



POLICY BRIEF ON WOMEN IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: POLICY STRATEGIES FOR EQUITABLE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN UZBEKISTAN

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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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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
ELDP	Educational Leadership Development Program
EMAP	Europe, Middle East and North Africa, Asia and Pacific
GPE KIX	Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women's representation in educational leadership in Uzbekistan remains limited despite an emphasis on equal opportunities in the 2020 Law on Education. Gender disparities in leadership persist, perpetuated by traditional societal norms, implicit biases and structural barriers. Current policies, such as the National Gender Equality Strategy (2021–2030), fail to adequately address these challenges, particularly in the context of school leadership. This policy brief identifies key issues and offers evidence-based recommendations to promote gender parity in education leadership.

The major findings highlight the absence of targeted measures, such as quotas or affirmative action, to address

gender disparities in leadership roles. The centralised nature of professional development programmes and the lack of capacity-building initiatives for aspiring female leaders further complicate the problem. Moreover, societal stereotypes and implicit biases in leadership selection processes discourage women from pursuing leadership roles.

By addressing systemic barriers, promoting inclusive policies and nurturing a supportive ecosystem, Uzbekistan can open the way for greater gender parity in educational leadership. These initiatives will not only empower women but also enhance the overall quality of educational administration.

INTRODUCTION

Uzbekistan, located in Central Asia, is a double-landlocked country bordered by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. With a population of 36.1 million in 2023, it is the most populous country in the region (World Bank, 2023). Around 50% of the population live in rural areas, and the nation has a young demographic, with over 55% of its citizens under the age of 30 (UNDP, 2025; World Bank, 2024).

Uzbekistan has made significant progress in advancing women's leadership in the education sector, with strong support from both President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and the Ministry of Preschool and School Education. Efforts to enhance gender equality have been central to educational reforms, particularly in promoting women's roles in school leadership (Madaminova and Madalinska-Michalak, 2022).

In Uzbekistan, a significant proportion of the teaching workforce is female, yet women remain underrepresented in senior school leadership positions, such as principals and administrators (United Nations Population Fund, 2022). This gender gap in educational leadership is a central policy concern, as it reflects broader gender inequalities in the workforce, limiting women's

opportunities to participate in decision-making roles and impeding progress towards gender equality.

The underrepresentation of women in educational leadership not only perpetuates gender stereotypes but also affects the broader educational landscape. Research shows that gender-diverse leadership teams are more effective, create a welcoming environment for everyone and provide inspiring role models for all students, especially girls. Promoting women's leadership in education contributes to national efforts for female empowerment and supports Uzbekistan's commitment to achieving the United Nations' SDGs, specifically Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Goal 4 (Quality Education).

To address this issue, it is important to identify and break down the barriers that hold women back, such as cultural expectations, limited training and lack of career advancement opportunities. This policy brief highlights the importance of increasing women's representation in school leadership, arguing that inclusive leadership practices can result in more equal, innovative and high-performing education systems in Uzbekistan.

SCHOOL LEADER POLICIES AND PATHWAYS

In Uzbekistan's centralised system, all regional and local departments adhere to national policies. Currently, school principals and candidates for those positions are required to complete a 144-hour course at the National Institute of Pedagogical Excellence named after A. Avloni, following the Cabinet of Ministers' decree (681-coh 25.12.2023) that outlines the regulations for training candidates for school director positions and issuing management certificates (Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2023). These policies aim to improve school leader recruitment, appointment, training, retention and evaluation. Previously, the appointment of school principals was handled by municipal councils in each district or city in a process that involved voting on one of three candidates proposed by the regional or district education department.

Since January 2023, candidates must possess a certificate from the education management courses at Avloni, but this alone does not guarantee appointment. Each region has established 11-member Councils of School Headmasters, including a chair and a secretary. The council members are selected from the most effective school leaders and are interviewed by ministry representatives.

After obtaining a certificate of successful course completion, candidates can apply for principal positions at schools with vacancies. Candidates apply through a specially developed platform and must meet specific criteria, including holding a diploma in education and teaching and having at least three years of teaching experience at the same school. The regional Council of School Headmasters reviews candidates' portfolios and invites them to interviews. If a candidate garners a majority vote from the council, they are recommended for the position, and the hiring procedure follows.

These new schemes aim to restore decision-making authority regarding appointments to the Ministry, thereby enhancing quality assurance in schools. Moreover, to ensure consistency and validity in leadership training, all directors are required to complete the single, Ministry-approved 144-hour programme offered exclusively at Avloni National Institute. In addition to new candidates, current school directors must complete this training and obtain a certificate to retain their positions, which also include a 50% salary increase for three years.

Currently, the performance of existing principals is not formally evaluated. While there is a school rating system, it is under review, with plans to link school evaluations to the appraisal system for school directors and to incorporate financial incentives in the future.

All these policies and procedures are designed to be gender neutral, ensuring equal opportunities for all candidates. No specific features either restrict female candidates or advantage them in the recruitment and appointment processes, an approach that promotes fairness and inclusivity, allowing individuals to compete solely based on their qualifications and capabilities. In general, the absence of policies that favour or disadvantage any gender reinforces a meritocratic system. By focusing on objective criteria, such as educational qualifications and relevant experience, the process aims to attract a diverse pool of applicants. Moreover, the commitment to equality in school leadership positions is crucial to fostering balanced representation in educational administration. It empowers women to pursue leadership roles without facing systemic barriers while also encouraging male candidates to support gender equity in the workplace. Overall, these measures contribute to creating a more inclusive environment in schools, where leadership is determined by skill and performance rather than gender.

However, a gender-neutral approach in recruitment and appointment also presents challenges that demand consideration. While neutrality is deemed the best option, it may ignore existing gender inequalities. Women, for example, may still face societal expectations or implicit biases that affect their access to leadership roles. Furthermore, this approach may lack supporting mechanisms for dealing with challenges such as work-life balance issues, maternity leave and biases in the hiring process. Additionally, some stakeholders may find this neutral approach to be unnecessary or ineffective when dealing with systematic biases that need specific attention.

While gender-neutral recruitment and appointment processes promote fairness and inclusivity, they must be carefully implemented alongside measures that address existing inequalities. A truly equitable system requires not only neutrality in policies but also active efforts to remove implicit biases, support underrepresented groups and ensure that all candidates have an equal opportunity to succeed.

WOMEN IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP BY THE NUMBERS

In recent years, Uzbekistan has seen a notable increase in the number of women stepping into leadership roles across various sectors. In September 2019, there were 332,909 female teachers out of a total of 481,604 teachers (69.1%). The nation

had 3,151 female school directors (32.2% of 9,779) in September 2014, and by September 2019 that number had increased to 3,689 (37.2% of 9,925), but it had fallen to 3,496 (34.8% of 10,025) by September 2023.

Statistics on the Number of School Directors, 2019			
No.	Regions	Directors	Female directors
1	Karakalpakstan Republic	723	251
2	Andijan Region	764	376
3	Bukhara Region	533	143
4	Jizzakh Region	544	103
5	Kashkadarya Region	1,136	282
6	Navoi Region	361	120
7	Namangan Region	705	243
8	Samarkand Region	1,245	387
9	Surhandarya Region	921	151
10	Sirdarya Region	309	92
11	Tashkent Region	889	771
12	Fergana Region	942	345
13	Khorezm Region	540	162
14	Tashkent City	313	263
Total number		9,925	3,689
Percentage of female directors			37.2

Source: Ministry of Public Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2024

WOMEN IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: BARRIERS AND ENABLERS

Uzbekistan's school management policies are gender inclusive and do not discriminate directly or indirectly, but the institutional practice of school principal training, which is centrally based in the country's capital and requires a full-time, month-long presence, indirectly discriminates against women. Due to the multiple roles women play in the cultural, social and economic context of Uzbekistan, long-term absence from their permanent geographic location can create challenges that prevent women from opting for leadership roles.

Uzbekistan is a strongly patriarchal society in which women are positioned primarily as mothers and wives with various responsibilities at the family level. Career and professional development are often seen as secondary to women's main family-oriented roles, and it is important that career responsibilities do not conflict with family roles. On this account, leadership roles, which are based on male leadership styles and requirements, are typically not attractive to women.

No research has examined the area of female educational leadership in Uzbekistan. The available reports of the international agencies monitoring the context do not specify any barriers specifically applicable to the education sector, but an OECD report (2019) describes the challenge of balancing family and career for women in educational leadership. The barriers outlined above are based primarily on the desk research-level analysis conducted by the KIX EMAP Learning Cycle 6 group from Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan has implemented the following programmes and strategies to support women's advancement into leadership positions:

School for Women Leaders programme: Developed by the Academy of Public Administration and the State Committee for Family and Women, this 552-hour training programme aims to prepare women for leadership roles. As part of the programme, 100 active women were trained, contributing to an increase in female leaders across government positions from 7% in 2016 to 27% in 2022.

National Women Leaders Caucus: The National Women Leaders Caucus in Uzbekistan represents a transformative step towards achieving gender equality. Launched in 2023 by UNDP and the Senate, it unites over 180 women leaders across 14 regions. This initiative strengthens women's leadership skills, fosters decision-making capabilities and offers mentorship, training and networking opportunities. By focusing on the governance, education and business sectors, it addresses

gender disparities and promotes inclusive development. Through shared experiences and collaborative strategies, the caucus plays a pivotal role in empowering women and advancing sustainable progress in Uzbekistan.

Educational Leadership Development Program: Funded by the US Embassy in Uzbekistan, ELDP focuses on enhancing the professional capacities of school administrators, including women, through targeted professional development opportunities. Over two years from 2023 to 2025, 28 public school principals and vice-principals will be trained in leadership and pedagogy. These participants will later train 280 additional school leaders across Uzbekistan's 14 regions, amplifying the programme's impact. A select group of 14 out of the 308 participants will attend a two-week programme in the US to shadow their counterparts' jobs in host schools. In October 2025, the programme will conclude with a conference in which participants will share insights, report on their action plans and advocate for further educational reforms.

Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality in Uzbekistan Until 2030: This national strategy promotes gender equality by ensuring equal participation in various spheres, particularly education. It emphasises increasing women's involvement in decision-making and leadership roles, with a focus on appointing women to senior positions in government and educational institutions.

Uzbekistan has also adopted several policies, laws and commissions that support women in leadership:

- 1. Legal framework enhancements:** Uzbekistan has adopted several laws to protect women's rights and promote gender equality, including the following:
 - Law on Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men
 - Law on Protection of Women from Harassment and Violence
- 2. Commission on Gender Equality:** This commission monitors the implementation of legislation related to women's rights and promotes women's participation in leadership roles within educational institutions.
- 3. Committee on Women and Gender Equality:** The committee's task centres on advancing gender equality through state policy proposals, legal improvements and parliamentary oversight. Key areas include enhancing women's roles, protecting rights, addressing social challenges and fostering cultural and educational initiatives.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Uzbekistan's 2020 Law on Education emphasises equal opportunities in education management but lacks targeted measures addressing gender disparities in leadership. Traditional gender norms and biases discourage women from pursuing or being selected for leadership roles (UNDP, 2021). Women's representation in school leadership is critical for advancing gender equity and ensuring inclusive education systems, yet significant barriers persist in leadership roles in Uzbekistan despite progress in female participation in education. This section outlines recommendations for adapting existing policies or establishing new policies to address these barriers and leverage enabling conditions.

Current Policies and Potential Adaptations

Affirmative action policies: Introduce quotas or gender-sensitive hiring practices to ensure increased representation of women in school leadership. Evidence from Rwanda demonstrates that quota systems significantly increase women's representation in leadership (Hassim, 2003).

Mentorship and training programmes: Establish mentorship networks and leadership training tailored to the specific needs of women educators, with a focus on flexible delivery modes. The implementation of the National Gender Equality Strategy (2021–2030) remains underdeveloped due to limited capacity-building resources and few gender-focused technical assistance initiatives – constraints highlighted by the ADB evaluation and country assessment (ADB, 2024c). Research shows that mentoring enhances confidence and readiness for leadership (Chisamya et al., 2012).

Decentralisation of professional development: Reform centralised training systems by offering localised, flexible programmes to make leadership development more accessible to women. Current professional development programmes in Uzbekistan are gender neutral but fail to address specific barriers faced by women, such as balancing family responsibilities with leadership roles (OECD, 2019). Flexible professional development initiatives have proven successful in countries such as Sweden (Lundkvist et al., 2015).

Cultural shift: Implement public campaigns to challenge societal stereotypes and normalise women's leadership roles. Addressing implicit gender biases is essential. School leadership selection criteria should be adapted to include women-friendly processes and mandatory female gender-sensitivity training for hiring committees, along with monitoring mechanisms to ensure fairness in leadership appointments.

Leadership ecosystem: Foster shared ownership of school governance by empowering all stakeholders—school heads, teachers, parents and local authorities—to support inclusive leadership practices. Collaboration with international organisations, such as UNESCO's Capacity Development for Education programme, can provide valuable support for policy refinement (UNESCO, 2024).

New Policies or Initiatives

Prioritising women during recruitment and creating additional benefits through policy to support women considering school leadership can bridge the initial gender parity gap. Such benefits could include flexible working options, financial support for educational and professional advancement, maternity leave support policy and other benefits. The following new policies are recommended:

- **Defining and adopting a clear concept of educational leadership in policy and training.** It is important to define the concept of school leadership at the policy level, make clear distinctions between management and leadership and identify school leaders' key performance indicators based on their leadership competencies.
- **Decentralising required professional development in school leadership.** Professional development can be managed through a decentralised approach in several ways: allowing autonomy for regional training hubs, cooperating with higher education institutions to provide recognised professional development services and opening the sector to private and international providers. Several options could be piloted initially to determine their efficiency.
- **Piloting a mentorship programme for female school leaders.** Several female mentoring initiatives could be adopted in the education sector to pilot a mentoring programme for women. For instance, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) women's We-Fi mentoring initiative, Inspiring Women Through Mentorship, as well as a mentoring programme for business women in Uzbekistan, the Mentoring for Women Entrepreneurs programme, take a very similar mentoring approach to nurturing female leadership agency.
- **Developing women-friendly recruitment procedures and human resources policies.** A review of existing human resources policies in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour may be required to introduce these changes.

Potential Impact

Promoting autonomy within schools fosters a sense of shared ownership and accountability. Creating a collaborative atmosphere can empower women, making them more likely to pursue leadership positions and actively participate in governance.

Building a supportive ecosystem that includes teachers, parents, and local authorities can enrich the school environment. This

network of support can motivate women to step into leadership roles, knowing they have the community's backing.

By putting these recommendations into action, we can significantly enhance women's involvement in school leadership in Uzbekistan. Addressing systemic barriers, nurturing a supportive culture and providing accessible professional development will promote a fairer, more inclusive landscape for educational leadership.

AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

Given the notable challenges that women face in achieving leadership roles in education in Uzbekistan, it is essential to conduct further research on the **socio-economic and cultural factors behind their underrepresentation**. A thorough study should look at how these factors differ across various regions and socio-economic groups, offering a clearer picture of the hurdles women encounter in their leadership journeys. This could involve qualitative approaches, such as interviews and focus groups with female educators to capture their personal experiences and highlight systemic barriers and societal stereotypes. Additionally, analysing existing data on women's career progression in education would support the pinpointing of critical gaps and disparities that need to be addressed in policy-making.

Another important area to explore is the **effectiveness of mentoring programmes** designed for aspiring female leaders in education. Research should focus on how women-to-women mentoring impacts professional growth and leadership ambitions, examining how these initiatives can build supportive networks that empower women. Furthermore, pilot programmes aimed at providing flexible professional development opportunities should be assessed to determine how well they attract more women into leadership positions. This research could also investigate the advantages of adopting supportive recruitment practices and workplace policies that prioritise women, such as flexible work options and maternity leave support. The findings of these studies will not only guide policy decisions but also promote a more inclusive educational environment that champions and nurtures female leadership.

Based on the evidence collected through the desk research on the available data regarding school leadership and female leadership in education in Uzbekistan, it is evident that a lack of research, data and statistics hinders effective decision-making in the area. Therefore, it is crucial to conduct research that considers a wide range of sampling, as the hypothesis discussed throughout this policy brief suggests that a myriad of factors may influence female career progression to leadership roles in various geographical and socio-economic segments.

One of the highest barriers to empowering leadership at the individual school level is the absence of the concept of leadership in existing policy documents and governance systems. At the policy level, introducing leadership elements into the daily practice of school heads can stimulate the initiation of leadership visioning. It is vitally important, however, to make the policy viable by modifying the relevant institutions to support the leadership ecosystem by, for example, encouraging more autonomy at the school level and offering a shared ownership of the school at all levels (school principals, deputies, teachers, support teams, students, parents and local affiliated authorities).

Research in the areas suggested above will allow for a better understanding of the gaps in the system that impede women from attaining leadership positions at the school level. It will contribute to designing a road map for women-friendly school leadership policies that could encourage more women to consider leadership careers in schools by breaking through 'female-unfriendly' systems and practices and existing social stereotypes and challenges.

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