ALiGN

Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms

Education and gender norm change

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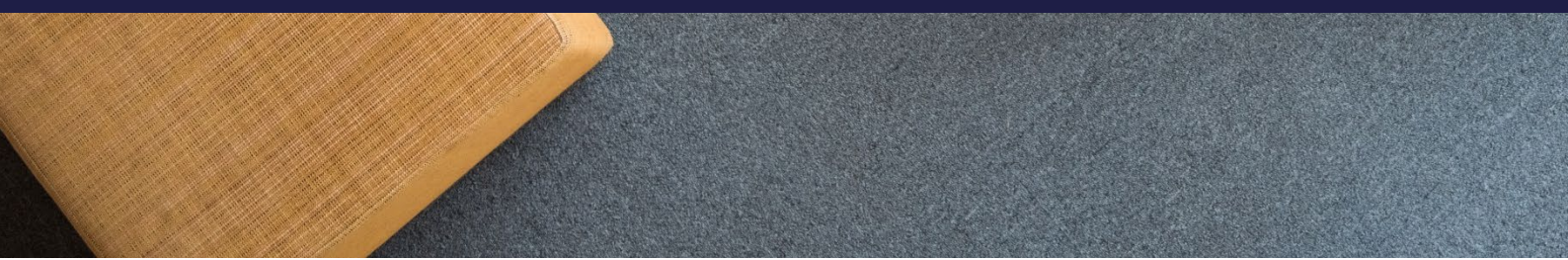

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1. Introduction and key concepts

Education is a powerful driver of gender equality because it empowers individuals and enables them to challenge discriminatory gender norms – the informal, often implicit, rules of masculinity and femininity that most people follow.

How does education change gender norms? It creates a potentially virtuous cycle, whereby education leads to changes in gender norms, and these changed norms contribute to improved learning outcomes. But this process is not automatic; prevailing gender norms and gender discriminatory practices in schools and in wider society can undermine the potential of education to bring about changes.

Gender norms exert a strong influence both on children's access to education and their educational experience. For girls, these norms often become stronger during adolescence, when the need to protect their own (and their family's) reputation often limits their mobility and their contact with boys outside the family.

Gender norms and stereotypes often reinforce one another in education. The norm that girls should defer to boys feeds a stereotypical view that girls are less capable academically, while expectations that their home-making role is more important than their future in the labour market can lead teachers to prioritise the boys in their classes. Three other widely used concepts relate to education and changing gender norms: capability development, agency and empowerment.

Capability development means, according to Nussbaum (2003), expanding the range of things people can be and do – an expansion that typically occurs during our education when we learn new knowledge and skills and change our aspirations.

Agency is our capacity to act in ways we have chosen, and is often seen as a key capability for a fulfilling and productive life (see, for example, Ross et al., 2011). Education develops agency through its impact on aspirations, skills and self-confidence.

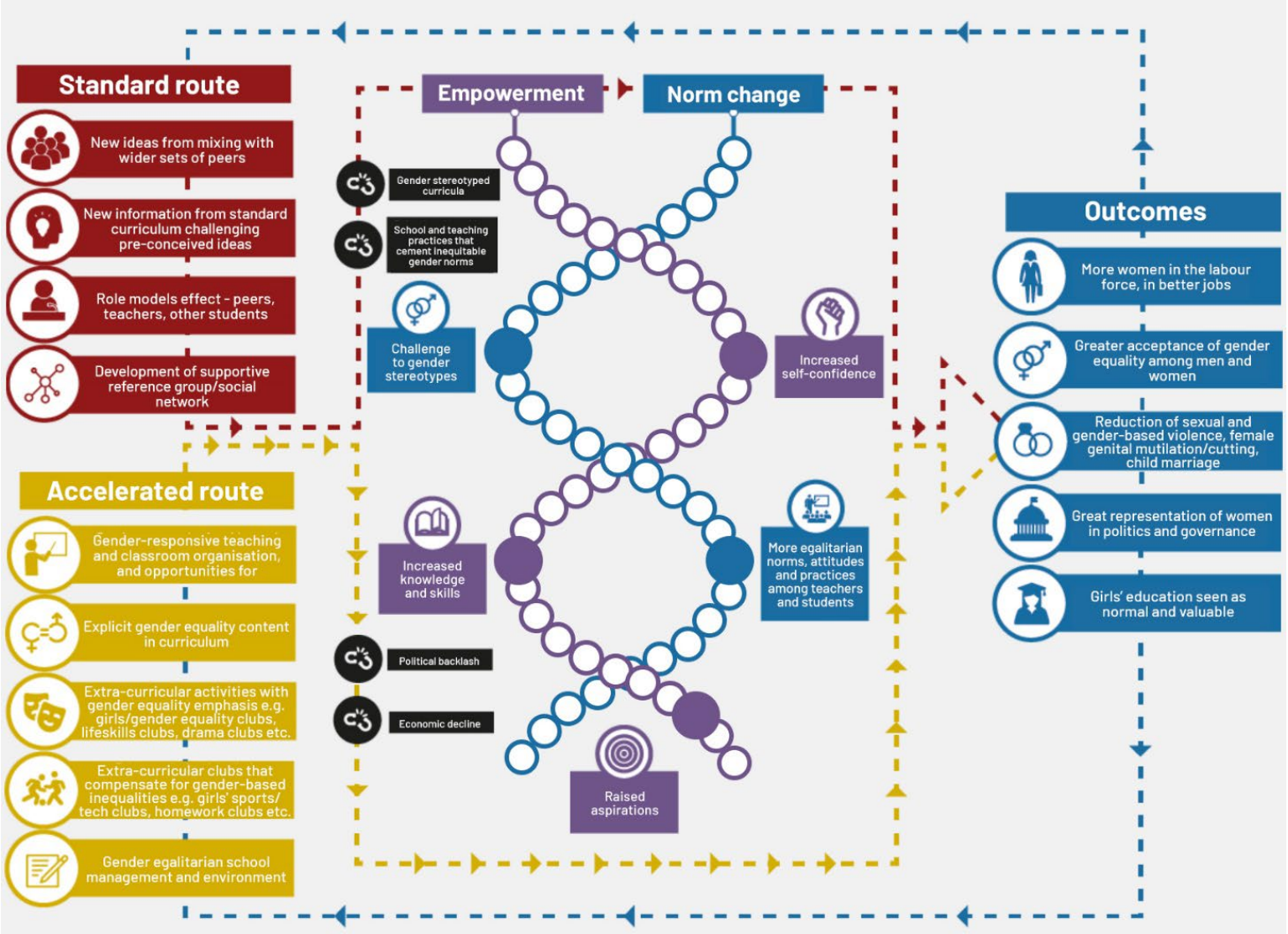
Empowerment (the most widely used of the three terms) is the process of gaining greater control over decisions that affect our lives. This is often underpinned by both the development of capabilities and a shift in the power relations associated with (in this case) changing gender norms.

This thematic guide brings together the evidence on this issue to unpack the concepts around gender norm change and educational processes, highlighting:

- Gender norms and educational access
- Gender norms and educational achievement
- Education as a driver of gender norm change
- Case studies
- Useful resources: toolkits and further reading.

While this guide focuses on formal education, it does include information on informal education in relation to girls clubs. The diagram below, sets out the links between education, empowerment and gender norm change, through standard, accelerated and interrupted routes to gender norm change.

Figure 1: Routes to gender norm change through education



2. Gender norms and access to education

Gender inequalities, sustained in part by discriminatory norms, undermine children's access to education and their learning experiences, according to UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report Gender Review 2018 (see also the World Bank's World Development Report 2018, *Learning to Realize Education's Promise*). Most of the literature focuses on the impact on girls, but there is growing recognition that gender norms can also disadvantage boys in education, as noted by Barker et al. (2012).

Recent data on trends in gender disparities in education and the role of gender norms in these disparities are captured in UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring reports. The data confirm that gender disparities in educational enrolment and outcomes vary markedly by region, socioeconomic group and age/ school stage. In many contexts, the poorest girls have education outcomes that lag behind those of their better-off peers. Here, we outline ways in which discriminatory gender norms affect educational enrolment and outcomes, highlighting key resources.

Norms on the value of education for girls and boys

Where families cannot afford to educate all their children, boys are often prioritised. A boy is seen as more likely to be able to get good jobs and support his parents in later life, while a girl is more often perceived as a future home-maker in her husband's family, rather than supporting her own family. Such perceptions often shape family decisions about children's education in low-income contexts.

There is evidence that, as a result of economic pressures and demographic change, norms are beginning to change. As noted by Kabeer (2012) in the case of Bangladesh, it is becoming acceptable for parents to accept support in their old age from adult sons as well as daughters, who were formerly 'lost' to their husband's families. Where norms are relaxing, or where economic opportunities for educated women mean that girls' education is perceived as a good investment (see Jensen, 2010), there is some qualitative evidence that parents are making education decisions more on the basis of the potential of their individual children rather than simply their gender. Stipends or other cash transfers that reduce the costs of school attendance have also shifted perceptions of the relative costs and benefits associated with educating boys and girls, according to research by Jones et al. (2014) on early marriage in Hmong communities in Viet Nam.

Norms around family reputation

In societies where a girl's reputation, or that of her family, depends on her modest behaviour and virginity until marriage, schooling – with its public mobility and unsupervised contact with adolescent boys – can represent a significant risk to that reputation. Where levels of adolescent pregnancy are high, parents may have valid concerns about girls who attend school having sexual relationships with boys, or being sexually exploited by teachers or other school staff, as noted by UNESCO's 2015 policy paper on this issue.

Norms around marriage costs

Specific perceptions of the impact of education on the marriage 'market' can skew beliefs on the level of education for girls. For example, the research by Jones et al. (2014) in Viet Nam found that many parents and young people believed that junior secondary education was optimal; providing enough knowledge and competencies for a healthy and productive life without raising girls' expectations so high that they might rebel against a traditional farming lifestyles and prevailing gender relations within marriage. There is also a body of evidence that education can increase dowry costs and bride price (Amin and Huq, 2008; Ashraf et al., 2014), and that this affects perceptions of the relative value of investing in girls' education or deciding upon marriage. Higher dowry costs reduce the incentive to invest in education, while higher bride prices can make education look like a better investment or can encourage parents to 'cash in' after girls have reached a certain threshold.

Norms around gender divisions of labour

Gender divisions of labour often burden girls with more domestic work and more tasks that interfere with their schooling, on girls, impeding their regular attendance at school and their learning, as this undermines their ability to do homework. Qualitative studies on Ethiopia, Nepal and Uganda from the Overseas Development Institute (Jones et al., Ghimire and Samuels, Watson et al., all 2015) highlight the detrimental effects of girls' domestic workloads – effects confirmed by UNICEF's 2016 report synthesising quantitative data on these workloads. Norms of masculinity that emphasise the role of men as breadwinners – combined with opportunities for adolescent boys to obtain manual labouring work – can put pressure on boys to drop out of school. This explains, in part, the recent gender disparities in favour of girls in parts of Latin America, the Caribbean and East Asia, as seen in the most recent UNESCO *Global Education Monitoring Report*, and shown in some studies from other regions, including Jyotsna et al. (2012).

Intersecting discriminatory norms affecting education

Gender norms do not operate in isolation – they are part of a web of other norms, beliefs and practices and are strongly influenced by the socio-economic context. Parents' decisions about which children to educate, and children's experiences in schools, reflect not only gender norms but also stereotypes and norms about different groups of children. For example:

- **Children from ethnic minorities:** Stereotypes about marginalised groups, their behaviour and their capacity to learn are often gendered, as well as reflecting prejudices about those groups. As research by Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian (2008) shows, children from marginalised castes in India, often face discrimination and mistreatment, as do children from marginalised ethnic groups across many countries. Poverty and other practical constraints (such as classes in a language that is not their own) can also stop children from particular ethnic and linguistic groups accessing or doing well in school (see Marcus et al., 2017).
- **Children with disabilities:** Children with disabilities face complex gendered perceptions of their capacities to learn, as well as negative perceptions of the value of their education. Girls

with disabilities (particularly learning disabilities) are more likely to be excluded from schools than boys in most contexts. This reflects both gender norms and specific concerns around managing disabilities and perceptions of vulnerability. Valid fears about a girl's safety can be heightened if she has physical disabilities and would struggle to repel or escape an attack, or a girl with hearing difficulties who may not hear an attacker's approach, as noted by Lord et al. (2016). Conversely, in some contexts, girls with disabilities are seen as less likely to marry and to have greater need of an education to support themselves (Jones et al., 2018).

The lack of focus on creating inclusive schooling also has gender dimensions. While all children need clean, safe toilets at school, children with physical disabilities may need adaptations such as handles or rails, while girls with disabilities may need particular support with menstruation management. Recent reports have documented the absence of reliable, gender disaggregated data on the education of children with disabilities and more studies are exploring gendered experiences of disability and their impact on education, including the *Still left behind* report by Leonard Cheshire Disability and UNGEI, Wapling (2016) and the analysis by Jones et al. (2018) on adolescents with disabilities.

3. Gender norms and educational achievement

Schools often reflect, replicate and reinforce the discriminatory gender norms found in wider society. Here, we outline how norms can undermine educational outcomes.

Stereotypes around the relative abilities of girls and boys

Levtov (2013) and Kagestan et al. (2016) summarise studies on how education reinforces discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes across a range of country contexts through teaching practices (such as responding more readily to boys or asking boys more questions) and through school and classroom organisation, such as gendered assignment of chores – such as asking girls to clean and boys to chop wood.

Discriminatory norms and stereotypes that affect learning and education outcomes are common and often reflect perceptions of girls' competence (particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and are linked to norms about 'suitable' subjects for girls to study or pursue as a future career. In some schools, gender norms see girls channelled towards technical subjects seen as useful for their future role (such as domestic science) and as unsuitable for (and rejected by) boys. Often, boys are steered towards the subjects that may lead to more lucrative careers in later life. UNESCO's 2017 report, *Cracking the Code*, provides useful insights into girls and STEM subjects.

Recent data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) show some narrowing of gender inequalities in STEM achievement in some regions. But boys still have better overall outcomes than girls in mathematics, physics and computing, as well as greater participation in these subjects. Qualitative evidence shows the strength of these gendered stereotypes among teachers and students alike. For example, see Masinire (2015)(subscription required) on school vocational and technical education in Zimbabwe, and Dunne (2007) on factors and processes related to gender inequality in Botswana and Ghana.

Norms around gender-segregated education

Some studies suggest that boys' schools may reinforce hypermasculinity (exaggerated male stereotypical behaviour) but there is little comparative evidence. There is also conflicting evidence on whether girls' schools challenge stereotypes about girls' capabilities or reinforce conventional norms, as noted by Unterhalter et al. (2014). In both cases, the extent to which they challenge or reinforce discrimination reflects the school's ethos and its commitment to gender equality, rather than whether boys and girls are educated together.

Gender stereotypes and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education

There is a pervasive stereotype that girls are less well suited to study science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and, therefore, less competent in these subjects than boys. This can hamper girls' interest and achievement in STEM and reinforce the behaviour of girls and boys during STEM classes, with girls reluctant to ask or answer questions and boys monopolising equipment and resources. Some studies show girls being discouraged from STEM subjects, which are seen as harder than others, particularly if subjects are not taught in a way that reflects real world issues.

Girls who have more self-efficacy and confidence in STEM subjects are more likely to reject such stereotypes, with self-efficacy improving both STEM education outcomes and increasing aspirations for STEM-related careers.

Globally, there are sign of a narrowing of the gender gap in STEM-related learning outcomes, but significant regional variations remain. Where data are available in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, the gender gap in mathematics achievement in secondary education favours boys, with less marked differences in sciences. In contrast, in the Arab states, girls perform better than boys in maths and science subjects in primary and secondary education. UNESCO suggests this may reflect the high proportion of single-sex schools in the region, which may limit the impact of negative stereotypes.

A range of initiatives (mostly small scale and/or time-bound) are underway to interest girls in computing and technology, often in girl-only environments with female mentors. UNESCO's *Cracking the Code* and Gardner et al. (2018) provide examples. Though these initiatives look promising, their impacts have not been synthesised. Where all schools are underfunded and most boys also lack STEM opportunities, offering similar initiatives to boys (in parallel, rather than in mixed groups) could prevent resentment and backlash.

Source: *UNESCO (2017) Cracking the Code*

Policy question: Are there thresholds for the impacts of education on gender norms?

The emerging consensus from the literature is 'yes'. Attending at least some years of secondary education seems to have a critical effect on gender norm change. This is the conclusion of analysis based on the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) in India, Rwanda, Brazil, Chile, Croatia and Mexico, and of analyses of education, women's work and decision-making power in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan by Barker et al. (2012). Qualitative evidence from India sets the threshold a little lower. Arnot et al. (2012), looking at Ghana and India, suggest that girls need at least five years of education to expand their self-confidence and change the way in which young married women are treated by their husbands and in-laws. Apart from IMAGES, few studies from other parts of the world have explored this issue.

4. Education and norm change

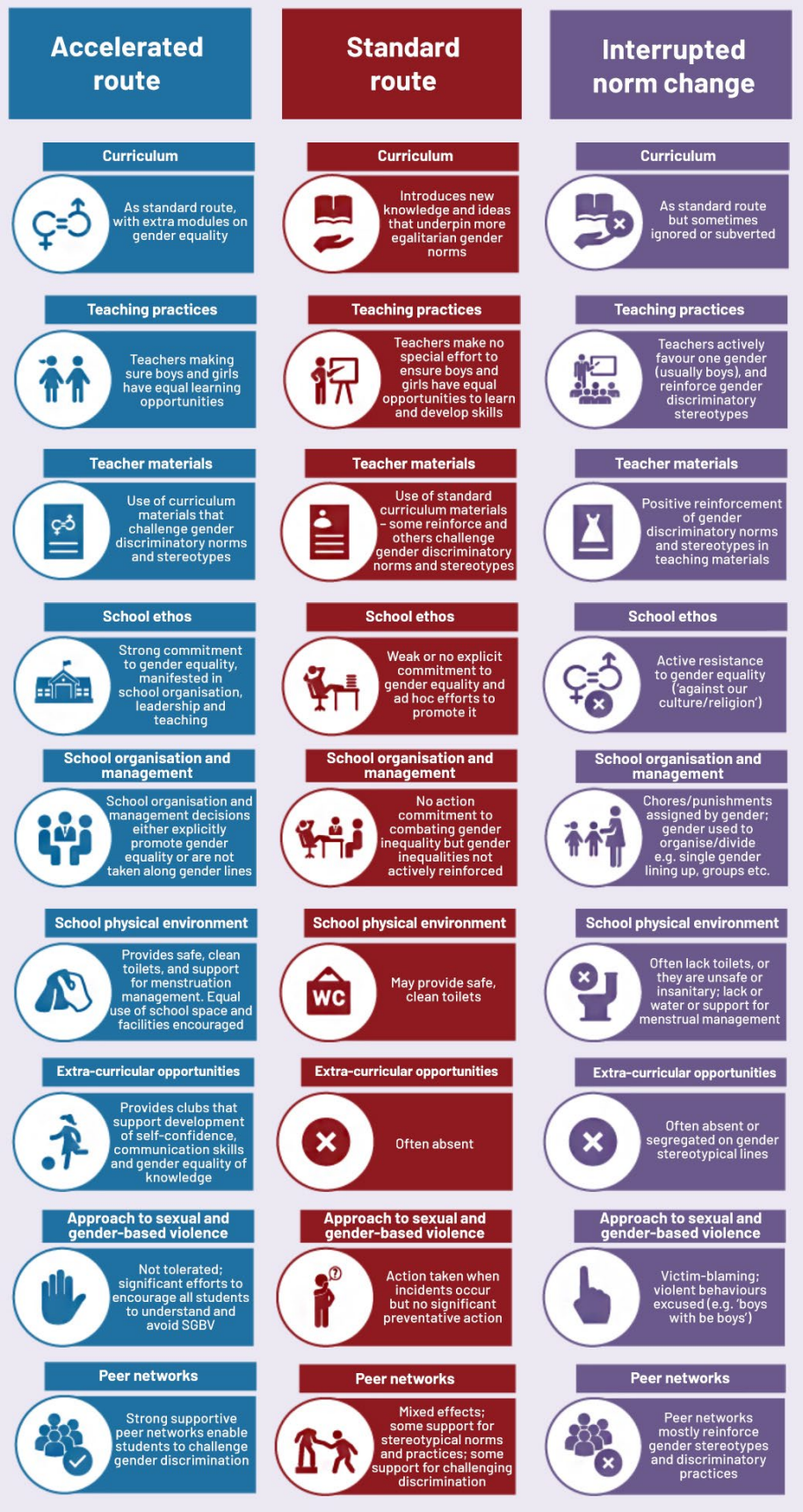


Figure 2: Gender norm change in educational environments

This diagram shows stylised routes to 1) change in a 'standard' school, 2) in a school that accelerates change by paying specific attention to promoting gender equality, and 3) in one where the positive potential of education to promote norm change is disrupted.

Few studies examine the impact of girls' education on changes in community level norms specifically, but a significant body of evidence records shifts in knowledge, self-confidence, attitudes and practices – the building blocks of norm change. Examples include the World Bank's *On Norms and Agency* by Muñoz Boudet et al. (2013), which draws on primary research in 20 countries to highlight education as a key driver of shifting gender norms (or of norms becoming less strict). Studies focused on particular issues (such as UNICEF's 2013 *Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Statistical Overview*) also highlight how education contributes to changing norms and practices. There is also a growing body of evidence about the ways in which schooling can become more gender-sensitive and play a greater role in promoting gender equality, which we summarise here.

How does education lead to change in gender norms?

A growing body of evidence suggests that the following are key mechanisms:

Developing self-confidence and communication skills

The self-confidence to challenge discriminatory norms and practices and overcome setbacks, and the communication skills to speak out and share your views are two building blocks for norm change. According to Kautz et al. (2014) they are also increasingly seen as vital for economic well-being and effective participation in society. Marcus and Page (2016) discuss evidence on how education can enhance self-esteem and resilience among adolescent girls. There are surprisingly few retrospective studies with women looking back on how their education has (or has not) helped them develop these and other skills. Studies from Tanzania by Willemsen and Dejaeghere (2015) and Posti-Ahokas and Hanna (2013) explore girls' views about how education has contributed to their self-efficacy, enabling them to be confident, resourceful and knowledgeable individuals who can handle setbacks.

If more girls enter the labour market and other public spheres with greater self-confidence and stronger communication skills they may create their own virtuous cycle, challenging stereotypes about the relative competence of men and women, as well as pervasive views on gender roles. However, few studies explore these processes in detail; the links remain theoretical or are backed up by only a handful of in-depth qualitative studies rather than a significant body of evidence.

Exposure to new ideas about gender within schools

One obvious route for change is exposure to new information and ideas that challenge established gender norms. A significant body of literature explores the effects of sexuality education on young people's factual knowledge and their ideas about gender equality.

UNESCO's (2015) review of *Comprehensive Sexuality Education* found that 'issues of gender and rights are almost consistently absent or inadequately covered through current curricula across all regions.' It appears that – in mainstream school curricula – shifts in young people's thinking on gender norms and practices are driven largely by new information (often in science classes on health or biology or through education on personal and social relationships) rather than education that questions discriminatory ideas and norms explicitly. ODI's qualitative research among the Hmong ethnic minority in northern Viet Nam confirms this: young people reported that health

information they learnt in school changed their ideas about the ideal age of marriage (Jones et al., 2014).

'My wife is 21. I think that if I married a younger girl with an underdeveloped body, my baby would be malnourished, unable to grow and slow to develop. I learnt it when I was in school.' (Young man in focus group discussion).

'If she gets married at the age of 20, she will not be as poor and she will give birth more comfortably.' (24-year-old mother) .

Levtov (2014) summarises attempts to integrate material on gender equality more widely across school curricula – in social studies, personal, health and social education, and within other subjects (e.g. as a topic for argument or debate in language classes). However, the impact on gender attitudes and norms among young people has not yet been evaluated.

Co-education

Qualitative evidence suggests that social interaction between boys and girls and co-education can lead young people to challenge gender stereotypes. For example, Alice Evans's 2014 qualitative study in Kitwe, Zambia, found that co-education had led children to reject stereotypes of boys and men as being more intelligent. This reflected boys' experience over time of seeing girls in their classes who mastered their subjects more quickly than some of their male peers. Co-education also reduced the extent to which boys and girls saw each other exclusively in sexualised terms – a change carried forward into their working lives. Girls from co-educational high schools reported that they learned to stand up for themselves and to deal with male-dominated workplaces.

Similarly, a study by Arnot et al. (2012) found new patterns of communication and gender relations being established at co-educational schools in northern Ghana. At junior high-school level, relationships between boys and girls were mostly platonic and academic, with students helping each other with assignments and class work based on academic ability rather than gender, though these relationships became more sexualised after puberty.

There has been much debate about the relative benefits of mixed-sex and single-sex schooling for girls' self-confidence and empowerment, and learning outcomes for both girls and boys. Yet the evidence is conflicting. The 2014 study by Unterhalter et al. on interventions to promote gender equality found no clear evidence to support single-sex schooling, as quantitative studies often fail to take the elite or selective nature of many single-sex schools into account. Levtov's 2013 analysis of the literature suggests that teacher attitudes and active commitment to gender equality matter more than whether students are educated in single-sex or mixed-sex groups.

Role models

Role models – such as teachers, classroom assistants, mentors, counsellors and visiting speakers – can also raise girls' aspirations by demonstrating that educated women can work in a variety of careers. Similarly, male teachers who display gender-equitable attitudes can be powerful role models to boys. Surprisingly few studies have examined how this contributes to shifts in gender norms, although Marcus and Page (2016) summarise evidence on the impact of mentors, counsellors

and classroom assistants, such as the Learner Guides supported by the Campaign for Female Education (Camfed). Most evidence outlined the impact on girls' academic achievement; only one study (Dejaeghere et al., 2015) highlighted the impact of a school counsellor as a role model.

Normalisation of school attendance

Large numbers of girls attending school and moving around in this public space can help to shift norms on female mobility, the acceptability of education, and gender equality more broadly. Alongside communications from government or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on the importance of girls' education (a common approach in many countries), this can start to shift norms so that girls' education is seen as valuable and a responsible course of action for parents. Schuler's 2007 qualitative study in rural Bangladesh shows the power of change among reference groups of girls' fathers in driving norm change on girls' education. Other factors included stipends to reduce the financial costs of girls' education to families.

Changing community-level perceptions of girls and young women

The value attached to education by the wider community affect the perceptions of girls and young women who have attended school. Lloyd and Young (2009) found that girls who attend school are often seen by other community members as knowledgeable and more worthy of respect. Studying northern Ghana and India, Arnot et al. (2012) suggest a shift in perceptions of young women who have attended school among their partners/ spouses and in-laws. This, in turn, contributes to subtle changes, such as more joint activities between husbands and wives, and (in India) slightly less control over young wives by mothers in-law. Women who had been to secondary school, in particular, were also more able to influence household decisions.

Gaining such respect is particularly important for girls from poor backgrounds, ethnic minorities and other marginalised and disadvantaged groups, not just in improving gender relations but also enabling them to chart their life course on more equal terms (see Crivello, 2009 and Schuler, 2007).

Maximising the potential of education to change gender norms

Schools with an explicit commitment to gender equality can accelerate changes in gender norms by instituting new, gender-egalitarian practices. These include the following:

Changing the school environment

A growing body of literature highlights the importance of a gender-equitable school environment for gender norm change, as highlighted by Marcus and Page (2016). As well as gender-equitable curriculum content, teachers' practices within the classroom and the wider organisation of the school can foster principles of gender equality that, in turn, challenge assumptions about the 'naturalness' of gender roles.

Levtov's 2014 overview of the impact of initiatives to promote gender-equitable values and practices among teachers ('gender-responsive' education) finds that they have generally improved learning outcomes and helped to promote more gender-equitable attitudes among students. The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) has, undertaken a major training programme on 'gender-responsive pedagogy' for two decades. A study of its impact concluded that it has helped

teachers treat boys and girls more equally: they call on girls and boys to answer questions, challenge all learners more, and set up group work so that girls and boys learn from one another. Institutionalising gender-responsive teaching requires a long-term commitment to challenge both teachers' own gender stereotypes and norms among teachers about effective teaching methods, as Nabbuye's 2018 study of Uganda demonstrates.

A strong gender focus in curricula

Efforts to promote more equitable gender norms have moved from their community base to mainstream education, sometimes as part of personal, health, social and relationships education, and sometimes as stand-alone initiatives delivered by external facilitators working with schools. The best-known is the Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) programme (see case study in next section), which started in India and has now spread to Bangladesh, the Philippines and Viet Nam, among other countries.

Studies by Erin Murphy-Graham suggest that gender equality education is far more effective when embedded in a broader education programme that helps people develop critical thinking and citizenship, as well as mastering knowledge and core academic skills. Murphy-Graham's 2009 study found that participants in the Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial (SAT) approach to education (see case study in next section) had used their learning to negotiate more gender-equitable practices at home, and had the skills to turn aspirations into reality, challenging norms about appropriate occupations for women.

Addressing gender bias in textbooks

Gender bias in school textbooks and educational materials is under-researched; as Blumberg (2008) explains, this problem is understandably seen as less urgent than enabling millions of out-of-school children to go to school or improving the quality of their schooling. However, Blumberg's detailed analysis shows how gender stereotypes in textbooks can help to cement discriminatory gender norms, and discusses efforts to revise learning materials to promote gender equality. The 2004 study by Mensch et al. (subscription required) on education and gender norm change among Egyptian adolescents reaches similar conclusions.

Tackling sexual and gender-based violence in schools

Sexual and gender-based violence in schools is increasingly recognised as a deterrent to enrolment, a major cause of school drop out and a negative influence on educational outcomes, particularly for girls but also for boys. Such violence in and around schools reflects and reinforces wider norms about the acceptability of sexual harassment, around heterosexuality as normative, and about consent and power in gendered and sexual relationships. Work by Parkes et al. at the Institute of Education at University College London, supported by UNGEI, has developed a useful conceptual framework for understanding different dimensions of this issue. It has brought together data on the scale of the problem, and provides pointers about how to eliminate gender-based violence, including homophobic violence, in and around schools.

Girls' clubs and gender equality clubs in schools

Extra-curricular activities, such as girls' only or mixed-sex clubs promoting gender equality, can challenge discriminatory norms and practices, and sometimes norms related to powerful taboos. Typically school-based, these clubs have multiple objectives: to enhance girls' self-confidence and communication skills, to educate them about gender equality and their legal rights and, in some cases, to improve their educational outcomes through study support. Contributing to transforming gender norms is generally an indirect objective. However, there is quantitative evidence of the impact of such clubs on attitudes to gender equality, which may indicate changing norms, as in the Taaron Ki Toli and GEMS programmes in India. According to the study by Jones et al. (2015) on Ethiopia, there is also qualitative evidence of girls (and boys) learning new information and changing attitudes to gender equality as a result of participating in school clubs. This is borne out by other studies from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) by Bantebya et al. (2015) on Uganda and Jones et al. (2015) on Viet Nam.

"The school-based activities give us information about how we should not be ashamed of menstruation and should not let it stop us from going to school; we should not get married early because this will stop short our education; and that we should share household chores so that we both have time to study." (14-year-old girl from a Straight Talk Foundation club, Uganda)

For more, see ALIGN's guide on girls' clubs, and Marcus et al. (2017) on the impact of girls' clubs and life skills programmes.

Transforming masculinities through education

There is a strong association between education, particularly secondary education, and changing masculinities. Barker et al. (2012) suggest key ways in which secondary education contributes to more equitable gender norms:

- Secondary class sizes are usually smaller, which reduces teacher stress and may be more conducive to building the critical thinking associated with justice-based reasoning and more gender-equitable attitudes.
- Boys who reach secondary school generally have more interaction with girls as equals in the classroom over longer periods. The enforcement of rules and collective solutions to problems may contribute to a greater awareness and practical experience of social justice, spilling over into notions of gender equality.
- Secondary school teachers often have higher levels of education themselves, making it more likely that they will promote and support gender equality.

The impact of schooling on masculinities may vary. For example, none of the men in the Promundo and ICRW study of Men Who Care identified their education as a key factor in their adoption of non-traditional gender roles – in this case, professional caring roles or providing most of the care for their own children. This contrasts with the findings on general attitudes to gender equality, and on issues such as gender-based violence, son preference and child marriage.

As boys and men have become increasingly recognised as potential change agents, there have been more attempts to promote gender-equitable masculinities through formal and informal education. Look out for ALIGN's guide on masculinities and gender norms in 2019.

The risks of backlash

Efforts to promote gender equality frequently lead to backlash. There appears to be limited evidence of backlash related to the promotion of gender equality in school settings (there is more evidence concerning informal education).

Policy question: Does gender equitable education improve learning outcomes?

The rigorous review of school environments and girls' learning and empowerment by Marcus and Page (2016) brings together evidence on this question. While there are few comparative studies with control groups, evaluations of projects that promote gender-egalitarian learning environments suggest that they help to improve learning outcomes for girls and boys alike. Evaluations of Transforming Education for Girls in Nigeria and Tanzania (TEGINT), Camfed's Learner Guide programme in Tanzania and Zimbabwe, and Plan's Building Skills for Life programme found evidence of improved exam pass rates in participating schools. Qualitative evidence of the gender-responsive pedagogy approach pioneered by the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) also shows greater engagement in learning among girls and boys.

Sources: Marcus and Page (2016); Mascarenhas (2012); Para-Mallam (2012); Camfed website.

5. Case studies

Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS): India and Viet Nam

Since being piloted in 45 schools in Mumbai with 12–14-year-olds over two years, GEMS has been implemented and evaluated in Jharkhand, Bihar and Maharashtra states in India and in Viet Nam. In Mumbai, one group of participants was exposed to an awareness-raising campaign alone. The other group also received 24 classes on gender equality and preventing gender-based violence. In Jharkhand, students received the classes and a workbook to continue their learning at home, and were exposed to a community awareness campaign.

In Mumbai, the proportion of students believing girls should be at least 18 (the legal age) before marriage reached nearly 100% (though baseline figures were not reported). Among those receiving group lessons and an awareness campaign, the proportion of girls believing they should delay marriage until the age of 21 increased from 15% to 22%. Students involved in classes and an awareness-raising campaign were 2.4 times more likely to oppose violence than those in the control group, falling to 1.5 times for those who took part in the awareness-raising campaign alone.

In Jharkhand, the GEMS curriculum had a positive impact on around 3,000 students in 20 schools, with a large proportion moving from the 'low' category for gender equality attitudes to the medium and high categories. Similar results were seen in Danang, Viet Nam, where students aged 11 to 12 in 10 schools moved from medium to high commitment to gender equality. In both India and Viet Nam, student attitudes in other schools did not change significantly.

Sources: Achyut et al. (2011); Achyut et al. (2016) and Verma et al. (2016)

The Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial (SAT): Latin America

The Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial (SAT) or Tutorial Learning System is a formal, co-educational secondary education programme (grades 7–12) in rural and peri-urban areas of several countries in Latin America. It helps students take charge of their own intellectual and spiritual growth and contribute to building better communities.

One distinguishing feature is the integration of the principle of gender equality into the curriculum, encouraging critical thinking and dialogue on cultural norms. The textbooks use a bird metaphor to portray men and women as two wings that must have equal strength if the bird is to fly – imagery retained by students and teachers during the programme and beyond. Discussions on gender allow students to question their assumptions and recognise inequalities in their own lives and communities. SAT students also take on productive projects such as raising chickens, developing practical skills they can use in their daily lives.

SAT has been recognised as a 'revolutionary' approach to secondary education in rural areas because it is relevant to the context in which students live. By combining high-quality academic content and opportunities to apply their learning in practice, students become empowered to take

action that can improve their lives and their communities. One new feature of the programme in Honduras, for example, involves lessons that challenge students to identify the causes of child marriage and early pregnancy and design a community-level campaign to challenge social norms on these issues.

The SAT programme was designed in the 1970s by, the Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias (FUNDAEC), a Colombian NGO. It now operates in Guatemala, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Honduras, and as a non-formal education programme Kenya, Uganda and Zambia. A study by Kwauk and Perlman Robinson (2016) for the Brookings Institution found that its slow, incremental and demand-led expansion was crucial for its successful scale-up, helping to ensure its quality.

The Taaron Ki Toli programme: India

Designed and implemented by global human rights organization, Breakthrough, Taaron ki Toli (TKT) (Gang of Stars) is a gender equity programme. Launched in 2014. TKT began by operating in 150 schools with around 18,000 adolescent girls and boys in four districts of Haryana, providing a safe platform for adolescents to take part in decisions that affect their lives. The programme started with a tri-party agreement between implementation partner Breakthrough, J-PAL South Asia (the research partner), and the Government of Haryana's Department of Education. The pilot programme, backed by a rigorous evaluation, was designed from the outset to be scaled up across Haryana.

Each school was guided by a teacher coordinator ('Druv Tara' - guiding star), who worked with Breakthrough facilitators to create enabling environments. Together the Druv Taras and Breakthrough facilitators helped to halt child marriage, ensure continued education for girls, prevent sexual harassment and create spaces for adolescents to assert themselves within their schools and communities.

Evaluation of the programme by J-PAL revealed its positive impacts on participants' attitudes towards girls' education, with an increase of positive attitudes of four-percentage points. Programme participants also reported more gender-equitable behaviour such as increased interaction with the opposite sex. Breakthrough scaled up the programme across the five Indian states of Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi as well as Haryana, reaching over 600,000 adolescent girls and boys. See our page on Taaron Ki Toli for more information.

6. Education, LGBTQI+ people, and gender norm change

Note: This chapter was added as an additional topic in November 2024 and was written by Evie Browne.

Introduction

This section of the guide examines how gender norms affect the experiences of LGBTQI+ students in schools,[1] from their educational access to their academic achievement. It draws out the impacts of discriminatory gender norms on LGBTQI+ young people, including harassment and bullying that lead to poor academic achievement and drop-out. It looks at how gender norms are reinforced in school environments, through curricula, policies and school practices, such as binary sex-based dress codes. It also includes a short section on LGBTQI+ teachers. Finally, this module provides recommendations on how to address homophobic, queerphobic and transphobic norms in schools.

Why do gender norms matter for LGBTQI+ students?

Prejudice against LGBTQI+ people is often rooted in norms that uphold heterosexuality and the male-female binary as 'the normal way to be'. Deep cultural beliefs about gender roles and 'appropriate' masculinity and femininity create environments where people who do not conform can be punished through discrimination, harassment and bullying, as well as verbal and physical violence.

Schools and education systems often uphold gender norms that view heterosexuality as the normal and only acceptable form of sexual orientation. They do this, first, through what is officially taught in their curricula on relationships and sex education. Second, schools often reinforce gender binaries in their policies and practices, through dress codes, sports, and class chores and activities that are divided by gender. Third, gender norms are threaded through the 'hidden curriculum' – the unwritten rules and values that young people encounter in school from their teachers and peers – which can reinforce a culture's gender norms. LGBTQI+ young people, or those perceived to be LGBTQI+, can experience bullying, harassment, and violence in education because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). This is largely a result of being seen as 'different' from the 'norm'.

Sexual orientation and gender identity and expression are often tied together, and both can lead to discrimination. Sexual orientation is sometimes expressed through non-conforming visual codes and markers, for example, boys wearing makeup or girls having short hair. Breaking gender norms through visible gender expression (such as mannerisms, behaviour or appearance) may be more of a trigger for violence than someone's actual orientation. As a result, transgender students may experience even higher levels of school-related gender-based violence than those who conform to norms of gender expression. In a study in Europe in 2019, up to 90% of trans women reported

[1] The module focuses on formal education settings.

experiencing or having experienced school bullying based on their gender identity. Gendered norms of appearance differ for people from different ethnicities, class and other axes of identity. LGBTQI+ young people who are also from a minority ethnic group or religion, class or caste, may face intersectional discrimination. In the US, a study showed that black LGBQ+ students felt like their identities were less valued, and they felt less safe at school, compared with non-black LGBQ+ students.

Most of the harassment experienced by LGBTQI+ school students comes from their peers, but discrimination is also perpetuated by teachers and other school staff. Many schools fail to act on such incidents, or implicitly condone them, allowing discrimination to flourish. In places where sexual and gender diversity is stigmatised or criminalised, schools may actively punish students who are perceived to deviate from the norm, or even expel them. Schools have some freedom to set their own policies, but are also subject to regional and national directives on LGBTQI+ inclusion, which may either reinforce or challenge prevailing gender norms.

More positively, schools can support a shift in gender norms towards acceptance of sexual diversity, given their pivotal role in shaping the attitudes of young people. LGBBy encouraging critical thinking, challenging gender stereotypes, and providing opportunities to practise equality, education has the potential to transform gender norms.

For more information on gender norms and LGBTQI+ people, see the 2019 ALIGN guide.

State of the evidence on discrimination against LGBTQI+ school students

Some robust and large-scale cross-national surveys provide evidence on the experiences of LGBTQI+ people in education (including UNGEI's 2018 worldwide survey; GLSEN's 2019 survey of LGBTQ secondary school students in seven Latin American countries; UNESCO's 2021 European study; and FRA's longitudinal survey in Europe). However, to reach a large number of people, these surveys are often administered online, which creates a bias towards people who have access to technology. There are also single-country studies that look at specific issues in depth (e.g. South African young people's views; GLSEN on teachers' experiences in the US). The overwhelming majority of evidence comes from North America and Europe, presumably because countries in these regions often provide legal protections for the rights of LGBTQI+ people and are obliged to monitor their implementation and protection. There is less information and data for regions where LGBTQI+ lives are criminalised because it can be dangerous for people to speak out, and because research may not be permitted.

This lack of information reflects widespread problems with recording data and reporting on LGBTQI+ issues, particularly violence and discrimination, including a reluctance among LGBTQI+ people to participate in research because it puts them at risk of retaliation and of being 'outed'. Violence is severely under-reported because of this fear, and because of a lack of trust in the authorities to respond supportively, particularly when authorities may perpetrate violence and discrimination. Where LGBTQI+ identities are criminalised, it can be unsafe for researchers and participants to conduct research. Yet despite the lack of large-scale evidence, research consistently shows that

LGBTQI+ people face high levels of violence, abuse and discrimination on the basis of their SOGIESC, including in education systems.

Most research on LGBTQI+ young people and education focuses on secondary school or adolescent settings, as this period of their lives is often when young people become aware of their SOGIESC.[2] There are, however, complications when it comes to conducting research on people under the age of 18, as parental consent is required, and young people may not want to tell their parents about their sexuality and gender identity.

There is also a lack of large-scale or comparative research on teachers who identify as LGBTQI+. The limited qualitative evidence mostly comes from the US and Europe. Discussions of the experiences of LGBTQI+ teachers often focus on the perceived risks and benefits of coming out (disclosing their LGBTQI+ identity) in their schools.

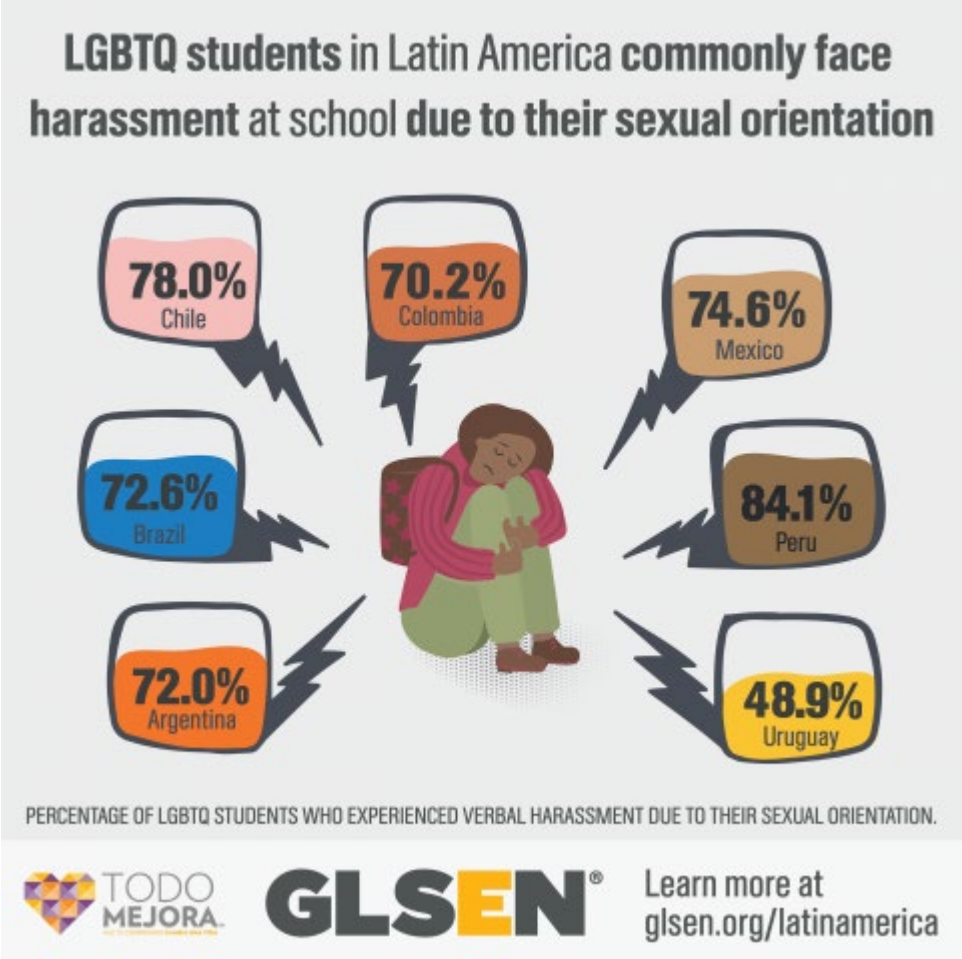
Violence and safety in schools

Schools are often hostile environments for LGBTQI+ students. There is widespread recognition that LGBTQI+ young people are more likely to experience bullying, harassment and violence in schools than their non-LGBTQI+ peers. LGBTQI+ students can face teasing, name-calling, public ridicule and humiliation, intimidation, physical and sexual assault, and even death threats. Those who are part of an ethnic minority, living with a disability, or who are marginalised because of their class, caste or religion, face even greater levels of discrimination.

- A worldwide survey from 2018, published by MAG Jeunes, found that 42% of 21,000 LGBTI+ youth respondents had been ridiculed, teased, insulted or threatened at school because of their SOGIESC status, with 10% experiencing physical assault and 4% sexual assault.
- In a GLSEN 2019 survey of LGBTQ secondary school students in seven Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay), students reported commonly hearing homophobic remarks and negative comments about gender expression (Figure 3).
- A large European study by UNESCO in 2021 (14,000 13 to 18 year olds, and 3,000 19 to 24 year olds) found that 83% had witnessed negative comments in school related to people's sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or variations of sex characteristics.
- The longitudinal FRA survey on LGBTIQ equality in Europe shows a recent and alarming increase in school bullying. Of 100,000 LGBTIQ people aged 15 and above, 60% to 70% said that they suffered bullying, ridicule, teasing, insults or threats during their time in school because they were LGBTIQ – a steep increase compared with the 2019 findings (when the European Union average was 46%).
- The United Nations Free and Equal Campaign for LGBTQI+ rights suggests that 45% of LGBT young people worldwide have been bullied at school.

[2] Some surveys, however, include respondents up to around the age of 25, who reflect on their earlier experiences at school.

Figure 3: Percentage of LGBTQ students who have experienced harassment: Latin America 2019



Source: GLSEN, A Global School Climate Crisis: Insights on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, & Queer (LGBTQ) Students in Latin America (2019)

The high prevalence of bullying and harassment they face makes LGBTQI+ students feel unsafe in school environments and beyond. The 2018 worldwide survey by MAG Jeunes on inclusive education and access to health for LGBTI+ young people reports that 22% of respondents rarely felt safe at school, and 15% never felt safe at all. This survey included many respondents from China and Russia. However, the results disaggregated by region show that a larger proportion of respondents from the Arab States (57%) reported feeling unsafe at school than respondents from any other region. GLSEN's 2019 Latin American study found that LGBTQ students in all seven surveyed countries avoided certain school spaces because they felt unsafe; usually the most gendered spaces like bathrooms, changing rooms and gym classes. It is clear, therefore, that improving safety is crucial to enable LGBTQI+ students to attend school and learn effectively.

Who perpetrates harassment and violence?

Harassment and bullying of LGBTQI+ students are perpetrated by both their peers and school staff. MAG Jeunes' worldwide survey of 21,000 young people showed that 70% to 80% of verbal and

physical harassment was perpetrated by peers. Peers can be a highly important reference group for adolescents, making their bullying and harassment particularly influential in upholding mainstream gender norms. But teachers and school staff may also discriminate against LGBTQI+ students. GLSEN's Latin American study found that, with variations across the seven countries, between 58% and 79% of students had heard teachers make homophobic remarks and that between 48% and 80% had also heard negative remarks about gender expression. More promisingly, however, half to two-thirds of students reported that school staff intervened when they heard homophobic comments. Yet, even where teachers are clearly charged with countering discrimination, this responsibility is often inconsistently applied in practice.

Academic achievement and drop out

Unsupportive, unsafe or discriminatory environments at school mean that LGBTQI+ students are more likely to skip classes, miss school, achieve lower academic results, and even drop out entirely. Across the seven Latin American countries mentioned above, a quarter or more of LGBTQI+ students (23% to 36%) reported missing at least one day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe. They were at least twice as likely to have missed school in the past month if they had experienced higher levels of verbal harassment related to their sexual orientation, than students who had experienced lower levels. The 2018 worldwide survey by MAG Jeunes found that 33% of trans girls and 30% of trans boys had considered leaving school because of the challenges they faced. While research often mentions poor participation, attendance, and drop out, there are few robust statistics that examine rates of LGBTQI+ youth absenteeism.

Students may also be denied access to school or formally expelled because of their SOGIESC. World Bank research found that some religious and coeducational schools in Indonesia deny LGBTQI+ students access. In Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, Malawi, South Africa, and Uganda, research finds that 'panics' over alleged same-sex sexual activity have resulted in the immediate suspension and expulsion of LGBTQI+ youth from schools.

The consequences of missing school, dropout, or expulsion can be severe. UNESCO emphasises that homophobic and transphobic violence has adverse effects on mental and physical health. LGBTQI+ young people are particularly prone to psychological poor health, with reports of anxiety, fear and poor mental health extremely common. The United Nations Independent Expert highlights how school dropout among LGBTQI+ students leads to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, social isolation, alcohol and drug abuse, and, in some cases, self-harm or suicide. School dropout can also be associated with problems in adult life, as it can increase the risk of family rejection, leading to homelessness. In addition, lower levels of education lead to reduced skills and less likelihood of securing a decent job.

School policies and curricula

Including affirming and positive content in school curricula about diverse SOGIESC has a powerful transformative potential. Scientifically accurate information empowers LGBTQI+ students, impacts how they understand themselves and navigate their lives, and affects how other students understand the issues and treat their classmates (and other LGBTQI+ people in their lives).

Relationships and sex education that supports diversity can establish equitable and respectful attitudes in young people, contributing to a generational norm shift. Schools can also teach critical thinking skills, which enable young people to challenge gender stereotypes and call out discriminatory gender norms.

But many countries do not include LGBTQI+ content in school sex education curricula at all. UNESCO reports that only 17% of 50 reviewed countries include SOGIESC in their sex education curricula. In the FRA survey in Europe in 2023, 35% of respondents aged 15–17 said that their school education never addressed LGBTQI+ issues, an improvement from the 47% found in the 2019 survey, but still a significant share. In some African countries, political discourses about maintaining traditional social norms, national identities, and protecting children's 'innocence' have resulted in the exclusion of homosexuality, abortion and pleasure from curricula. In Burkina Faso in 2021, the then Minister for National Education, Professor Stanislas Ouaro, spoke against comprehensive sexuality education as an attempt by development partners to force acceptance of homosexuality in the country.

If schools do include LGBTQI+ content in their curricula, it is often framed in a negative way. In South African schools, for example, queer youth reported that sexuality is often framed in terms of deviance, danger and disease to encourage abstinence. A textbook released in Cameroon in 2018 conflated and denounced homosexuality, sodomy and zoophilia (the textbook was later retracted as conservative forces felt that it normalised pornography and immorality). Discriminatory teaching materials and curricula reinforce negative stereotypes, embed unequal gender norms and contribute to bullying and violence against LGBTQI+ students. Even if LGBTQI+ content is included in the official curriculum, some teachers may choose to skip it if they feel uncomfortable about it, are opposed to it, or if they do not feel well-equipped to answer questions. UNESCO's worldwide review of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) shows is it very common for teachers to be poorly trained on sexuality education and struggle to provide accurate information, even if they are supportive. The absence or poor delivery of CSE contributes to reinforcing unequal gender norms for another generation, instead of leveraging the transformative potential of education.

Anti-gender or anti-rights movements have mobilised to oppose inclusive curricula and sex education. They often exploit feelings of anxiety around young people's sexuality, and sometimes use religious arguments or appeals to tradition and family values to put pressure on schools and governments to remove mentions of homosexuality from curricula. They have been successful in many contexts; for example, the Ministry of Education and Sciences in Paraguay prohibited teaching materials that it deemed supportive of gender theory or 'gender ideology'. In Argentina, despite the 2006 law that mandates the teaching of CSE, many schools do not teach anything about sex and relationships due to pressure from parents and religious actors. In some African countries, political discourses about maintaining traditional social norms, national identities, and protecting children's 'innocence' have resulted in the exclusion of homosexuality, abortion and pleasure from curricula. In Burkina Faso in 2021, for example, the then Minister for National Education, Professor Stanislas Ouaro, spoke against comprehensive sexuality education as an attempt by development partners to force acceptance of homosexuality in the country. Removing or silencing discussions about SOGIESC has direct and negative outcomes for LGBTQI+ young people. In the US, research by the Human Rights Campaign in 2024 shows clearly that hate crimes against LGBTQI+ youth on school campuses have more than quadrupled in states with restrictive LGBTQI+ laws.School policies on

gender expression and identity may also reinforce negative gender norms. School dress codes are part of the hidden curriculum that reinforces norms of 'appropriate' appearance for each gender, which may be stereotyped. If gendered dress and hair codes reflect stereotypical and conservative gender norms and are strictly enforced, they can discriminate against gender non-conforming students, especially those marginalized by race and class as well, which UNESCO refers to as institutional violence. Gender-restrictive dress codes can sometimes marginalise transgender students to such an extent that they drop out of school. The absence of gender-neutral toilets and changing facilities might negatively affect those who do not feel safe in sex-segregated facilities. This is not limited to transgender students; lesbian, gay and bisexual young people are often made to feel unwelcome by their peers in single-sex facilities such as communal changing rooms.

Teachers

Teachers fulfil multiple roles, from facilitating learning and upholding a school's values and discipline system, to advocating for change and providing pastoral support to individual students. In the context of LGBTQI+ rights, a teacher's most important role is to act as an ally, role model and advocate for young people. A national survey in the US by GLSEN in 2016 found that LGBTQI+ educators were more likely to support LGBTQI+ students, with 74% of respondents engaging in advice, personal support, advocacy and teaching LGBTQI+ topics (versus 49% of non-LGBTQI+ teachers). Visibility and role-modelling are strong supportive elements for LGBTQI+ youth, and contribute to more inclusive gender norms. But homophobic environments affect teachers too, and many are unable to protect LGBTQI+ students if they fear there will be professional repercussions.

GLSEN's US survey shows that LGBTQI+ educators face a hostile environment at school. In particular, many fear that they will face a backlash from parents and school administrators – or even lose their job – if their identity is known or if they engage in inclusive and affirming practices for their LGBTQI+ students. Another study in the US reports a strong discourse of privacy, caution and silence among lesbian, bi and gay educators to different degrees, as they navigate selective levels of 'outness'. Most of the evidence on LGBTQI+ teachers comes from the US, but available evidence points to a few examples from other countries:

- In Czechia, a study in 2021 found that 52% of LGBTQI educators did not talk about their sexual orientation at work; 71% reported that they feared negative reactions from their colleagues; 64% feared it would damage their relationships in the workplace; and 44% feared it would impede their professional progress.
- In Israel, a study in 2021 found that 94% of teachers had received homophobic and insulting comments from their students and 53% had heard homophobic comments from other teachers and staff members.

These fears of negative repercussions appear to be well-grounded. For example, in Chile in 2007, a teacher who came out as lesbian had her teaching certificate revoked (her certificate was later reinstated through the Inter-American Court of Human Rights). In addition, the recent surge of anti-gender campaigns has targeted LGBTQI+-affirming teachers. In Brazil, teachers who are perceived to advocate for LGBTQI+ rights have been threatened, harassed, intimidated and even criminally investigated by state actors.

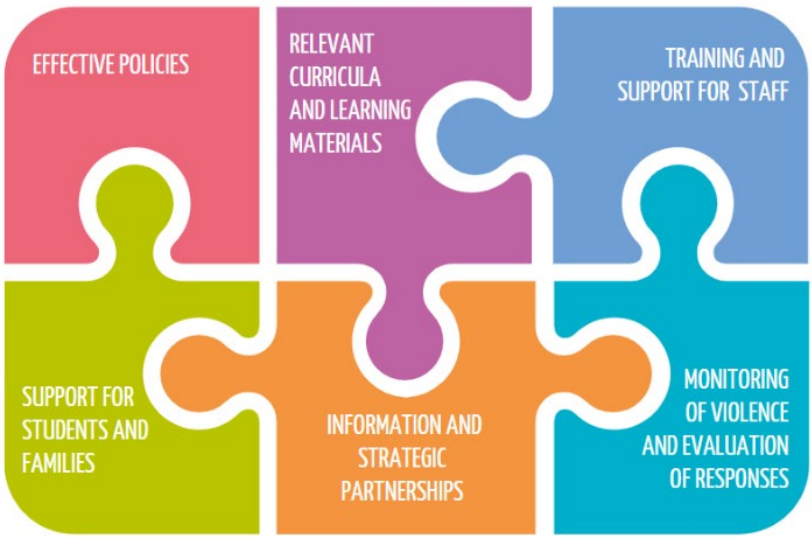
The volatile and rapidly changing nature of anti-LGBTQI+ laws and political discourse leaves teachers very uncertain about what they are allowed to say. Many end up self-silencing in order to avoid repercussions. Removing supportive teachers directly imperils LGBTQI+ students, who lose allies in a structural position of power. As school employees, LGBTQI+ teachers are protected under legal provisions that prohibit discrimination on the basis of SOGIESC in the 81 countries that had such provisions, as of 2022. Yet the enactment of legal protections is often weak.

What can be done to challenge anti-LGBTQI+ discriminatory norms in educational environments?

The education sector has a responsibility to provide a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students. Tackling anti-LGTBQI+ discrimination in schools supports progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) and upholds the rights to education and the rights of the child, as agreed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Although many countries are reluctant to state their full support for LGBTQI+ rights, almost all states have signed the CRC, which protects the right to education for all children, including their protection against discrimination on the basis of their SOGIESC. Tackling discrimination and working towards the acceptance of SOGIESC diversity is crucial for transforming gender norms.

UNESCO's 2016 policy recommendations on education sector responses to violence based on SOGIESC are a useful guide on how different elements connect to create a comprehensive response (Figure 4). The next section follows this outline drawing together recommendations on what works.

Figure 4: The elements of a comprehensive education sector response to homophobic and transphobic violence



Source: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000024465.

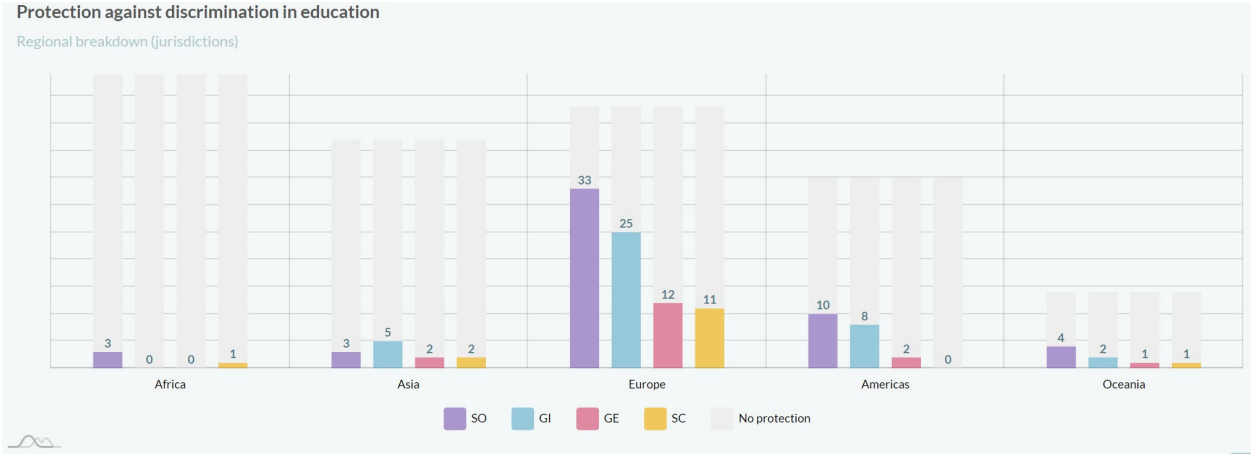
For more information on the gender-restrictive backlash in educational spaces, especially around Comprehensive Sexuality Education and practices that are inclusive of LGBTQI+ students, see the 2024 ALIGN report: Whose Hands on Our Education?

Effective policies

Legal provisions

At their root, homophobic, queerphobic and transphobic violence and discrimination are the results of restrictive gender norms that must be addressed in wider society, going beyond schools. Schools' ability to tackle discrimination depends on the legal and policy environment that surrounds them. For example, if same-sex activity is criminalised by law, schools will have only limited room for manoeuvre. Figure 5, from the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), shows the extent of legal provisions for protection against discrimination in education, on Sexual Orientation (SO), Gender Identity (GI), Gender Expression (GE), and Sex Characteristics (SC):

Figure 5: Number of countries with legal provisions for protection against discrimination in education, as of 2024



Source: https://database.ilga.org/discrimination-education-lgbti.

National and sub-national legal systems must support anti-discrimination measures in order for schools to implement these. In South Africa, which has constitutional protections for LGBTQI+ rights, students have successfully challenged discrimination from teachers, showing that a robust legal system is necessary. It is helpful to have national or regional action plans that specifically prohibit school bullying based on SOGIESC.

Laws and policies on anti-discrimination must also protect teachers as (state or private) employees. Governments and education employers should uphold workers' rights in line with the 2019 ILO Convention 190 against violence and harassment at work, and protect specific LGBTQI+ rights within wider strategies, for example, in teachers' unions. Laws alone are usually not enough, as they can be poorly implemented, or they may lack political support.

Non-discriminatory school policies and facilities

All school policies should be inclusive, with anti-discrimination measures and inclusive language throughout. One example is Argentina's 'Maternity Rooms', where adolescent parents can leave their young children while they learn. SOGIESC-inclusive policies also benefit staff. It may also be helpful to provide at least one gender-neutral toilet in addition to single-sex facilities, although this may be difficult in contexts that lack clean and safe water and toilet facilities more generally. Gender-neutral uniforms or relaxed dress codes may foster inclusion. Allowing students to change their names and pronouns is delicate matter to manage, including debates on what age is appropriate and whether parents should be informed, but in principle these changes can counter discrimination.

School anti-bullying policies

Proactive policies have a strong impact on reducing anti-LGBTQI+ harassment, increasing staff intervention, and increasing the likelihood that students will report incidents. School policies need to specifically state that violence against LGBTQI+ people is prohibited, as generic anti-bullying policies are not as effective.

Relevant curricula and learning materials

Including LGBTQI+ content in a positive way in teaching about gender and sexuality has a strong impact on students' attendance and feelings of school belonging, shown by GLSEN research. Comprehensive sexuality education might also develop more positive attitudes to diverse SOGIESC among all students, contributing to a shift in norms towards greater acceptance of sexual and gender diversity. CSE gives critical skills to young people related to their sexual health and reproductive rights, and has been shown to reduce patterns of gender- and sexual-based violence and unintended pregnancies, and delay the age of marriage for young women. As such, CSE benefits all young people, not just LGBTQI+ students. Changing the content of teaching materials sometimes requires specific legislation to change curricula, remove discriminatory language and revise textbooks. UNESCO cites a positive example from Namibia, where the Life Skills curriculum requires students to understand and discuss differing sexualities. Curricula need to be adaptable to local contexts, which includes using local terms for different genders and sexualities, and incorporating other intersectional identities.

Training and support for staff

Teacher training on LGBTQI+ issues

It is important to invest in teacher capacity and confidence to deliver inclusive curricula and address norms underpinning anti-LGBTQI+ bullying. This requires including positive LGBTQI+ content in pre-service training and continuing professional development. Teachers who have positive attitudes to LGBTQI+ rights may be able to influence their students even where such topics are not formally taught. UNICEF's work on gender-transformative approaches in schools strongly suggests that teachers need to critically examine their own gender biases and the norms they, perhaps unknowingly, reinforce in the classroom. Sweden, for example, has tried a 'norm critical' approach for in-service training, which examines how and why norms determine who is 'normal' or 'abnormal' and encourages staff to reflect on discrimination and difference.

Teacher training on anti-LGBTQI+ bullying

Providing awareness training to staff, students, teachers, and parents is important to prevent bullying. Training on generic bullying at school is not considered sufficient by UNESCO to address the specificities of homophobic and transphobic bullying. Teachers benefit from training on anti-discrimination measures and how to recognise and address SOGIESC issues among students, and on preventing violence. Training should take an intersectional approach that understands how different groups of young people experience discrimination related to their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Support for students and families

Support for people experiencing bullying

Measures should be put in place to support students who are the targets of bullying and others affected by discrimination on the basis of SOGIESC. This might include counselling in school or referrals to outside services. Japan, for example, has a national LGBTQI+ helpline to call, and the UK has a website to report online abuse. It is important to note, however, that solutions should not require students to put up with bullying or suppress their SOGIESC in order to fit in, and should be supportive of diversity. Resource constraints limit what is possible, but even having a sympathetic teacher to talk to can be helpful.

Supportive school personnel

Supportive and sympathetic staff can help LGBTQI+ students feel a greater sense of school belonging, and become less likely to skip school. Changing attitudes and awareness among school staff is essential to increase support for LGBTQI+ students. For LGBTQI+ teachers, a supportive work environment and allies among the staff can help them to become positive role models.

Guidance for family members

Guidance is needed for the families of all school students on how to respond to harassment and violence, as well as awareness campaigns and materials on the rights of students and relevant school policies on inclusion. Families also need support to provide a positive and accepting home environment for the well-being of LGBTQI+ young people, because approaches that are only school-based will not work without buy-in from families.

Information and strategic partnerships

Partnerships, in particular with LGBTQI+ community organisations, can contribute to successful responses to counter discrimination. UNESCO research shows that one common feature of progress on including SOGIESC in CSE has been collaboration and partnership between Ministries of Education and LGBTQI+ civil society organisations. For example, in Nepal in 2014, the non-governmental organisation Blue Diamond Society developed and delivered a training course for teachers and school administrators. This supported the introduction of a new inclusive curriculum on sexual and reproductive health, and helped schools identify solutions to address problems faced by their LGBTQI+ students.

Other initiatives by LGBTQI+ organisations might include anti-bullying networks with teachers and student unions, long-term awareness raising and training, and contributing to education policies and curricula development. In Cambodia, for example, the Reproductive Health Association of Cambodia has trained Ministry of Education staff on inclusive language in the CSE curriculum, explaining why each term is accurate, scientific and age-appropriate. The training has changed attitudes among the Ministry's senior leadership, some of whom are now using previously contested terms. Community organisations can be particularly helpful in translating national educational policies into locally appropriate terms, using language that will be effective for different identity groups. In many countries, civil society organisations are also leading advocacy on LGBTQI+ rights and SOGIESC education in schools, countering the narrative of conservative anti-gender movements.

Monitoring of violence and evaluation of responses

Effective reporting mechanisms

Policies alone are not enough. They must be supported by reporting and disciplinary procedures. These procedures can be as simple as anti-bullying committees in schools, as seen in India. In addition, school practices should include clear guidance on how to report discrimination, as well as clear follow-up mechanisms for staff.

7. Early childhood education and gender norms

Note: This chapter was added as an additional topic in November 2025 and was written by Evie Browne and Rachel Marcus.

Key messages

- Early childhood is a critical time to nurture gender equitable attitudes and behaviours in children, before biases and stereotypes become embedded.
- Early childhood educators need support, resources and training so that they can reflect on their own gendered biases to avoid transmitting these to children.
- Emerging best practices show that it is possible to challenge gender stereotypes by encouraging boys and girls to play together, and to play with non-stereotypical toys. But educational systems need resources and political will to shift towards gender-responsive play-based learning pedagogies.
- More evidence is needed on how gender-responsive pedagogy in the early years translates into learning outcomes for boys and girls, and into wider gender norm change.

Introduction

This module of ALIGN's Education and Gender Norms guide examines how gender norms affect early childhood education (ECE). It looks at not only how unequal gender norms are often reinforced in pre-schools, but also how they can be transformed in a positive way to promote gender equality.

ECE refers to formal or informal learning from birth to eight years old, in pre-school, kindergarten or nursery environments. The module focuses on formal early educational settings, and largely on children aged three to six.

Early childhood education is an important formative experience, during which children are exposed to many gendered norms. Socialisation into gender stereotypes begins in the very early years, often from birth. By the age of three, children understand cultural gender stereotypes; and by the age of six, they have formed expectations about gender roles.

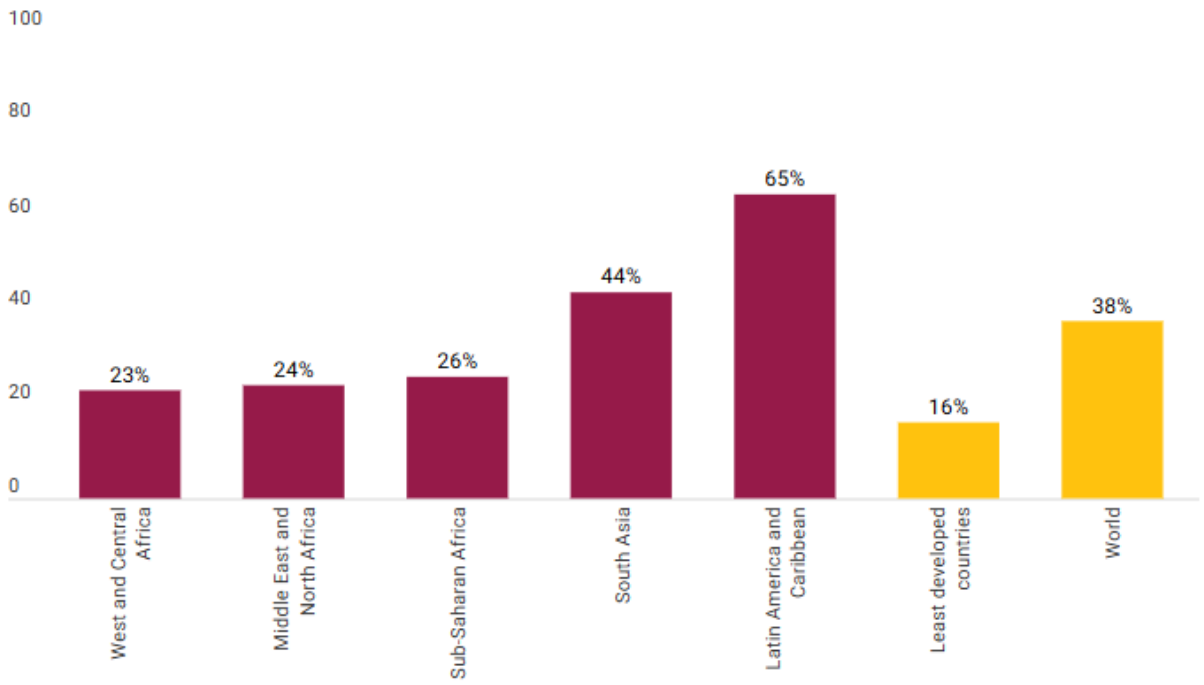
Educators' approaches to children can either reinforce or challenge gender norms. Learning materials may also reinforce unequal norms by portraying men and women in stereotyped roles in stories or encouraging girls or boys to play only with certain toys or games. Children develop their understanding of gender through these interactions.

The past decade has seen growing efforts to reduce such biases by promoting gender-transformative approaches in early childhood education. This guide discusses two main areas where there is evidence that gender norms can be challenged in this field: pedagogy and learning materials.

Gendered access to early childhood education

While enrolments in ECE have increased worldwide over the last two decades, but UNICEF estimates that, as of October 2024, only four in 10 children aged three and four are enrolled, with substantial regional differences. Around two in every three children in Latin America and the Caribbean attend ECE compared to just under half of children in South Asia and only one in four in sub-Saharan Africa (Figure 6). Enrolment rates reflect accessibility of provision – both the existence of facilities and their affordability, as shown in an ILO review. Children are more likely to attend ECE the older they are.

Figure 6: Percentage of children aged 36 to 59 months who attend some form of early childhood education programme, by region



***Notes**: The world estimate is based on a sub-set of 95 countries covering 61% of the global population of children aged 36 to 59 months. Regional estimates represent data from countries covering at least 50% of the regional population. Data coverage was insufficient to calculate aggregates for the regions not shown.*

***Source:** UNICEF global databases, 2024, based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), and other national surveys, 2015—2023. https://data.unicef.org/topic/early-childhood-development/early-childhood-education*

Globally, there is gender parity in access to early childhood education. But gender may not be the determining factor in access; income, rural location, class, and ethnicity may be the fault lines that determine who has access and who does not. UNICEF data from household surveys estimate that 90% of children from the richest wealth quintile attend ECE in the year before primary school starts, compared to only 58% of the children from the poorest wealth quintile. A similarly strong rural-urban divide can be seen in some places: urban areas in West and Central Africa have 73% attendance, while rural areas have only 42%. The rural-urban split is not so evident in Latin America and the Caribbean, or in South Asia.

Gender, however, still has an impact in some contexts, although this is not necessarily seen in net enrolment figures. A study across 11 Asian countries by Plan International in 2022 found that parents attached equal importance to pre-school for both girls and boys. In India and Nepal, however, parents with enough income would send their sons to private pre-schools that were perceived to be of higher quality, while keeping their daughters in lower-quality public institutions. Access to ECE is complex and varies considerably by region and demographic groups, making it essential to pay close attention to those variables in analysis and policy.

How are gender norms reproduced in early childhood education?

Local gender norms are brought into the classroom by both teachers and children. Norms about gendered behaviour, appearance and futures for children affect how ECE staff interact with learners, with other teachers, and with parents. Teachers may consciously or unconsciously interact differently with girls and boys, and the spaces, play materials, books, illustrations and language used convey messages about gender norms and roles. Children develop their understanding of gender through these messages (as well as at home and in other spaces). These practices may seem harmless, but they become problematic when educators use them to frame children's mind-sets about what they can and cannot do by virtue of them being girls or boys.

Gender biases are often upheld through the hidden curriculum, including *how* teachers teach, as well as *what* they teach. Early childhood education staff might divide children into groups of girls and boys, treat them differently, assign different tasks, or hold different expectations of their abilities. Some examples of gender biases from Rwanda, South Africa and Zambia include:

- treating girls as the weaker sex by comforting a girl who hurts herself and is crying, while a boy in the same situation is told, 'Get up, boys don't cry'
- giving girls chores such as sweeping, and boys heavier physical duties, such as lifting
- not allowing girls to participate in tree climbing or other activities considered 'rough', such as football; sending boys away when playing with a group of girls or not allowing them to play with dolls
- giving girls easy numeracy exercises while giving boys more challenging tasks.

While such examples are easy to understand as gendered, some gender biases can be extremely subtle. Research in Sweden found that teachers used more verbal communication with girls, while responding more urgently to boys' needs. Early childhood educators may also use softer language and warmer interactions with girls, and stronger language or harsher tones with boys.

While there are cultural differences in expectations for boys and girls, an OECD review finds that early childhood educators commonly describe girls as 'easier' and boys as 'demanding', meaning that they pay more attention to boys in order to control the class. Gendered expectations of girls' compliance and boys' liveliness mean that educators may treat them differently. This can include holding higher expectations of girls' academic achievements because they are seen as diligent and obedient, and calling on boys more often than girls to answer questions. Because biases can be so subtle, teachers may not be aware of how their practices contribute to gender inequality.

Gender inequality may also be reproduced in resources and learning materials. Learning materials are identified by UNICEF and OECD as under-representing women and reproducing stereotypes of men and women, boys and girls. In early years environments, these stereotypes can be found in story books, illustrations and posters, that often show women as passive characters at home, with men as active protagonists.

At early childhood education level, play and toys are as important as the written materials that educators follow. But play itself is not gender-neutral; in fact, it can reinforce stereotypes. Learning environments can reinforce gender divisions if toys are deliberately separated into boys' and girls' categories, or if boys and girls only play with one set of resources (such as girls playing with cooking and home equipment). Gender-specific play can influence children's understanding of men's and women's roles, for example, that only women can or should cook. Different toys teach different skills, and while children may have preferences for certain activities, it is important not to entrench these as differences that affect their aspirations and achievements.

OECD research on gender stereotypes in education, in general, also suggests that gender norms shape educational expectations and aspirations in different ways for boys and girls, leading to long-term consequences such as channelling girls towards low-paid, caregiving jobs. Dismantling gender stereotypes is, therefore, important to enable all children to reach their full potential, regardless of whether they are boys or girls.

Strategies to address unequal gender norms in early childhood education

This section focuses on two key areas through which ECE practitioners can promote equitable gender norms: pedagogy, and learning materials and environment. Both sections draw on gender-transformative approaches and recognise the importance of learning through play.

Some studies show that gender stereotypes and biases are present in ECE (including this systematic review from 2021), and some toolkits describe interventions to address these (particularly the GRP4ECE[3] toolkit by VVOB and FAWE; one on pre-primary systems by UNICEF; and one on ending gender stereotypes by UNGEI).

But there is only limited rigorous and evaluation-based evidence of the effectiveness of these efforts to remove gender biases and promote gender-equitable values. In particular, there is little evidence on whether gender-responsive approaches result in better learning outcomes or changes in children's attitudes and behaviours regarding gender in later years. There is more research and evidence from Global North contexts and a relative silence on gender and sexuality in ECE in Global South contexts. Some of the most important evaluations are from the Gender Responsive Pedagogy for early childhood education project in South Africa and Zambia, and from Right to Play in Rwanda and Mozambique.

[3] Gender-responsive pedagogy for Early Childhood Education

Pedagogy

Efforts to enhance the quality of ECE often focus on improving pedagogical practices. One key element of this is promoting play-based learning, which can enhance physical, social, emotional, cognitive and social skills in both girls and boys. Such learning can help young children develop equitable interactions with their peers and learn problem-solving skills. A play-based approach to ECE can, therefore, help to establish gender parity in children's readiness for primary school. However, many teachers lack the capacity to apply learning through play, even for this age group, but rely on teacher-led activities at the chalkboard with the whole class.

Recently, early childhood education practice has begun to integrate content on gender equality into pedagogical training on learner-centred approaches, recognising the transformative potential of challenging unequal gender norms at a critical time in young learners' development. This approach, often termed gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP), aims to enable children to develop and explore their abilities and interests without the limitations of gender stereotyped roles, norms and ideas imposed by teachers and others. It aims to lead to more gender-equitable learning outcomes, and to more gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours in children.

Pre-school leaders also benefit from this training so that they are equipped to support teachers, and to promote gender-equitable values through a 'whole school' approach. This involves making sure that all staff and associated bodies, such as governors or parent-teacher associations, are on board, and that there is outreach to parents and caregivers.

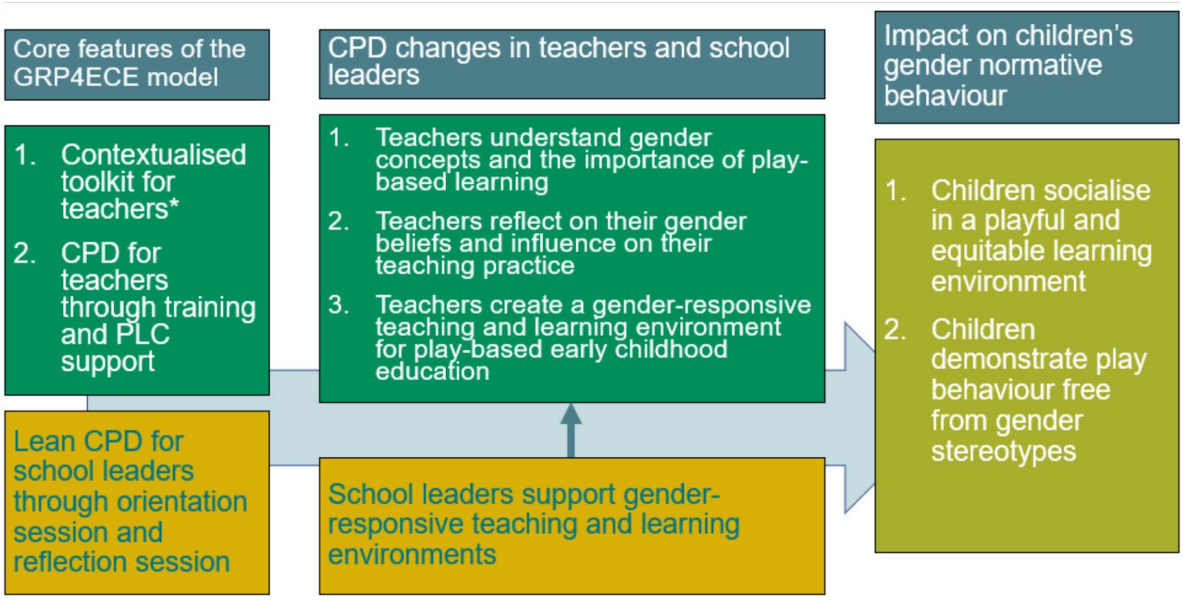
Gender-responsive pedagogy training aims to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to teach in a gender-equitable way. It prompts teachers to:

- reflect on their own beliefs about traditional gender roles,
- give attention to gender issues in teaching, and in interactions outside the classroom.

Figure X, developed by the GRP4ECE project in South Africa shows its intended outcomes in terms of teachers' understanding and practice, and children's behaviour.

While GRP training is beginning to be mandated in teacher training (in Ghana, for example), it is currently delivered almost exclusively through in-service training, and in only a limited number of places.

Figure 7: Intervention logic for GRP4ECE model applied in South Africa



**Continuous Professional Development (CPD); Professional Learning Community (PLC)*

Source: Ismail, Cabus, and Pieck, (2022) Effectiveness of a gender-responsive pedagogy model in early childhood education in South Africa. VVOB and Mthente Research and Consulting Services., p.5. https://www.vvob.org/en/downloads/effectiveness-gender-responsive-pedagogy-model-early-childhood-education-south-africa.

Supporting teachers to challenge and overcome their own biases

Helping teachers to understand their own gender biases and stereotypes and to develop more gender-equitable practices is key to changing gender norms in the classroom. The three evaluations in this section suggest that, with support, teachers can quickly change their attitudes and beliefs about gender and begin to remove negative stereotypes in their teaching. For example, evaluations of GRP4ECE's training package reported positive results on teachers' attitudes and practices in South Africa and Zambia.

- In South Africa, there were significant and positive changes (i.e. from 0.5 to 1 point on the Likert scale) from baseline to endline on the beliefs and practices of participating teachers on some gendered statements (e.g. 'There are some jobs that only men or women should do', or 'a boy should not behave like a girl'). This is in comparison to the control group. Teachers also reported that, following the training, children were encouraged to choose whatever clothing they liked and were no longer taught what different sexes should wear.
- In Zambia, teachers who completed the training changed their beliefs about gender roles and began to give children examples that challenged gender stereotypes, in contrast to teachers in the control schools. After the training, school leaders said they now saw boys and girls as equal, and like the classroom teachers, ensured that boys and girls were given equal opportunities in day-to-day tasks, such as being allowed to raise the school flag.

These evaluations also found some small effects on children's behaviour in South Africa, where teachers learned to help children play with non-stereotypical learning materials and toys. Teachers reported that children showed an increased ability to cross gender-stereotypical lines.

In Rwanda and Mozambique, Right to Play adapted its primary-level Gender Responsive Continuum of Teacher Training programme for use among ECE teachers. This approach does not explicitly focus on changing gender norms, but on training teachers to support boys and girls so that they are equally prepared to enter formal schooling. Interviews with teachers in Mozambique indicated that they had changed their attitudes and practices to be more gender-equitable, for example, not seeking out pink chairs for girls, and encouraging boys and girls to play together.

The evaluations of GRP4ECE and the Gender Responsive Continuum of Teacher Training programme are among only a few in Global South countries that draw a link between gender-responsive pedagogy training for teachers and changes in children's behaviour or learning. They found small but noticeable and positive effects that increased gender-equitable practices in the educational environment. It is not yet clear whether this kind of training changes children's behaviour and attitudes about gender, or if it will make a significant difference to gender norms as children grow up.

Checking and challenging gender stereotypes among children

One of the overarching approaches to gender-responsive pedagogy is to challenge gender stereotypes and gender norms when they arise – in books and stories, in discussions and conversations, and among learners. Teachers can listen in to learners' conversations and play and use their interactions to question and challenge stereotypical beliefs. They can provide alternative examples (e.g. female doctors, male nurses, fathers who cook and mothers who work) or asking thought-provoking questions (e.g. 'can girls play football?' or 'can boys play with pink toys?').

When boys or girls explore a different gender role or cross a gendered boundary in their independent play, this should be supported by educators. Teachers can play an active role in facilitating greater gender equity in play, by for example:

- intervening if one gender is taking up all the play space or dominating a specific activity
- reserving time for one gender to play a specific game that they would not otherwise do, like a 'boys only' dressing-up time, or time for girls to play football.

In Zambia, trained teachers were observed trying these methods, actively listening to children's conversations and intervening to challenge stereotypes, unlike most teachers without such training. Teachers must be supported to learn and practice these methods, especially those they find harder.

Ingredients of effective gender-responsive pedagogy training for ECE teachers

Often, the first recommended step is for teachers to reflect on their own biases through observation of their practices and language, in dialogue with colleagues. The GRP4ECE toolkit recommends observing (or filming) a teacher, and paying attention to subtle gender biases like different language or intonation when talking to girls or boys, different task assignation or questions, and counting how often boys and girls respond or participate. The toolkit contains many concrete tips and examples of what to watch out for.

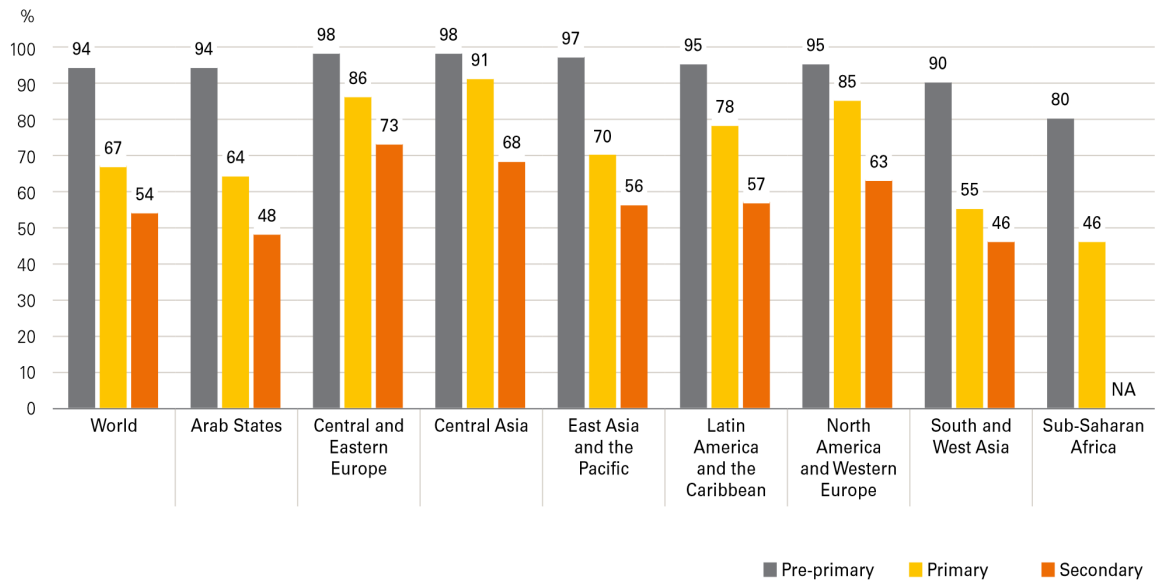
Peer learning and support is also mentioned as a sustainable way to change educational practices, given that gender norm change can take a long time. Peer support can help to strengthen teachers' implementation of gender awareness approaches; for example, some Nordic countries[4] have established networks to share gender resources online.

The GRP4ECE programme offered educators fortnightly suggestions and discussion questions via WhatsApp on how to incorporate GRP. Follow up observations also identified further needs and offered support through regional meetings of educators. GRP4ECE developed its 'Go, Gender Go', game for teachers to support peer learning, which was a fun way to explore stereotypes and experience learning through play. Through its GRP Training Pack, Plan International recommends reflection circles where educators share challenges, problem-solve and reflect on their practices.

Gender balance in the early childhood education workforce

Globally, the ECE sector is highly feminised (Figure 8). It is also poorly paid, low status, and less professionalised than other education sectors, precisely because it is often perceived as an extension of women's caregiving role.

Figure 8: Percentage of female teachers by education level and region, 2019



Source: https://www.unicef.org/reports/tackling-gender-inequality-early-years. p.32.

Parents and teachers may themselves hold gender-biased views, believing men to be unsuitable as early years educators. Some studies have found that male early years teachers are sometimes perceived to be gay or men who are not 'at ease' with their gender. Others suggest that men are seen as more aggressive or more liable to use harsh discipline, and therefore not suited to early years roles, while women are believed to be more nurturing.

[4] See page 39 of report

The overall poor recognition of ECE as a profession contributes to its female dominance, as men tend to pursue higher-paying teaching roles. However, deliberate efforts to include more men in ECE, along with improving recognition and pay for ECE teachers, can expand the pool of gender role models for students and can help to counteract negative views of men working with children. And whatever educators' gender, the strategies outlined in this module and others can help to change gender biases.

Institutionalising gender-responsive pedagogy in early childhood education in Viet Nam

Early childhood education (ECE) has a long history in Viet Nam, with well-established childcare centres that enable women to undertake paid work. By 2021 Viet Nam had achieved gender parity in ECE and child enrolment rates of 92%.

VVOB and UNICEF worked with the Ministry of Education to develop more gender-sensitive ECE. In 2020, the country began to review ECE and develop a 10-year ECE strategy, with a strong focus on gender equality. This involved a pilot programme in 15 mountainous districts to train educators on play-based and gender-responsive education, lessons from which have been incorporated into the new curriculum.

UNICEF and VVOB have identified the close working relationship with the Ministry as central to the success of their pilots and advocacy. This relationship has allowed approaches and successes to be incorporated into the new ECE curriculum and teacher training courses. The country's existing commitments to play-based learning and gender equality provided a fertile ground for success.

Source: Nugroho, D. et al. (2022) *Tackling Gender Inequality from the Early Years: Strategies for building a gender-transformative pre-primary education system.* Florence, Italy: UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight (https://www.unicef.org/reports/tackling-gender-inequality-early-years).

Learning materials and classroom environments

Learning materials and classroom arrangements may transmit gender stereotypes, or channel children in gendered directions. Small tweaks to learning materials and classroom arrangements can help prevent this.

Gender-sensitive materials

Illustrations and examples in learning materials may promote gender stereotypes, with gender bias in materials part of the 'hidden curriculum' that reflects and reinforces unequal gender norms. In story books, for example, boys and men are often the main characters who have adventures, while girls and women are often shown in family and caring roles, or they show women as passive and unambitious characters at home, with men as the active, driven protagonists.

As revision of learning materials takes time, instead teachers can avoid using specific biased texts and images, or they can use gender stereotypes as teaching moments to challenge and question gender norms. The GRP4ECE evaluation in South Africa shows that teachers were able to adapt

materials to be more gender-neutral after their training; and in Zambia, teachers discussed with children how boys and girls, men and women, were portrayed in the teaching materials.

Toys and physical materials can be gender-neutral, like building blocks, colouring books and puzzles. Indeed, toys traditionally associated with one gender can be powerful tools to promote gender equality. Encouraging all children to play with a diverse range of toys helps to break down stereotypes and broadens their understanding of different roles and activities. Ultimately, diversifying play toys helps children to see that skills and activities are not limited by gender, fostering a more inclusive and equitable mind-set from an early age. This can contribute significantly to challenging and changing societal norms and biases.

Case study: gender-neutral learning materials and classroom environments in South Africa

KwaZulu Natal province, in South Africa, participated in VVOB's pilot of GRP4ECE training in 2020 to 2021. Some findings from a study on the impact reveal that teachers were able to update their learning materials and classroom arrangements to be more gender-responsive. An evaluation used classroom observations to identify the differences between the classrooms where teachers had taken part in the training and control classrooms.

In the former, teachers had updated their learning materials so that more than 50% of the classroom displays, books, games, pretend play and construction play areas promoted gender equity and encouraged free play. The play areas had been adapted to offer a range of opportunities across different kinds of play. Teachers were also careful to adapt their stories and rhymes to be more gender-neutral, and otherwise used gender-neutral language. By contrast, teachers in the control classrooms did less to encourage free play, and had considerably fewer materials promoting gender equality.

Trained teachers also began to use gender-neutral strategies to group children – alphabetically, randomly, or by learning ability – and then assigned chores and tasks to the groups. This helped to encourage the idea that chores are not specific to a particular sex. Teachers also said that they saw that mixed-sex groups helped boys and girls to play together and move around the different play areas, rather than sticking to one type of play.

These changes in both the learning materials and classroom environment begin to challenge gender norms by reducing the importance of gender as a type of difference between people, and teaching children that boys and girls can both be interested in all kinds of activities and play.

Source: Ismail, I. et al. (2022) *Effectiveness of a gender-responsive pedagogy model in early childhood education in South Africa*. Brussels: VVOB and Mthente Research and Consulting Services (https://www.vvob.org/en/downloads/effectiveness-gender-responsive-pedagogy-model-early-childhood-education-south-africa).

Classroom arrangements

UNICEF reports that mixed-sex and mixed-ability groupings help foster cross-gender friendships and play, which helps children learn how to interact comfortably and equally with other genders. There is some evidence from Sweden that young children who favour same-sex playmates develop more pronounced gender-stereotyped interests and behaviour over time, embedding gender inequality. In contrast, mixed-sex groups and play that crosses traditional gender stereotypes promotes empathetic relationships between genders and helps children develop interests that may not align with gender norms. Some options for grouping children instead of by gender are:

- children grouped by age
- equal groups at random
- groups divided by the number of tables in the class
- groups by alphabetical order.

Giving play areas gender-neutral names might also encourage mixed-sex play. For example, instead of the 'doll area', calling it the 'pretend play' area might make it more attractive to boys, as found in Zambia. Other neutral choices include 'games area', 'cosy area', or subject names like 'maths corner'.

It should be noted, however, that resource constraints, lack of space and large class sizes are a significant challenge in low-income contexts. In Rwanda, for example, an evaluation showed that ECE class sizes were as high as 68 children per teacher, and there was little or no room in the classroom for play space, and no outside space at all. But even if opportunities for free play are limited, teachers can still promote gender equality by mixing boys and girls for activities and encouraging their equal participation.

Contextualisation, stakeholder and parental engagement

When looking at gender interventions, it is important to always have in mind the specific operational context. One important first step is the contextualisation of resources, aiming to tailor the content to prevailing and specific cultural, social and economic realities. Contextualising resources and approaches helps to create more effective, meaningful and respectful content that can drive real progress in challenging and changing gender biases.

Ministries of education are crucial in this process. Ultimately if resources and approaches are to be used in official ECE classrooms, their content must be approved by the relevant authorities to whom teachers are accountable. Experience from South Africa and Zambia show these ministries are the first stakeholders that should be engaged when developing resources on gender, especially for ECE.

Parents and caregivers, however, have the greatest influence on the development of gender norms and stereotypes among young children. Efforts to challenge gender inequalities in pre-schools are likely to be more effective if they are consistent with the messages children are also receiving at home and in the wider community. For this reason, initiatives to promote gender equality in early education often take a 'whole school' approach that involves parents and caregivers.

This involves sensitising parents to common gender biases and explaining how all children benefit from less restrictive stereotypes. Inviting parents to observe parts of early education sessions to

see gender-equitable approaches in practice can help to make this real and less daunting. Parent-teacher associations or similar structures such as community workers, can play an important role in this kind of outreach activity. In New Delhi, India, for example, community-based pre-schools are run by community workers who have a holistic approach to caring, which includes supporting their health, nutrition and their lives at home. Community workers are more able to engage in an informal way with parents, in contrast to the often formal relationships between parents and teachers. A Plan International study of 11 Asian countries found parent groups were almost completely women-only; reinforcing women's caregiving roles and meaning male caregivers were poorly informed about their children's needs. ECE providers can take steps to more actively engage fathers by inviting them and making spaces welcoming to men (and other caregivers), institutions can help shift the gender norm that caring for children is women's work.

Table 1: Tools and resources for addressing gender norms in early childhood education

Name	Organisation	Content
Putting SDG4 into practice: Gender-responsive pedagogy for early childhood education. VVOB Technical Brief No. 5.	VVOB (2020)	This technical brief presents the concept of GRP4ECE in detail, with examples from South Africa, Viet Nam and Zambia.
Gender-Responsive Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education (GRP4ECE) toolkit	VVOB and FAWE (2019)	The toolkit, which has a focus on African countries, aims to provide ECE teachers and school leaders with a set of practical and low-cost instruments to reflect on their own gender biases, and tips to introduce gender-responsive pedagogy in their schools and classrooms. It has been endorsed by the African Union and UNESCO-IICBA.
Gender-Responsive Pedagogy Teacher Training (GRPTT) pack	Plan International Canada (2020)	This pack provides materials for a 10-day teacher training programme. While it was not originally developed for pre-primary education, it is currently being adapted for ECE. The programme introduces general concepts related to gender and provides tools and guidelines for teachers in areas such as classroom management, lesson planning, and the evaluation and assessment of practices.
TEACH ECE	World Bank (2021)	This classroom observation tool was developed to monitor and improve teaching in pre-primary education, which can be incorporated into external monitoring of system quality. It includes gender-bias indicators to measure whether teachers show gender stereotypes in the classroom by not giving children equal opportunities to participate and by expressing unequal expectations about their behaviour or capabilities, and to assess whether they challenge gender stereotypes.
Early Childhood Education (ECE) Accelerator toolkit	UNICEF (2020)	This technical guidance provides a framework for governments that are in the process of scaling up or improving provision for pre-primary education. The framework recognises the pre-primary education workforce as highly feminised and often undervalued; and recommends improvements to their working conditions and greater professionalisation as pathways to greater gender equality.
Tackling Gender Inequality from the Early Years: Strategies for building a gender-transformative pre-primary education system	UNICEF Innocenti (2022)	This consists of a full report, technical briefs and an overview of tools for the implementation of a systemic approach.

Source: https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/4201/file/UNICEF-GTPPE-Tools-Gender-Transformative-Policy-Programming-2022.pdf

8. Useful resources

Toolkits

Tools to promote change in school systems

- UNICEF's 2011 guidance, Promoting Gender Equality through UNICEF-Supported Programming in Basic Education, shows how to incorporate gender issues in education programme design, focusing on the support girls need to access education and the barriers that prevent them doing so.
- CIDA's 2006 Tip Sheet on Gender Equality in Education, covers policy, education statistics, teacher training and curriculum development, identifying questions to ask and actions to improve gender responsiveness and education outcomes for girls.
- UNESCO's 2009 Promoting Gender Equality in Education provides resources to raise awareness of gender and activities for school environments with exercises to build gender-responsive educational management, including how to develop gender-responsive budgeting.

Tools to support gender-equitable approaches in the classroom

- IREX's Creating Supportive Learning Environments for Girls and Boys: A Guide for Educators describes how to ensure 'gender friendly' classrooms and teaching materials, using a workbook format to help teachers create their own action plan and monitor change.
- Alongside other FAWE resources, FAWE's 2005 Gender Responsive Pedagogy: A Teacher's Handbook describes how to implement its gender responsive pedagogy model. Teachers are helped to understand the specific needs of boys and girls as they learn, and the skills required to be gender-responsive in the classroom.
- Promundo's Portal for Gender Equality in Schools (PEGE) has teaching resources for lessons on gender equality. Teachers have accessible manuals for Programmes H and M (flagship community based informal education programmes on gender-sensitive masculinities).

Tools based on proven initiatives

- Transforming Education for Girls in Nigeria and Tanzania (TEGINT): tools to promote gender equality and girls' rights with teachers, school management, community members and policy-makers, as well as girls and boys, provide insights into how different actors can work together to achieve change.
- The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) has produced resources based on the Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) programme, including a training manual for facilitators and a campaign guide setting out activities to reach young people and community members, including campaigns to tackle gender and violence in schools.
- The Population Council's It's All One Curriculum presents a unified approach to gender, health and sexuality education, while the Council's broader work with adolescent girls has generated other toolkits on programme design, including on Girl-Centered Programme Design, Building Girls' Protective Assets, and Girls' Leadership and Mentoring.

- Connect with Respect is a resource from Plan International focused on how teachers and school management can prevent gender-based violence in schools. Other resources on this issue include My Safety, My Wellbeing (a curriculum developed by the International Rescue Committee), and insights from ActionAid's Stop Violence Against Girls in School project.
- Useful resources from Girl Effect include the *Girl Consultation Toolkit* and the *Insights Toolkit*.

Further reading

- While there is strong evidence for the social impact and transformative effects of education for girls, the processes by which education contributes to empowerment and norm change have received much less attention.

Social impacts of girls' education

- While a vast body of literature draws on large-scale statistical evidence to highlight the positive social impacts of girls' education, the pathways to norm change are not discussed in any depth. Good overviews include Sperling and Winthrop (2015), King and Winthrop (2015), UNESCO's 2013 infographics on 'Education Transforms Lives', and Chaaban and Cunningham's 2011 analysis of the economic gains of investing in girls' education.

Education and empowerment

- Studies focus on the relationship between education and various dimensions of empowerment, such as developing self-confidence and skills. Key conceptual sources include Murphy-Graham and Lloyd (2015) and Stromquist (2006). Marcus and Page (2016) synthesise evidence on the empowering impacts of girls' education, while Sperling and Winthrop (2015) highlight evidence on the impact of girls' education on voice and agency and political engagement.

  Analysis of demographic and health survey (DHS) data from the mid-2000s shows how these patterns can be complicated by factors such as family structures. Studies of women's empowerment processes with a long historical view highlight the rising proportion of girls in school and greater economic opportunities for women with secondary education as key drivers of gender norm change (see also here).

Education and norm change

- Some literature explores the impact of education on gender norms using statistical data to illuminate the role of education and of other factors in attitude and norm change. Examples include the World Bank's 2013 *On Norms and Agency*, which draws on primary research in 20 countries to highlight education as a key driver of shifting gender norms. Kabeer's 2012 analysis of evidence on the forces underpinning women's economic empowerment also emphasises education, as does Seguino's 2007 analysis of data from the World Values Survey. Studies on particular issues (such as UNICEF's 2013 Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A Statistical Overview) illustrate education's power to change gender norms and practices.

About the authors

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