



Professional Negotiation of Female Teachers Amid School Leadership Inequality: A Grounded Theory Study in Public Senior High Schools in Dili

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article history: Submitted: July 31, 2026 Final Revised: Sept. 20, 2026 Accepted: September 21, 2026 Published: September 30, 2026 Keywords: Women Teachers; Gender Equality; School Leadership; Professional Negotiation; Grounded Theory.	Purpose: This study develops a grounded theory explaining how women teachers negotiate their professional roles amid unequal school leadership structures in public senior high schools in Dili, Timor-Leste. Methods: A qualitative multisite grounded theory design was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis involving 21 purposively selected participants, comprising nine women teachers, nine students, and three principals from three public senior high schools. The data were analysed using open, axial, and selective coding with the constant comparative method supported by ATLAS.ti 9. Findings: Five interrelated categories emerged: the policy–implementation gap in gender equality, structural and cultural barriers to women teachers’ leadership, the reproduction of inequality through school culture, adaptive negotiation strategies, and professionalism as a source of legitimacy. The core category identified was the professional negotiation of women teachers in confronting gender inequality through competence development, professional networking, strategic participation, and classroom role modelling. Research Implications: The findings support the development of transparent promotion systems, mentoring, leadership succession programmes, equitable task allocation, and gender-responsive school cultures while enriching theoretical understanding of gender negotiation in educational leadership. Originality: This study proposes a grounded theory that explains women teachers’ professional negotiation by integrating structural, cultural, and professional dimensions into a coherent conceptual framework within the context of public secondary schools in Timor-Leste.
	
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INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is a fundamental principle for achieving equitable and inclusive education. In Timor-Leste, this principle is firmly established in Article 17 of the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, which guarantees equal rights and responsibilities for women and men in family, political, economic, social, and cultural life (R. D. de Timor-Leste, 2002). Nevertheless, the existence of formal legal provisions has not been sufficient to eliminate gender disparities in practice. Previous studies indicate that women continue to encounter barriers to equal opportunities, professional recognition, and leadership positions despite the legal recognition of gender equality (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Setyaningrum & Juansih, 2024; Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Therefore, the persistence of gender inequality within educational organisations suggests that formal commitments to equality need to be examined in relation to how they are experienced and enacted in everyday institutional practices (Simmie, 2023).

Schools play a strategic role in promoting gender equality because they not only facilitate knowledge transmission but also shape values, identities, and social relationships (Godara, 2024; Keating & Baker, 2025). At the same time, schools may reproduce existing inequalities when promotion systems, task allocation, and leadership practices continue to be influenced by gender stereotypes (Nkosi & Nhlumayo, 2024). This phenomenon is evident in educational leadership worldwide. Recent reviews continue to identify the underrepresentation of women in senior educational leadership and the persistence of structural, cultural, and organisational barriers to women's advancement (Harris et al., 2024; Wang & Gao, 2024). Such barriers include gender stereotypes, discriminatory expectations, unequal organisational opportunities, and institutional practices that can restrict women's access to leadership positions despite their professional qualifications and experience (Dhasmana, 2023; Rhee & Sigler, 2015). Thus, the problem is not only whether women are formally permitted to

participate in leadership, but also how organisational conditions shape their opportunities to gain professional recognition and participate in decision-making.

In Timor-Leste, this issue is particularly significant because the country continues to navigate post-conflict social structures shaped by patriarchal cultural norms. Previous studies have shown that women's efforts to attain leadership positions involve prolonged processes of negotiation as they confront customary traditions, political legacies, and male-dominated power relations (Niner et al., 2024; Niner & Loney, 2020; Pranitasari & Sarmento, 2024). More recent research also indicates that, despite growing support for women's participation, doubts regarding women's leadership capabilities remain prevalent (Niner et al., 2024). Similarly, Timor-Leste & Ministry of Youth Art and Culture (2024) emphasize that unequal social norms continue to constrain women's participation in decision-making processes. These conditions make schools an important organisational context for examining not only the barriers experienced by female teachers but also the ways in which they respond to and navigate those barriers in their professional lives.

Although previous scholarship has extensively documented the underrepresentation of women in educational leadership and identified structural, cultural, and organisational barriers to women's career advancement, less is known about the process through which experienced female teachers negotiate professional space when opportunities for leadership and decision-making remain constrained. Existing studies tend to emphasise the barriers themselves, the structural conditions that produce inequality, or the individual and organisational factors associated with women's leadership advancement (Harris et al., 2024; Wang & Gao, 2024). Research on professional agency likewise demonstrates that individuals actively respond to changing institutional conditions and renegotiate professional identities, suggesting that women's responses to organisational constraints cannot be understood solely as passive experiences of inequality (Chaaban et al., 2021). However, the interplay among institutional commitments, structural and cultural barriers, teachers' strategies for maintaining professional legitimacy and access, and the consequences of those strategies for perceptions of gender equality remains insufficiently explained as an interconnected process. This gap calls for an approach capable of developing conceptual categories from participants' experiences and examining how conditions, actions, and consequences are connected. Grounded theory is particularly appropriate for such a purpose because it uses iterative comparison of empirical data to develop and integrate concepts that explain an underlying social process (Charmaz, 2014).

This study was conducted in three public senior high schools in Dili Municipality, Timor-Leste. Rather than treating policy conditions, structural and cultural barriers, professional strategies, and students' perceptions as four unrelated issues, this study examines them as interconnected dimensions of a process through which female teachers navigate gender-related constraints within their professional contexts. Specifically, the study examines how gender equality commitments and organisational conditions shape the barriers encountered by female teachers, how they negotiate professional space through their professional practices and strategies, and how these experiences are associated with students' perceptions of gender equality. Based on this orientation, the study asks: How do female teachers experience and negotiate gender-related barriers to professional recognition and leadership participation within public senior high schools in Dili, Timor-Leste? Through a grounded theory approach, the study seeks to develop a conceptual understanding of professional negotiation as the central process emerging from these interconnected conditions, actions, and consequences. The study contributes to research on gender and educational leadership by explaining how female teachers respond to organisational constraints while seeking to sustain professional legitimacy and participation within school settings, while also providing a contextual basis for discussing more inclusive educational practices and policies in Timor-Leste.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multisite grounded theory design to develop a contextualized conceptual explanation of how female teachers experience, respond to, and negotiate gender-related inequalities within public senior high schools in Dili, Timor-Leste. A grounded theory approach was selected because the study sought to move beyond describing participants' experiences toward identifying and integrating conceptual categories that explain relationships among organisational conditions, structural and cultural barriers, professional actions, and perceived consequences (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The study followed the Strauss and Corbin grounded theory tradition, particularly the use of open, axial, and selective coding and the examination of conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences in the development of categories (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The broader grounded theory principle of constant comparison was applied throughout the research process, allowing emerging concepts to be examined against subsequent data and across participants, sites, and sources. Thus, data collection and analysis were treated as interconnected activities, with emerging categories progressively refined through repeated comparison and analytical reflection.

Research Setting and Multisite Context

The study was conducted from March to July 2026 in three public senior high schools in Dili, Timor-Leste: FINANTIL Comoro Public Senior High School, 10 December Public Senior High School Comoro, and 4 September Public Senior High School Unamet. The three schools were purposively selected to provide organisational contexts in which educational policy, local cultural norms, leadership arrangements, and teachers' professional practices could be examined in relation to gender and professional participation.

The multisite design served an analytical purpose rather than functioning solely as a description of multiple research locations. Data from the three schools were compared to identify recurring patterns, contextual variations, and relationships among emerging categories. Cross-site comparison was particularly directed toward experiences of professional recognition, task allocation, participation in decision-making, access to leadership opportunities, and gender-related organisational practices. This approach enabled the analysis to distinguish patterns that appeared consistently across the three schools from experiences that were more contextually specific.

Participants and Sampling

Twenty-one participants were involved in the study, comprising nine female teachers, nine students from Grades 11 and 12, and three school principals. Initial participant recruitment used purposive sampling based on the relevance of participants' experiences to the research focus. Female teachers constituted the primary participant group because they had direct and extended experience of professional recognition, task allocation, participation in decision-making, professional development, and access to leadership opportunities. The nine female teachers had between 20 and 26 years of teaching experience, representing highly experienced educators whose professional histories provided substantive accounts of organisational practices and gender-related constraints.

Students were included as a complementary participant group to provide perspectives on classroom interactions, teacher role modelling, professional recognition, and perceptions of women's leadership. Principals were included because of their knowledge of school governance, organisational practices, leadership arrangements, and the implementation of institutional procedures. Three female teachers were represented from each participating school, while one principal represented each school. Students were drawn from the participating schools and represented Grades 11 and 12.

Sampling was initially purposive and was subsequently informed by the development of emerging categories. As patterns became visible during analysis, comparison across participant groups and sites was used to determine which accounts were most relevant to clarifying, elaborating, or challenging the emerging categories. This analytical orientation allowed participant accounts to be considered in relation to their conceptual contribution rather than solely as descriptive cases.

In grounded theory terms, sampling decisions were therefore considered in relation to the developing analysis. Emerging categories were examined for variation and conceptual relevance across the three schools and participant groups, while additional attention was given to evidence that could confirm, refine, or challenge emerging interpretations. The sampling process was guided by the need to develop sufficiently rich categories capable of explaining the central process under investigation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. The three methods were selected to provide complementary perspectives on participants' experiences and the organisational contexts in which those experiences occurred.

Semi-structured interviews explored participants' experiences of professional recognition, task allocation, participation in decision-making forums, leadership opportunities, gender stereotypes, professional development, adaptive strategies, and perceptions of women's leadership. The semi-structured format provided sufficient consistency across participants while allowing the researchers to pursue issues that emerged during the interviews and became relevant to the developing categories.

Observations focused on classroom interactions and school activities relevant to teachers' professional roles, relationships with students, organisational practices, and school-based participation. Observational evidence was used to contextualise interview accounts and to identify whether reported practices and interactions were reflected in the observed organisational setting.

Document analysis examined institutional materials relevant to organisational structures, school policies, teacher development programmes, leadership arrangements, and role distribution. Documentary evidence was used as a complementary source for examining formal organisational arrangements and for comparing stated procedures or structures with participants' reported experiences.

The combination of interviews, observations, and documents enabled methodological triangulation and provided multiple sources through which emerging categories could be examined. Participant identities were protected through identification codes: G1–G9 for female teachers, S1–S9 for students, and P1–P3 for principals.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti 9 and followed three interconnected coding stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During open coding, meaningful segments of the empirical material were identified and assigned preliminary codes that captured participants' experiences, perceptions, actions, organisational conditions, and consequences. The researchers continuously compared codes with new segments of data to identify similarities, differences, and conceptual relationships.

Axial coding was then used to examine relationships among related codes and to consolidate them into broader categories. Particular attention was given to conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences, consistent with the Strauss and Corbin grounded theory tradition. At this stage, categories were compared across participant groups, schools, and data sources to identify commonalities, contextual differences, and possible negative or contradictory cases.

Selective coding was subsequently used to integrate the higher-order categories around a central process. The researchers examined the relationships among the categories and assessed their explanatory relevance to the broader phenomenon of female teachers' experiences of gender inequality and professional participation. Through this process, the analysis generated 18 preliminary categories, which were progressively consolidated into nine first-level axial categories, five higher-order axial categories, and one core category.

Constant comparison was maintained throughout the analysis. Comparisons were conducted within participant groups, across participant groups, across the three schools, and across interview, observational, and documentary evidence. This process enabled the researchers to determine whether emerging categories were supported consistently, whether they varied across contexts, and whether additional evidence altered the interpretation of existing categories.

Analytical memos were used to document emerging interpretations, questions about category properties, relationships among categories, and decisions made during category development. Memoing provided an analytical bridge between empirical observations and the conceptual integration of categories and was used to record why particular codes were combined, differentiated, retained, or reconsidered during the analysis.

The analysis continued until the categories demonstrated sufficient conceptual development and additional evidence no longer resulted in substantial changes to the structure or meaning of the emerging core categories. Attention was therefore directed not simply to repetition of participants' responses but to whether additional data contributed new properties, dimensions, or relationships that were necessary for the development of the emerging explanation. The resulting core category, professional negotiation, represented the central process connecting organisational conditions, structural and cultural barriers, professional strategies, and their perceived consequences.

Trustworthiness and Analytical Auditability

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness and auditability of the study, including source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking, contextual description, researcher reflexivity, and an audit trail. Source triangulation involved comparing the perspectives of female teachers, students, and principals. Method triangulation involved examining interview accounts alongside observational and documentary evidence. These comparisons were used to identify convergence as well as differences that required further analytical attention. Rather than treating disagreement between sources as a methodological weakness, contrasting accounts were considered analytically relevant because they could reveal differences in how organisational practices and gender-related experiences were understood by different participant groups.

Member checking was conducted by returning summaries of emerging interpretations to selected participants to assess whether the interpretations were consistent with their experiences. Feedback from participants was considered during subsequent analysis and used to clarify or refine interpretations where necessary.

An audit trail was maintained throughout the analytical process to document coding decisions, emerging categories, category definitions, relationships among categories, and the rationale for consolidating categories. The audit trail supported the reconstruction of the analytical pathway from 18 preliminary categories to nine first-level axial categories, five higher-order categories, and the final core category.

Researcher reflexivity was also incorporated into the analysis. The researchers critically examined how their assumptions, interpretations, and engagement with the theoretical literature could influence the reading of participants' accounts. Particular attention was given to maintaining a distinction between participants' reported experiences and theoretical interpretations derived from previous scholarship.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical procedures were implemented to protect the autonomy, privacy, and confidentiality of all participants. Participation was voluntary, participants were informed about the academic purpose of the study, and participant names were replaced with identification codes in the research records and manuscript. The data were used exclusively for academic purposes and were handled in a manner intended to minimise the possibility of participant identification.

Because the participant group included students from Grades 11 and 12, additional safeguards were applied to protect participants who might be minors. Participation by students was conducted in accordance with the applicable consent and assent requirements, and school-level permission was obtained before data collection. Information provided by participants was treated confidentially and was reported in aggregate or through coded identifiers where appropriate.

The three schools were also considered in relation to the potential risk of deductive disclosure. Where school-level details could make individual principals or teachers readily identifiable, reporting was limited to information necessary for the analytical purpose of the study.

Research Participant Profile

Table 1. Research Participant Profile

Code	Participant Group	School/Unit	Main Characteristics
G1–G3	Women Teachers	FINANTIL Comoro Public Senior High School	20–26 years of teaching experience
G4–G6	Women Teachers	10 December Public Senior High School Comoro	20–26 years of teaching experience
G7–G9	Women Teachers	4 September Public Senior High School Unamet	20–25 years of teaching experience
S1–S9	Students	Three Public Senior High Schools in Dili	Grade 11–12 students
P1–P3	Principals	One Principal from Each School	2–10 years of leadership experience

RESULTS

The processes of open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and constant comparison generated five interrelated conceptual categories. These categories converged into the core category, "Professional Negotiation of Women Teachers in Confronting Gender Inequality in Schools." A summary of the categories, empirical evidence, and their conceptual meanings is presented in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. Conceptual Categories Derived from the Grounded Theory Analysis

Category	Empirical Evidence	Conceptual Meaning
Policy–Implementation Gap	Schools formally express commitment to gender equality; however, promotion, task allocation, and participation in decision-making remain inconsistent.	Formal gender equality has not yet been institutionalized into school procedures.
Structural and Cultural Barriers	Strategic leadership positions are predominantly occupied by men, while organizational traditions, gender stereotypes, and non-merit-based practices continue to influence leadership appointments.	Gender inequality is produced by institutional structures and cultural norms rather than by women's lack of competence.
Reproduction of Inequality through School Culture	Gender equality is promoted in classroom instruction, yet leadership representation and organizational practices convey contradictory messages.	Schools may reproduce gender norms through everyday organizational practices.
Adaptive Strategies and Professional Negotiation	Women teachers strengthen their competencies, demonstrate professional performance, build professional networks, and accept intermediary leadership responsibilities as pathways to recognition.	Women's agency operates through gradual processes of professional negotiation.
Professionalism and Students' Perceptions	Students perceive women teachers as patient, fair, competent, and capable of leadership, although strategic leadership positions continue to be dominated by men.	Positive role modelling can challenge gender stereotypes but requires structural representation to achieve sustainable change.

The Gap Between Gender Equality Policies and Organizational Practices

The findings revealed a recurring tension between the normative commitment to gender equality expressed by school leaders and the experiences reported by female teachers and students in everyday organisational practices. Across the three schools, principals generally described gender equality as equal access to opportunities, responsibilities, professional development, and participation based on competence rather than gender. KS1 stated that opportunities were provided according to teachers' competence, while KS2 emphasised equal opportunities for professional responsibilities and professional development. KS3 similarly reported that female teachers were involved in committees, student activities, and administrative coordination.

However, these institutional accounts did not fully correspond with the experiences reported by female teachers. At FINANTIL Comoro, G1 described the limited recognition of female teachers' professional competence, stating, *"There has been no recognition of our competence to be given the opportunity to lead the school."* She nevertheless emphasised her continued effort to demonstrate her professional capacity.

G2 similarly described women's access to leadership as limited despite their capabilities. She explained that female teachers could perform professional responsibilities but were not always given comparable opportunities to occupy leadership positions. The discrepancy was also visible in the distribution of responsibilities. G3 reported that female teachers were less frequently involved in school leadership and smaller organisational teams and were more commonly entrusted with supportive or administrative responsibilities, including consumption arrangements, choir activities, and administration.

G4 similarly explained that women were given opportunities but not as frequently as men, noting that *"men are given more trust and delegation"*. Students independently recognised a similar pattern. S1 reported that teachers were generally treated fairly, but male teachers were still more frequently trusted to lead school activities. The pattern was not uniform across the three schools. At 4 September Unamet, G7 reported that female teachers had been appointed to responsibilities such as examination committees and student affairs. G9 similarly reported opportunities for women to lead teams, although she noted that women had not occupied the highest structural positions during her approximately 20 years of teaching experience. Thus, the findings indicate not a simple absence of gender-equality commitment but a gap between normative commitment and organisational practice. Equal opportunity was widely articulated at the institutional level, while experiences of access to strategic leadership and decision-making remained uneven.

Structural and Cultural Barriers to Female Teachers' Leadership

The findings indicate that female teachers' access to leadership was shaped by an interaction between organisational arrangements and cultural perceptions of women's leadership. The barriers were not experienced uniformly across the three schools, but recurring patterns emerged concerning access to strategic positions, trust, informal influence, political considerations, and perceptions of leadership competence.

At FINANTIL Comoro, G1 explained that some people continued to question women's ability to handle difficult students. Rather than withdrawing from leadership aspirations, she responded by continuing to demonstrate her professional capacity and competence. G3 provided a more explicit description of the gendered distribution of organisational responsibilities. She reported that female teachers were less frequently involved in leadership and were more often assigned administrative or supportive responsibilities.

The experiences at 10 December Comoro provided evidence of additional organisational and political concerns. G5 associated access to positions with political interests within the organisation and suggested that women did not always receive unrestricted opportunities to advance professionally. G6 provided a particularly significant contrasting case because she had actually occupied the position of principal. She reported:

"I once served as a school principal, but only for about nine months. After that, I was dismissed without being given an official dismissal letter." (G6)

Her experience demonstrates that women's leadership barriers cannot be understood simply as complete exclusion from leadership positions. Women could obtain formal leadership positions while still experiencing difficulties in sustaining organisational authority and legitimacy. G6 further emphasised that female teachers possessed qualifications and leadership capabilities comparable to those of male teachers, but that trust was not always distributed equally.

Cultural and relational factors were also evident at 4 September Unamet. G8 referred to *"family relationships"* and political considerations as factors that could influence access to leadership positions, while contrasting these factors with her own qualifications and previous leadership experience as a former *camat*. G9 similarly reported that political-party involvement could affect access to higher leadership positions and observed that female teachers were more commonly involved in smaller teams than in the highest organisational structures.

The principals' accounts partly confirmed the existence of these contextual barriers, although they tended to frame them differently. KS3 acknowledged that community culture could still position men as primary leaders and that political and family relationships could influence leadership appointments. KS1 also identified domestic workload, confidence, and traditional gender-role perceptions as factors affecting women's participation in school

activities and committees. Taken together, the findings indicate that barriers to women's leadership emerged through the interaction of organisational opportunity structures, patterns of trust, political or relational considerations, and gendered perceptions of leadership.

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School Culture as a Space for Reproduction and Change

School culture emerged as a dual space in which gender equality was simultaneously reproduced and challenged. On the one hand, principals described school practices as supportive of equal participation. On the other hand, teachers and students continued to observe gender differences in access to strategic leadership.

The three principals described practices intended to support gender equality. KS1 reported that female students were encouraged to participate in student organisations and leadership activities, while teacher responsibilities were assigned according to competence. KS2 similarly described equal participation in school programmes and professional development. KS3 reported that female teachers were involved in decision-making, committees, student activities, and team leadership.

At classroom level, female teachers deliberately enacted gender-equitable practices. G1 explained that she provided equal learning opportunities to male and female students. G4 similarly described treating male and female students equally while communicating that women possessed capabilities comparable to men. Students largely confirmed this pattern. S1 reported that female teachers provided male and female students with equal opportunities to speak, ask questions, and participate in learning activities.

However, students also perceived a contradiction between classroom-level equality and organisational leadership. S3 observed that male teachers still occupied more important positions despite the strong professional capabilities of female teachers. S5 similarly reported that women were sometimes less involved in important decision-making activities and that men were more frequently placed in leadership roles. This contradiction was further illustrated by S7:

"Sometimes female teachers' opinions are less valued in school activities, whereas male teachers are more often trusted to make important decisions." (S7)

These findings position school culture as both a space of reproduction, through continuing gender differences in organisational leadership, and a space of change, particularly through classroom practices, female teachers' role modelling, and opportunities for women to participate in committees and school activities.

Female Teachers' Professional Negotiation Strategies

The findings indicate that female teachers did not respond to organisational constraints solely through withdrawal or resistance. Instead, they engaged in practices through which they demonstrated competence, maintained professional legitimacy, built relationships, accepted available responsibilities, and encouraged other women to pursue opportunities. These interconnected practices constitute the empirical basis for the core category of professional negotiation.

One prominent strategy involved demonstrating professional competence. G1 described responding to doubts about women's leadership capacity by continuing to demonstrate her professional abilities. G3 similarly emphasised professional ethics, teaching quality, discipline, patience, and continued effort. G8 expressed a similar orientation when discussing responsibilities entrusted to her. She explained that she was willing to accept responsibilities and demonstrate that women were capable of performing them successfully. A second strategy involved collective support and professional solidarity. G3 stated:

"We continue to work together with other female teachers so that we can encourage one another to obtain equal opportunities." (G3)

G9 similarly described female teachers as working together and supporting one another despite their more limited participation in the highest organisational structures. A third strategy involved accepting available organisational responsibilities as opportunities to demonstrate capability. G7 described her role as school treasurer and other organisational responsibilities as meaningful opportunities to contribute and demonstrate competence. G8 similarly stated:

"Although I am a woman, I am not inferior to others." (G8)

At 4 September Unamet, such opportunities included committee leadership, student activities, and other team responsibilities. A fourth strategy involved using professional practice as gender role modelling. G4 explicitly communicated to students:

"I am a woman, but I can also do it because I have abilities equal to men." (G4)

G8 similarly drew on her previous experience as a *camat* to encourage students and demonstrate that women could succeed in leadership. These strategies, however, did not consistently result in access to the highest leadership positions. G9 reported that female teachers could receive opportunities to lead smaller teams while remaining excluded from the highest structural positions. G6's experience further demonstrates that obtaining a formal leadership position did not necessarily guarantee sustained leadership authority.

Therefore, professional negotiation is understood in this study as a process through which female teachers respond to gendered organisational conditions by demonstrating competence, maintaining professional performance, building collective and relational support, accepting available responsibilities, and using professional practice to establish legitimacy. The process does not necessarily culminate in formal leadership attainment; rather, it represents how teachers navigate constrained organisational spaces while sustaining professional participation and claims to leadership capability.

Female Teachers' Professionalism and Students' Perceptions of Gender Equality

The findings indicate that students' perceptions of female teachers were predominantly positive and were shaped substantially by their everyday classroom experiences. Students repeatedly described female teachers as patient, attentive, approachable, professional, and supportive of equal participation.

S1 described female teachers as disciplined and professional and regarded them as role models for students. S2 similarly described female teachers as patient and attentive, explaining that they were willing to provide explanations until students understood the learning material.

These perceptions were also evident among other students. S6 regarded female teachers as examples that women could succeed in education and possess capabilities comparable to men. Students also explicitly connected female teachers' professional competence with their capacity to lead. S3 stated that female teachers demonstrated discipline and responsibility and should receive equal opportunities to lead. At the same time, students recognised a contradiction between their positive experiences with female teachers and the gender composition of school leadership. S1 observed that male teachers were still more frequently trusted to lead school activities.

S7 reported:

"Sometimes female teachers' opinions are less valued in school activities, whereas male teachers are more often trusted to make important decisions." (S7)

S9 similarly observed that male teachers more frequently occupied leadership roles despite recognising female teachers' leadership capabilities.

The findings therefore suggest that students encountered two contrasting organisational messages. At the classroom level, female teachers enacted gender equality through equal treatment, inclusive teaching, encouragement, and professional role modelling. At the organisational level, students continued to observe a greater concentration of important leadership roles among men. Rather than demonstrating that classroom experiences *caused* changes in students' gender attitudes, the data indicate that students associated their positive perceptions of women's capabilities with their direct experiences of female teachers' professionalism.

Professional Negotiation as the Core Category

Across the five categories, the findings reveal a recurring process rather than five independent themes. The process begins with a normative commitment to gender equality that is not always experienced consistently in organisational practice. Female teachers encounter structural, relational, and cultural constraints in accessing strategic leadership and decision-making. In response, they engage in professional negotiation through competence demonstration, sustained performance, collective support, acceptance of available responsibilities, and professional role modelling.

The cross-site findings demonstrate that professional negotiation occurs under different organisational conditions. The accounts from FINANTIL Comoro emphasised limited recognition and restricted participation in leadership and smaller teams. The 10 December Comoro accounts highlighted leadership experience, trust, and political or organisational considerations. Meanwhile, 4 September Unamet showed relatively greater opportunities for female teachers to lead committees and teams alongside continuing limitations in access to the highest structural positions.

Accordingly, professional negotiation emerged as the core category linking organisational conditions, barriers, strategies, and consequences. Importantly, the data do not support interpreting professional negotiation as a guaranteed pathway to formal leadership. Instead, it represents the ongoing process through which female teachers navigate constrained professional spaces, demonstrate their legitimacy, and sustain claims to equal professional and leadership participation.

DISCUSSION

The Gap Between Gender Equality Policy and Organizational Practice

The findings revealed a persistent gap between formal gender equality policies and organizational practices within schools. This discrepancy reflects the distinction between *equality as policy* and *equality as lived practice*, whereby gender equality has been formally recognized but has not been fully realized in the everyday experiences of school members. Formal policies alone are unlikely to produce meaningful change unless they are accompanied by organizational mechanisms that genuinely ensure equal opportunities for all teachers (Malik et al., 2026).

These findings are consistent with those of Lentz et al. (2024), who argued that educational policies are unlikely to generate organizational change without consistent implementation, shared ownership, and acceptance at the school level. In the present study, principals' commitment represented an important starting point for promoting gender equality; however, such commitment was insufficient to transform organizational practices that continued to place greater trust in male teachers for strategic leadership positions.

The findings further indicate that gender discrimination in school leadership was not manifested through explicit policies restricting women from assuming leadership roles. Rather, inequality emerged through informal organizational mechanisms, including leadership appointments, the allocation of strategic responsibilities, the distribution of trust, and access to decision-making networks. Because these practices are embedded in organizational routines and cultural norms, they are often less visible than formal discriminatory policies. Consequently, evaluating the implementation of gender equality requires more than examining the existence of formal policies. It also requires assessing how those policies are translated into equitable access to leadership opportunities, the distribution of professional responsibilities, and the lived experiences of female teachers within the school organization.

Structural and Cultural Barriers to Female Teachers' Leadership

The findings indicate that the underrepresentation of female teachers in school leadership positions cannot be explained solely by individual readiness or professional competence. Rather, it is shaped by the interaction between organizational structures and the cultural norms embedded within the school environment. This suggests that access to leadership is determined not only by professional qualifications but also by organizational processes and social perceptions regarding who is considered suitable for leadership roles.

These findings are consistent with Role Congruity Theory proposed by Eagly & Karau (2002), which argues that women are more likely to experience prejudice when socially prescribed female characteristics are perceived as inconsistent with the attributes traditionally associated with leadership. Consequently, women often face a

double bind. When they adopt a collaborative leadership style, they may be perceived as lacking authority, whereas displaying assertiveness may lead to evaluations that they have violated gender role expectations.

The present findings also support [Coleman \(2003\)](#) argument that educational leadership is frequently portrayed as gender-neutral, despite leadership standards being largely constructed around masculine experiences and norms. In the context of this study, female teachers' professional competence was recognized in instructional practice; however, such recognition did not automatically translate into trust for occupying strategic leadership positions.

Within the context of Timor-Leste, these findings are consistent with those of [S. Niner & Loney \(2020\)](#), who argued that women's participation continues to be shaped by patriarchal social structures. Similarly, [S. Niner et al. \(2024\)](#) reported that although the idea that *feto bele* ("women can lead") has gained broader acceptance, doubts regarding women's leadership attributes remain pervasive. A similar pattern emerged in the present study, where female teachers' professional competence was acknowledged but was not accompanied by a more equitable distribution of leadership positions.

Furthermore, these findings reinforce the perspective proposed by [Martínez et al. \(2021\)](#) regarding the dual dimensions of the gender leadership gap. At the organizational level, barriers arise from non-transparent promotion processes, double standards, and assumptions about leadership suitability. At the individual level, some women tend to postpone accepting leadership responsibilities until they feel fully prepared. However, this caution should be understood as a rational response to organizational environments in which women are expected to repeatedly demonstrate their competence before receiving the same level of legitimacy afforded to their male counterparts.

School Culture as a Space for Reproduction and Change

The findings indicate that school culture functions as a space that both reproduces and transforms gender constructions. Although schools have promoted gender equality through classroom instruction and the involvement of female teachers in various school activities, leadership structures continue to be dominated by men. This suggests that the principle of gender equality has not yet been fully reflected in organizational practice. These findings are consistent with [Torres \(2022\)](#), who argued that school organizational culture is shaped not only by espoused values but also by leadership practices embedded in everyday school life.

The findings also revealed that students were exposed to two contrasting experiences. In the classroom, they learned that women and men have equal rights and capabilities; however, within the school's organizational structure, they observed that leadership positions were predominantly occupied by men. This reflects the concept of the hidden curriculum, whereby students acquire values and social norms through everyday organizational practices rather than through the formal curriculum alone. This finding supports [Donovan et al. \(2023\)](#), who demonstrated that school culture and everyday institutional practices play a significant role in shaping students' perceptions of gender and power relations.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that transforming school culture requires the institutionalization of gender equality through transparent promotion systems, leadership succession processes, and more inclusive leadership mechanisms rather than relying solely on the commitment of individual school principals. This finding is consistent with the guidance issued by [Timor-Leste & Ministry of Youth Art and Culture \(2024\)](#), which emphasizes that women should be provided with meaningful opportunities not only to participate in, but also to influence, decision-making processes within educational institutions.

Female Teachers' Professional Negotiation Strategies

The findings indicate that professional negotiation represents a form of agency through which female teachers seek to gain legitimacy within organizational structures that have not yet achieved gender equality. In this study, professional negotiation is not understood as a compromise with inequality but rather as an active strategy for gaining recognition through competence development, demonstrated performance, and the cultivation of professional relationships. These findings are consistent with [Odell \(2023\)](#), who found that women aspiring to school leadership develop various strategies to establish credibility and navigate organizational cultures that continue to be shaped by patriarchal norms.

The findings further reveal that female teachers bear a greater burden of proof than their male counterparts. Recognition of their professional competence is often achieved only after they consistently demonstrate high levels of performance and exceed organizational expectations. This finding supports the work of [Hilal et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Iskindirova et al. \(2025\)](#), who concluded that women in educational leadership continue to face gender stereotypes, limited access to strategic leadership positions, and persistent expectations to repeatedly demonstrate their professional competence before receiving recognition equivalent to that afforded to men.

A key contribution of this study is the development of the concept of professional negotiation as a mechanism that bridges the relationship between organizational structures and individual agency. The findings suggest that patriarchal organizational cultures, male-dominated leadership structures, and inconsistencies between formal policy and organizational practice encourage female teachers to adopt professional strategies to establish legitimacy. These findings also reinforce the argument of [Watterston & Ehrich \(2024\)](#) that increasing women's

representation in educational leadership cannot rely solely on individual capacity development but also requires supportive organizational environments, mentoring, professional networks, and institutional policies that actively create inclusive pathways to leadership.

Female Teachers' Professionalism and Students' Perceptions of Gender Equality

The findings indicate that female teachers' professionalism shapes how students perceive gender equality and leadership. Direct learning experiences with female teachers fostered students' understanding that leadership is determined not by gender but by competence, responsibility, and professional capability. In this context, female teachers served not only as educators but also as representative role models who influenced students' understanding of the relationship between gender and leadership.

This representation is particularly significant because authentic experiences are more influential in shaping students' perceptions than messages conveyed solely through classroom instruction. These findings are consistent with [Lesch et al. \(2023\)](#), who demonstrated that the presence of female role models enhances perceptions of women's suitability for leadership roles (*leadership role fit*) and helps reduce gender stereotypes associated with women in leadership positions. Similarly, [Tremmel & Wahl \(2023\)](#) found that gender stereotypes continue to influence how individuals evaluate leaders, with leadership characteristics more frequently associated with men than with women. Together, these studies reinforce the present findings by suggesting that exposure to competent female teachers provides students with direct experiences that challenge traditional gender stereotypes about leadership.

Nevertheless, the findings also revealed an inconsistency between pedagogical practices and the school's organizational structure. Although students recognized the professionalism and leadership potential of female teachers, they observed that most strategic leadership positions continued to be occupied by men. This suggests that students' understanding of gender equality is shaped not only through classroom interactions but also through their observations of how leadership is enacted within the school organization. These findings are consistent with those of [Adongo et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Odell \(2023\)](#), who argued that school leadership cultures continue to be influenced by patriarchal norms, resulting in persistent barriers for women despite their demonstrated competence and effective leadership practices. Therefore, increasing women's representation in school leadership is important not only for promoting more equitable organizational governance but also for strengthening students' understanding of democracy, equity, and gender equality through authentic institutional practices.

Conceptual Model of Professional Negotiation

Based on the integration of all categories, this study proposes the following conceptual model: the misalignment between formal policy and organizational practice, together with a patriarchal school culture, generates structural and cultural barriers. Women teachers respond to these barriers through professional negotiation, which results in conditional recognition, gradual access to leadership opportunities, and positive role modelling for students. However, gender equality remains fragile as long as institutional mechanisms remain unchanged. The conceptual model can be summarized as follows:



Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Women Teachers' Professional Negotiation in Confronting Gender Inequality

The theoretical contribution of this model lies in positioning professionalism not merely as an individual attribute but as a process of negotiation within existing power relations. Professional competence, performance, and networking acquire social significance because they function as mechanisms through which women teachers gain legitimacy in organizational systems that have not yet achieved substantive gender equality. The model further demonstrates that although adaptive strategies may generate change at the micro level, achieving substantive gender equality requires organizational transformation at the meso level and broader policy and social norm reforms at the macro level.

Policy and Practical Implications

First, the Ministry of Education and schools should translate the principle of gender equality into transparent promotion mechanisms. Leadership appointments should be based on competence, professional experience, integrity, and performance, supported by documented selection procedures and accessible mechanisms for reporting potential bias. Greater transparency would reduce dependence on informal networks and subjective assumptions regarding leadership suitability.

Second, schools should establish leadership development programs specifically designed for women teachers through mentoring, coaching, rotational assignments, and acting leadership positions. These initiatives should extend beyond general professional development by providing practical experience in school planning, budgeting, academic supervision, conflict management, and decision making.

Third, schools should conduct regular gender audits of task allocation and leadership opportunities. Such audits should examine who receives strategic and promotable responsibilities, who is assigned predominantly administrative or service related duties, who represents the school in external forums, and who has access to professional development programs. Gender disaggregated data would enable evidence based policy decisions rather than reliance on assumptions.

Fourth, efforts to transform school culture should actively involve school principals, male and female teachers, students, parents, and the wider community. Gender equality should not be regarded solely as a women's issue. Reflective dialogue, nondiscrimination codes of ethics, gender responsive curricula, and greater representation of women in school decision making committees can strengthen collective responsibility for achieving equality.

Finally, the professionalism of women teachers should be recognized without requiring them to meet disproportionately higher standards of proof. Evaluation systems should ensure that the same performance standards apply equally to all teachers. Recognition of professional achievement should be accompanied by equitable promotion opportunities rather than merely assigning additional responsibilities that do not contribute to career advancement.

CONCLUSION

Gender equality in the three public senior high schools in Dili has not yet been fully institutionalized in everyday organizational practice. Although school leaders expressed commitments to equal opportunities, women teachers continued to experience uneven access to strategic leadership and decision-making. These conditions were shaped by organizational practices, leadership succession, cultural expectations, patterns of trust, and gendered perceptions of leadership.

The study identified professional negotiation as the core category explaining how women teachers navigate these conditions. Professional negotiation involved demonstrating competence, maintaining professional performance, building professional support, accepting available responsibilities, and using classroom practice as role modelling. However, these strategies did not necessarily lead to formal or sustained access to strategic leadership, indicating that individual professional efforts alone are insufficient to overcome organizationally embedded inequalities.

The study therefore conceptualizes gender equality in educational leadership as a relational process between individual agency and organizational structures. Achieving more substantive gender equality requires schools to complement women teachers' professional efforts with transparent leadership selection, equitable opportunities for professional advancement, structured succession and mentoring, and organizational practices that ensure competence is recognized without gender-based differences in the standards of legitimacy. Future research should examine these processes across broader educational and geographical contexts in Timor-Leste.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

AN conceived the study, designed the research, collected and analyzed the data, interpreted the findings, and prepared the original manuscript. DS supervised the research process, contributed to the research design, validated the analysis, and critically reviewed and revised the manuscript. AS contributed to the conceptual framework, assisted in data interpretation, provided methodological guidance, and reviewed and edited the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) during the preparation of this manuscript to assist with language translation, academic writing, grammar improvement, and editorial refinement. After using the tool, the authors thoroughly reviewed, verified, and edited all content as necessary and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the published work.

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