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Is there gender equity in school managerial positions?

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In a hypothetical school system that had perfect levels of “gender equity” (with respect to staffing and promotion policies) it would be expected that about 50 percent of the school heads and about 50 percent of the teachers would be female. However, some educationists might argue that this form of equal representation may be undesirable in primary schools. For example, Zhang et al (2008) contend that one would expect more female teachers at the primary school level because in many countries female teachers (perhaps because of their motherly connection with young children) are often reported to produce better pupil educational outcomes.

Research results from the SACMEQ III Project (2007) have shown that about one-third of the Grade 6 pupils (36.6%) were in schools with female school heads. However, there were large variations in the percentages of female school heads across the SACMEQ countries. For example, in Malawi and Kenya less than 15 percent of the pupils had female school heads. While in Seychelles and Lesotho around 80 percent of the pupils had female school heads.

Within some SACMEQ school systems there were differences in the percentages of pupils with female school heads between rural and urban areas – with more pupils tending to have female school heads in urban areas compared with rural areas. However, the differences in percentages of pupils with female school heads between urban and rural areas were not large in Botswana, Lesotho, Kenya, Namibia, Seychelles, and Swaziland.

Because school heads are drawn from the existing teacher population, it might be expected that the gender balance among teachers (which was around 60 percent female across all SACMEQ countries) would be approximately the same as the gender balance among school heads. However, this is not always the case because some education authorities prefer male heads in remote rural areas (Zhang et al, 2008). If the preferences for male heads in remote areas are counterbalanced with roughly similar preferences of female heads in urban areas then, at the national level, there would be no considerable gender imbalances between heads positions and the general population of teachers.

For the SACMEQ countries it was only in Seychelles and Lesotho (and to some extent in Botswana) that the percentages of female school heads were similar to the percentages of female teachers. For all other SACMEQ countries, in both urban and rural settings this “gender gap” exceeded 10 percent. That is, there was considerable bias in the allocation of school managerial positions in favour of males for 12 SACMEQ school systems.

For example, at the national level in Zanzibar, 66 percent of the pupils had female teachers yet only 21 percent of the pupils had female school heads. Similarly, at the national level in Kenya, 48 percent of the pupils were taught by female teachers and a mere 15 percent had female school heads. In almost every SACMEQ country, this gender gap was evident in both rural and urban settings.

Thus, in most SACMEQ school systems, it is clear that there are gender equality problems in school managerial positions. This outcome has implications at two levels.

First, female teachers may consider that there are barriers to their professional advancement and this could be harmful to their morale.

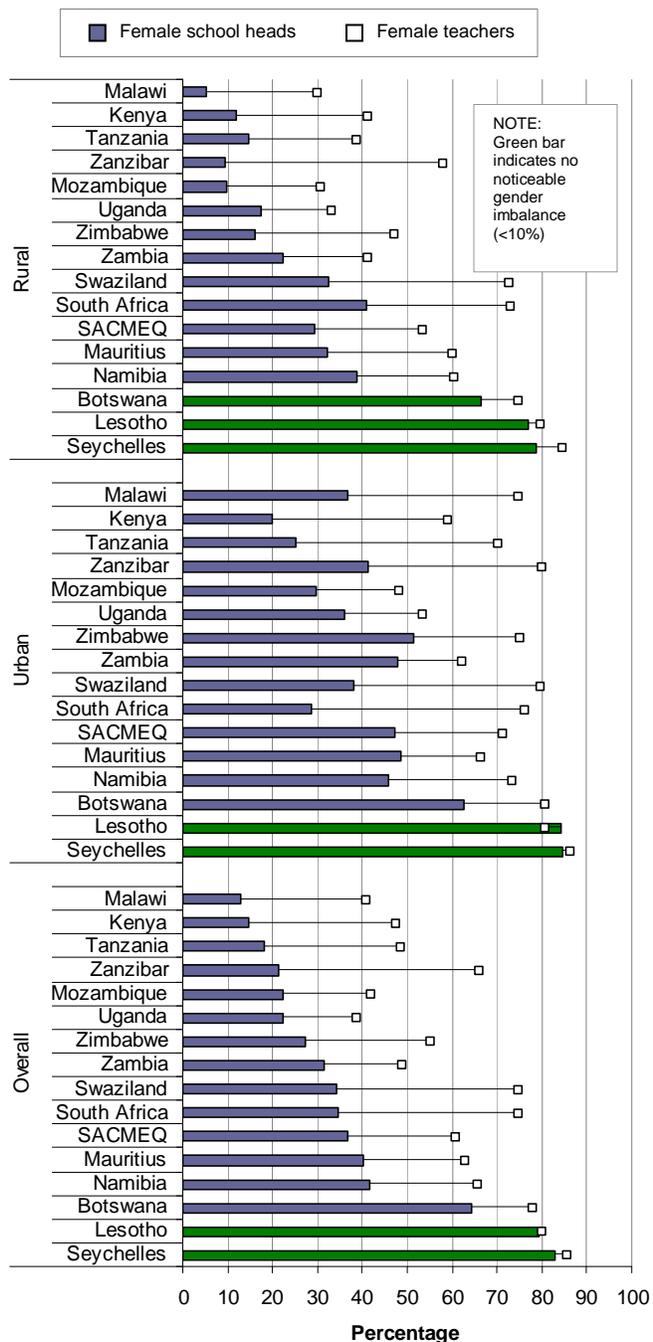
Second, these gender inequities could send the wrong signal to pupils (both boys and girls) - that female teachers are incapable of being leaders.

The way forward in this area is to open up informed dialogue among the key stakeholders in the process of managing the career progression of teachers (Staffing Divisions, the Inspectorate, Teacher Unions, and so on). This dialogue should be based on the kinds of research data that has been summarized in this article, and should be focused on setting agreed and feasible targets for greater gender equity in school managerial positions.

Reference

Zhang, Y., Postlethwaite, T. N. and Grisay, A. (Eds) (2008). *A view inside primary schools: A world education indicators (WEI) cross-national study*. Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

Percentages of female school heads and female teachers (SACMEQ III)



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