

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Women Leading Schools:

Unsupported, Overlooked and Exhausted



In late 2022 Women & Leadership Australia, in partnership with National Excellence in School Leadership Institute (NESLI), surveyed more than 200 women in teaching, administrative and leadership roles across Australian schools. Overwhelmingly, women in schools told us they are unsupported, overlooked and exhausted.

Huge workloads, long work hours and a lack of support are contributing to high stress levels and burnout. Caring for the wellbeing of their students, colleagues and themselves in the wake of the pandemic adds complexity for many women in schools.

And for many women in schools, gender discrimination, bias and systemic barriers are still holding them back from success in leadership roles.

Respondents outlined some clear recommendations for improved support within their workplaces, and identified key development areas that would help build their own capability and satisfaction at work.

We heard from women across diverse roles in Australian schools

We received 207 responses to our online survey from teachers and school leaders from public, independent and catholic schools in all states across Australia.

—
40%

Forty percent of respondents were in a designated leadership role.

—
33%

A third were not in a formal role but still undertook leadership activities from time to time

—
17%

and a further 17% were aspiring leaders.

—
10%

The remaining 10% did not aspire to leadership roles.

—
84%

The vast majority of respondents (84%) had worked in the school sector for more than ten years.

Systemic barriers leave women feeling unsupported

Women in schools face a number of systemic challenges in their roles. The top three issues reported by respondents were long work hours (67%), being unable to pursue professional development because of other responsibilities (64%) and gender discrimination and bias against women (42%).

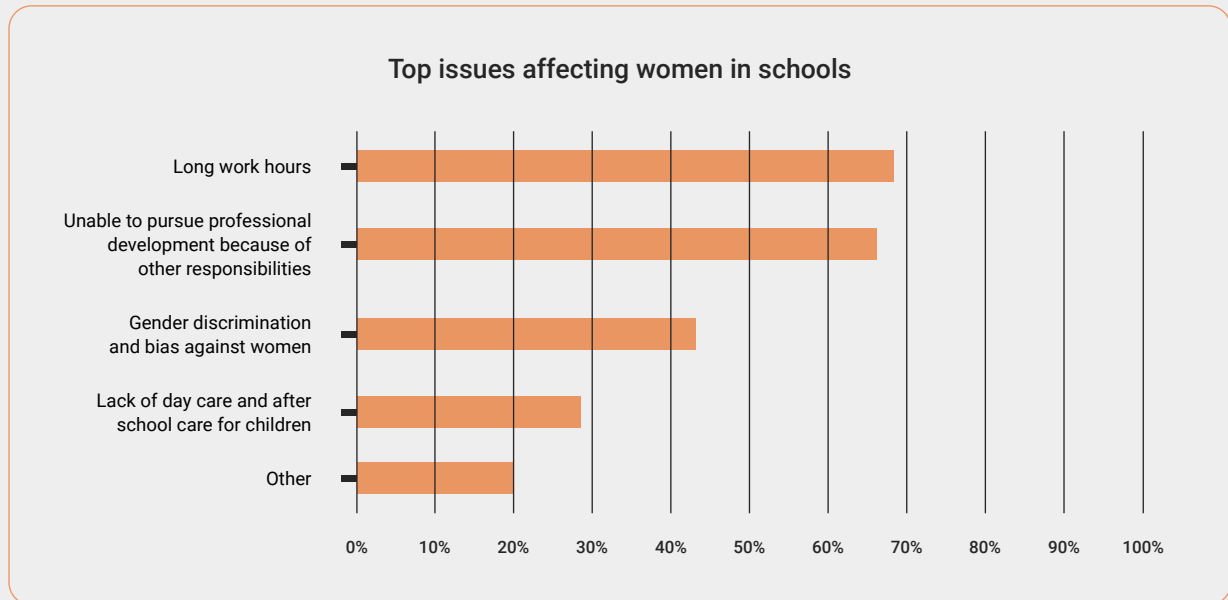


Figure 1: In your view, what are the top three issues affecting women in schools? (Multiple responses allowed)

When asked to expand on their responses, some participants saw themselves as isolated because of their age, and excluded from the 'in' crowd of men or women in senior roles who would not recognise their experience and talent.

Others expressed resignation to the fact they were unable to gain a senior role or that they had to suffer abuse by management - and in some cases, students - and had to put up with mediocre decisions by management.

Some respondents were also resigned to a lack of flexible or part time roles, which prevented them from spending as much time with their own children as they would like.

Gender inequity is still holding women back

Two in five respondents (41%) have experienced barriers or discrimination within a school, because of their gender. Those who had experienced gender discrimination described examples of male tribalism, ageism, gender bias, and racism and stereotypes.

Gender inequity was also evident in the list of leadership issues that affect women in schools. These responses reflect ingrained and systemic gender bias. Participants ranked a number of statements, with the biggest issues affecting women in schools being:

1. skills and knowledge traditionally viewed as female are undervalued by management
2. stereotyped views of leadership as being primarily male
3. pay not appropriate for the responsibilities of the job
4. lack of support for carer responsibilities preventing women from applying for leadership roles
5. women candidates not able to get into the 'boys' club' of senior leadership
6. unwillingness of current leaders to promote women into leadership.

Poor wellbeing affects almost a third of women in schools

Wellbeing levels varied across respondents, with just under a third (28%) reporting very poor or poor wellbeing, a further third (35%) reporting fair wellbeing, and 40% reporting good or excellent wellbeing levels.

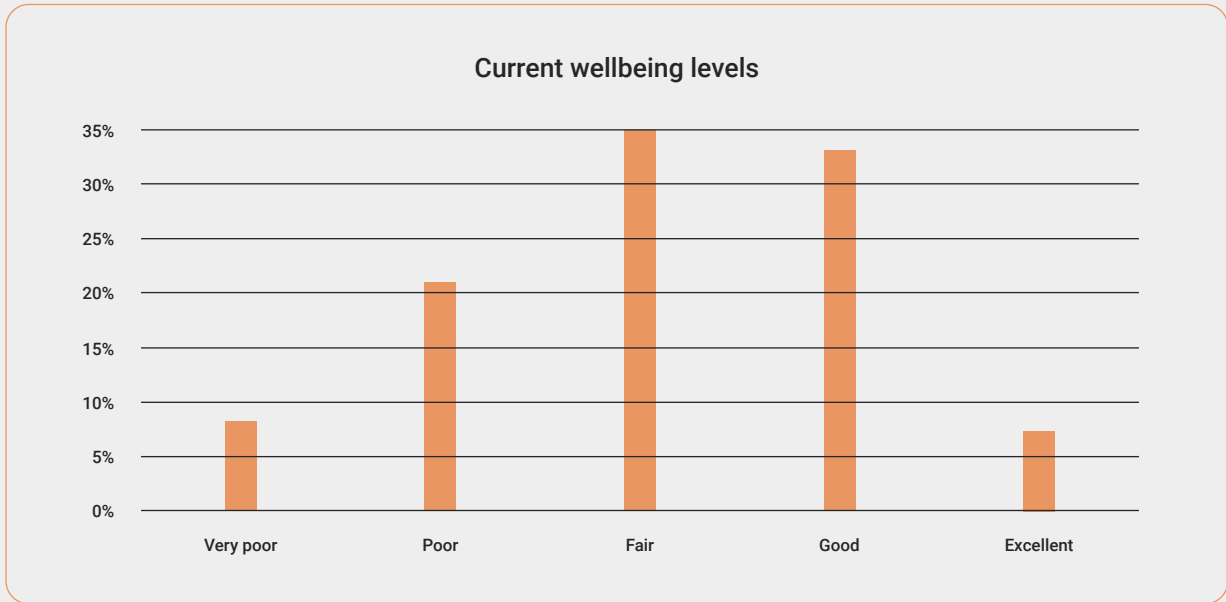


Figure 2: Please rate your current level of wellbeing within the workplace

Of those who reported poor or very poor levels of wellbeing, the key drivers for this included long work hours (affecting 66% of respondents), conflict at work (affecting 45%), and lack of autonomy at work (affecting 44%).



Long work hours are a key stressor

Similar responses were reported by respondents in relation to their stress levels. The most common stressor across all respondents was long work hours (affecting 62% of respondents). Managing and responding to student wellbeing was the second most common stressor, followed by staff shortages or sickness, managing their own wellbeing, and supporting the wellbeing of staff and colleagues.

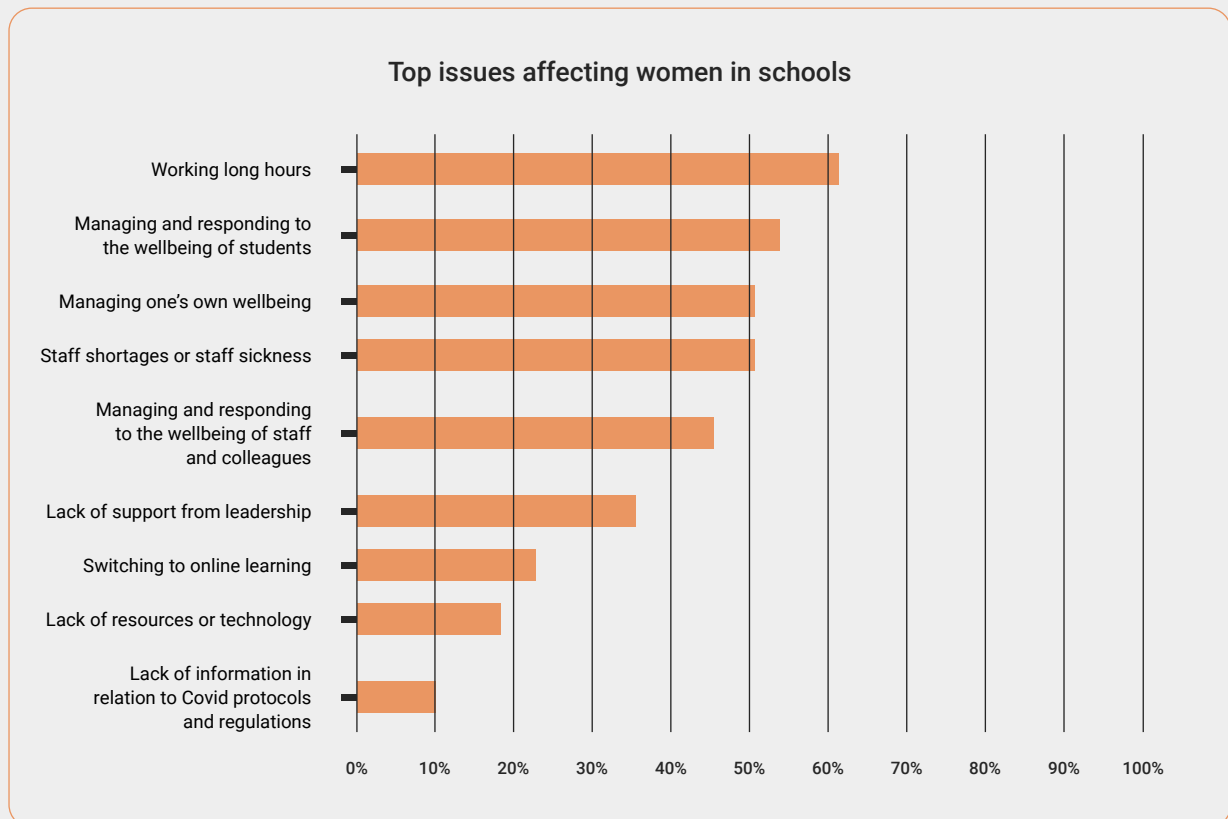


Figure 3: If you answered poor or very poor for the last question, what factors informed your choice? (Multiple responses allowed)

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Pressure

Pressure caused by a lack of resources, high demands and high workload .



Tension

Tension between their own needs, family needs, student needs and the unrealistic demands of the job. Participants expressed a sense of being torn between two competing priorities such as work and family.



Lack of control

Lack of control, with the sense that things were being done to teachers rather than with teachers or even explained to them and they had little control over their work situation.



- “We can’t take time for our own wellbeing or even illness as that increases the workload of other school leaders which then negatively affects their wellbeing.”
- “Lack of time to teach crowded curriculum with too many interruptions to the timetable/calendar.”
- “Abuse and lack of respect from parents.”
- “Responding to escalating student behaviour”

Reflecting on the pandemic

For the majority of respondents (63%), the pandemic had provided an opportunity for new knowledge of technology through online learning.

Around a quarter of respondents valued the increased flexibility in being able to work from home (26%), and a similar number (24%) reported a greater ability to differentiate for student learning.

Of those who reported ‘Other’ opportunities, some reflected on the effectiveness of online professional development – especially for rural, remote and regional schools – and the increased efficiency of online meetings.

Some expressed relief at the new seriousness with which hygiene was practised and that if unwell, they could stay home until they got well rather than returning to work early and infecting others or undermining their own recovery.

Some participants expressed frustration at the increased workload and having to manage both work and family duties under lockdown.

What effective support looks like

We asked respondents how leaders at their schools could better support them in the context of current challenges. Many (59%) want consultation by leadership on the issues that affect them. Others would benefit from more time to prepare for lessons (41%), staff events or team building activities (28%) and public recognition of their contribution to the school (20%).

61 respondents provided further comments, addressing workload, staffing, remuneration, help with conflict, targeted professional development opportunities, realistic time allocation, job security, staff recognition, transparency by leadership and flexibility.



- “When something is added - something else is removed”
- “A greater focus on coaching to support wellbeing issues”
- “support for dealing with toxic staff and individuals, having more psychological safety”
- “More administrative support, lessening work related to compliance, more time to work on school improvement and maintaining focus on the students”
- “More sharing of information and transparency”

Top leadership development needs

Respondents told us the areas of leadership knowledge they would find most useful in their role. Result show that many respondents would benefit most from knowledge and skills in resolving conflict (48%), building presence and influence (42%), and leading diverse teams (41%).



Figure 4: What areas of leadership knowledge would you find most useful in your role? (Multiple responses allowed)

How Women & Leadership Australia can help

Women & Leadership Australia offers specialised school leadership programs to provide school leaders with the insights, skills and confidence to accelerate their development while simultaneously strengthening the performance of their schools.

We combine world-leading leadership development, passionate and talented facilitators, and flexible applied learning to deliver career-changing outcomes to develop skills, build networks, and facilitate growth.

We bring together more than 15 years' experience in gender equity and women's leadership with extensive experience in the school leadership space, to deliver individual leadership programs for professionals at all levels of their career journey, and customised organisation-wide development solutions for schools, school clusters, and education departments around the country.



Find out more at wla.edu.au

or contact us to discuss how we can help you achieve your leadership goals.