



BEYOND EQUALITY: UNPACKING THE NEED FOR EQUITY IN WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE MALDIVES

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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.



KIX EMAP Learning Cycle Case Study, April 2026

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This case study is a product of the [KIX EMAP Learning Cycle: Increasing Women's Representation in School Leadership](#) with external contributions. This work was supported by the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX), a joint endeavour with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this work do not necessarily reflect the views of the KIX EMAP Hub, NORRAG, GPE, IDRC, its Board of Governors, or the governments they represent. The KIX EMAP Hub / NORRAG does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this work.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
EMAP	Europe, Middle East and North Africa, Asia and Pacific
ESP	Education Sector Plan
GEAP	Gender Equality Action Plan
GPE KIX	Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange
GSL	Global School Leaders
MBS	Maldives Bureau of Statistics
MNQF	Maldives National Qualifications Framework
MoE	Ministry of Education
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our sincere gratitude to the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX) Europe, Middle East and North Africa, Asia and Pacific (EMAP) Hub Team for the invaluable opportunity given to us to participate in Learning Cycle 6, 'Increasing Women's Representation in School Leadership'. This learning journey has greatly contributed to our understanding of systemic barriers and of the policy approaches needed to move towards establishing gender equity in school leadership. We are especially thankful to Dr Fenot Aklog and Dr Cathryn Magno for their insightful and engaging sessions, which provided both theoretical and practical perspectives on educational policy and women's representation in school leadership.

We also deeply appreciate the enriching experiences and perspectives shared by fellow participants from other countries, who very generously shared their national experiences, policies and initiatives, which broadened our understanding of the topic. The vibrant discussions, collaborative reflections and peer learning throughout the three months of this Learning Cycle greatly contributed to the development of this policy brief. Finally, we again thank the GPE KIX EMAP Hub Team for their continued guidance and support throughout the process of publishing this knowledge product.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief, *Beyond Equality: Unpacking the Need for Equity in Women's Educational Leadership in the Maldives*, explores the systemic barriers that hinder women's advancement in school leadership roles, with a particular focus on advocating equity. In the Maldives, even though women comprise 72% of the teaching workforce, they are underrepresented in leadership positions, holding only 27% of top leadership roles (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Culturally rooted norms and biases, as well as structural barriers, exacerbated by the geographical challenges specific to the Maldives' being an archipelago, hinder women's advancement into school leadership roles.

This brief highlights the role of school leadership in improving student learning outcomes, illustrating the significant positive difference that women leaders can make, as noted in the international literature. Hence, the present brief underscores the urgent need for the Maldivian education system to move beyond equality to equity and provides tailored recommendations to address systemic barriers that hinder women's advancement to leadership.

Key policy recommendations include the introduction of quotas to encourage women to assume leadership positions, the establishment of vertical promotion systems to streamline career progression and the introduction of incentives to encourage women to take on leadership roles, particularly in remote island schools. In addition, targeted research and collaborative work with stakeholders are recommended to better understand and address women's specific needs in educational leadership positions. These interventions are expected to establish a more inclusive and effective educational leadership agenda in the Maldives, focused on improving student learning outcomes.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of educational leadership policies in the Maldives, it is essential to recognise that women require equity, not merely equality. While equality emphasises providing the same resources and opportunities to all individuals, equity focuses on ensuring that women receive the specific support and resources necessary to overcome societal and systemic barriers that hinder their progress in attaining leadership roles. Cultural norms and societal expectations in the Maldives often marginalise women's voices in educational leadership, resulting in a significant underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions. By prioritising policy development, the Maldives can create targeted initiatives that promote women's participation in leadership while actively dismantling the barriers that perpetuate gender disparities. This approach will ensure that women are not merely included in leadership roles but empowered to thrive and lead effectively, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape for all students. This policy brief examines the representation of women in school leadership in the Maldives and recommends policy initiatives to promote equity and increase women's representation in school leadership roles.

1.1 Country Context

The Maldives, an archipelago of 1,192 islands, faces distinct challenges in achieving gender equity, particularly in educational leadership. Although the country claims a high adult literacy rate of 98% and has made strides in women's education, gender disparities persist in the labour market and

leadership positions (Maldives Bureau of Statistics [MBS], 2024). Women's labour force participation remains significantly lower than that of men, and they hold only 3.2% of parliamentary seats, highlighting their limited presence in decision-making roles (Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services, 2022). These barriers extend to the education sector, where women encounter societal and cultural obstacles in ascending to leadership positions. Moreover, the geographical isolation of rural and remote islands exacerbates disparities in access to resources and opportunities for leadership development.

To move beyond equality and achieve equity in educational leadership, systemic interventions are needed to address the unique geographical, economic and cultural challenges women face in the Maldives. Efforts such as the national Gender Equality Action Plan (GEAP) 2022–2026 aim to improve gender representation in leadership roles, targeting an increase of women in managerial positions from 22.3% to 35% by 2026 (Ministry of Gender, Family and Social Services, 2022). Despite these initiatives, however, women remain underrepresented at the highest levels of leadership, particularly in schools.

Kindergarten to grade 10 education is compulsory and provided free by the state. The structure of the school education system encompasses the foundation stage, primary level (key stages 1 and 2), lower secondary level (key stage 3), secondary level (key stage 4) and upper secondary level (key stage 5) as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The Maldivian Education System



Geographic challenges stemming from the country's dispersed islands complicate equal access to quality education, especially in remote islands where resources are limited, leading to disparities in educational outcomes between urban centres, like Malé, and smaller islands. According to the Ministry of Education (MoE), in 2024, the Maldives' 218 public schools serve a student population of 80,930, supported by a total of 10,094 teachers (Haarr, 2025, p. 131). The student-teacher ratio averages 10:1 but varies across the country, with ratios ranging from 20:1 in Malé schools to 5:1 in some remote island schools.

1.2 The Importance of School Leadership and Women in the Role

Effective school leadership is crucial to fostering a positive learning environment and ensuring student success (Day et al., 2014). The international literature indicates that women in school leadership roles have a significant impact on educational outcomes through collaborative and participatory approaches. According to the Global School Leaders' (2024) review of research on gender in school leadership, female school leadership is positively associated with improved educational outcomes for both boys and girls and tends to be more collaborative, collegial and effective. Female principals are often recognised for their compassionate engagement with stakeholders, fostering positive school cultures and improving academic and personal development (Abdallah & Farhan, 2023). In regions such as Africa, female leaders demonstrate greater collegiality and collaboration than their

male counterparts, suggesting a more effective leadership style (Bush et al., 2022). These qualities enable women leaders to drive systemic changes towards gender equity in education (Porritt, 2021). Despite these advantages, women continue to encounter substantial barriers to leadership positions, including entrenched societal attitudes and organisational biases that undermine their potential (Bush et al., 2022; Porritt, 2021).

The positive impacts of female leadership are evident across various global contexts. For instance, studies reveal that female leaders are associated with improved learning outcomes (D'sa et al., 2023), enhanced management practices (Kovaleva et al., 2023) and effective support for students with learning difficulties (Coleman, 2009). Additionally, women in leadership positions inspire increased academic participation among girls, fostering a culture of equity and inclusion (Main et al., 2022). In New Zealand, collaborative leadership among female principals empowers teachers and enhances professional development, creating a positive school climate (Court, 2003). Similarly, female principals in the United States implement equity-focused reforms that lead to higher teacher retention and improved student outcomes, particularly in urban schools with large minority populations (Grissom et al., 2021). In Finland, female leaders adopt a holistic approach that prioritises student well-being alongside academic success, contributing to the country's exceptional educational performance (Aho et al., 2006). These examples illustrate that women's leadership advances educational quality and equity globally.

2. SCHOOL LEADERSHIP POLICIES AND PATHWAYS

2.1 School Leadership Policies

The Education Act of the Maldives outlines the standards for and responsibilities of school leaders, with policies developed by the MoE to guide leadership roles (MoE, 2020). The Education Sector Plan (ESP) 2019–2023 emphasises leadership development and capacity-building for school leaders, including tenure-based principal appointments and leadership pathways through teacher registration and licensing (MoE & Ministry of Higher Education, 2019). While these policies ensure merit-based recruitment, they lack a specific focus on gender equity in educational leadership. This general approach to leadership development fails to recognise the unique barriers women face, particularly in accessing higher-level leadership positions.

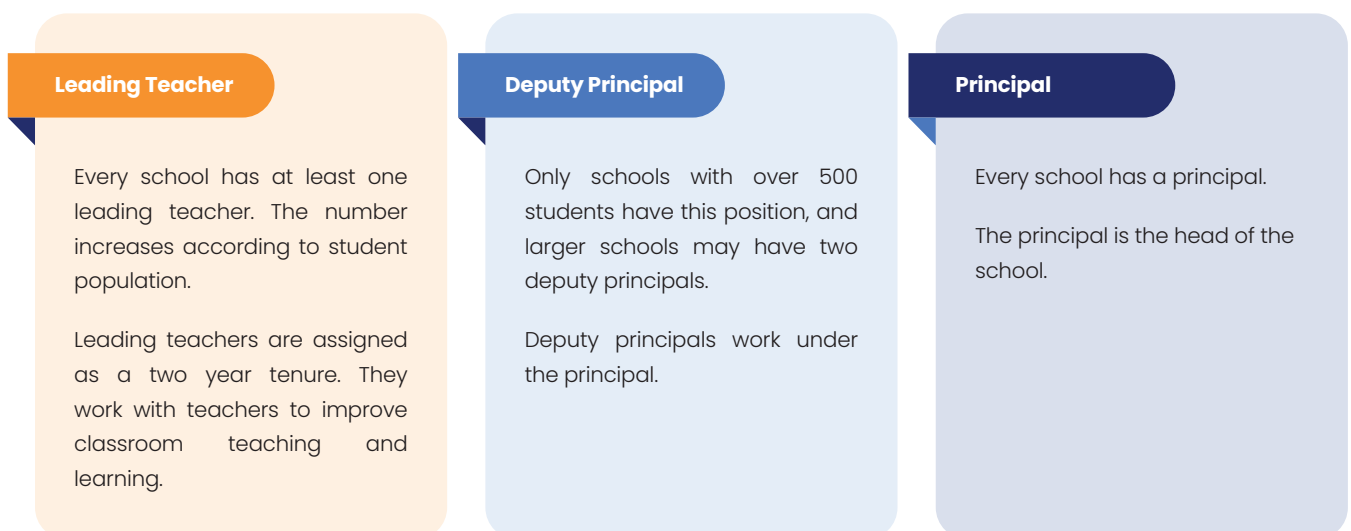
Societal norms and implicit biases often limit women’s advancement to top leadership roles, and the absence of targeted gender equity policies in the education sector exacerbates these issues. GEAP 2022–2026 addresses equitable representation in leadership but lacks concrete strategies to tackle the cultural and structural barriers faced by women. These gaps highlight the need for policies that go beyond equality, ensuring not only equal opportunities but also equitable support and resources for women aspiring to leadership roles.

2.2 Pathways to School Leadership Roles

There are three distinct leadership roles in the Maldives’ school education system. These are leading teacher, deputy principal and school principal as described in Figure 2.

Unlike the positions of principal and deputy principal, which are defined as job categories in the Maldives National Pay Framework, the role of leading teacher is a responsibility assigned to a teacher (Civil Service Commission, 2023). A qualified teacher with two years of teaching experience may compete for a position within a school and be appointed as a leading teacher for a term of two years. In contrast, top leadership positions (principals and deputy principals) are publicly advertised and filled through an open, merit-based selection process. To qualify for top leadership positions, candidates must meet stringent educational and experience requirements, with principals requiring a Level Nine qualification from the Maldives National Qualifications Framework (MNQF) and significant experience in both teaching and educational management.

Figure 2. Leadership Roles in the Maldives’ School Education System



3. WOMEN IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP BY THE NUMBERS

The Maldives has made notable strides over the years in providing access to and completion of education, as well as in women’s representation across various levels of society. Clear policies ensuring that women face no significant discrimination in access to education, health care services or employment have increased their participation in the workforce tremendously over the past few decades. According to the MBS (2024), 65% of civil servants are female, underscoring women’s active participation in the public service. However, this positive trend of female representation declines at the leadership and managerial levels, with only 22.6% of senior and middle management positions in the Maldives being held by women as of 2019 (World Bank, 2024).

Women remain significantly underrepresented in school leadership roles in the Maldives. According to 2023 school statistics, only 27% of school leaders are women, representing only 58 of the 217 public schools in the country (MoE, 2024). Over the past few years, however, the situation has reversed in schools in urban centres. Urban regions present a different and remarkable scenario, with a slightly higher number of female school leaders, as shown in Table 1.

This trend is even more significant in the capital city, Malé, where over 60% of public schools are led by women (see Table 1). According to the results of the National Assessment of

Learning Outcomes conducted in the year 2024, the highest-scoring region is also Malé (Quality Assurance Department & MoE, 2024). Therefore, it can be argued that school leaders in Malé are demonstrating their ability to lead the most diverse and challenging student populations, supporting findings in the literature that women in school leadership may be better than their male counterparts in their instructional leadership roles (Hallinger et al., 2016).

In the country’s rural regions, accounting for more than two-thirds of the nation’s schools, the data indicate that more than 70% of schools have male leaders. This significant imbalance highlights a concerning underrepresentation of women in school leadership, showing the pressing need for greater gender equity within the education system.

Despite the underrepresentation of women in school leadership roles, their presence in the teaching workforce has consistently been significant. At the primary school level, the proportion of qualified female teachers is greater than that of men, even in rural and very remote islands. According to the MBS (2023), schools across the Maldives employ a total of 10,615 teachers, of which 72% are female and the remaining 28% are male (see Figures 3 and 4). In Malé, female teachers constitute 82.1% of the total teacher population, compared to 68.8% in total schools. Therefore, on average, 7 of every 10 teachers in the Maldives are female.

Table 1. School Leadership Statistics in the Maldives for 2019 and 2024 by Gender and Region

	2019			2024		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Whole country	213	168 78.87%	45 21.13%	217	159 73.27%	58 26.73%
Urban centres	30	17 56.67%	13 43.33%	31	14 45.16%	17 54.84%
Capital city	15	7 46.67%	8 53.33%	19	7 36.84%	12 63.16%

Figure 3. Percentage of Teachers in the Maldives from 2017 to 2023 by Gender

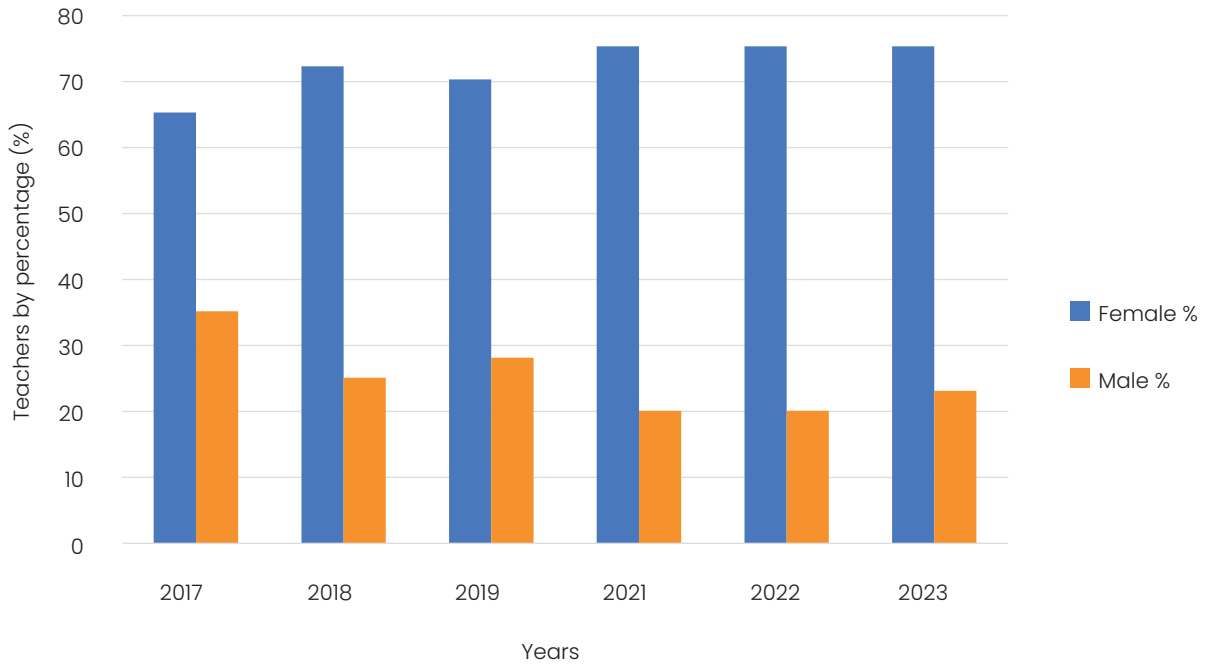
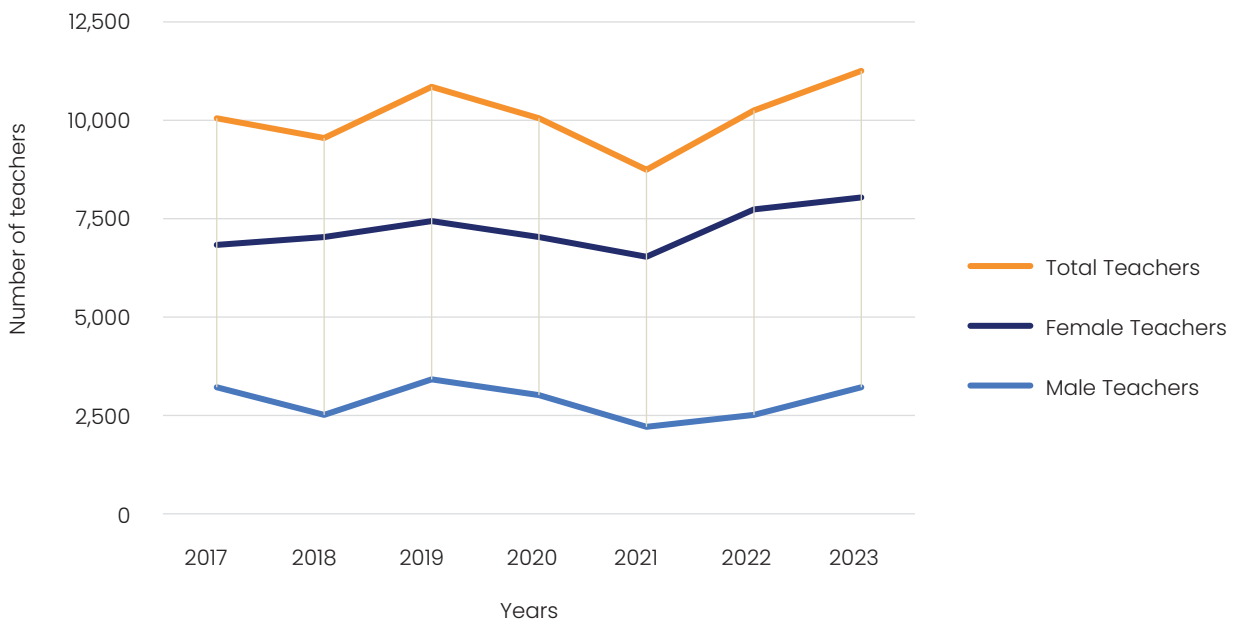


Figure 4. Number of Teachers in the Maldives from 2017 to 2023 by Gender



4. WOMEN IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: BARRIERS AND ENABLERS

4.1 Barriers and Constraints

The disparity between women in leadership roles and those in teaching positions highlights a very significant gap and demonstrates the level of underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, despite policies enabling individuals with proven records of effective teaching experience to pursue leadership positions. Addressing this gap necessitates a shift from mere equality measures to a focus on equity, which acknowledges the additional support women need to overcome systemic barriers. This includes ensuring that leadership training programmes are accessible to women in remote areas, challenging societal norms that limit women's professional advancement and enacting policies that enable women to progress to top leadership roles in education. Without these targeted efforts, women's full potential in educational leadership in the Maldives will remain unrealised.

Although policy provisions in the Maldives focus on establishing equality, women face systemic barriers that hinder their leadership potential, mirroring challenges observed globally. While women may attain leadership positions, traditional gender roles often limit their effectiveness, underscoring the importance of moving beyond equality to achieve true equity. In addition to women's biological functions, such as childbirth and feeding, cultural expectations that bind women to family responsibilities present a daunting challenge for them in advancing to leadership positions (Asian Development Bank, 2007). Given that school leadership is a highly demanding job requiring long hours of work, it is necessary to establish systemic provisions that encourage women to take up these positions while also attending to their familial responsibilities. According to research by Latura (2020) that explored gender equality issues in private sector leadership, employer-supported on-site childcare promotes more work hours for women.

Another contextual barrier inherent in the Maldives is the country's geography as an archipelago of islands separated by the sea, which consistently challenges the MoE's efforts to employ and retain leaders in remote island schools. In this context, female leaders face additional obstacles to assuming these positions due to the lack of policy provisions that establish support systems for them and their families. Therefore, achieving equity in women's leadership in the

Maldives necessitates addressing the intersection of social norms, policy gaps and logistical challenges posed by the country's unique geography.

The merit-based open competitive process for recruitment can also be considered a systemic barrier for aspiring women leaders, as it may not account for implicit biases or the additional societal burdens women often shoulder, such as family care responsibilities. These factors can limit their capacity to pursue advanced qualifications or leadership opportunities. The lack of a vertical promotion system enabling leading teachers to climb the ladder to top management is another factor contributing to the underrepresentation of women in school leadership.

4.2 Enablers for Women in School Leadership

The Maldives has signed a number of conventions and instruments addressing gender equality, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (CEDAW) in 1993 and the CEDAW Optional Protocol in 2006. The Maldives is also committed to the achievement of the SDGs by 2030, including SDG 4 Quality Education and SDG 5 Gender Equality, which together directly align with efforts to address gender equity in school leadership.

Similarly, the Maldivian Constitution upholds the principles of the abovementioned conventions. Under the Constitution of the Republic of Maldives (ratified in 2008), all persons, regardless of gender, are guaranteed the same rights and freedoms without discrimination. The government's policy directions also follow these principles of equality for all. Women in the Maldives operate without the secondary burdens of class, caste, race or gender. Men and women socialise freely, can expect equal pay and equal access to education and live to about the same age. There is no detectable gender preference for male children or parental bias in nutrition or education.

The country's policies also promote women-friendly conditions of employment and women's participation in cooperative societies. The Employment Act (No. 2/2008) prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, marital status or family obligations. It also provides 60 days of paid maternity leave, three days of paid paternity leave for childbirth, two 30-minute

breastfeeding breaks per day and an optional one-year unpaid leave for employees.

Another important and recently established systemic provision to encourage women leadership in the Maldives is the Decentralisation Act of the Maldives, which introduces a 33% quota for women in local councils to enhance their participation in decision-making. According to a survey conducted by the Local Government Authority and the United Nations Development Programme Maldives (2024), the quota is viewed as an effective step for enhancing women's participation in governance and decision-making. In the survey, 79.4% of participants reported that this change brought a positive community impact. This systemic provision is also likely to impact school leadership positively, as the literature indicates that female school leaders are as or more effective than male leaders in many cases.

Another enabler is the National Gender Equality Policy and Framework for Operationalisation, which envisions a society wherein both "women and men are able to realise their full potential and participate in and benefit from democracy and development both in public and private life" (Government of the Maldives, 2009, p. 3). Moreover, the government and the democratic system have allowed the formation of nongovernmental and community-based organisations that view national and atoll- or island-level issues with a critical eye and conduct various programmes and projects to address gender issues, enhance awareness and build capacity and skills to empower women in the society.

The Maldives has made significant strides in ensuring equality through conventions, constitutional provisions and policies. Now is the time to focus on equity, bringing systemic changes that address the specific needs of women, encouraging them to step into leadership roles in schools.

5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommended policy initiatives described below aim to encourage and improve women's representation in school leadership positions.

5.1 Introducing Quotas for School Leadership

O'Neil et al. (2015) reviewed the evidence on support for women and girls' leadership and found that introducing quotas has succeeded in increasing women's access to leadership positions. In the Maldives, therefore, where principalship requires substantial experience in teaching and educational management and, at a minimum, a diploma in leadership, introducing a quota can increase the number of women leaders. Despite women comprising over 72% of the teaching workforce and having the same qualifications as their male counterparts, they rarely advance to leadership roles. This disparity may be influenced by societal expectations and traditional gender roles, with men being perceived as more dominant. Quotas can bridge this gap by ensuring both substantive and descriptive representation of women in leadership positions. According to Rohini and Deanna (2012), quotas can also create positive externalities by inspiring potential women leaders through female role models. Mandated women leaders can demonstrate the benefits of being leaders, encouraging other women to pursue leadership roles and helping them overcome internalised stereotypes.

5.2 Establishing a Vertical Promotion System

As mentioned previously, the Maldives' school education system offers three different leadership roles: leading teachers, deputy principals and principals. While the role of leading teachers is internally assigned and provides some scope for career progression within the school, it is not linked to a more formalised and competitive recruitment process for top leadership positions. This lack of a vertical promotion system, whereby leading teachers or deputy principals could ascend through the ranks in their schools, constitutes an additional barrier to those seeking advancement, particularly women who may already face societal and structural challenges in pursuing leadership roles. Therefore, implementing a vertical promotion system would not only streamline the leadership progression but also provide women with greater opportunities for career growth, fostering gender equity in school leadership.

5.3 Incentivising Relocation

The problem of women's underrepresentation in school leadership is most significant in the rural islands, where over 70% of leadership positions are held by men. As in other countries across the globe, it is not easy to relocate people to rural areas. Although there is limited literature that examines how school leadership can be made more attractive to women in rural regions, there is evidence that suggests that other jobs, such as teaching, can be made more attractive in rural regions through the provision of incentives (Naylor et al., 2019). Therefore, policy provisions that incentivise female leaders to relocate to island schools and assume leadership positions—such as monetary incentives, career guarantees for accompanying spouses and/or housing and childcare support—could mitigate the challenges women face in taking on leadership roles, particularly in the islands.

6. AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

6.1 Research Gaps and Recommendations for Future Research

Women often lack the opportunity to express their opinions in male-dominated organisations (Waheeda & Nishan, 2018). As a result, the challenges faced by women are often not addressed in their policies. Therefore, further research is crucial to listen to women's voices regarding their demands and preferences, and to gain a better understanding of the underrepresentation of women in school leadership.

Research on school leadership is limited in the context of the Maldives, and the effectiveness of female and male leaders in the country's schools is unknown. Hence, comparative research on the effectiveness of women's and men's leadership could contribute to eliminating stereotypical perspectives on women's leadership.

The data on school leadership clearly reveal that more challenging, diverse schools in urban areas are run by women leaders, demonstrating women's potential leadership skills. However, research is limited on why school leadership is unattractive to women in rural areas but attractive to those in urban schools. Hence, research is recommended in this area to obtain deeper insights into the obstacles women face and the reasons for their not assuming leadership roles in the Maldives' rural islands.

6.2 Outreach and Engagement

Collaborative efforts should be encouraged between the government and funding agencies to allocate more gender-responsive financing to implement leadership development programmes that nurture women's skills and confidence, enabling them to assume leadership roles with competence and authority. The government could craft and advance gender-responsive policies with the collaboration of government bodies' community organisations, women's groups and nongovernmental organisations. This would include conducting focus group discussions and promoting awareness to acknowledge women's preferences and needs, as well as advocating for and implementing policies that provide affordable childcare facilities, support flexible working arrangements and ensure equal pay for equal work.

KIX EMAP Learning Cycle Case Study, April 2026



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