



BREAKING BARRIERS AND EMPOWERING CHANGE: STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN'S SCHOOL SYSTEMS

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ABOUT THE LEARNING CYCLE ON INCREASING WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

This case study is a result of the KIX EMAP Learning Cycle "Increasing Women's Representation in School Leadership". Facilitated by Dr Fenot Aklog and Dr Cathryn Magno, this Learning Cycle ran from 18 September 2024 to 28 February 2025. The course equipped participants with the conceptual and analytical tools for understanding conditions that promote and serve as barriers to the recruitment, development, and retention of women in school leadership roles. Sixteen national teams took part in this Learning Cycle, including Albania, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Indonesia, Kyrgyz Republic, Maldives, Moldova, Nepal, Pakistan (Punjab), Pakistan (Sindh), Philippines, Sri Lanka, Timor Leste, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.



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Rukhsana Asim is an accomplished education professional with a master's degree in Educational Planning and Management. She currently serves as an Education Program Manager at the British Council Pakistan and is the Learning Lead for the GOAL project, funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), which focuses on empowering girls and out-of-school children. As the South Asia Regional Lead for Professional Development under the *Connecting Classroom* program, she has led professional development for teachers and leadership programs for school leaders. She has spearheaded large-scale capacity-building initiatives, led the development of leadership standards for Punjab's school heads and trained educators. A UN TeachSDGs Ambassador, Rukhsana is dedicated to empowering women leaders, fostering inclusive education and promoting sustainable development in school systems.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

DEAs	District education authorities
NEP	National Education Policy
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
QAED	Quaid-e-Azam Academy for Educational Development
SDPI	Sustainable Development Policy Institute
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WELI	Women's Educational Leadership Initiative

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief addresses the critical issue of women's representation in school leadership in the Punjab province of Pakistan, emphasising its importance for advancing educational equity and improving learning outcomes. It also outlines actionable strategies to foster gender equity and enhance the educational landscape in Punjab. Despite progress in gender equity initiatives, women face systemic and societal barriers that hinder their access to leadership roles. Key findings reveal disparities in female leadership representation,

especially in rural areas, and highlight enabling factors such as mentorship and training programmes. Recommendations include adapting existing policies to include gender-sensitive recruitment, mentorship and leadership development programs, alongside new initiatives such as gender quotas and public awareness campaigns. Further investigation is required to understand regional disparities and the impact of cultural norms on women's leadership.

1

INTRODUCTION

Women in Pakistan face significant challenges in accessing school leadership roles, despite constitutional assurances of gender equality. Persistent cultural norms, societal expectations and institutional biases restrict their career progression. Educational leadership by women not only enhances inclusivity but also improves student outcomes and teacher satisfaction. This policy brief synthesises international literature about women and school leadership, analyses the current situation in Pakistan (Punjab) and proposes actionable policy strategies to increase women's representation in educational leadership roles.

A study conducted by the United Nations Development Program in 2019 highlighted that many women in rural areas face restricted access to higher education and leadership development programmes due to societal expectations around domestic roles and the limited availability of educational infrastructure. This disparity results in a significant underrepresentation of women in educational leadership positions in rural and underdeveloped regions. Addressing these issues is vital for promoting gender equality and improving educational outcomes. Increasing women's representation in leadership enhances school-community connections and supports economic development and cultural transformation, ultimately empowering women to advocate for equality (UN Women, n.d.). Countries like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have implemented policies to increase female representation in educational leadership roles, resulting in better access to education for girls and improved community engagement in educational reforms (Press Xpress, 2024).

In Punjab, women face significant barriers to leadership roles in education due to societal, cultural and institutional challenges. Persistent stereotypes frame leadership as a male domain, while a lack of mentorship and professional networks hinders women's confidence and development. Educational disparities, especially in rural areas, limit access to quality training, and gender biases in hiring create a hostile environment. Family responsibilities and safety concerns further deter women from pursuing leadership. When women lead, they create inclusive, supportive learning environments that contribute to better outcomes for all students and foster a more equitable society. For instance, research in Kenya has shown that schools led by women perform better in terms of student retention and academic performance, as women leaders often prioritise holistic development and inclusive teaching methods.

By increasing the representation of women in leadership positions, Punjab can follow similar trends seen in other parts of the world, where more women in leadership roles have led to increased educational achievements, a reduction in gender-based violence and broader societal changes. Women's leadership in education not only nurtures future generations of learners but also serves as a catalyst for gender equality, social progress and economic development.

2

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP POLICIES AND PATHWAYS

Existing national policies, such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2017–2025 and the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2012, provide frameworks for improving educational quality in Pakistan. The Punjab Education Sector Plan 2019/20 – 2023/24 and the School Leadership Development Program by the Quaid-e-Azam Academy for Educational Development (QAED) Punjab guide improvement efforts as well. However, they all lack specific provisions for advancing women’s leadership. Recent initiatives, such as the School Leadership Development Program, offer leadership training but require expansion to include mentorship and gender-sensitive recruitment. International best practices, such as gender quotas and leadership networks, can inform policy adaptations in Punjab.

At the provincial level, after the 18th Amendment, policies are tailored to align with the NEP’s goals, ensuring localised solutions that address specific regional challenges. Educational development academies focus on leadership training to equip school leaders with the necessary skills and knowledge. A good example of one such academy is QAED in Punjab, which strengthens women’s leadership in Punjab’s education sector through targeted training, networking and policy advocacy. QAED runs programmes specifically designed to develop leadership skills among women educators, helping them navigate the professional challenges they face and enabling them to take on roles in school leadership.

Locally, school management committees encourage community involvement in school management, ensuring that schools are responsive to local needs. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as the Aga Khan Education Services (2019), support these efforts by providing leadership training programmes for both male and female teachers. These programmes focus on leadership, management skills and inclusivity, fostering an environment where women can step into leadership roles. To a greater extent, the initiatives and support by United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Pakistan in Punjab have contributed to improving the quality of education by providing training for head teachers.

Key policies aim to strengthen the recruitment, training, retention and evaluation of school leaders in Pakistan. The NEP at the national level and the New Deal 2018–2023 at the provincial level

have advocated for merit-based recruitment and continuous professional development as essential components of a successful education system. This has improved the quality of leadership in schools across the region by ensuring that only qualified individuals are selected for leadership roles. The direct selection of school leaders in Basic Pay Scales 17 and 18 has also given a great opportunity to join the education sector through a competitive process arranged by the Punjab Public Service Commission.

The New Deal 2018–2023 (School Education Department, 2019) in Punjab focuses on leadership and governance by promoting the:

1. Selection of competent leadership.
2. Empowerment of district education authorities (DEAs).
3. Training for education managers.
4. Gender-inclusive policies through emphasis on equity: The New Deal promotes an education system where access and opportunities are equitable across gender and socioeconomic divides.
5. Integration of gender sensitivity in leadership: Initiatives aim to improve the participation and representation of women in leadership through targeted training and supportive policies.
6. Public-private engagement by strengthening partnerships: Developing frameworks to involve private actors can address leadership gaps and improve education quality, including the recruitment of educators and administrators.
7. Reforms for transparency: Introduction of the Punjab Private Education Sector Reform Bill has helped to regulate private education providers for equitable and efficient governance.

Effective policies support actions to advance the rights of women and girls, to ensure their full participation in all spheres of society. To promote gender equity, the NEP emphasises inclusivity with targeted programmes for female educators, helping them overcome the barriers they face in accessing leadership roles (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2017). The Gender Policy Framework provides specific

guidelines for monitoring and increasing women's leadership representation in schools. In this regard, the Punjab Women Development Policy endeavours to bring systematic, sector-wide reforms (Women Development Department, 2018). It explicitly outlines gender parity in education and educational leadership, including professional capacity-building programmes. One notable initiative is the Punjab Education Foundation, which launched a Girls' Education Program focused on empowering female teachers to transition into leadership positions. By providing scholarships, training and professional development, this programme works to increase the pipeline of women leaders in education.

By aligning provincial and local policies with a gender-sensitive approach, Punjab is moving towards a more inclusive educational system where female educators are empowered to become effective leaders, ultimately driving improvements in the overall education sector. One recent example is the merit-based selection of DEAs, including chief executive officers (CEOs), district education officers and deputy district education officers. Through this meritorious selection, a good number of female CEOs have been selected to serve different districts across Punjab for the first time, reflecting the Punjab government's focus on increasing women leadership in education.

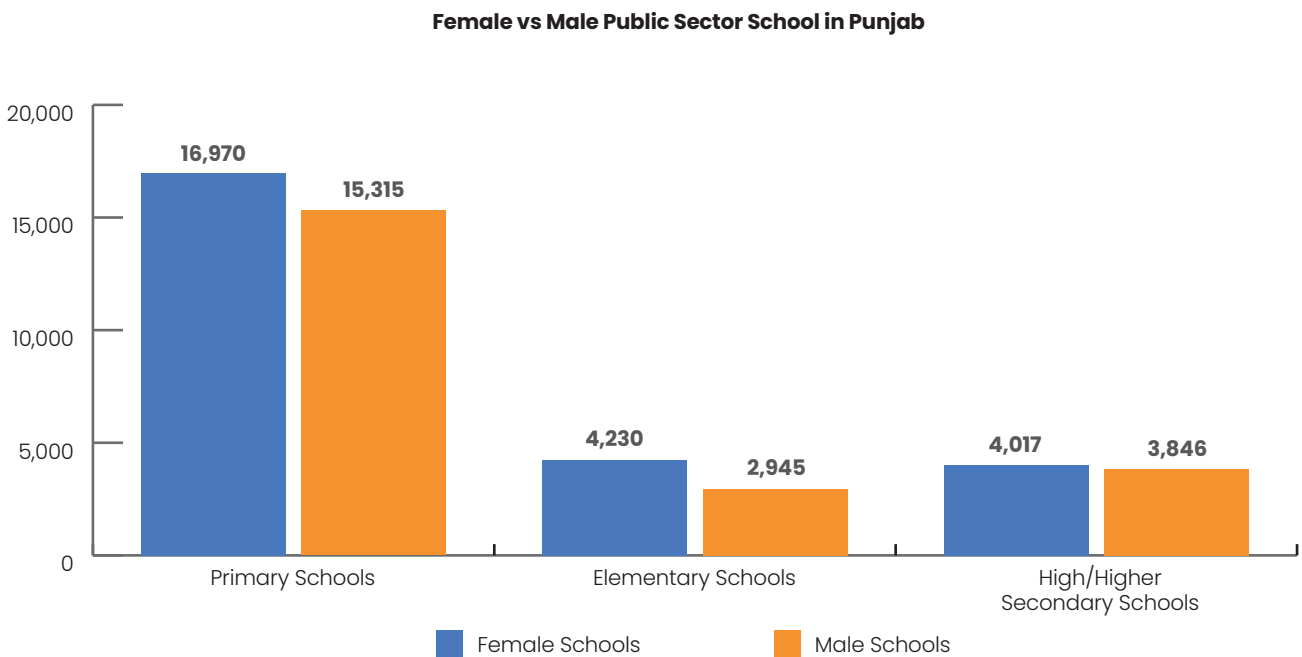
3

WOMEN IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP BY THE NUMBERS

Female representation in school leadership varies widely across Punjab. Notably, urban areas show relatively higher representation. The data reveal that female schools outnumber male schools at each educational level, as given in Figure 1. This distribution indicates a consistent prevalence of female-led institutions across public sector schools in Punjab. All female schools are led by female leaders, although they face different

challenges while performing their roles as leaders, particularly in rural areas. However, the level of challenge varies from school to school and depends on the coordination of the school head with the community. Though there are separate schools for girls and boys, female teachers are also found in male high or higher secondary schools, albeit at a smaller ratio.

Figure 1: Gender-Based Schools in the Public Sector, Punjab



Women are more prominently represented in teaching than in leadership in Punjab, particularly at the primary level. Approximately 50% of primary school head teachers are women, but this percentage declines at the high and higher secondary levels, since the number of schools at these levels declines. Therefore, they are not enough to cater to the female population in schools. The smaller number of schools at this level also causes the issue of drop-outs and out-of-school children in Punjab.

In Punjab, women's participation in the teaching profession is notably high, with women often filling the majority of teaching positions in rural schools. According to the Punjab Gender Parity Report, the majority of women in Punjab are employed

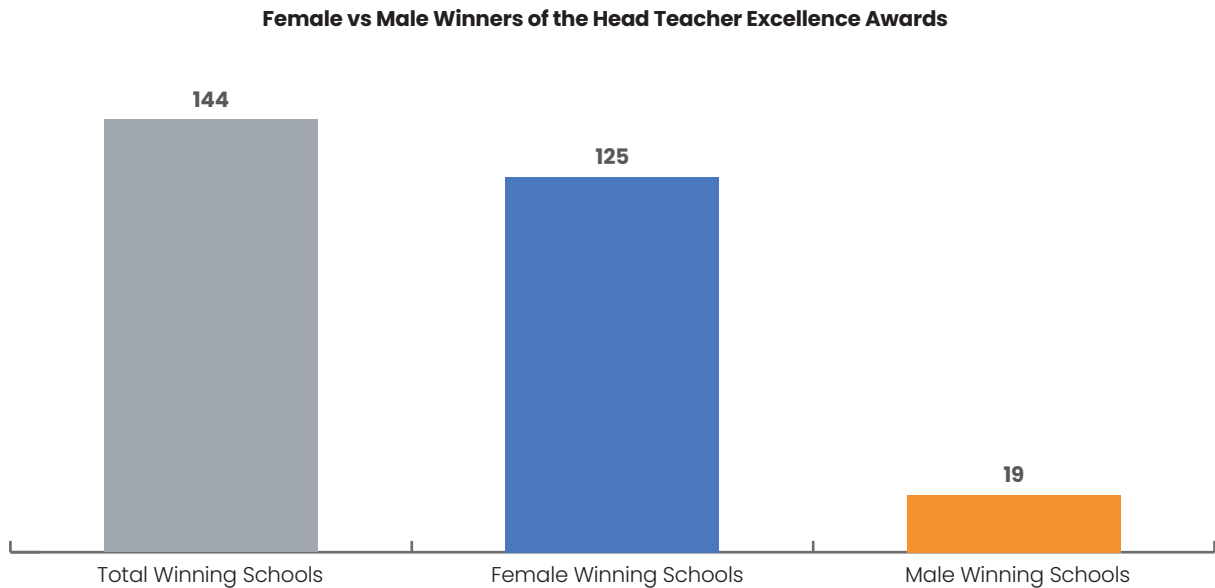
in health- and education-related services (Punjab Commission on the Status of Women, 2021). The Punjab Education Foundation has worked to increase the presence of female educators in leadership roles by creating pathways for women teachers to advance to principal and administrator positions. Through programmes such as Girls' Education Initiative, women are trained to take on leadership responsibilities, with a focus on improving the quality of education in rural areas. This initiative has helped increase the visibility of female educators and provided them with the support needed to pursue leadership roles.

The results of different projects have indicated that schools led by female leaders show better participation and performance.

Figure 2 shows the significant difference in the number of female head teachers who won the 2024 Head Teacher Excellence Award under the Instructional Leadership Program, a joint effort by QAED Punjab and the British Council. In total, 600 schools from South Punjab participated in this training and

around 400 schools submitted their portfolios after successfully implementing their action plans. Of the 400 schools, 144 won the Head Teacher Excellence Award. This data has been extracted from the school result sheet, available from QAED Punjab.

Figure 2: Winners of the Head Teacher Excellence Award, 2024



Despite this progress, challenges such as cultural barriers, limited access to professional development and few advancement opportunities persist, hindering further improvement. In some rural regions, the cultural expectation that women should prioritise family over career remains a significant deterrent. Additionally, limited access to training programmes for women

in leadership roles continues to be a barrier. The School Education Department in Punjab has made strides in this regard, offering specialised leadership development programmes for women teachers, but many women in remote areas still lack access to such opportunities.

4

WOMEN IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: BARRIERS AND ENABLERS

Women in Pakistan face significant system-level barriers that hinder their access to school leadership roles. Gender-insensitive policies, particularly those that fail to support work-life balance, compel many women to choose between career growth and familial responsibilities due to inadequate maternity and childcare provisions (Yasmeen & Ali, 2020). Institutional biases, including nepotism and the “Sifarish” culture that favours personal connections over merit, further limit promotion opportunities. Exclusion from male-dominated networks isolates women from decision-making processes, thus stifling their leadership potential (Sarwar & Imran, 2019). Moreover, hostile work environments and a lack of accountability mechanisms deter women from aspiring to leadership positions.

Societal norms and individual expectations also play a role in restricting women’s leadership aspirations. Cultural biases often perceive leadership traits like assertiveness as inherently masculine, reinforcing the stereotype of “think manager – think male” (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). This creates a glass ceiling effect where women are viewed as either warm or competent, but rarely both (Malathi & Naga Sundari, 2022). The expectation for women to prioritise family responsibilities leads to increased work-family conflict and burnout. Gender quotas are inconsistently applied, resulting in limited female representation, with women occupying only 14% of provincial and 20% of district roles (Punjab Commission on the Status of Women, 2021).

Patriarchal norms and insufficient political backing further limit women’s advancement in educational leadership. The quota for the promotion of female leaders in Punjab is lower compared to male leaders, and it decreases in higher positions in the education system. Female leaders face character assassination to a greater extent that keeps them away from adopting leadership roles. It is also easy in Punjab’s context, particularly in rural areas, to dishearten women by creating barriers like character assassination to stop them from progressing in their leadership roles. Most of the time, this is done by male counterparts in the education system in the same locality.

Several successful policies and programmes in Pakistan, however, support women’s advancement in leadership

positions. Mentorship initiatives like the Women in Leadership programme connect aspiring female leaders with mentors for guidance and networking. For example, in Islamabad, the Women’s Educational Leadership Initiative (WELI) provides young female teachers with the tools they need to pursue leadership roles, offering them both formal training and informal support through mentoring. Programmes such as the National Training Program for Women Education Managers and the Punjab Education Sector Reform Program provide women with essential management and advocacy skills while addressing gender-specific barriers. UNICEF’s Gender-Responsive Education Initiative has also been working with government schools in Punjab to train female educators in leadership and school management, which has led to an increase in the number of female headteachers. These initiatives, along with government reforms and capacity-building workshops, create a supportive environment for women’s progression in educational leadership.

Documented examples, such as the success of UN Women’s gender-responsive policies and case studies from the Pakistan Coalition for Education, highlight how targeted interventions can enhance women’s representation in leadership roles. The Annual Report 2021 of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) emphasised the positive impact of these initiatives on educational outcomes (SDPI, 2022). Despite the challenges, specific policies and programs are helping to uplift women’s leadership in education. Strengthening policies, providing mentorship and tackling gender biases at all levels of education are critical to dismantling these barriers and ensuring that women have the opportunities, support and confidence to take on leadership roles. In Punjab, initiatives like the School Leadership Program of QAED Punjab, with the technical assistance of the British Council, have successfully mentored women teachers and leaders, helping them develop the skills and networks necessary to advance in their careers. Such programmes have shown that mentorship can increase women’s confidence and leadership capabilities, ultimately improving school management and student outcomes. Similarly, the Ministry of Federal Education’s National Professional Standards for Teachers highlights leadership competencies, encouraging career progression through structured training programmes. Programmes like the British Council’s International School Award, Connecting Classrooms

and Instructional Leadership initiatives provided female head teachers with global exposure, mentorship and skill-building, allowing them to adopt best practices and enhance school management. UNESCO's gender parity projects, in collaboration with the Pakistani government, work to dismantle cultural and social barriers by offering training that empowers women with leadership skills. The Teach for Pakistan fellowship also nurtures leadership by supporting female educators through mentorship and networking, enabling many alumni to ascend into school administration roles. The Instructional Leadership Program and Connecting Classrooms Program of the British Council show significant progress in schools led by female leaders. Most of the schools that received the International School Award, a joint initiative by QAED Punjab and British Council, were female-led schools as well.

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This section outlines key policy measures to strengthen women's leadership in education in Punjab by addressing systemic barriers, enhancing professional development opportunities and fostering an inclusive leadership environment. The recommendations are designed for policymakers, educational institutions, government agencies and development partners working towards gender equity in educational leadership. By implementing these strategies, stakeholders can create a more diverse and effective leadership framework that benefits both educators and learners.

While there has been notable advancement, the overall pace of change regarding women's representation in leadership remains slow, indicating that significant efforts are still necessary to enhance women's leadership in education. Policies like the NEP and provincial initiatives must continue to prioritise gender equity in educational leadership, ensuring that women have the necessary resources, support and opportunities to thrive in leadership roles.

The government of Punjab should implement gender-responsive policies to promote the recruitment, retention and advancement of women in school leadership roles, as supported by organisations like QAED and UNESCO. Expanding access to leadership training and professional development, as seen in initiatives by QAED and the British Council, should be prioritised at all education levels. Establishing mentorship programmes and professional networks for women, as backed by collaborative partners, is crucial to overcoming barriers to leadership. Policy reforms must focus on shifting cultural norms and institutional practices that limit women's access to leadership roles, with support from organisations like UNESCO. Finally, monitoring and evaluation frameworks should be created to track progress in women's leadership representation, in line with UNESCO's Gender Policy Framework. Work-life balance policies and the provision of daycares at workplaces can also ensure the maximum participation of female officers in leadership positions.

Key policies under the NEP promote merit-based recruitment, continuous professional development and clear selection criteria for school leaders. These include programmes like the National Training Program for Women Education Managers, which provides women with leadership training to help

them assume decision-making roles. Additionally, DEAs at the provincial level support local recruitment and tailored leadership training, fostering inclusive, supportive environments for all educators. Equal opportunities should be given to female officers for senior/leadership posts. For example, the Punjab Education Sector Plan has successfully integrated gender-sensitive strategies to ensure women are included in leadership roles, providing targeted training for female teachers and administrators (Government of Punjab, 2020). There is a dire need for the successful implementation of all these policies, and a proper follow-up mechanism, to ensure the policies are being implemented in true letter and spirit.

To address gender equity, the NEP emphasises the inclusion of female educators in leadership roles. The Gender Policy Framework sets concrete guidelines for tracking women's participation in leadership and enforces gender-sensitive recruitment practices. All these policies outline strong commitments; however, to bridge the gaps between policies and their implementation, strong accountability systems need to be introduced. The quota for women in leadership positions should be clearly articulated and exercised. Regular tracking of all policy recommendations should be ensured. School management committees, in collaboration with local NGOs like WELL, are instrumental in providing training and mentoring programmes for women in leadership positions. This initiative has led to successful outcomes, particularly in rural areas where female school leaders, once rare, are now more visible and supported. However, the scalability of such initiatives should be encouraged and a progress tracking system should be in place. Additionally, organisations like UNICEF and the SDPI have partnered with the government to implement policies that focus on creating gender-sensitive school environments. As the government of Punjab has taken a leap towards encouraging women's participation in leadership, certain steps should be taken to support female leaders to exercise their leadership roles with full capacity, irrespective of their gender. The negative forces that discourage female leaders through hate speech and defamation should be dealt with iron hands to ensure women feel safe while performing their official assignments in parallel to their male counterparts. The success stories of women leaders in education should be periodically published as well to provide additional motivation and encouragement for aspiring female leaders.

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AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

While this policy brief highlights key strategies for strengthening women's leadership in education in Punjab, further research is needed to explore persistent challenges and emerging opportunities. This section identifies critical areas for future investigation, including the long-term impact of gender-inclusive leadership policies, the role of mentorship and professional networks, and the effectiveness of capacity-building initiatives. The following areas are proposed for further investigation:

1. **Impact of gender-sensitive policies:** Research on the effectiveness of policies like the NEP and Pakistan Vision 2025, Punjab Women Development Department in promoting women's leadership in schools in Punjab.
2. **Barriers to professional development:** Examining challenges women face in accessing leadership training, mentorship and networking opportunities in Punjab.
3. **Work-family balance:** Investigating how family obligations and lack of support impact women's ability to pursue leadership roles.
4. **Cultural and societal norms:** Understanding how gender biases and societal stereotypes affect women's leadership potential.
5. **Gender-based harassment:** Exploring the prevalence and impact of harassment and discrimination on women's career advancement.
6. **Effectiveness of mentorship programmes:** Assessing the long-term impact of mentorship initiatives on women's leadership development.
7. **Leadership and school outcomes:** Investigating how women in leadership roles influence school culture and educational outcomes.
8. **Regional disparities:** Researching how urban and rural factors affect women's representation in leadership.
9. **Role of NGOs and civil society:** Examining the role of organisations like UNICEF and WELI in supporting women leaders.
10. **Educational policy advocacy:** Exploring how international organisations like UNESCO influence gender equity in Pakistan's educational policies.

7

CONCLUSION

This policy brief aimed to analyse the challenges and opportunities in strengthening women's leadership in school systems in Punjab, Pakistan. The key objectives were to identify barriers limiting women's access to leadership roles, explore enabling policies and initiatives, and propose actionable recommendations for gender equity in educational leadership.

The findings indicate that while progress has been made in female representation, significant disparities persist, particularly in rural areas. Cultural norms, institutional biases, limited access to professional development and work-life balance constraints hinder women's advancement. However, mentorship programmes, leadership training and policy reforms have demonstrated positive impacts, providing avenues for women to step into leadership roles.

By ensuring equitable opportunities, sustainable efforts and collaboration across government bodies, NGOs and local communities, Punjab can create a more inclusive and dynamic education system where women leaders contribute to school improvement, student outcomes and broader social change.

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