



# ADVANCING GENDER EQUITY IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: EMPOWERING WOMEN LEADERS IN BHUTAN'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

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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

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|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| <b>BCSR</b>    | Bhutan Civil Service Rules   |
| <b>EMAP</b>    | Europe, Middle East and North Africa, Asia and Pacific             |
| <b>GPE KIX</b> | Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange |
| <b>LDP</b>     | Leadership Development Programme                                   |
| <b>MoE</b>     | Ministry of Education  |
| <b>MoESD</b>   | Ministry of Education and Skills Development                       |
| <b>NCWC</b>    | National Commission for Women and Children                         |
| <b>RCSC</b>    | Royal Civil Service Commission                                     |
| <b>UNICEF</b>  | United Nations Children's Fund                                     |

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report on Bhutan pertains to the underrepresentation of women in school leadership roles in the country's education sector and explores pathways to enhance policies that support their advancement. Although women make up 41% of the teaching workforce, only 0.8% constitute school leaders, with 51 women serving as principals and vice-principals across government and private schools. Several factors limit women's progression into leadership, including sociocultural barriers, traditional gender roles and institutional constraints. Additionally, barriers such as the absence of gender-sensitive policies, limited professional development opportunities, societal expectations and the need to balance family and professional responsibilities further limit their progression to leadership. These limitations are exacerbated by a lack of mentorship, role models and networking opportunities, particularly in rural areas, where cultural norms often restrict women's leadership potential.

Although Bhutan has made progress in gender equality through initiatives such as the National Gender Equality Policy and work-life balance provisions, such as maternity leave and childcare facilities, these measures have not adequately addressed the systemic barriers to women's leadership. This report stresses the need for targeted interventions and transformative change in Bhutan's educational landscape. These include adapting

existing policies to create gender-sensitive workplaces, introducing structured leadership tracks, expanding family-friendly policies and creating leadership training programmes, mentorship programmes, gender quotas and campaigns to encourage women educators to aspire to leadership roles. Additionally, international best practices, such as leadership models from Singapore and the Principal Pipeline Initiative, can provide structured pathways for women leaders by promoting early identification, professional development and inclusive recruitment. Implementing these initiatives may support women's progression into leadership, thereby supporting the nation's commitment to Gross National Happiness.

Furthermore, by both challenging traditional gender norms and promoting diversity and role models for future generations, these interventions are likely to create ripple effects that not only empower individuals but also increase women's representation in leadership roles. Doing so would promote a cultural shift leading to greater gender equity in school leadership, which aligns with Bhutan's national development goals and fosters a more inclusive, progressive society. Overall, this report underscores the critical need for collaboration among stakeholders, comprising policymakers, educators and the community, to address systemic barriers and unlock the full potential of women in educational leadership.

# INTRODUCTION

The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in secondary schools in Bhutan is a major challenge that affects not only gender equality but also the overall quality and equity of education. Figure 1 illustrates that although women make up 41% of the teaching workforce in Bhutan, only 0.8% of them hold leadership roles, such as principal or vice-principal (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2019). This gap exists not because women lack competence or interest but due to deeper systemic and societal issues that make it difficult for them to take leadership positions. As a result, their voices and opinions are frequently absent from important decisions regarding school management and inclusive educational practices.

Moreover, the lack of female school leaders perpetuates traditional gender stereotypes and deprives students and staff of the diversity of views and experiences that women leaders can bring to education. Female leaders often prioritise inclusivity and student well-being, promoting an environment

in which all learners flourish (Deki & Rigdel, 2023; UNICEF, 2024). Addressing this gap is not only a matter of equity but also a catalyst to improve the overall quality of education in Bhutan. Targeted policy interventions to close the leadership gap are needed to overcome these challenges and address systemic barriers. To unlock the potential of women leaders and enrich the education system with diverse perspectives and innovative approaches, structural and cultural barriers must be addressed. Diversity in leadership is associated with better school performance, greater responsiveness to the needs of stakeholders and inclusive educational practices (Tobden, 2020). Empowering women in leadership roles can encourage future generations to defy gender stereotypes and drive progress across multiple sectors. If this issue is not addressed, the lack of women in leadership roles will continue to prevent the Bhutanese education system from becoming a more dynamic and inclusive setting for learning and growth.

**Figure 1: Representation of women in school leadership**



Source: MoE (2019).

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# SCHOOL LEADER POLICIES AND PATHWAYS

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Bhutan has made commendable progress in advancing gender equality through the Eleventh Five-Year Plan and initiatives undertaken by the Women and Children Care Division. These efforts have effectively addressed domestic violence and discrimination, but little progress has been made concerning the participation of women in leadership roles, particularly in education. Women continue to encounter individual, societal and structural barriers that hinder their progress, and they face cultural expectations that reinforce gender roles, gender-biased promotion processes and limited opportunities for professional development (Deki & Rigdel, 2023; UNICEF, 2024). Moreover, women perceive themselves as less confident and less capable (Dema, 2017; NCWC, 2012), further exacerbating and widening the gender gap.

## School Leadership Framework in Bhutan

In Bhutan, school leadership is governed by the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC) Manual, which outlines the recruitment, appointment and training of school leaders. Recruitment starts with a staffing needs analysis and vacancy announcements through various media. Newly appointed leaders undergo orientation training to acquire foundational leadership skills. The Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014–2024 (MoE, 2014) underlines the importance of stringent selection processes for principals to ensure effective leadership and improved educational outcomes. The National Education Policy mandates that all principals be qualified educators with substantial teaching and leadership experience (Ministry of Education and Skills Development [MoESD], 2024). However, no specific policies—such as a quota system or mentorship for women school leaders—currently address gender equity in school leadership.

## Pathways to School Leadership Roles

The pathway to school leadership roles typically adheres to a structured progression informed by clearly defined qualifications, professional experiences and requisite skill sets. This systematic approach aims to equip educational leaders with the essential competencies needed to effectively manage schools, cultivate supportive and engaging learning environments and promote enhanced educational outcomes. The various pathways are delineated in the following sections.

## Qualifications and Career Paths

Candidates vying for a school leadership role require a bachelor's degree or equivalent qualification endorsed by the MoESD. A master's degree in educational leadership is not mandatory but is encouraged. Aspiring school leaders generally start their professional journey as classroom teachers. Over time, they advance to roles such as head of a department, in which they gradually build their leadership capability.

## Formal Steps and Certification Requirements

Candidates for school leadership roles must undergo formal training and certification, primarily through the Leadership Development Programme (LDP), which emphasises administration and strategic planning. According to the Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014–2024 (MoE, 2014), participation in the LDP is mandatory. To meet the requirements for continuous professional development, aspiring leaders must also complete the School Leadership Certification, which evaluates their proficiency in instructional leadership and financial management.

## Relevant Policies and Institutional Mandates

For school leadership, the Bhutan Civil Service Rules (BCSR) 2023 offer a structured framework with a focus on professional conduct, accountability and promotions based on merit. The BCSR guarantee that leaders fulfil educational requirements by outlining precise standards for ethical behaviour and career progression. Research also suggests that professional development and adaptive leadership practices are critical for career progression and for meeting educational expectations (Dorji, 2021).

## WOMEN IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP BY THE NUMBERS

Table 1 shows the gender distribution of teachers in Bhutan, where among 10,158 teachers, women constitute 44% (4,466) and men 56% (5,692). Although women make up a substantial part of the teaching force, men slightly outnumber them. This gender gap indicates the challenge in achieving gender balance within the education sector. The disparity may be influenced by factors such as societal norms, recruitment

patterns and barriers to professional progress for women. The figures highlight a need for targeted policies to support gender equality in the teaching profession, particularly in leadership roles, where women are less represented. Addressing this imbalance would not only promote fairness but also enrich the diversity and inclusivity of Bhutan's education system.

**Table 1: Number of teachers in Bhutan by gender**

| Country | Female | Male  | Total Number of Teachers |
|---------|--------|-------|--------------------------|
| Bhutan  | 4,466  | 5,692 | 10,158                   |

Source: MoE (2019).

Table 2 presents an overview of women's representation in school leadership roles in Bhutan. Out of a total of 51 female school principals, 14 serve in private schools and 37 in government schools. Of those 37 in government schools, 35 serve in secondary schools and only 2 in primary schools.

In contrast, there are 468 male school principals. This stark disparity underscores a significant gender gap in leadership, particularly at the foundational level of education, highlighting the need for targeted policies and interventions to promote greater gender equity in school leadership.

**Table 2: Representation of women in school leadership**

| Women Principals | Private | Government                                    |
|------------------|---------|---|
| Total = 51       | 14      | 35 (Secondary schools)<br>2 (Primary schools) |
| Categories       | Rural   | Urban   |
| Principal        | 10      | 29  |
| Vice-Principal   | 1       | 11  |

When examined regionally, women principals are predominantly concentrated in urban areas, with 29 serving in urban schools compared to only 10 in rural schools. This disparity suggests that urban areas may offer better opportunities, resources or support systems for women to assume leadership roles, whereas rural areas may pose challenges, such as logistical, cultural or systemic barriers.

In addition to principals, the data reflects gender disparity in other leadership positions. Among vice-principals, only one woman serves in a rural school, whereas 11 serve in urban schools. This uneven distribution indicates a similar trend

wherein urban settings are more conducive to women's advancement to leadership roles. Furthermore, only three women occupy positions as chief district education officers, the highest level of administrative leadership in education. This stark underrepresentation in senior leadership underscores the significant gender gap in decision-making and governance within Bhutan's education sector. Overall, these findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to promote gender equity in educational leadership across all levels, particularly in rural areas and senior administrative roles (District Education Records, 2024).

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# WOMEN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: BARRIERS AND ENABLERS

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## Barriers and Constraints

In a patriarchal society such as Bhutan, women school leaders encounter numerous systemic barriers that arise from institutional policies, deeply rooted cultural norms and traditional practices affecting women's participation and advancement in leadership roles.

**Institutional policies:** Although Bhutan has made efforts to promote gender equality, women in education still face challenges in regard to assuming leadership roles. No specific policies support women, such as flexible working hours or leadership training designed for them, which makes it harder for them to move forward in their careers. A study by Dema (2017) shows that women leaders in education often have fewer opportunities for professional development than men. Additionally, institutional promotion criteria that prioritise continuous career requirements often affect women who take breaks for family responsibilities, making it harder for them to rise to leadership positions.

**Lack of mentorship and role models:** One major challenge for women aspiring to school leadership is the lack of female role models in senior leadership positions. As Chuki and Turner (2017) highlight, Bhutan's political and institutional systems are slow to change, often sidelining women in leadership decisions. The lack of visible women leaders makes it difficult for aspiring female leaders to find mentorship and guidance, which is critical to overcoming the challenges that come with leadership roles.

**Societal and cultural barriers:** Women aspiring to leadership roles face significant challenges, primarily due to societal perceptions that view their primary responsibility as homemaking while often undermining their confidence, capabilities and decision-making (Chuki & Turner, 2017; Dema, 2017; NCWC, 2012). Other contributing factors include women's lack of confidence and their lower status within society (Dema, 2017; Tshering, 2015); patriarchal structures within society erect further barriers. Balancing motherhood and career adds yet another obstacle to women's professional growth. Cultural and social challenges such as gender stereotypes, segregation, misogyny and a lack of confidence, competence and ambition for leadership further limit their opportunities. Consequently, these gender or societal norms greatly restrict the participation of Bhutanese women in leadership positions.

**Systemic barriers:** Bhutan has no established quota system specifically designed to promote women in leadership roles, as the country focuses on offering equal opportunities and pay for career advancement, regardless of gender. The RCSC

implements a merit-based system that enables individuals to advance their careers in government agencies based on their skills, qualifications and performance (NCWC, 2023), with similar practices followed in the private sector. However, even if equal opportunities exist, women still face systemic, cultural and societal barriers affecting their representation in leadership roles (Chuki, 2018; Jayachandran, 2020).

## Enablers and Policy Levers

Bhutan has implemented several key initiatives to promote gender equality and support women in leadership. A key initiative was the creation in 2004 of the NCWC, which leads the country's efforts to ensure gender equality, helping other organisations by offering training, expert advice and support in making policies, rules and guidelines. The NCWC also conducts research and tracks how gender-related programmes are working across various sectors (NCWC, 2023).

In addition to institutional support, Bhutan has introduced measures to help women balance work and family life. For example, ministries and agencies provide early childhood care and development centres (Chan et al., 2021). Women also benefit from six months of paid maternity leave (Subba, 2016) along with annual and medical leave (NCWC, 2023). Du (2024) highlights that such gender-responsive policies create equitable opportunities and help lower barriers related to pay disparities and family responsibilities, making it easier for women to move into leadership roles.

Bhutan's National Gender Equality Policy (NCWC, 2020) offers clear guidelines for promoting gender equality. This policy aligns with global best practices, such as the Principal Pipeline Initiative in the United States, which has successfully improved student outcomes and principal retention by systematically selecting, training and supporting school leaders (Gates et al., 2019).

The best-performing education systems, such as those of Singapore, Shanghai (China) and Finland, provide useful lessons in developing strong school leaders. In Singapore, for instance, teachers with leadership potential are identified early and guided through specialised leadership pathways. These tracks include personalised support, structured training and thorough evaluations. Key attributes are prioritised, such as collaborative skills, values orientation and a commitment to lifelong learning.

Adapting these best practices to Bhutan's context could significantly enhance women's representation in educational leadership, contributing to both gender equity and improved educational outcomes.

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# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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## Adapting and Introducing New Policies or Initiatives

Although the government of Bhutan is actively working to empower women by encouraging their participation in leadership roles, traditional societal norms and the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles persist as significant challenges. To address these issues, it is important to adapt existing policies to bridge the gaps. Potential measures include the following:

- introducing quotas based on competence to ensure equitable representation of women in decision-making roles;
- implementing mentorship programmes, such as appointing credible female mentors, to inspire and build confidence and leadership skills; and
- fostering gender-sensitive and supportive workplace environments that encourage inclusivity, including childcare services, flexible work arrangements and family-friendly policies.

Such targeted policy adaptations can empower women by enabling them to contribute fully to the nation's development and, at the same time, support equitable access to educational opportunities.

Research indicates that women leaders often practice collaborative and inclusive leadership, enhancing teacher motivation and school effectiveness. For example, a study by UNICEF (2024) reports that their participatory approaches focus on social justice and the promotion of gender equity. To promote such practices, Bhutan could introduce the following new policies to support an increase in women's leadership in education:

- Establish institutional support systems to help women overcome societal barriers and build confidence.
- Revise principal recruitment policies to emphasise inclusivity and leadership potential.
- Develop tailored programmes that promote/build educational leadership and confidence-building for women.
- Pair aspiring leaders with experienced female mentors to foster career growth.
- Regularly monitor and evaluate representation to identify gaps and refine interventions.

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## AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

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### Data and Research

In Bhutan, women constitute only 0.8% of school leadership positions. This report recommends conducting longitudinal studies to understand their career trajectories by shedding light on patterns, barriers, workplace challenges and the extent of gender inequality in school leadership. In addition, application documents, selection interviews and recruitment records of women applicants for leadership roles could be analysed to expose systemic biases and emerging trends.

Subsequently, in order to understand their lived experiences in school leadership, a qualitative phenomenological study is suggested. While not formally documented, evidence suggests that schools led by women have excelled in both academic and co-curricular domains. In this regard, comparative case studies of schools led by women and men could further throw light on differences in leadership practices, school outcomes and community perceptions, providing a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of gender dynamics in school leadership.

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## CONCLUSION

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This report examined women's representation in educational leadership in Bhutan, highlighting the disparities between male and female school principals. The analysis indicated a significant gender gap, with only 51 women serving as school principals compared to 468 men. Furthermore, female leadership is observed to be a small number at the primary school level, with only a handful in these positions.

The findings highlight that systemic barriers likely contribute to this significant gender gap, including societal expectations, institutional challenges and limited access to leadership development opportunities, thereby hindering women's advancement to educational leadership.

This report suggests interventions such as leadership training programmes for women, gender-inclusive policy reforms (such as gender-inclusive hiring and promotion practices) and mentorship initiatives to address the gender gap.

Subsequently, to enable greater gender equity in school leadership, collaboration is recommended among stakeholders, such as policymakers, educational institutions and others, to create an enabling environment that empowers women to take on leadership roles. By addressing these disparities, Bhutan is likely to cultivate a more inclusive and balanced educational leadership landscape that benefits both educators and students.

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