

POLICY BRIEF

When girls lead: Strengthening leadership pathways for rural and peri-urban girls in Zambia

ECHIDNA GLOBAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM





Executive Summary

In recent years, Zambia has made commitments and launched programs to advance gender equality and girls' leadership. The National Gender Policy (2023), the Education Act (2011), and the Eighth National Development Plan all name it, and years of skills, confidence, and empowerment programming have sought to build it. Yet girls in rural and peri-urban areas remain largely outside of formal leadership, a missed opportunity for Zambia's gender and education goals. The problem is not that girls lack leadership, but that institutions fail to recognize, name, or support it. Girls defined leadership through values and responsibility rather than title, consistent with Ubuntu, in which leadership is communal and relational. Programs targeting girls treat leadership as a skill to be taught, while policy names it without defining, tracking, or funding it.

Drawing on storytelling circles with girls aged 12 to 17 and interviews with head teachers, teachers, and community elders across four schools in two Copperbelt districts, this brief examines how girls understand and practice leadership and what supports or constrains it.

The brief shows that girls already lead at home, school, church, and community, learning it from the women around them, few of whom are in formal positions. Barriers identified across all four schools and both districts were structural and relational: peer discouragement, pressure to conform, fear of judgment, and inconsistent adult support. Girls named age as the barrier; adults named gender. Schools recognized only the roles they created, and support remained uneven, so whether a girl's leadership was noticed depended on the adults and peers around her. Girls identified individuals as enablers of their leadership, yet these relational supports are insufficient to address the structural barriers they face.



Closing this gap means recognizing and supporting girls' leadership in coordinated and consistent ways. This brief recommends that institutions, schools, communities, and policymakers:

1. Strengthen girls' leadership identities.
2. Expand opportunities to practice leadership.
3. Reduce social, structural, and cultural barriers.
4. Strengthen networks around girls: mentors, peers, families, and communities.
5. Align policy through definitions, indicators, and budgets that make girls' leadership visible and policy actors accountable.

Introduction

Efforts to promote greater gender equality in leadership often start with girls, yet existing approaches have demonstrated limited impact (Plan International 2023). A 2025 report on the status of adolescent girls in Zambia, for example, found that individual interventions focused on skills training, confidence-building, or economic participation have not fundamentally changed outcomes for girls because systemic barriers remain intact (World Bank 2025). This brief argues that these individual-focused development efforts may not bring about desired outcomes because they are based on flawed understandings of, and therefore do not effectively engage, girls' leadership.

Leadership, as this brief understands it, is not defined by title or position. It is the act of directing and inspiring people toward a shared purpose (Abebe et al. 2020). In the Zambian context, this leadership is rooted in Ubuntu understandings that are not individual but communal, not positional but relational, and not separated from the community one serves (Ndlovu 2016; see Box 1).

Previous research with women in Zambia points to the need for a fundamental rethinking of what leadership might look like and how to (re)build systems to support this (Hauge and Bryson 2015; Kalaba 2024). This is likely to be true for girls as well, particularly those in rural Zambia who are frequently excluded both from formal leadership opportunities at school and extracurricular developmental programs (see Context section). These girls already lead in informal, everyday ways in homes, churches, peer groups, and communities, yet institutions fail to recognize, support, or engage this leadership. This brief focuses on that gap.

This brief centers rural and peri-urban girls as experts on their leadership journeys, providing insight into how they practice leadership, what supports and constrains that, and what is needed to strengthen their leadership pathways. The study offers: 1) reimagined understandings of leadership for Zambia, and 2) recommended actions to strengthen leadership pathways for young people in and outside of schools. It is primarily addressed to policymakers, educators, and community leaders working to strengthen girls' leadership pathways and improve long-term educational, social, and economic outcomes in Zambia.

BOX 1

Understanding Indigenous and community leadership in the Zambian context

In Zambia, girls' leadership is shaped by Indigenous and informal community understandings and practices, which offer distinct perspectives on power and authority. In many rural and traditional settings, leadership is communal, emphasizing collective decision making and shared responsibility. This approach prioritizes community well-being over individual interests, enabling more inclusive and participatory leadership approaches (Kalenga Chikoko, and Khanare 2013).

Existing expressions of leadership among Zambian women often go unrecognized as legitimate foundations for leadership development that link community-based moral authority to education, mentorship, and formal decision making. Despite these roles being viewed as informal or weak within patriarchal and colonial leadership frameworks, they are central to social order in rural communities and significantly influence socialization, gender roles, and community cohesion (Tiernan et al. 2025; Kalaba 2025; Minthorn and Shotton 2019).

Beyond Indigenous structures, other local institutions define how leadership is accessed and practiced at the community level. Church-based and community leadership structures represent additional vital local institutions that shape moral authority, social cohesion, and collective action, especially in rural and peri-urban areas. In this brief, community-based leadership structures include chiefdoms, village communities, churches, local development organizations, community groups, and resource boards (Lembani 2021). It is within and across these overlapping structures that rural and peri-urban girls in Zambia navigate, negotiate, and practice leadership.

Context

Adolescent girls in rural and peri-urban settings face unique challenges and pressures in their everyday lives (Ossai et al. 2025; Kadonsi 2025), indicating the need for policies and programs that specifically support young girls and women living in rural and peri-urban areas.

Adolescent girls regularly assume responsibilities in their homes, schools, and communities, such as caregiving, peer coordination, conflict mediation, and household decision making (Archard 2013; Fulton et al. 2019; Hoyt and Kennedy 2008). However, because dominant, mostly Western leadership norms and structures emphasize assertiveness, hierarchy, and personality traits often gendered as masculine, girls struggle to identify themselves as leaders, and their leadership remains undervalued, especially within formal systems (Archard 2013; Hoyt and Kennedy 2008).

This section looks at the social and gender norms girls navigate, the institutional and household conditions that shape their leadership, and the policy gaps keeping rural and peri-urban girls from being recognized and supported as leaders.

SOCIAL AND GENDER NORMS SHAPING GIRLS' LEADERSHIP

Transitioning into adolescence can be difficult and poses intersectionality challenges for girls, especially under conditions where social and economic constraints impose barriers due to deeply embedded gender norms that restrict girls' actions, opportunities, and how they interact with society. Rural adolescent girls in Zambia face significant sociocultural challenges that impact their lived experiences, social standing, economic opportunities, and access to education (Menda et al. 2023). These challenges can keep them from fulfilling their potential and make them more likely than their male counterparts to lack access to and drop out of school (Banati et al. 2021; Kadonsi 2025).

Sociocultural factors also influence adolescent girls' perceptions of themselves as future leaders. Prevailing gender norms and social expectations often instill in rural girls the belief that their value lies in domestic roles, such as caregiving and household responsibilities, rather than pursuing education or leadership positions (UNFPA 2020). Traditional cultural practices like initiation ceremonies often emphasize these traditional gender roles and prepare girls for marriage and motherhood rather than leadership or career aspirations (UNFPA 2020). These ceremonies teach girls how to interact with men, creating expectations to engage in sexual activities, which can contribute to early pregnancies and, in turn, limit girls' opportunities (see below).

Additionally, girls' aspirations and their ability to envision themselves in leadership positions are challenged in rural and peri-urban contexts where they encounter few educated female role models. With limited visible examples of successful women, girls may struggle to see leadership as a viable path (Menda et al. 2023; National Gender Policy 2023). This points to a broader question of how success itself is understood. In this brief, "success" refers to women whose leadership is recognized in everyday life through values such as honesty, accountability, and care across the home, school, church, and community, apart from having formal titles or education (Menda et al. 2023). When the culture around girls does not show them what female leadership looks like, their own sense of possibility narrows accordingly.

Collectively, these socioeconomic factors contribute to the exclusion of most rural adolescent girls in Zambia from opportunities for education, formal leadership, and decisionmaking, perpetuating cycles of poverty and limiting their potential for empowerment (Menda et al. 2023).

INSTITUTIONAL AND HOUSEHOLD BARRIERS TO GIRLS' LEADERSHIP PATHWAYS

Leadership often requires financial independence and access to resources, including education (World Bank 2025). Formal education is one of the few spaces where leadership opportunities are made available to young people in Zambia (as school prefects or class monitors), yet educational and socioeconomic inequalities can limit the scope, recognition, engagement with, and promotion of rural and peri-urban girls' leadership in these spaces. Rural and peri-urban girls living in high-poverty contexts have limited access to skills and leadership development programs compared to girls in urban spaces and to boys generally (Zambia, Ministry of Education 2024; World Bank 2025; National Gender Policy 2023). Programs that do reach rural and peri-urban girls are often limited to education around reproductive health and gender-based violence or economic empowerment, rather than more holistic leadership development (Kwauk and Braga 2017).

High poverty rates also drive economic dependence on male partners in rural areas, hindering girls' ability to make independent decisions, take on leadership roles, and exercise their rights to education (Kadonsi 2025). Girls are often pressured to engage in sexual relationships in exchange for financial support, gifts, or to meet basic needs for food, clothing, and toiletries (Mbele et al. 2025; Naudeau et al. 2015; GIRL Center and UNICEF 2024). Nearly 30% of adolescent girls in Zambia become pregnant annually, a key factor in secondary school dropouts; this number rises to 37% for girls in rural communities (Zambia Statistics Agency, Ministry of Health, and ICF 2019). While the School Re-entry Policy in Zambia officially states that girls who leave school due to pregnancy should be allowed to return, limited community awareness, social stigma, and socioeconomic factors often hinder its effectiveness (Chavula et al. 2025), again excluding girls from formal school-based leadership experiences and supports.

Teenage mothers also face economic, social, and emotional hardships after pregnancy that challenge their pathways to become leaders. Young mothers frequently face rejection from their families, peers, and communities, which affects their mental health and ability to reintegrate into society (Menda et al. 2023; Malunga and Bain 2025).

POLICY AND SYSTEMS GAPS AFFECTING GIRLS' LEADERSHIP

In Zambia, with few women in leadership roles, women's representation in decisionmaking is inadequate. Despite the recent introduction of progressive policy frameworks, including the 2023 National Gender Policy, women in Zambia remain underrepresented in formal leadership positions. Women make up roughly 51% of Zambia's population but hold only 15% of parliamentary seats, 16% of cabinet positions, and less than 10% of local government roles (National Gender Policy 2023; World Bank 2025). Within the education sector, women make up the majority of the teaching workforce but hold only 21% of school leadership positions (Bergmann et al. 2022).

This underrepresentation of women in leadership roles from the school to the national level perpetuates policy gaps that hinder the leadership development and participation of girls and women. Historically, youth policies have focused on protection and prevention (Camilletti et al. 2018) with limited participation from adolescents. Further, as Table 1 outlines, girls remain underprioritized in national frameworks and budgets, particularly with respect to issues of policy and system change. Even when national and regional policy frameworks in Zambia identify girls' leadership as a priority, they lack the mechanisms, resources, and accountability structures to reach rural and peri-urban girls (Mbewe 2020; Murphy-Graham and Lloyd 2016). This study addresses that disconnect by documenting how rural and peri-urban girls in Zambia understand and practice leadership in their own lives.

Even when national and regional policy frameworks in Zambia identify girls' leadership as a priority, they lack the mechanisms, resources, and accountability structures to reach rural and peri-urban girls.

TABLE 1

Gender policy frameworks at national and regional levels: Provisions and gaps for rural and peri-urban girls' leadership pathways in Zambia

POLICY	HOW IT RELATES TO GENDER EQUALITY AND GIRLS' LEADERSHIP	GAPS FOR RURAL GIRLS' LEADERSHIP PATHWAYS
National Gender Policy (2023)	Mentions girls in decision making, participation, representation, and leadership training. Emphasizes increasing girls' participation and strengthening their leadership capacities.	Lacks a clear definition of girls' leadership and pathways. Limited monitoring and accountability (e.g., data, tracking). Weak coordination and resourcing for implementation.
Zambia Education Act (2011)	Provides leadership opportunities through school governance (boards, learner councils). Promotes equity in access, gender-sensitive curriculum, and teacher training.	No clear mechanisms to track leadership by gender or location. Does not address structural barriers affecting girls' leadership.
Eighth National Development Plan (2022–2026)	Promotes women and girls' participation in leadership. Includes affirmative action targets (e.g., 50% representation). Addresses gender disparities in education, work, and governance.	Limited focus on rural girls' pathways. Emphasizes participation targets over pathways. Lacks strategies on social and cultural barriers and clear indicators for progress.
African Union Agenda 2063	Promotes a people-driven development agenda, including women and youth.	Lacks clear implementation framework for women's and youth leadership. Limited specificity on gender and youth pathways.



Methodology

This study was carried out in two districts in Copperbelt Province (see Figure 1). Kitwe, a peri-urban area, and Lufwanyama, a rural area, were selected to understand how girls' experiences vary across settings, which is key to identifying how policies and programs might reach girls who grow up far from the centers of opportunity and power.

Data were collected in four schools, three in Kitwe and one in Lufwanyama. The study involved 50 girls aged 12-17 and nine adults: one head teacher, four teachers, and four community elders. Girls took part in storytelling circles and group discussions, while teachers and community elders were interviewed separately (see Table 2).

The girls were selected by teachers, in line with the study's sampling age group of 12-17 years. All girls who participated had to obtain adult consent before taking part in the storytelling circles. Community elders were identified by the schools and were selected according to their proximity to the school. Head teachers and teachers were included automatically by virtue of the schools selected for the project. Because teachers selected the participants, the girls who took part are likely to be those already visible to school staff.

FIGURE 1
Research sites within the Copperbelt province showing Lufwanyama and Kitwe districts

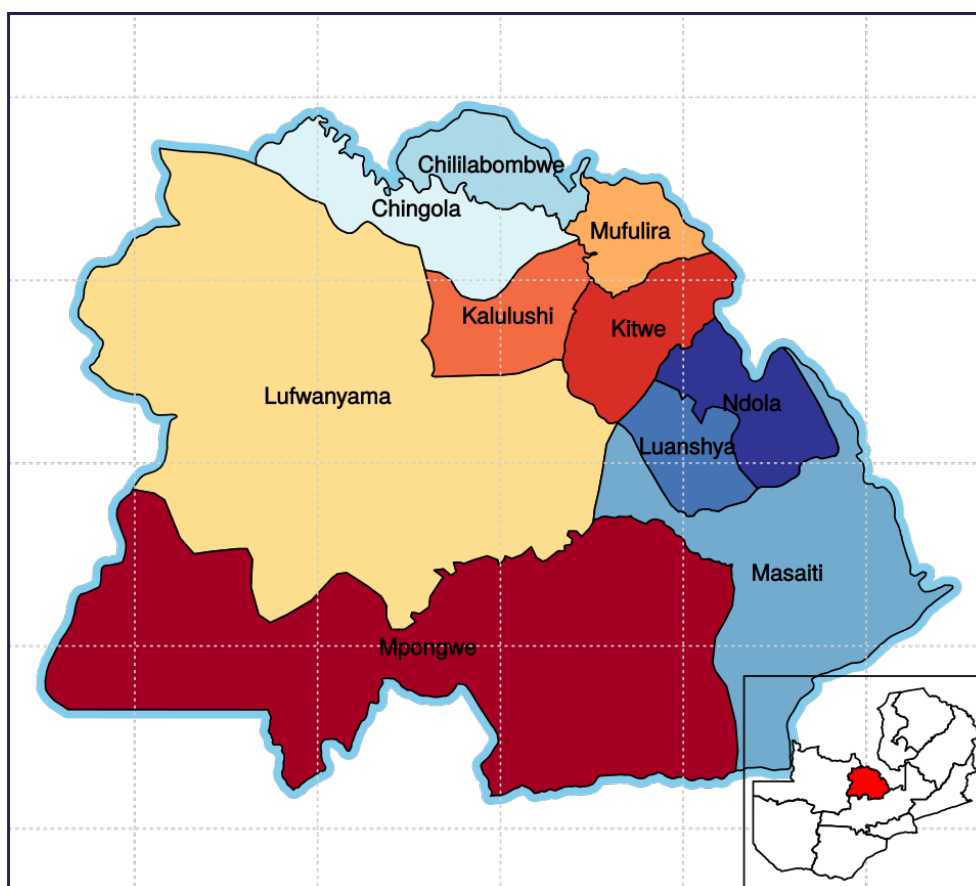


TABLE 2
Research participants

DISTRICT	SCHOOL	SCHOOL TYPE	GIRL PARTICIPANTS	ADULT PARTICIPANTS
Kitwe (Per-urban)	School 1	Government	12 girls (grades 8-11)	1 head teacher
	School 2	Government	10 girls (grades 8-11)	2 teachers
	School 3	Community	14 girls (grades 8-9)	--
	--	--	--	2 community elders (village chief, church leader)
Lufwanyama (rural)	School 4	Government	14 girls (grades 8-11)	2 teachers
	--	--	--	2 community elders (village chief, church leader)
TOTAL			50 GIRLS	9 ADULTS

This study used narrative inquiry through storytelling circles, keeping girls' own accounts of leadership at the center of the analysis. All interviews and discussions were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed using thematic analysis. The themes discussed in the findings below reflect the issues and patterns that appeared repeatedly in the girls' accounts across the four schools, rather than being decided in advance.

This approach was intentionally designed to engage girls in sharing directly about their lived experiences while also incorporating views from schools and communities. It gives a practical basis for recommendations grounded in everyday realities in both rural and peri-urban settings.



Findings

Girls from the two districts of the Copperbelt Province described leadership not as having a title or public role, but as an activity requiring character and responsibility enacted through values across different spaces: home, school, church, and community. This section first delves deeper into how girls understand leadership, then presents their experiences and perspectives across each of these domains, and closes with a discussion of the barriers and enablers girls identified to exercising their leadership.

HOW GIRLS DEFINE AND UNDERSTAND LEADERSHIP

Across all four schools, girls shared three consistent understandings of leadership:

- Leadership is rooted in demonstrating one's values.
- Leadership does not require a title or public role.
- Leadership is shaped by the role models they see in their community.

A. Leadership as values in action

The girls defined leadership as rooted in demonstrating values such as honesty, accountability, and trust. One girl, entrusted with money to buy supplies for a neighbor's traditional ceremony, said she "was expected to be accountable and do the right thing," adding that she "was delighted that mum for the first time trusted [her] with money." Leadership here was not the task itself but the character the task demanded. Another girl, chosen as chairperson of her church group, understood her selection the same way: "I later learned that I was given this responsibility because they had seen certain leadership qualities in me, such as honesty, respect, and obedience." Girls in Kitwe put it as a general rule: "For a person to succeed, they must be honest, respectful, bring peace, and lead by example."

This understanding of leadership reflects the rural and peri-urban contexts in which girls grow up, where household

responsibilities, respect for elder authority, and strong faith and community norms shape how girls learn and practice responsibility and leadership long before they step into any formal role. It also carries a tension worth naming. The values girls associate with leadership, obedience, respect for elders, and good behavior are the same values that, elsewhere in their accounts, keep them from speaking up (see section on Social, cultural, and structural barriers to girls' leadership).

B. Leadership does not require a title or a public role

Girls located leadership in ordinary responsibilities, some named as such and some not. They shared their narratives of how they took up responsibilities. One girl, the eldest at home, explained: "Being the eldest in my family, I am often expected to take on the role of a parent when my guardians are absent. Because of this, leading has become a part of my daily life." Another described distributing information leaflets in her neighborhood, an unplanned, unpaid task she chose to complete and concluded: "I learned the importance of being nice to people and rendering service either free or paid actually pays off. I believe this is part of leadership too."

Girls were also explicit that leadership is not conferred by age or status. One rejected the community's assumption directly: "Even if I'm young, I can still make meaningful contributions in my community." Another, reflecting on overcoming her own fear, arrived at a definition: "Leadership is not about age but about character, courage, and a willingness to grow."

Institutions, however, largely do not see it this way. As one head teacher acknowledged: "The two kinds of leadership noticed in our school are school prefects and student council. Informal leaderships are not usually noticed." Another teacher confirmed that "formal roles like prefects are noticed in our school." Girls defined leadership broadly; schools recognized it narrowly. The result is that most of what girls actually do goes uncounted.

C. Leadership is shaped by the role models they see in their community

Girls' understandings of leadership were built almost entirely from women within their communities, mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, teachers, and neighbors rather than from public or political figures. Asked to name a leader they admired, no girl named a national figure. One described her grandmother, known in the family as "the Iron Lady," who "holds authority firmly yet leads with a democratic spirit" and "is respected because she maintains boundaries, does not tolerate nonsense, and embodies qualities of boldness, accountability, and a powerful feminine presence. Another described her mother: "She is not a learned person but carries so much wisdom ... She knows how to manage her business as well as our home despite all the busyness surrounding her."

Where role models were educated, girls admired the struggle as much as the achievement. One admired a friend's sister who completed a doctorate while married with children. "It's hard in my country to be married with children and excel academically," and another admired her sister, "the first in our family to finish high school and be in university. I have witnessed her struggles, late nights of no sleep just to get things done."

Teachers featured prominently, and girls were precise about what made them models. Of a mathematics teacher, one girl explained: "She interacted with everyone individually and never looked down on anyone. ... She also helped us boost our self-esteem and believe in ourselves." Of their head teacher, girls said she "is confident, fair, and always encourages us to study hard," and is "committed to nurturing future leaders for our nation."

Girls' narratives bring nuance to a common assumption in the literature that rural girls lack female role models (Menda et al. 2023). The girls in this study had role models in abundance, but almost none held formal leadership positions, and the qualities girls admired in them were largely relational and moral rather than positional. Adults reinforced this framing: asked what makes a woman a leader in the

community, one elder answered: "maturity, being able to take care of their homes and children well, approachable." Girls therefore learned what leadership looked like from women who led without titles, which is precisely why they were able to recognize the same pattern in themselves and precisely why formal systems failed to recognize either.

Taken together, these three understandings of leadership explain the gap this brief addresses. Girls defined leadership as character demonstrated through responsibility, exercised without a title, and modeled by women in their immediate lives. Institutions defined it as a position. The following sections turn to where girls practiced leadership on their own terms, the barriers that constrained them, and the enablers already present in their lives.

GIRLS PRACTICE LEADERSHIP ACROSS HOUSEHOLD, SCHOOL, CHURCH, AND COMMUNITY

The girls in this study pointed to leadership practices in their homes, schools, churches, and communities. The "gap," as they discussed it was not in their capacity or interest, but in whether the adults and institutions around them could see, name, and support what the girls were already doing. Across all four schools, girls described leadership practices that involved managing resources, navigating relationships, and holding responsibilities even when conditions were difficult. This was done through self-determination and courage.

A. Household leadership

At home, girls described taking charge in practical ways: caring for siblings, organizing household tasks, and making decisions when adults were not around. For those who were the eldest, this was routine rather than occasional, and it had been happening long before anyone named it "leadership." As one girl put it, she felt like a leader "whenever I take charge of the household and guide my younger siblings on what should and shouldn't be done." For many girls, home was where leadership began, not because anyone had called it, but because circumstances demanded it.

Household responsibility was not just about daily tasks; it was also where girls started noticing what was not working around them and thinking about what to do about it. One girl, for example, connected what she had seen at home directly to her future goals: “I have observed in my community that a lot of women lack financial literacy, and it blocks them from running businesses smoothly. I believe I will help many women get out of poverty once I take this route.”

B. School-based leadership

At school, girls described taking on formal roles as moments where their leadership became visible to others for the first time. In both Kitwe and Lufwanyama, roles like class monitor and prefect were available to girls, but taking them up meant navigating peer resistance, community scrutiny, and the weight of household responsibilities that followed girls into school. One girl shared: “I hadn’t expected that I could lead so well, nor that everyone would pay attention to me and show me respect.”

For some, this came as a surprise because home-based responsibilities had not been named or recognized in the same way. The qualities rewarded, obedience and respect for authority, mirrored what girls had already been taught at home and in their communities. Unlike at home, school was felt to offer titles and public recognition. However, access to these roles was not equal.

C. Community and faith-based leadership

Beyond home and school, girls described leading in church activities, youth groups, and other community spaces. Girls described these spaces as ones of belonging and participation. As one girl said: “I have grown up in a Catholic home, and do you know what that means? You have to attend and participate in all the church activities.”

Church was also where the values girls had been taught at home became visible to adults who could act on them. One girl was chosen as a chairperson of her church group. “I was so happy because I had never held a leadership position in

the church before ... it made me feel like someone others could rely on.”

Another girl described how she overcame her fears and learned to lead because an adult pushed her and then guided her. She had wanted to join her church’s children’s ministry but never said so. When a matron asked her to organize a children’s trip, she refused: “I was nervous and told her [matron] politely to ask someone else to do it, but she insisted that I take up the task. It was nerve-wrecking but thankfully she guided me through what I needed to do.”

In church and community settings, participation was often less a choice and more an expectation shaped by upbringing and belonging. Church and community spaces asked less of girls at the entry point. Girls were chosen or asked, rather than required, to nominate themselves, and for several, this was the first time an adult recognized them as a leader. This does not make it any less meaningful, but it does indicate leadership in these spaces may come with obligation attached. Girls are contributing to their communities while also managing expectations that the community has of them.

Across all three spaces, girls were already taking on leadership, but what that leadership looked and felt like shifted depending on where they were. At home, it was driven by necessity, often without recognition. At school it became visible through titles, though access was unequal. In the community and church, it was tied to the expectations that come with belonging. These experiences build on each other. Policies that treat leadership as something girls still need to learn will miss the leadership pathways girls are already walking.

SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO GIRLS’ LEADERSHIP

The study identified four barriers that consistently limited girls’ leadership across home, schools, and communities: 1) peer discouragement and bullying, 2) pressure to conform to community norms, 3) fear of judgment, and 4) inconsistent adult supports and limited institutional leadership pathways.

These barriers may appear relational—a friend who mocked, a teacher who did not encourage, an elder who dismissed. But the same patterns appeared in all four schools across both districts, regardless of which peers, teachers, or elders a girl happened to have. What girls experienced as personal discouragement was the local expression of norms, making these barriers structural. For this reason, interventions aimed at individual girls are often insufficient because they leave these structural elements intact.

These challenges help explain why girls participate differently across the spaces where they practice leadership. Whether and how a girl took on leadership often depended on how the elders, family, community members, and institutions around her responded when she did. None of the girls described a school or community process that set out to spot or build girls' leadership. Support usually came from individual adults rather than from a structured system, so it reached only the girls those adults happened to notice. What was missing was a reliable, structured way of providing support, rather than any failure on the part of individual adults.

A. Peer discouragement and bullying

Peer discouragement and bullying made girls reluctant to take on visible leadership roles. Even when selected, some reported struggling to perform if they were mocked, undermined, or lacked social support. In the rural context, peer discouragement did not stay within school; it was reinforced by community gender norms, elder authority, and the reality that the same peers who discouraged girls at school were their neighbors at home. One girl recalled when she passed her Grade 7 exams: "Some of my friends tried to discourage me. They said things like, 'You can't do it. You'll just be insulted,' or 'You are too shy to stand in front of people and speak.'" This type of discouragement is not casual; it targets a girl's confidence and sense of ability, and repeated messages like these begin to shape how girls see themselves. It also shows that peers pay close attention to what girls do and say. This type of attention if used positively, can make peer encouragement powerful. Another girl described how it

affected her participation: "My friends would pull me down, saying I would never succeed or that I would only make a fool of myself." A teacher described it as a pattern rather than a matter of particular friendships: "Girls shun to participate in most activities due to lack of support from fellow girls."

B. Pressure to conform to community norms

Girls described navigating strong social expectations and gender norms that limit their participation in leadership. They named the age-related pressures they faced directly. As one explained, "In my community, elderly people always look down on the young ones ... I do not have the courage to approach the elderly, but one day I will gather some courage to air my views."

Gender appeared in girls' accounts differently, not as a barrier they named for themselves, but in how they saw the women they admired who, for example, managed marriage, children, studies, and work. In each of these stories, girls registered the gendered load carried by the women around them, the double burden of home and work, or women's exclusion from economic life.

Adults named gender more directly. One elder said: "Chances for men are very high in a community of becoming a leader because they are responsible in what they do." The head teacher said most leadership positions "are held by men, and this discourages some women from contesting." A teacher said, "Older girls tend to shun from leadership roles due to gender stereotyping and being in a state of experiencing an inferiority complex."

Elders in both districts named the same rules. In contexts where respect for elders is strongly enforced, girls who spoke up or took initiative risked being labeled disrespectful. These norms shape not only what girls do, but also what they feel permitted to do.

C. Fear of judgment

Girls described being judged by peers, family members, and teachers, which they said affected both their willingness to step forward and how they performed in leadership roles. One girl shared: “I remember the time when I wanted to become a prefect. I struggled to stand out because of my fear of people.” Another explained that being “afraid of public speaking and worried that I might be bullied” made it difficult to lead effectively.

Adults described the same thing. One head teacher said: “Lack of confidence. Most girls doubt their abilities. They fear making mistakes.” A community elder added: “Most girls feel they are not good enough to belong in leadership.” Another elder placed the cause outside the girls: “Girls will feel unprotected due to not supporting them. They feel out of place in the community.”

This fear showed up in visible ways. Girls may speak less, avoid taking initiative, or step back from leadership altogether. What can appear as a lack of confidence or interest is often a response to the risk of being judged or criticized. This is where adults and peers carry particular responsibility, because the same people whose judgment girls fear are also the ones whose affirmation they need. A classroom where a teacher responds with encouragement, or a group of peers who listen rather than mock, could begin to ease that fear.

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D. Inconsistent adult supports and limited institutional leadership pathways

Limited support from adults and inconsistent encouragement from teachers reinforced these challenges. Where support existed, girls described it as decisive. One credited her head teacher: “He taught me how to lead by being honest, having integrity ... the head teacher later promoted me to head girl.” Without steady guidance and affirmation, girls were less likely to take up or sustain leadership roles.

As above, leadership in schools was recognized only through the roles the school system had created: “prefectureship, monitors, school council, cadet, clubs and sport and culture.”

One teacher described the only formal process girls’ leadership passed through: “In the process of appointing prefects, we ensure that both girls and boys have equal numbers.” That process counts girls at the point of appointment, but in telling their leadership stories, no girl described a formal process that brought her to the attention of adults who could recognize and support her, and no recognition carried from one space to another. Each space—school, home, and community—judged girls on its own terms. This is not a failing unique to these schools but a structural and systemic failure. National frameworks such as the National Gender Policy and the Education Act name girls’ leadership as a goal, but neither defines what it is nor requires that it be tracked (see Context section). With no clear policy guidance, each school falls back on the roles it can see and control, such as prefects and councils. The gap in these four schools therefore reflects a gap already present in the policy above them.

Individual adults filled that support and recognition gap. Most girls who led credited a particular teacher, head teacher, or elder, and adults described their support in the same terms. One head teacher said she helped girls “by engaging them in activities that build their skill area, such as communication in debates clubs and teamwork in various school clubs where girls are able to express themselves.” This type of support was decisive for the girls who received it (Section 4.4), but it was a personal effort rather than a pathway.

ENABLERS OF GIRLS' LEADERSHIP

Girls identified teacher guidance, peer support, family and community encouragement, and self-determination as conditions that support their leadership. In rural and peri-urban contexts, these enablers carry particular weight. Girls are already navigating household responsibilities, the authority of elders, and expectations shaped by faith and community norms. In these settings, the presence of even one consistent and encouraging adult can influence whether a girl steps forward or holds back.

A. Teacher support

Many girls highlighted the role of teachers and head teachers in shaping their leadership journeys. Support came through guidance, encouragement, and opportunities to take part in school clubs, debates, and leadership roles. One girl explained: "He taught me how to lead by being honest, having integrity, maintaining peace, and treating others with respect. Because of my efforts, the head teacher later promoted me to Head Girl." In contexts where girls have limited opportunities to be recognized, teachers played a key role in identifying potential and creating opportunities for leadership.

B. Peer support

Peers also played a key role, especially when they encouraged and supported one another. Chimwemwe described how two friends supported her after she was chosen as class monitress: "When I was chosen as class monitress, they became my strongest supporters. They encouraged me to lead with confidence and encouraged me whenever I felt like stepping down." Another girl shared that her friend's encouragement meant that "whenever I follow this principle, I excel in my work, and I succeed." Where peer discouragement can push girls back, peer support can help them persist, especially when affirmation from other sources is limited.

C. Family and community support

Girls pointed to family members, church, and community figures as important sources of encouragement. Support in these spaces helped build confidence and sustain motivation. As Kalenga described: "There is a certain lady in my neighborhood who always stops me to chat about life in general. Talking to her just brings this inner peace that I can't describe." In rural and peri-urban communities where church and community networks are central, this kind of informal support is often the most consistent source of encouragement available to girls.



D. Self-determination

Girls spoke about the importance of self-determination and the ability to keep going despite criticism or setbacks. This included building confidence over time and choosing to believe in their potential. “Despite their words, I took time to reflect and told myself that I shouldn’t depend on others to believe in me.” Significantly, these girls are not waiting for conditions to improve; they draw on something internal to keep going, even when the environment around them is not supportive. Supporting and strengthening these enablers through deliberate policy investment provides a direct way to build on the leadership girls already demonstrate.

Peers, teachers, families, and community members can either support or discourage girls’ leadership. The same relationships that hold a girl back can also sustain her, and Table 2 sets out how each group acts as a barrier and as an enabler. These relationships, though, work within structural conditions that no single relationship can change: a definition of leadership that counts only formal titles and roles, gender norms and household and economic pressures that limit girls’ time to lead, and the lack of any institutional mechanism to recognize, develop, or track the leadership girls already practice. This is the gap between relational support and structural change. The encouragement of an individual teacher or elder is real and, for the girls who receive it, decisive, but on its own it cannot shift the conditions that hold girls back.

TABLE 2
The dual role of peers, teachers, families, and community members

ACTOR	ACTS AS AN ENABLER WHEN ...	ACTS AS A BARRIER WHEN ...
Peers	Encourage and affirm girls. Support them in leadership roles and recognize their contributions.	Bully or mock girls who lead. Undermine their efforts or give discouraging feedback.
Family	Recognize girls’ contributions at home and beyond. Provide encouragement and support for girls to take on responsibility.	Discourage girls through negative messages. Reinforce beliefs that leadership is not for girls. Limit girls’ time and opportunities through excessive household responsibilities.
Teachers	Create safe spaces where girls feel confident to lead. Acknowledge and support girls in leadership roles. Provide opportunities such as class monitor roles, clubs, and debates.	Discourage girls who show initiative. Fail to acknowledge their efforts. Remain silent when girls take on leadership, reinforcing doubt.
Community and elders	Create supportive environments. Publicly recognize girls’ contributions and encourage their participation in community roles.	Express disapproval when girls take on leadership roles. Maintain expectations that limit girls’ participation. Remain silent, leaving girls unsure of their place.

Recommendations

This brief proposes a leadership approach grounded in the lived experiences of girls in rural and peri-urban Zambia, recognizing the everyday leadership girls already practice, and the conditions needed to strengthen it. Girls' leadership was found to be held back by structural barriers: a narrow, title-based definition of leadership, gender norms, household and economic pressures, and no institutional pathway to recognize or develop it. The support girls report receiving is mostly relational, reaching them through individual teachers, peers, families, and elders. The problem lies in the gap between the two. Relational support cannot resolve structural barriers on its own. What is needed is a coordinated response rather than reliance on individual goodwill. The recommendations

that follow focus on five areas that respond to the structural barriers and relational enablers identified in the findings section: 1) strengthening girls' leadership identities; 2) expanding opportunities to practice leadership; 3) reducing social and cultural barriers; 4) strengthening support networks; and 5) improving policy and accountability frameworks.

These recommendations set out practical actions for schools, churches, communities, and policymakers to strengthen girls' leadership pathways in Zambia. At their core, they call for three shifts: how leadership is recognized, how consistently adults support girls, and how support is coordinated across the spaces girls move through every day.

» **Recommendation 1: Strengthen girls' leadership identities**

Key actors: Schools, communities, ministry of education, department of gender

This recommendation responds to the finding that girls define leadership through values, responsibility, and care rather than titles, and that role models play a significant part in shaping how they see themselves as leaders. Recognizing girls' leadership practice strengthens girls' sense of themselves as leaders.

LEVEL	ACTORS	ACTIONS
School	Teachers, head teachers	Recognize informal leadership at home, at school, and in the community as a real leadership experience, not only formal elected roles. Create regular opportunities for girls to reflect on and talk about their own leadership experiences and what they have learned from them.
Community	Community elders, church leaders	Publicly affirm girls who demonstrate leadership qualities such as honesty, care, and responsibility in community and faith spaces, not only those who hold formal school or church positions.
System	Ministry of Education, Department of Gender, Ministry of Youth and Sport, Ministry of Local Government	Develop a gender-responsive leadership framework within the National Education and Gender Policy that recognizes the everyday forms of leadership girls already practice. Invest in girls' leadership development programs that build on what girls bring rather than introducing entirely new models.

» **Recommendation 2: Expand opportunities for girls to practice leadership**

Key actors: Schools, communities, ministry of education, department of gender, ministry of youth and sport

This recommendation responds to the finding that girls develop leadership through real responsibility across household, school, and community spaces, and that opportunities to practice leadership in visible and consistent ways remain limited. When girls are supported regularly and given opportunities to lead, they build and demonstrate their leadership skills.

LEVEL	ACTORS	ACTIONS
School	Head teachers, teachers	Create visible leadership opportunities for girls beyond elected positions, including chairing meetings, leading group activities, and taking responsibility for school tasks, with structured follow-through and teacher support. Integrate leadership roles into everyday classroom practice through group facilitation, peer organization, and shared responsibility.
Community	Community leaders, church leaders	Create structured roles for girls in community events, committees, and faith-based organizations that go beyond token inclusion and include clear responsibility and support.
System	Ministry of Education; Department of Gender; Ministry of Youth and Sport; Ministry of Local Government; Ministry of Community Development	Fund and expand extracurricular programs where girls can practice leadership in supported environments. Recognize and resource girl-centered leadership programs within both formal and informal structures. Work with schools, communities, and organizations to create safe and inclusive spaces for leadership development.

» **Recommendation 3: Reduce social and cultural barriers to girls' leadership**

Key actors: Schools, communities, ministry of education, department of gender, ministry of youth and sport

This recommendation responds to the finding that peer discouragement, pressure to conform to community norms, fear of judgment, bullying, and inconsistent adult support all undermine girls' leadership. Addressing these barriers requires coordinated action across school, community, and system levels.

LEVEL	ACTORS	ACTIONS
School	Head teachers, teachers	Establish and enforce clear school codes of conduct that protect girls in leadership roles from bullying and undermining. Introduce structured peer sessions that address bullying, gender stereotyping, and respect for girls in leadership.
Community	Community elders, parents	Engage men and boys, alongside women and girls, in structured community discussions on gender norms and the value of girls' leadership within families and communities.
System	Ministry of Education; Department of Gender; Ministry of local government, Ministry of youth and sport	Develop and enforce gender-responsive policies with clear targets for girls' participation in leadership. Hold schools and communities accountable for creating safe and supportive environments. Establish policy frameworks that recognize and build on everyday leadership practices such as caregiving, peer support, and community service and promote girls' participation in school, community, and national decision making.

» **Recommendation 4: Strengthen enabling systems and support networks**

Key actors: Schools, communities, ministry of education, department of gender, NGOs, and donors

This recommendation responds to the finding that teacher mentorship, peer support, family encouragement, and self-determination enable girls to lead and sustain their leadership over time.

LEVEL	ACTORS	ACTIONS
School	Head teachers, teachers	Formalize teacher mentorship for girls in leadership roles. Establish peer mentorship structures that pair girls in leadership positions with trained peer supporters to provide guidance and encouragement.
Community	Faith leaders, community organizations	Strengthen the role of community members, including parents, siblings, neighbors, and church members as mentors and allies in girls' leadership. Ensure community spaces are inclusive and free from discrimination so that girls feel confident to participate and lead.
System	Ministry of Education; Ministry of Gender; Ministry of Community Development and Social Welfare; Ministry of Youth and Sport; NGOs and donors	Resource family engagement programs that support parents and guardians to actively encourage girls' leadership at home, at school, and in their communities. Invest in leadership development programs that position girls as active participants and contributors, not only as beneficiaries.

» **Recommendation 5: Strengthen policy and accountability for girls' leadership pathways**

Key actors: Ministry of education, department of gender, ministry of community development, Zambia national parliament, ministry of justice, ministry of finance

This recommendation responds to the policy gaps set out in the Context section (Table 1) and the finding that schools recognized only the leadership roles they had created. Including girls' leadership in policies, budgets, and reporting gives governments and institutions accountability mechanisms.

LEVEL	ACTORS	ACTIONS
School	Head teachers, school boards	Track and report annually on the number of girls in both formal and informal leadership roles. Use this data to identify gaps and take action to improve participation.
Community	District education offices, community leaders	Establish community-level accountability mechanisms to monitor whether girls are included in and supported through leadership roles. Work with communities to create safe and inclusive spaces for girls' leadership development.
System	Ministry of Education; Department of Gender; Ministry of Community Development; Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Finance, Zambia National Parliament	Integrate girls' leadership development as a measurable outcome in national education plans, with clear indicators, timelines, and budget allocations. Align leadership initiatives with the National Gender Policy 2023 and the national education curriculum. Develop policies that recognize and build on everyday leadership practices such as caregiving, peer support, and community service. Strengthen implementation to ensure that national commitments are reflected in practice at school and community levels.

Conclusion

Strengthening leadership pathways for girls in rural and peri-urban areas is central to Zambia's broader gender and education goals. When girls are recognized and supported to lead, they can participate more fully in decisions that affect their lives and communities. This also strengthens Zambia's progress towards its gender equality commitments, including

SDG 5 on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. The goal is not simply to have more girls in formal positions, but to have communities and institutions that recognize and build from the leadership girls are already practicing every day.



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Appendix A. Methodology

Within the four schools, girls were selected for participation based on age (12-17 years old) and on the advice of the headmasters. Headmasters participated in the study by virtue of their role as school leaders, and they also helped identify community elders based on their roles and contributions within their respective communities.

In accordance with school practices, head teachers appointed teachers as point persons for the study at the school level. These teachers played a critical role in coordinating and mobilizing the participants and ensuring that the research process aligned with school routines and ethical considerations.

Selection of the girls was done by the teachers. The selected participants were fully briefed and informed of the purpose of the study, the duration and next steps, and the need to obtain consent to participate from their guardians as well as teachers to be part of the study.

Data collection involved two phases. The first phase featured stakeholder meetings, participant recruitment, and training for local youth cofacilitators. This was followed by storytelling circles where girls participated in group discussions and shared their experiences and perceptions of leadership, and interviews with head teachers/teachers and community elders. Elders were selected at the recommendation of head teachers based on their leadership within the community around the school. The storytelling circles and interviews were audio-recorded and accompanied by note-taking. Audio recordings and notes were transcribed and subjected to thematic coding and analysis with a focus on understanding girls' experiences and perceptions of leadership in rural Zambia. This methodological approach sought to partner with girls in knowledge production, which "means letting go of our need to know more or know better" (Bent 2016, 117).

Telling the stories of girls makes visible the "communities, partners, and support systems central to girls' success" (Bent 2016, 117). While the methods used cannot fully capture the complexity of girls' lives, research on girls' lives and leadership journeys moves the research "beyond the public praise of empowered girlhood" to analysis of girls' (dis)empowering experiences.



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DISCLOSURE

Microsoft Copilot and Grammarly were used in preparing this brief for editing and proofreading for grammar, clarity, and consistency.

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ABOUT THE ECHIDNA GLOBAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM

The Echidna Global Scholars Program at the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at Brookings seeks to catalyze and amplify the impact of local leaders working to advance gender equality in and through education across the Global South.

During a six-month fellowship, Echidna Global Scholars conduct individual research focused on improving learning opportunities and life outcomes for girls, young women, and gender non-conforming people, develop their leadership and evidence-based policy skills, build substantive knowledge on gender and global education issues, and expand their pathways for impact. Upon completion of the fellowship, scholars transition to the Echidna Alumni Network, a growing community of practice aimed at promoting their significant, sustained, and collective influence on gender-transformative education globally and locally.

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