are essential to track progress and inform future policy decisions.

d) Future research should consider how intersecting factors, such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and disability, impact women's access to leadership roles. This will ensure a more inclusive approach to addressing gender disparities.

e) The authors found that the interviewed school leaders represent women who have had the privilege of a supportive environment, whether from their families, spouses, or

communities. Future research should examine the challenges faced by women who lack family backing, face workplace hostility, or experience systemic discrimination in leadership selection. However, this pattern among the interviewees also provides a crucial insight: supportive environments play a significant role in enabling female teachers to advance into leadership positions. Instead of viewing this as an exception, it suggests a policy direction—creating systemic interventions that replicate the conditions of "privilege" these women had.

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