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Women teach while men lead: A systematic review of hindrances to women advancement to school leadership in Kenya

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Abstract
Background *Women constitute majority of Kenya's teaching workforce. Yet they remain substantially underrepresented in school headship and other senior educational management positions. This paper presents the findings on the challenges hindering women from ascending to leadership position.*
Method and material*: The study was based on a systematic review of published literature. The study followed a structured search of academic databases, institutional repositories, and other reports. The study followed a systematic review approach informed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. Studies reviewed were predominantly qualitative and published between 2007 and 2026. We particularly conducted a search on Google Scholar, Web of Science and Research Gate. A total of fifteen articles met the inclusion criteria and were then analyzed to address the study objectives.*
Results: *The study revealed six major barriers to women advancement to school leadership were common across the studies reviewed-sociocultural and patriarchal norms; policy implementation gaps; biased recruitment and promotion practices; negative stakeholder attitudes and gender stereotyping; work–family conflict and the burden of domestic responsibility; limited access to mentorship and psychological factors such as diminished confidence linked to role-congruity pressures. The study concluded with recommendations for policy aimed at closing Kenya's persistent gender disparities in school leadership in Kenya in particular and globally.*
Keywords: *hindrances, women, school leadership, systematic review*

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I. Introduction

Globally, women make up the majority of the teaching work force (UNESCO; 2024; UNECO, GEM Report, 2025; UNICEF, 2024; World Bank, 2026) In the United Kingdom, 63% of secondary school teachers are female (DfE, 2022). Women comprise 71% of the teachers in Australia (Liddy & Hanrahan, 2017), and in Kenya, 6 out of 10 teachers in both primary and secondary schools are women (APHRC, 2024).

In pursuing gender equality, the Constitution of Kenya (2010) anticipates that no one gender should dominate public institutions and decision-making bodies. The constitutional provision seeks to promote equitable representation, participation, and opportunities for both women and men in governance, leadership, employment, and other spheres of national development (Nderitu, 2026; GoK, 2010; NGEC, 2026). Despite women being majority in the teaching works force and the constitutional provisions towards gender equality, men continue to dominate leadership positions in both public primary and secondary schools (Makori, 2022; ILO, 2020; OECD. (2020).

II. Statement of the Problem

Despite the commitment of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) and other policy interventions to aimed at enhancing women's gender equality, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions (UN Women, 2021). In Kenya, women constitute a substantial proportion of the teaching workforce (APHRC, 2024), yet school leadership roles are predominantly occupied by men (WERK, 2026). Existing literature on the causes

of gender disparity in school leadership- particularly in Kenya remains fragmented. Given the extensive evidence of gender disparity in school leadership, a comprehensive understanding of how gendered pathways in school leadership emerge despite sustained policy interventions is essential. This systematic review seeks to address this knowledge gap by identifying and synthesizing existing studies on the challenges encountered by female school leaders in Kenya

III. Objectives of the study

This study sought to address the following specific objectives;

i. To identify the hindrances to women advancement to school leadership positions in Kenya.

ii. To examine how the hindrances, manifest across various levels of education

IV. Methodology

The study followed a systematic review approach informed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. The literature reviewed was predominantly qualitative and drawn substantially from peer-reviewed journal articles. Given the heterogeneity of methods and outcome measures across the included studies, a narrative thematic synthesis was used rather than a statistical meta-analysis.

Literature searches were based on multiple sources including; ERIC, Google Scholar and Research Gate. Some studies were drawn from institutional repositories of Kenyan universities and government reports. Search terms combined variants of "female" or "women" with "school leadership," "head teacher," "principal," "educational management," and "Kenya," These were looked against other key terms describing hindrances such as "challenges, “barriers and "obstacles,"

Data sources included in the study were determined based on some predetermined criteria;

- The study focused on Kenya
- The study focused on Africa but with a substantial Kenyan component
- Addressed school level leadership and decision making positions
- Reported empirical findings on hindrances, challenges, barriers, and
- Were available in full text in English language.

Table 1 presents a summary of the data screening process

Table 1. Summary of the screening process.

S/No	Description	# of records
1	Records identified through database and grey-literature search	40
2	Records after duplicates removed	31
3	Records screened by title and abstract	31
4	Records excluded (not focused on Kenya; not addressing challenges/barriers	13
5	Full-text sources assessed for eligibility	18
6	Sources excluded after full-text review (insufficient relevance or duplication of findings)	3
7	Sources included in the final analysis	15

A search of databases yielded a total of 40 records that were considered to be relevant. After removing duplicate entries, 31 records were retained further consideration. These records were then subjected to an initial screening based on their titles and abstracts to determine their relevance to the study focus. During the screening stage, 13 records were excluded because either they did not focus on the Kenyan context or failed to address the hindrances to women advancement to educational leadership positions. This process resulted to 18 full-text sources to be assessed for eligibility. Finally, a comprehensive full-text review was conducted to evaluate the suitability of the

remaining sources. At this stage, 3 sources were omitted because they did not sufficiently address the objectives of the study objectives or because they presented findings that substantially duplicated those already represented in other selected studies. Ultimately, 15 sources satisfied all inclusion criteria and were retained for the final analysis. These sources formed the evidence base for the systematic review, providing insights into hindrances to women advancement to educational leadership in Kenya.

Data was extracted based on the author(s) and year of publication, geographic focus, methodology, scope, and theme. These were then grouped into thematic categories through iterative comparison across sources, following the conventions of thematic synthesis for qualitative and mixed-methods evidence.

V. Limitations of the Review

The study was based on a couple of limitations that should be noted. First, majority of the studies were limited in scope. They were based on either a small sample or geographical location. This could limit generalizability to other contexts. Second, the evidence base is dominated by cross-sectional, self-report designs, with few longitudinal studies that could establish how identified barriers change over a leader's career or in response to policy reform. Third, grey literature such as unpublished theses may not have undergone the same level of peer review as journal articles. Finally, the search was restricted to English-language sources, which may have excluded relevant Kiswahili-language material.

VI. Findings and Discussions

Sociocultural, patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes

One of the barriers to women advancement to leadership that was identified from the review was cultural norms that construct leadership, as an inherently masculine domain (Mberia, 2017). This was reported by a number of other studies. Rarieya (2007) observed that women in school leadership had to continually negotiate their professional identities against gender stereotypes. Hockett (2021) reported that experiences of women in leadership were shaped by systemic stereotyping. Experiences that were often tied to long-held cultural expectations where leadership was meant to be male domain (Kanake, 2018).

On the other hand, some studies alluded that female teachers themselves were not aggressive in taking up leadership roles (Wangari, 2015). While this was not a problem unique to Kenya, it echoed patterns identified across the wider African continent (Bush, et.al. 2022). Taken together, the findings probably suggest that sociocultural factors and gender stereotypes strongly hampered women from advancing into school leadership positions in Kenya.

The findings also revealed overtly negative attitudes among educational stakeholders, including staff, parents, and community members, toward women in headship roles (Kanai et al., 2022). Negative attitudes were particularly entrenched in cultural biases against female leadership, with women frequently held to higher standards of qualification and performance than their male counterparts before their authority was accepted.

Policy-implementation gaps

Some studies reported a misalignment between policy and practice. Whereas there were clear policies supporting gender equality in leadership- at least in public service, that was not the case on the ground. For instance, whereas, the Teachers Service Commission, nominally provided equal deployment opportunities, that was not the case in the actual deployment of teachers to headship positions. Mulani, et.al. (2020) seems to suggest that there was lack of clear policies for facilitate women advancement in school leadership. The Gender Audit of the National Gender and Equality Commission (2025) report corroborates this at scale. The report reported that gender parity had been achieved among classroom teachers, but administrative posts remained male-dominated nationally. These findings probably suggest that policy architecture alone was insufficient without dedicated enforcement, and accountability mechanisms within the Teachers Service Commission's appointment processes.

Skewed recruitment, promotion and appointment practices

Closely related to the policy-implementation gap is evidence of bias embedded within the procedures of recruitment and promotion of teachers. Some studies reported that women were not necessarily discriminated outright in leadership appointment. Instead, there was gender stereotyping in recommendation processes in addition to rigid career pathways which disadvantaged them relative to male colleagues. In her study of the causes

of underrepresentation of females in school leadership positions in Kenyan schools, Barmao (2013) reported biased promotion practices as some of the hindrances to women advancement to leadership role.

Work-family conflict and domestic burden

Educational leadership research has documented tension between leadership responsibilities and socially assigned domestic roles among the barriers to women advancement to leadership (Bush, et.al. 2022; KEMI, 2025). A study by Nguzi (2025) on gender dynamics in educational leadership and women experiences in Kenyan secondary schools established that work-family balance was a critical barrier- with rigid institutional policies limiting flexibility for women to juggle between professional and family responsibilities. Studies around the world seem to confirm similar trends. In Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada, women in leadership face persistent challenges balancing between work and family responsibilities (Bush, 2018; Horton et al., 2016). Of course, these findings are comparable to those reported in along Kenyan studies. According to a survey done by a local daily newspaper (DN: October, 10, 2026) overall, women in Kenya take longer than men to become school principals- 19 years compared to 16 years- largely because of family responsibilities. Other studies tended to agree with previous findings. For instance, Purdul, et al., (2020) concluded that men dominated institutional leadership as a result of the traditional and cultural attitudes and position that society has placed women.

Limited mentorship and access to leadership devepment programmes

According to Gatundu (2025), female teachers' underrepresentation in school leadership was attributable in part to limited mentorship opportunities exclusion from leadership development programmes. The study reported that female teachers often encountered exclusion from professional mentorship networks, a problem that often discouraged or limited their access to leadership positions. To address these issues, the study recommended the need to provide women with additional leadership training and structured mentorship programs to prepare them to take effectively take up leadership responsibilities.

Psychological factors and self-efficacy

Kitele (2013) examined the influence of psychological factors on female secondary school head teachers in Kenya. Although the study acknowledged that female principals were competent and effective leaders, cultural and social pressures continued to affect their leadership experiences and perceptions. Soi, et al., (2017) found a strong positive correlation between self-efficacy and leadership aspiration among female teachers in Kenya, according to the study, majority of female teachers were not confident enough to take up leadership positions. This finding is supported by Choge (2015). The study identified low self-esteem among female teachers as one of the major factors hindering them from aggressively pursuing leadership positions. Additionally, women's leadership pathway was constrained not only by structural barriers but also by psychological factors - specifically identified as low self-confidence (Kariuki, 2006; Purdul, et al., 2020).

VII. Conclusion

This study synthesized fifteen articles on hindrances to women advancement to school leadership. The study also highlighted of comparative global evidence on the challenges facing female school leaders. The study established that the barriers were neither isolated nor incidental but form interrelated set of societal, institutional, and individual -level barriers that together accounted for the persistent gap between women's numerical dominance of the classroom teaching workforce and their underrepresentation in school headship. The evidence translating policy into practice required sustained attention to enforcement, institutional culture, mentorship and support for women managing the dual demands of professional leadership and domestic responsibility. Addressing these challenges is not only a matter of equity but, given the well-established importance of school leadership for educational outcomes, a matter of educational quality for the country as a whole.

VIII. Recommendations

Arising from the evidence established from the review, the study recommended that policymakers and stakeholders in education adopt interventions that address the persistent underrepresentation of women in school leadership. Such interventions should focus on closing the gap between policy and practice through enforcement of gender equality provisions, reforming recruitment and promotion systems to eliminate gender bias. These could include institutionalizing mentorship and leadership development programmes for female teachers, discouraging societal attitudes and cultural norms that continue to associate leadership with men while undermining women's

leadership aspirations and supporting mechanisms that enhance women's self-efficacy and leadership confidence, alongside flexible workplace arrangements that recognize the realities of work-family responsibilities. Addressing these interconnected barriers is essential not only for achieving gender equity but also for strengthening the quality of educational leadership and ensuring that Kenya benefits from the talents, skills, and perspectives of both women and men in the management of its schools.

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