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for Education

TOOL

12

Mainstreaming gender equality

in early childhood care and education



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Objectives

The objectives of this tool are to help trainees:

- understand why early childhood care and education (ECCE) is important for achieving gender equality;
- identify ways of strengthening the approach to gender equality in ECCE;
- reflect on their own country context;
- identify strengths and weaknesses in gender equality in ECCE.

Key information



Setting the scene

In the Asia-Pacific region, the importance of early childhood care and education (ECCE) is becoming increasingly recognized, both in its own right and as a foundation for primary school and lifelong learning.

Early childhood is defined as the period from birth to eight years old. A time of remarkable physical and brain development, these years lay the basis for an individual's subsequent well-being. ECCE is more than a preparatory stage assisting the child's transition to formal schooling. It emphasizes the development of the whole child – attending to his or her social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic and physical needs – to establish a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and well-being.

Good quality ECCE programmes are:

- **child-centred**, play-based and appropriate to the child's age and stage of development, and not simply a downward extension of formal primary education;
- **holistic**, focusing on all of the relevant needs of the child and encompassing health, nutrition and hygiene as well as protection and cognitive, linguistic, and psychosocial development;
- **inclusive** of children of both sexes and children with disabilities as well as of their parents and caregivers, building on traditional practices;
- **committed** to establishing and monitoring standards for ECCE service delivery.



Box 1 Sustainable Development Goal 4

Target 4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.



Indicators

4.2.1 Proportion of children under 5 years of age who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being, by sex.

4.2.2 Participation rate in organized learning (one year before the official primary entry age), by sex.

ECCE lays the foundation for gender equality

ECCE programmes help both boys and girls to prepare for and do better in primary school and further education/learning. They cater for a period in the child's life when important socialization, including gender identity formation and learning gender roles and norms, takes place. They therefore represent a good entry point for basic education about gender and for demonstrating good practices in gender relations. ECCE is also an entry point for programming for vulnerable and disadvantaged populations, and especially girls from these groups.

However, ECCE is generally a highly feminized subsector. Often more than 90 per cent of the teaching force is female.¹ Care must therefore be taken to ensure learning materials, toys and games, playground space and teaching styles are equally responsive to both boys and girls. It is also important to promote male role models during the period of early childhood, whether in the form of male teachers or fathers who are more active in childrearing.



Self-study and/or group activity

Reflect on your experience of ECCE

- On your own or in pairs, think about your own experiences of ECCE. Choose an ECCE setting that you know or have worked with.
- Create a mind map. In the centre is the ECCE setting.
- Add to the mind map all the ways in which the ECCE setting supports gender equality.
- Then add the ways in which it hinders gender equality.
- Add a further layer of information to the mind map by writing down your ideas for tackling the negative aspects of the ECCE setting, and for building on the positive aspects.

Strengthening gender equality in ECCE: how to make it happen

Create gender-responsive ECCE policies

ECCE policies should emphasize gender equality from birth, with regard to issues such as nutrition and caregiving practices. Targeted interventions need to be provided to ensure the participation of young children from groups most often excluded

– but who may benefit most – from good quality ECCE programmes.

An ECCE situation analysis and a programme of consultation with stakeholders should inform ECCE policy formulation. The situation analysis should include a comprehensive gender analysis of girls' and boys' needs, their current status and available

1 The feminization of ECCE is closely linked to gender stereotypes where caring for young children is traditionally associated with women as mothers. As a result, there is a general belief that female teachers are better equipped for the job than men. See: Puamau, P. and Pene, F. 2008. *Early childhood care and education in the Pacific*. Fiji: Institute of Education, University of the South Pacific.

resources. See **Tool 6** for an overview of policy analysis using a gender lens.

In addition, a policy review should identify and review, from a gender perspective, all relevant laws, national policies and plans relating to ECCE and the target population.

This should consider:

- policy content areas and gaps;
- policy objectives and intended results;
- policy strategies to achieve those results;
- the effectiveness and efficiency of the strategies, including an assessment of barriers and bottlenecks;
- plans for programmes, if any, which specifically target usually excluded groups.

Ensure the ECCE curriculum promotes gender equality

The ECCE curriculum should include the development of social skills with peers, which are critical for developing gender identity and behaviours. The teaching and learning process should be as participatory, active and child-centred as possible. The curriculum needs to prevent gender bias, gender stereotyping and discrimination among young children. The emphasis should be on fostering equality in roles and norms through participation in ECCE activities.

The ECCE space should be friendly to both boys and girls. It should be comfortable with appropriate furniture, toys, games and other materials. The environment should be colourful with age-appropriate art on display, with examples from both boys and girls.

There should be gender-responsive guidelines for the curriculum. These should promote gender equality. To implement the curriculum, gender-sensitive instructional resources are needed. Materials such as storybooks should be assessed to ensure that they do not perpetuate gender stereotypes.

Train ECCE teachers on gender equality

Educators may have gender bias which can reinforce traditional patterns of disadvantage.² To mitigate this risk, ECCE teachers, regardless of their sex, need to receive gender training and know how to carry out a gender analysis in relation to their own work. This will help them treat both girls and boys with equal respect, and support every child to express ideas and participate fully in the all activities.

Collaborate with parents and families

Parents can be offered training to support them to become more effective caregivers and educators of their pre-school children. Such education programmes can raise awareness of the importance of ECCE, and the crucial role that parents play in a child's health, development, learning, protection and happiness. These programmes can also help raise parents' awareness of gender issues, the importance of gender equality, the links with children's behaviour, and how to be more gender aware at home. It is important that fathers as well as mothers engage in such programmes.

Community leaders should also be encouraged to recognize the importance of ECCE and the need to promote gender equality in ECCE programmes.

² Ibid.



Group activity

Investigate the ECCE situation in your context

- Divide trainees into small groups and tell them this is a fact-finding activity.
- Give each group one of the areas listed below to investigate.
- Each group should write on a flipchart what they already know about the issue.
- They should also list things they do not know and need to investigate further. They can make notes about what question to ask, and to whom.
- The groups then share and discuss their answers and questions.
- They can help each other to fill more gaps and then create a final list of things they still do not know and need to find out.
- The groups could be asked to go away and do some investigations, and then come back together after a period of time to share what they have learned.

Issues for the groups to discuss and investigate:

- **Policy**
 - Does your country have a national policy or policy framework on ECCE? Or related policies?
 - If so, what statements are made about gender in general and promoting gender equality in particular?
- **Strategic plan**
 - Does your country have a strategic plan to develop ECCE at a national level?
 - If so, what targets are set for gender equality in ECCE service delivery?
- **Coverage data**
 - Who is participating in ECCE programmes?
 - Which target populations?
 - What is the situation regarding the coverage of girls and boys in ECCE service delivery?
- **Standards**
 - Are there agreed national standards for ECCE delivery?
 - What standards are set with regard to ensuring gender equality?
- **Teacher preparation**
 - Is there a national curriculum for ECCE teacher education?
 - If so, what content is included with regard to gender equality in ECCE?
 - Does it include both theory and practice?
- **The curriculum**
 - Is there a national curriculum for ECCE?
 - If so, how is gender equality integrated into this curriculum?
 - Are there principles, objectives and competences set for gender equality?
 - Are gender-related interaction skills monitored or assessed?

(cont.)



Group activity

Investigate the ECCE situation in your context

- **Parents and the community**
 - Are there interventions to sensitize or educate mothers and fathers on gender equality in relation to ECCE?
 - How is this conducted?
- **Monitoring and evaluation**
 - Is there a monitoring and evaluation framework for ECCE roll-out and quality improvement?
 - If so, are there indicators that relate specifically to gender equality?
 - Is all available statistical data disaggregated by sex?
 - Is there provision for gender analysis of progress in ECCE?



Optional extension activity for self-study and/or groups

Analyse barriers from a gender equality perspective

On your own, or in groups, think about these questions:

- What are the barriers to achieving gender equality in ECCE?
- How might these barriers be overcome in a) the short-term, b) the medium-term and c) the long-term.

When answering the questions, consider the following:

- **the enabling environment** – e.g. national policies and education sector strategies/political will;
- **financial resources** – e.g. the adequacy of financing the costs of ECCE for poor families;
- **demand for ECCE** – e.g. are communities convinced of the value of ECCE?
- **supply-side factors** – e.g. are there shortcomings in recruitment and training of teachers, educational facilities and learning resources?



Box 2 ECCE in Malaysia: an interview with the Minister of Education

“The world today is facing new challenges in terms of quality, equity, durability, sustainability and inclusivity. We need to equip our children with knowledge and appropriate skills to face new challenges in future,” said Mr Mahdzir Khalid in an interview with UNESCO about the crucial importance of early childhood education and his country’s efforts to boost its quality and reach.

“If we get it right from the start, that is the early years, we know that children will thrive throughout school and their adult lives,” he said.

The Minister said Malaysia faced particular challenges with [a large number of] ethnicities making up its population of 31 million, and some of these live in very rural and remote areas.

“In our country, early childhood education has an important role to play in better promoting understanding and cooperation among different population groups and preventing negative effects of poverty and disadvantage on children’s learning and development.”

The country began providing ECCE in the 1970s, and in 2010 new initiatives were introduced to improve quality through the National Key Result Area, part of the Government Transformation Programme. This work was continued in the Malaysian National Education Blueprint 2013–2025, elaborated with the support of UNESCO.

Initiatives aligned with the global education agenda

The Minister said the involvement of parents, the larger community, and the private sector had been vital in providing quality education, from pre-school to tertiary level schooling. The latest initiatives were developed in line with the wider global education agenda.

“The great thing is that the Blueprint and SDG 4 are completely aligned. They both aspire to provide quality education for all.”

He said ensuring equity and quality had been the main objective of the government. With government agencies, the private sector and NGOs working together, access to ECCE had been provided to 85 per cent of children aged 4–5 plus.

One of the country’s most successful early childhood education programmes is the Permata Negara. This was founded in 2007 as part of the overall Permata scheme (the word means jewel and the slogan of the scheme is ‘each child is precious’) spearheaded by H.E. Rosmah Mansor, wife of the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

The Permata Negara targets children below the age of four, in low-income and rural families who otherwise do not have access to quality early childhood education. The holistic curriculum developed through the Permata Negara is central to the provision of quality care and learning in 5,531 Permata Negara centres, and was endorsed as the National Preschool Standard-based Curriculum by the government in 2008.

With regard to teachers, the government has committed to ensuring that all ECCE educators have a diploma by 2020. Other special areas of focus are technical and vocational education and training.

“Our approach to education is holistic and lifelong, and equipping young people with the necessary skills for the modern world is extremely important.”

Source: Interview with Mr Mahdzir Khalid, Malaysia’s Minister of Education, October 2016.³

3 UNESCO. 2016. http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/early_childhood_education_key_to_meeting_future_challenges/. (Accessed 9 July 2019).



Further reading

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