



POLICY BRIEF

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Enhancing Gender Inclusivity in Indonesia's School Leadership Pathways

Executive Summary

- This policy brief addresses the significant underrepresentation of women in school leadership roles in Indonesia, aiming to highlight and propose solutions for the gender gap in educational leadership.
- Women constitute 68% of teachers but only 44% of school leaders, with this disparity increasing at higher education levels.
- Female teachers show a lower conversion rate from leadership training to principal appointments (3.7%) than their male counterparts (5.15%).
- Existing regulatory frameworks, while not explicitly discriminatory, create an uneven playing field.
- Recommendations include actions for the:
 1. Central government: integrating gender-responsive training into leadership programs; revising regulations to eliminate gender bias in leadership selection processes; ensuring equitable recruitment mechanisms for madrasah leadership; expanding grassroots gender equality initiatives; incorporating gender equality metrics into national education standards; and conducting monitoring and evaluation thoroughly by collecting gender-disaggregated data and conducting longitudinal studies to track progress.
 2. Sub-national governments: introducing incentive schemes (e.g., childcare allowances, flexible work) and implementing transparent selection processes.
 3. Community-based organizations & development partners: advocating for gender equity, promoting work-life balance policies, and collaborating on data collection to track progress.

1. Introduction

Despite making up a significant portion of the teaching workforce in Indonesia, women remain underrepresented in school leadership roles. This gender gap in educational leadership is a central policy concern that highlights broader gender disparities in the Indonesian workforce.

Nevertheless, addressing the issue is not straightforward. Indonesia has a very complex education service delivery among two different ministries: the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (hereafter 'MoPSE'-previously 'Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology' or MoECRT) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA). MoPSE is the primary ministerial agency in charge of delivering education and typically leads education reform and policies; it has a decentralised provision of public education, with district governments responsible for service delivery. Under MoPSE, the district governments oversee early childhood, primary, and junior secondary education, while provincial governments oversee senior secondary education and vocational education equivalent to the latter. MoRA, on the other hand, provides Islamic education and has a centralised oversight of madrasahs. There are over 60 million students and over 4 million teachers in over 500 thousand schools in Indonesia (MoPSE, 2024a; MoRA, 2025).

This policy brief will focus on the policy regulating and supporting the pipeline and/or recruitment of teachers as school leaders. The authors conducted several interviews with school leaders to enrich our insights.

2. School Leader Policies and Pathways

2.1 Policies & Pathways

Over the past 20 years, the government of Indonesia has continuously delivered policy reforms to regulate school leaders' selection; from one that is heavily political, to one that is based on competencies; from one that considers school leaders as managers to one that expects them to be instructional leaders (Government of Indonesia, 2003, 2007, 2010, 2018a, 2021, 2022, 2023b, 2024b; Pusat Penelitian Kebijakan Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2017). Through the recent reform, the government has included teacher leadership training called Program Guru Penggerak (Teacher Activators Program) as a prerequisite for school leadership candidacy. Even though the appointment of school leaders is still heavily under the authority of subnational governments, this pre-service leadership training gives more nuance to the profile of prospective school leaders.

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

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

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

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

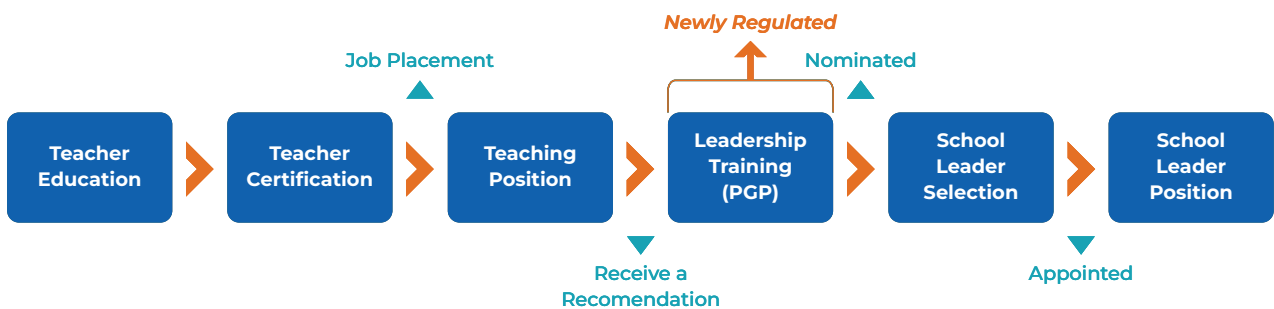


Figure 1 Indonesia's School Leadership Pathway

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

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

The policy reform will surely impact the educational landscape in a way that will shape future school leaders as instructional leaders. Nevertheless, since the regulatory framework does not

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

2.2 The Importance of School Leadership and Women in the Role

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

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

Female school leaders also play a significant role in driving innovation and continuous learning among teachers. Some principals establish structured peer-learning models, ensuring teachers regularly reflect on and improve their teaching practices. One leader explained, *"Every Thursday, my teachers stop teaching in the afternoon and instead learn from one another. We document our progress and share ideas. This has transformed our teaching culture"* (Informant 2). Such initiatives improve teacher quality and create leadership pipelines within schools, demonstrating how female-led institutions cultivate long-term capacity building.

One school leader also emphasised the importance of mentorship and teacher development, ensuring that her teachers were prepared to teach and committed to improving their craft. *"Many of my teachers [in my ECE school] only had high school diplomas when they started. I guided them through structured training and encouraged them to pursue higher education. Now, they are more confident and effective in the classroom"* (Informant 3).

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

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

3. Women in School Leadership: In Numbers

In schools under the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE), females make up 68% of all teachers, but only 44% of school leaders are females (Figure 2). The gaps are wider, the higher the level of education. The percentage of female school leaders is higher at the primary level (49%), compared with the junior secondary (34%), senior secondary (29%), and vocational (27%) schools. This illustrates that, at all levels of education, female teachers are less likely to advance to leadership positions. Unfortunately, historical data on the proportion of female school leaders is not easily accessible to the public. Therefore, the observation of whether there is an increase in female school leaders is limited. There is, however, an interesting finding in the lower grade levels, especially in early childhood education (ECE). In ECE, it is perceived that women are better caretakers compared to their male counterparts, thus more suitable principals (Informant 3).

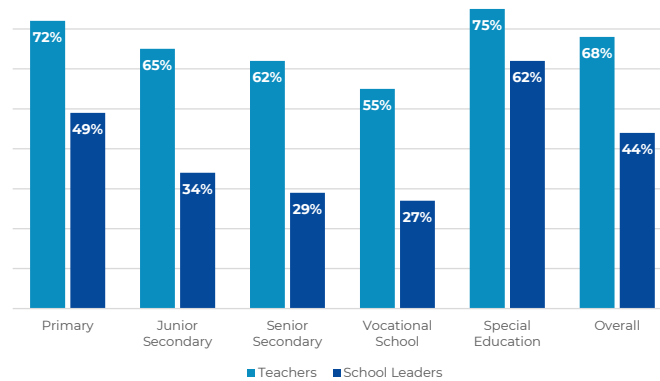


Figure 2 Proportion of Female Teachers and School Leaders by Education Level under MoPSE

Source: MoPSE, 2024b, 2024a

Apart from the low level of representation for female leadership, disparities also occur in regions in Indonesia. The western part of Indonesia has a higher proportion of female school leaders compared to the eastern part of Indonesia (Figures 3 & 4).

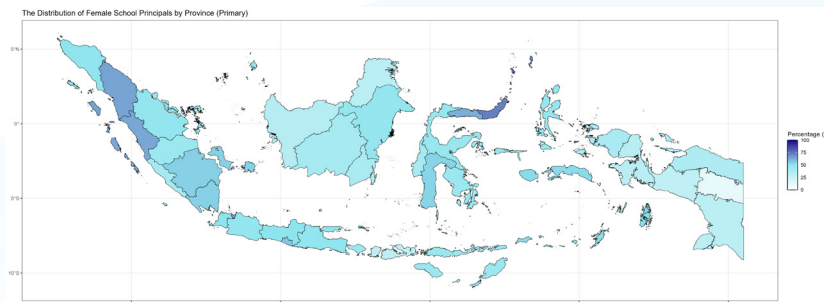


Figure 3 The Distribution of Female Primary School Principals by Province

Source: MoPSE, 2024c

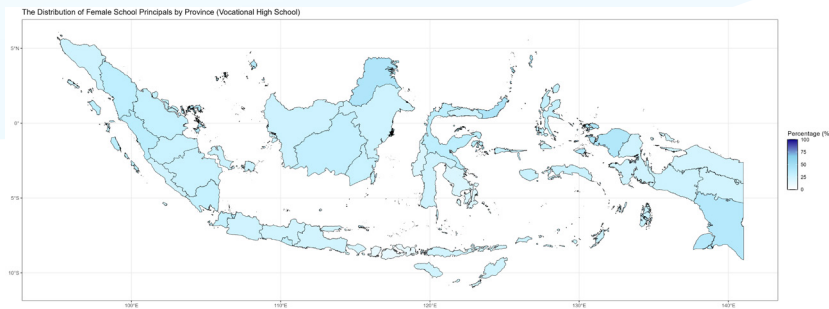


Figure 4 The Distribution of Female Vocational High School Principals by Province
Source: MoPSE, 2024d

Current regulation about principal assignment (MoPSE Regulation No. 40/2021) states that teachers who aspire to be principals should have a certificate of completion of the Teacher Professional Development Program or Program Guru Penggerak (PGP). The program itself focuses on enhancing teachers' learning strategies and instructional leadership. Only then can teachers fulfil one of the administrative requirements to participate in the selection process to become principals. The graph in Figure 5 illustrates the number of teachers who have passed the certification program by gender compared to the number of teachers who were selected as principals by gender.

The data depicted in the graph highlights a notable gender disparity in the transition from teacher leadership training to school leader appointments. While significantly more female teachers (66.94%) than male teachers (33.06%) completed the certification program, the conversion rate from program completion to principal appointment remains disproportionately higher for males. Specifically, 5.15% of trained male teachers were appointed as school leaders, compared to only 3.70% of trained female teachers.

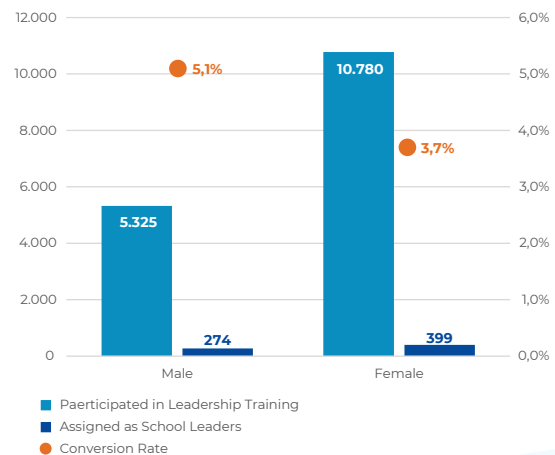


Figure 5 Proportion of Teacher Professional Development Program (PGP) participants to Appointment as Principals (by gender)
Source: MoPSE, 2022

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

According to Margret et al. (2021), "most female teachers need more time to become principals." In the provinces of their studies, female teachers, on average, need 19.8 years to become principals, while male teachers need 16.1 years, or 3.7 years faster than female teachers. Gibson and Purba (2020) reveal that academic or professional qualifications are not the issue. In fact, "most teachers in Indonesian primary schools are qualified women" (p. 14), and they are no more likely than men to quit teaching positions.

4. Women in School Leadership: Barriers and Enablers

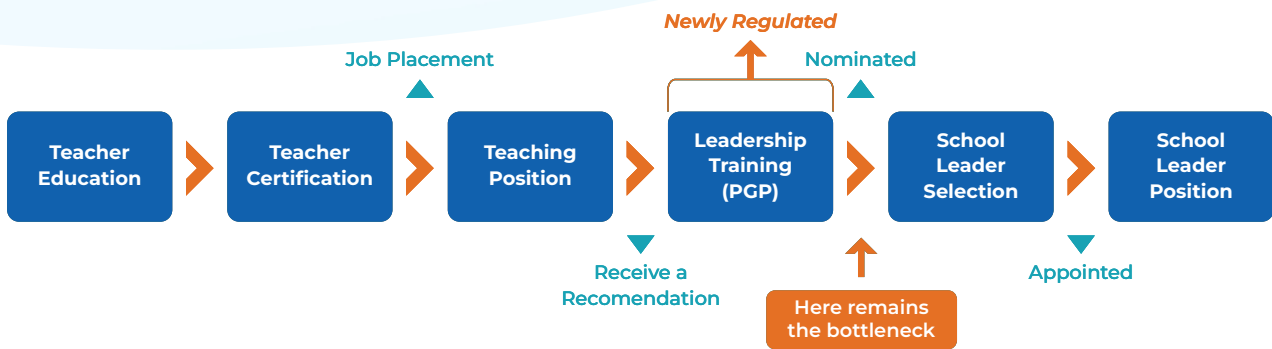


Figure 6 Indonesia's Female School Leadership Pipeline

4.1 Barriers and Constraints

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

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

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

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

senior teachers resist the promotion of younger teachers into leadership positions, causing friction between schools (Informant 2).

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

4.2 Enablers and Policy Levers

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

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

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

At the policy level, the Indonesian government has introduced family-friendly regulations to support teachers, particularly female educators who juggle work and family responsibilities. The regulation on fulfilling children's rights promotes a balanced role between parents and encourages workplace policies that accommodate working mothers (Government of Indonesia,

2024a). However, more targeted interventions, such as structured mentorship programs for aspiring female principals, could enhance this impact.

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

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

5. Recommendations

5.1 Recommendations for the Central Government

- a. **Integrate Gender-Responsive Training in School Leadership Programs.** The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) should enhance leadership training programs such as Program Guru Penggerak (PGP) by incorporating gender-responsive modules. These should include social-emotional regulation training, as recommended by school leaders. *"Women in leadership face dilemmas. Decision-making requires emotional balance. We need more training on social-emotional skills in leadership programs"* (Informant 2). Additionally, mentorship from experienced female leaders should be formalized. *"We need more women leading and mentoring other women in leadership training"* (Informant 3).
- b. **Revise Regulations to Eliminate Gender Bias in Leadership Selection.** Current leadership selection policies should be reviewed to remove biases against women. Many teachers face systemic barriers due to maternity leave policies, which often exclude them from selection processes. *"Maternity leave is a right. But in some places, women don't get selected as leaders because authorities assume they'll take leave"* (Informant 1). The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) should establish national guidelines to prohibit the exclusion of female candidates based on assumptions about reproductive roles.
- c. **Ensure Equitable Recruitment Mechanisms for Madrasah Leadership.** The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) should align its leadership selection for madrasah principals with gender-responsive policies. Special consideration should be given to mentorship programs for female candidates in religious schools, where male-dominated leadership persists.
- d. **Expand Grassroots Gender Equality Initiatives.** The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (MoWECP), in collaboration with MoHA and MoPSE, should implement

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

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

5.2 Sub-National Governments

- a. **Introduce Incentive Schemes Specifically Targeted at Female School Leaders** District and provincial governments should introduce childcare allowances and flexible work arrangements for female school leaders.
- b. **Implement Transparent and Inclusive Selection Processes.** Sub-national governments should ensure that leadership selection is based on merit, rather than personal networks. MoPSE's School Leader and Superintendent Selection System (Sistem KSPS) should be fully utilized to minimize political influence.
- c. **Encourage Professional Learning Communities for Female Leadership.** Female-led mentorship initiatives should be expanded within existing teacher and school leader working groups (KKG and KKKS). Experienced school leaders have emphasised the need for structured mentorship to prepare more women for leadership roles. *"A good leader is one who creates new leaders"* (Informant 2).

5.3 Community-based Organisations and Development Partners

- a. **Actively Support Female Teachers by Fostering A Culture that Values Gender Equity** Parent-Teacher Associations and local groups can play a pivotal role in encouraging and advocating for female leadership in schools. Development partners and NGOs should collaborate with local governments to create structured mentorship networks. Existing peer-support initiatives, such as *Kelompok Guru Belajar*, should be expanded to include leadership-focused programs for female teachers.
- b. **Advocate for Work-Life Balance Policies for Female Leaders.** Community-based organisations should push for family-friendly policies at the district level, ensuring flexible school placement policies for female school leaders with young children.
- c. **Collect and Analyze Data to Track Progress.** To ensure data-driven policy, organizations should collaborate with governments to track the progress of female representation in school leadership positions.

5.4 Potential Impact

- a. Integrating gender-responsive modules in leadership training and addressing biases in recruitment and selection processes has the potential to significantly increase the number of qualified female school leaders. This will not only address the current gender gap but also set a precedent for future reforms promoting inclusivity.
- b. By leveraging the expertise and experiences of female leaders through mentorship and training programs, schools will benefit from diverse leadership perspectives. Research shows that gender-diverse leadership can enhance decision-making, school management, and instructional strategies, which will help improve student outcomes (Global School Leaders, 2024).
- c. Encouraging gender equity at grassroots levels, such as through the Children and Women Friendly Village/District (Desa/Kelurahan Ramah Perempuan dan Anak/DKRPPA initiative and Parent-Teacher Associations, will help challenge societal norms and promote broader acceptance of female leadership. This shift in community mindset can create a supportive environment for aspiring female leaders.
- d. Transparent and merit-based selection processes for school leaders have the potential to reduce political influence, fostering trust in the system. Additionally, incorporating gender-equality indicators into the Minimum Service Standards (MSS/SPM) will institutionalize accountability for gender equity, ensuring sustained progress.
- e. Incentive schemes, such as childcare allowances and bonuses, have the potential to alleviate some of the systemic and personal barriers hindering female leaders, allowing them to focus on their professional roles. Empowered female leaders will act as role models, inspiring greater participation of women in leadership across other sectors, contributing to economic growth and social equity.
- f. By collecting and analyzing data from development initiatives, stakeholders can better understand barriers and enablers to female leadership. This evidence-based approach will guide future policy reforms and ensure alignment with national and international gender equity goals

6. Limits & Further Areas of Investigation

To refine strategies and ensure targeted interventions, additional research is necessary to fill key knowledge gaps:

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

- b. The lack of historical data on the representation of female school leaders limits the ability to evaluate whether existing initiatives have succeeded in increasing gender parity. Longitudinal studies are essential to track progress and inform future policy decisions.
- c. Future research should consider how intersecting factors, such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and disability, impact women's access to leadership roles. This will ensure a more inclusive approach to addressing gender disparities.
- d. The authors found that the interviewed school leaders represent women who had the privilege of a supportive environment, whether from their families, spouses, or communities. Future research should examine the challenges faced by women who lack family backing, face workplace hostility, or experience systemic discrimination in leadership selection. However, this pattern among the interviewees also provides a crucial insight: supportive environments significantly enable female teachers to advance into leadership positions. Instead of viewing this as an exception, it suggests a policy direction—creating systemic interventions to replicate the conditions of “privilege” these women had.

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