



CREATING OPPORTUNITIES: ADVANCING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN SINDH, PAKISTAN

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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

EMAP	Europe, Middle East and North Africa, Asia and Pacific
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GPE KIX	Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange
NEP	National Education Policy
OOSC	Out-of-School Children
SELD	School Education and Literacy Department
SESP	Sindh Education Sector Plan
SPSC	Sindh Public Service Commission
TALIS	Teaching and Learning International Survey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

School leaders have an important role in transforming schools, and recent studies show that schools with female leaders tend to perform better than those with male leaders with the same resources (Global School Leaders, 2024). This highlights the importance of women as school leaders, not only to improve school performance but also to give confidence to young girls to continue their education and become future school leaders and decision-makers themselves. Globally, most schools are led by men, and this is also the case in Sindh, Pakistan, the region upon which this policy brief focuses; the brief seeks to explain why there are so few women as school leaders in Sindh and how the number can be increased.

Women in Sindh are relegated to lower social standing from the very start by the small number of girls' schools, which leads to low numbers of female students and ultimately few female school leaders, in addition to few women professionals in the private sector. Women are appointed as school leaders in girls' schools, but mixed-gender schools more commonly have male than female leaders. Among the 40,978 schools in Sindh, only 5,499 have female school leaders, representing 13 per cent of the schools.

This low number of female school leaders in Sindh is a reflection of the grey areas in educational policies in which we see no focused attempts to promote women as school leaders. The recruitment process for school leaders takes one of two paths, with 40 per cent recruited by the Sindh Public Service Commission (SPSC) and 60 per cent through the promotion of teachers on the basis of long service (seniority). These recruitment channels do not seek to increase the number of female school leaders, and those women who are appointed lack the authority to make decisions. Capacity building during in-service training programmes prioritises administration over the development of instructional leaders. Nevertheless, initiatives in Sindh, like girls' stipends, are supporting girls in receiving education at schools and have been found to be positive and supportive. Such initiatives should be extended to higher education to further increase opportunities for women.

This brief offers three recommendations for policymakers: 1) create opportunities for women to become school leaders by providing girls with access to schools, 2) remove barriers to women receiving leadership appointments at mixed-gender schools, and 3) fund facilities for women to continue their educations at university level, which would make them eligible for post-university leadership training.

1

INTRODUCTION

Women in school leadership roles exemplify the significance of girls' education and empowerment, inspiring communities to rethink traditional sociocultural biases and helping young girls to unlearn the belief that only men should be decision-makers. Increasing women's leadership in schools therefore requires a transition from a gender-neutral system to a pro-women system that is focused on integrating women rather than mere access or equal participation (Goyal, 2015).

In Pakistan, patriarchy is a deeply rooted structural issue, and most women lack personal agency, which limits their decision-making and leadership skills. The right to education is constitutionally guaranteed under Pakistan's Article 25-A, but 13 million girls nevertheless remain out of school due to economic, social, and infrastructural obstacles. Furthermore, most girls enrolled in schools face the possibility of being forced to drop out due to poverty and sociocultural challenges (Ahmad, 2024). This policy brief aims to help create an environment that will allow for more female school leaders who can then address these issues at the grassroots level.

1.1 Country Context

Pakistan is a debt-distressed country with an annual inflation rate of 24.8%. Fiscal policies are either directed by the International Monetary Fund or politically motivated rather than being people-centric and sustainable (Kiani, 2024). Consistent debt and low economic growth have reduced the availability of education financing, which was around 1.9% of GDP in 2024 (Abbasi, 2024). Politically, Pakistan remains unstable, with frequent changes in parliamentary leadership that lead to policy inconsistencies, short-sightedness, and a general lack of consensus amongst political parties on key areas, including the economy and education.

1.2 Education Context

The education system in Pakistan is divided into three main streams: public schools, private schools, and deeni madaris (religious institutes) (Halai & Durrani, 2021). The formal education system is composed of primary, middle, secondary and tertiary education. The 18th Amendment to the Constitution, introduced in 2010, decentralised education to the provincial level. Under Article 25-A, the state is responsible for providing free and compulsory basic education to all children until Grade 10 (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973, Art. 25-A); however, chronically low public education financing

has resulted in inadequate infrastructure, limited access to schools, a lack of basic facilities, high pupil-teacher ratios, multi-grade teaching, and limited efforts towards teacher training and innovation. More recently, climate-induced floods have damaged existing school infrastructure.

Poverty and sociocultural beliefs – alongside greater travelling distances due to the inadequate number of schools – have led to girls' education in Sindh being undervalued and disregarded, while early marriages and migration can result in children dropping out of schools, especially girls. Indeed, Pakistan has the largest number of out-of-school children (OOSC) in the world – 26.2 million –, and according to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2023), Sindh was home to 7.6 million OOSC in 2021–22, of whom 4.18 million were girls. Despite various interventions, female enrolment is still far from reaching equality with male enrolment in Sindh.

1.3 The Importance of School Leadership and Women in Leadership Roles

School leadership has an important role in improving student learning outcomes: it is the second most significant factor after classroom teaching (Bergmann et al., 2022). Lack of women's leadership in primary schools also reinforces amongst young children the wider sociocultural gender biases, resulting in them believing that women cannot become effective leaders and perpetuating the generational cycle of social disempowerment of women.

Research shows that schools led by women often have better educational outcomes than schools led by men with the same resources (Global School Leaders, 2024). A UNESCO report similarly shows that effective schools are more likely to be led by women than lower performing schools (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2024). In Mozambique, there are lower dropouts at schools led by women, and in Togo, there are better exam results, higher graduation rates, and smaller gender disparities. The 2018 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), which included 48 countries, found that more schools with instructional leadership were led by female than male school leaders. A study in Chile of 381 schools also found that female school leaders improved pedagogical practices and teacher retention rates, while the World Management Survey – an analysis of eight countries' data – indicated that schools led by women had higher quality management (Bergmann et al., 2022).

2

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP POLICIES AND PATHWAYS

2.1 School Leadership Policies

National and provincial education policies in Pakistan do, to some extent, consider the need for and importance of in-service training for school leaders. The 2009 National Education Policy (NEP), for example, acknowledged that the majority of school leaders in Pakistan are unprepared and untrained for the roles they are expected to perform. The NEP 2009, therefore, pledged to develop the capacity of school managers through in-service training programmes. Likewise, the 2017 NEP acknowledged ineffective school leadership with a promise to prepare qualified, competent, and committed educational managers by providing them with access to in-service training; this has already been implemented in Sindh province.

In Sindh specifically, there are four major policies and education reforms that address the role of school leadership. The first is the School Clustering Policy (Revised) 2021, which highlights the need to support headteachers in performing their roles more effectively. Second is the School Education Sector Plan and Roadmap for Sindh (2019–2024), which proposes building the capacities of headteachers through policies on cluster-based continuous professional development for teachers, headteachers, and administrators. Interestingly, this roadmap recognises the low proportion of women in management positions and seeks to develop and implement programmes to train female candidates to take up management roles at different levels, from headteachers.

Third, the Sindh Education Sector Plan (SESP) 2019–2024 presents a vision for improving education, but significant gaps remain in its approach to promoting female teachers in leadership roles. Fourth, according to the Government of Sindh's rules for school education and literacy development, all aspiring headteachers must receive relevant in-service training to be eligible for promotion.

Although these policies and education reforms are encouraging, there remain significant gaps that affect the provision and quality of in-service training and development for school leaders. First, the policies and reforms do not explicitly highlight the instructional leadership role of school leaders; references to school leadership use the word 'manager', which highlights the managerial rather than academic role of school leaders (e.g., NEP 2009, NEP 2017). A careful analysis of the content of the training for school leaders under the School Clustering Policy in Sindh and the mandatory in-service training for headteachers

similarly reveals mostly managerial, administrative, and financial aspects, with limited attention to the academic and instructional leadership roles of school leaders.

In addition, the policies related to in-service training have not been sufficiently implemented; both the authors' experience and research suggest that a very low proportion of school leaders have access to in-service training opportunities and that the quality of in-service programmes has been questionable (Gopang & Zarif, 2016).

Lastly – and most importantly – women in school leadership have received limited or even no mention in education policies and reforms. Women in patriarchal Sindh face tremendous challenges in becoming and being school leaders, which necessitates more directed support for prospective and current female school leaders to enable them to perform their roles more effectively.

2.2 Pathways to School Leadership Roles

Our limited literature search found no robust policy directives in Sindh for recruiting new school leaders generally, nor women specifically. According to Shah et al. (2024), secondary school headteachers in Sindh are mainly recruited based on seniority, with little emphasis on academic qualifications or leadership skills. About 40% of headteacher positions are filled through direct appointments by the SPSC, which holds irregular recruitment cycles every two to five years, leading to many schools having vacant headteacher positions. The remaining 60% are filled through promotions of existing senior teachers.

It is commonly believed that any experienced teacher can become a headteacher without the need for specific leadership training. However, Memon (2010) and Bush (2016) have argued that teaching experience alone does not prepare a person for effective school leadership because the demands of managing a school are distinct from those of teaching in it. Many headteachers are also not given clear job descriptions or professional development opportunities before taking on their roles.

The 2019–2024 strategic plan of the School Education and Literacy Department (SELD, 2019) addresses gender inequality in management by highlighting training programmes and policies that promote women's access to leadership roles at various levels within the education sector. However, recruitment of new female school leaders is not mentioned.

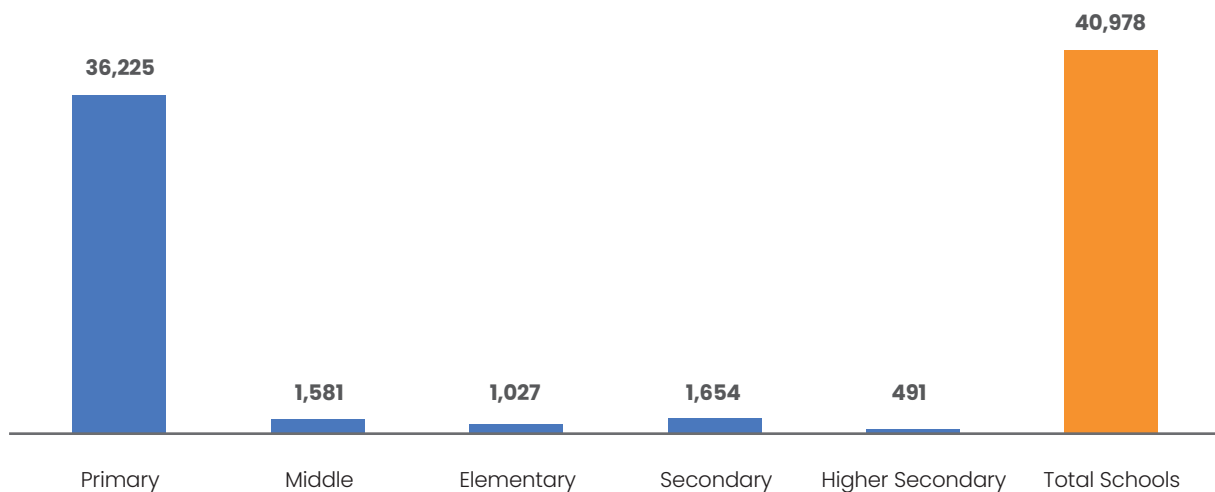
3

WOMEN IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: BY THE NUMBERS

3.1 Overall Representation of Women in School Leadership Roles

Public-sector schools in Sindh are managed and operated by the SELD of the Government of Sindh. These schools are categorised into five levels: primary, middle, elementary, secondary, and higher secondary. Their numbers are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Number of Public Sector Schools in Sindh, Pakistan



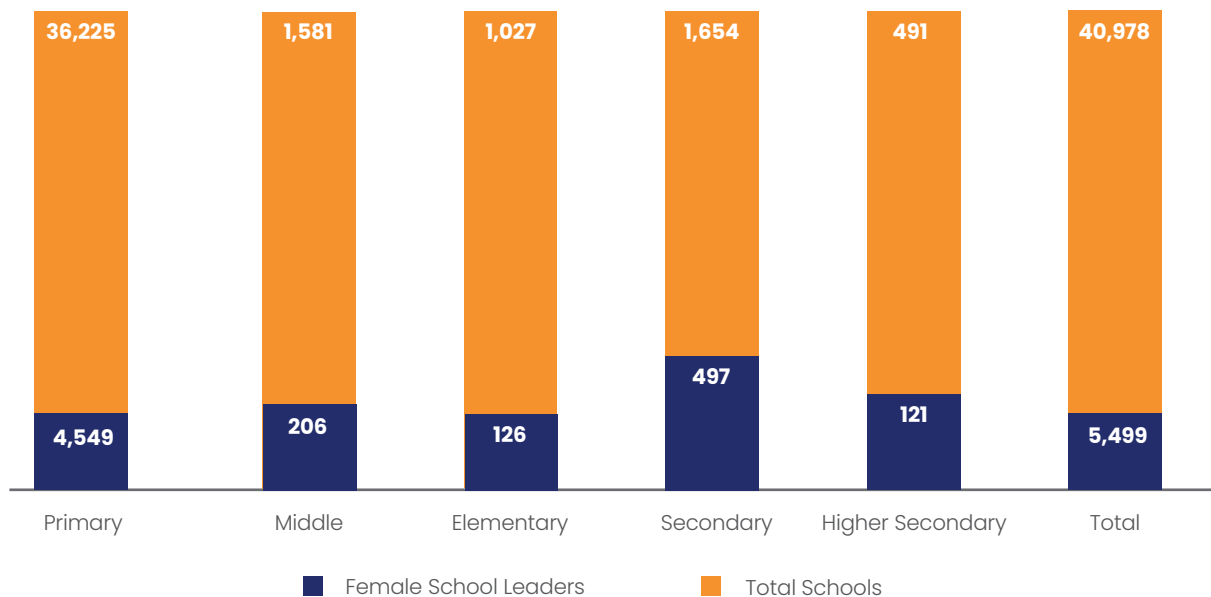
Source: SELD, 2024

3.2 Female School Leaders

School leaders in public schools are appointed by the SELD. According to the 2023–24 Annual School Census Report, there were only 5,499 women working as headteachers in the 40,978 public-sector schools in Sindh, indicating the importance of increasing the number of female school leaders.

Numbers of female school leaders at primary, middle, elementary, secondary, and higher secondary school level are shown in Figure 2. Overall, only 13 per cent of public-sector schools in Sindh are led by women.

Figure 2: Number of Female School Leaders in Schools in Sindh, Pakistan

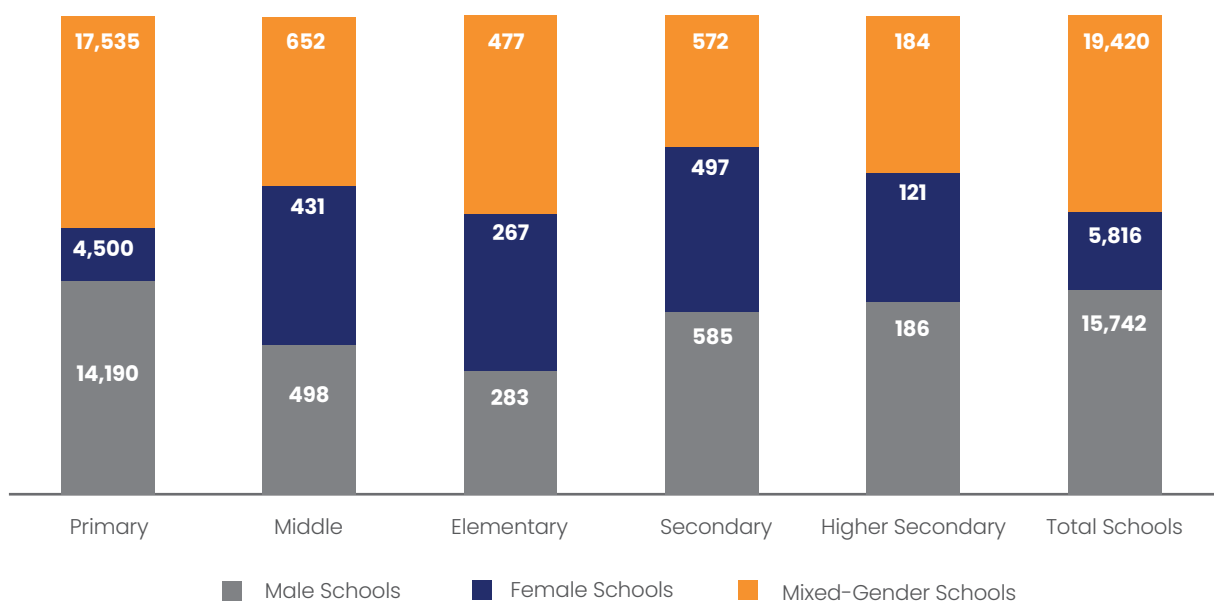


Source: SELD, 2024

The proportion of female school leaders is small at every school level. One reason is that women are primarily appointed as leaders at girls' schools, which limits the number of female school leaders because the number of girls' schools is also low (see Figure 3). There are more mixed-gender schools than male

or female schools, but the proportion of female school leaders in mixed-gender schools remains low, and more research is needed to establish the reasons for this.

Figure 3: Number of Male, Female, and Mixed-Gender Schools in Sindh, Pakistan



Source: SELD, 2024

4

WOMEN IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: BARRIERS AND ENABLERS

4.1 Bureaucratic Challenges

In Pakistan's centralised and bureaucratic educational system, female headteachers face significant challenges to their decision-making authority and influence within their roles. Research indicates that female headteachers often lack the power to make crucial decisions about hiring, firing, transfers, and staff accountability, relegating them to merely implementing directives from higher authorities (Shah et al., 2024). This situation is exacerbated by systemic barriers that undermine their authority, particularly in human resource management and maintaining school discipline. Consequently, female headteachers are frequently viewed as administrative figures rather than empowered leaders, limiting their ability to effect change or foster innovative practices within their schools (Shah et al., 2024). This lack of influence not only affects their professional autonomy but also diminishes the potential for transformative leadership in educational settings, which is essential for fostering an inclusive and effective learning environment.

4.2 Enablers

Women in patriarchal and male-dominated societies often require an enabling environment in which to build and improve their leadership skills, such as mentorship programmes and leadership training. Such programmes can help in enhancing communication skills, interpersonal skills, and the ability to work under pressure and lead a team of diverse people. At the school level, girls' stipends from the Sindh SELD also support girls in continuing their education.

5

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of this review, the following policy recommendations could help to create opportunities for women as school leaders:

1. The SELD should increase the number of girls' schools to improve access to education and establish a pipeline into professionalisation and leadership for women.
2. The SELD should appoint more female school leaders at mixed-gender schools to balance gender in leadership. This may necessitate a quota system and/or a public relations campaign.
3. The Sindh Teachers Education Development Authority should provide continuous professional development programmes tailored to women as school leaders to increase their professional confidence and equip them with skills and knowledge to overcome gender biases.
4. The SELD should establish gender-specific selection criteria to mitigate any disadvantages women may face in the recruitment and selection process.

5. The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan should offer free education to women at universities or offer stipends or scholarships for women to attend university or in-service leadership training.
6. The SELD should make interest-free loans available for women to continue their education at higher levels.

These policy recommendations would begin to address the many challenges faced by women seeking to become school leaders and would help to increase the number of women in school leadership. Seeing women leaders in schools would, in turn, communicate a positive message to female students. More girls would have access to schools, and more women would have access to professional leadership opportunities in education and other sectors.

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AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

An important area requiring further investigation is why fewer women than men are appointed to lead mixed-gender schools in Sindh. Reducing barriers to leadership in these schools could offer many more opportunities for women.

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