

TACKLING GENDER INEQUALITY FROM THE EARLY YEARS

Strategies for building a gender-transformative
pre-primary education system

November 2022

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TACKLING GENDER INEQUALITY FROM THE EARLY YEARS

Strategies for building a gender-transformative
pre-primary education system

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FOREWORD

Gender equality is central to achieving the vision of an equitable world, a promise made by the United Nations Member States when they adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Current gender norms and expectations continue to negatively impact the lives of women and girls, exposing them to gender-based discrimination and rights violations.

As a global community, we face the common challenge of achieving gender equality, of questioning harmful norms and contesting power relations. Governments, communities, schools, donors and private sector partners should commit to building systems based on respect, social justice and inclusion.

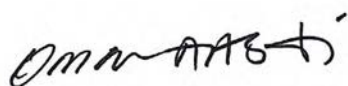
Education has immense transformational power to combat social inequalities and gender bias – and our greatest opportunity lies in the potential to tackle these inequalities in the earliest years, before they are consolidated. After three decades of focused efforts on girls' education and gender equality, we have made progress in reaching gender parity in school participation, with an increasing number of countries reaching equal access to education for both boys and girls.

This global achievement, however, hides huge regional, national and sub-national inequalities that put girls, in low-income and fragile countries and contexts, in particular, at a disadvantage. It also hides the range of ways gender norms and stereotypes shape educational experiences and life outcomes for all children, with boys increasingly dropping out of secondary education and young women half as likely as young men to transition into further education, training, or employment after completing secondary education.

We know that gender socialization happens from birth. Research has shown that even before three years of age, children start gaining insight into cultural gender stereotypes through their interactions with adults and peers. As early as age six, children have formed gender biases around girls' and boys' intelligence and expected roles. Proactively incorporating gender-transformative strategies into the classroom and the broader early childhood education system is imperative, if we want to ensure true gender equity as the early years are a critical time when such stereotypes and biases can be confronted and intentionally addressed.

This report proposes a systems' approach in advocating for gender-responsive and transformative policies and practices in pre-primary education. Following UNICEF's Build to Last Conceptual Framework, the report highlights key considerations that can help governments and policymakers incorporate gender-responsiveness into the design and implementation of pre-primary education policies and programmes. Case studies – from Sweden and Viet Nam – as well as other country-level examples are provided to highlight promising practices that contribute towards gender-transformative pre-primary education systems.

It is never too early to act. We know that investing in early childhood education has the highest return in learning, well-being, and development. To achieve lasting social change and gender equity, we must capitalize on the promise of these early years and address gender stereotypes and harmful gender norms in this crucial window of opportunity. Every child has the right to thrive and reach their full potential in school, and in life – regardless of their gender. It can be done. It is up to us to ensure a more just and equitable future, in every school, in every country, for every child.



Omar Abdi

Deputy Executive Director, Programmes



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research report presents key strategies with country cases and examples that can help governments and policymakers to proactively incorporate gender-responsiveness into the design and implementation of their early childhood education (ECE) policy and programming. This report proposes a systems perspective in advocating for gender-transformative policies and practices in pre-primary education.

Access to pre-primary education has increased significantly in the past two decades and, based on current global enrolment rates, boys and girls are participating equally. However, despite this gender parity in access, the pre-primary education system does not always deliver on its potential to tackle gender inequities and address harmful gender stereotypes and norms while they are being absorbed by the youngest learners.

The **11 key strategies to support** the development of a gender-transformative pre-primary education system have been organized around the five interconnected action areas presented in UNICEF's Build to Last framework: planning and budgeting, curriculum development and implementation, workforce development, family and community engagement, and quality assurance ([UNICEF, 2020a](#)).

PLANNING AND BUDGETING

1

Conducting gender-responsive education sector planning that incorporates the dimensions of planning, programming, and monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes at the different government levels.

2

Implementing gender-responsive budgeting to ensure equal distribution of resources between girls and boys in ECE.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

11

Collecting and analysing sex-disaggregated intersectional data that capture the gender-transformative features of the pre-primary education system's plan/budget, curriculum, workforce standards and family/community engagement.

10

Including gender-responsive quality standards and indicators and assessing these periodically as a measure of accountability.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

9

Educating caregivers about gender-transformative parenting through pre-primary institutions, with dedicated efforts to reach fathers or male caregivers.

8

Pre-primary education provision that supports gender equality can provide opportunities for primary caregivers, particularly women, to enter the labour market.



CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

3

(Re-)designing a gender-transformative pre-primary curriculum framework, which starts with a gender-focused review of the existing curricula to assess how they promote or hinder gender equality in education.

4

Reviewing existing teaching and learning materials to identify gender bias and stereotypes.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

5

Providing gender-transformative pedagogy and teacher training to guarantee that teachers have the competencies to deliver positive gender socialization and support children's learning and growth.

6

Introducing improvements to pre-primary staff's employment conditions, such as setting wages allowing for a decent standard of living, providing teachers with adequate training, and setting limits on staff-to-child ratios to support the feminized ECE workforce and improve the way the profession is viewed.

7

Gender-balanced pre-primary teacher recruitment to address the feminized ECE workforce and to counteract stereotypes through attracting more men to the field.

It is important to recognize that these action areas are interconnected. Developing a pre-primary education system that is coherent as well as gender-transformative would require the strategies to refer to each other. This includes ensuring quality assurance indicators are linked to targets in pre-primary education system plans, expected outcomes in curriculum documents, and to pre-primary workforce standards.

Coherence also requires engagement with other levels of the education system and levels of government involved in delivering pre-primary education and gender-transformative programming. This includes organizations and individuals responsible for planning, finance and social welfare, from national/central bodies to subnational and local structures.

Engaging the private sector is also particularly important, considering that globally 40 per cent of pre-primary education providers are private ([UNICEF 2019a](#)). The gender-transformative strategies listed above should encompass such private providers and engage other institutions such as pre-service and in-service teacher training providers, as well as international organizations and donors.

Finally, a supportive enabling environment has also played an important role in countries that have already incorporated gender considerations into their pre-primary education systems.

The strategies and materials referred to in this report should be considered alongside the [ECE Accelerator Toolkit](#), which supports the inclusion and strengthening of ECE in the context of education sector planning processes.

INTRODUCTION

TACKLING

GENDER

INEQUALITIES

IN THE EARLY

YEARS

Gender differences are formed and reinforced at different ages and by different factors, including race, caste, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. This process begins early. Children begin to gain insight into certain cultural gender stereotypes as early as age two or three ([Berenbaum et al., 2008](#)), begin to understand gender stability around three-and-a-half years old, and gender stereotypes about girls' and boys' intelligence may be acquired as early as age six ([Bian et al., 2017](#)).

A study of five-year-olds in England and Estonia found that, even at this age, girls were more likely to aspire towards caring careers, such as being a doctor or nurse, while boys see their future in traditionally male-dominated roles in construction or transportation ([OECD, 2021](#)). This study found that gender was a stronger predictor of aspirations than family socioeconomic background.

Gender roles are assigned by society, which reflects cultural, religious and political beliefs ([UNESCO, 2015a](#)). Gender norms reinforce stereotypes of what children and young people are expected to become ([UNICEF, 2021a](#)). Young children's interactions with adults and their environment can transmit gendered beliefs about ability and aspirations that influence later development in children's cognitive and socioemotional formation, as well as the skills they learn ([Eble & Hu, 2019](#)).

As stated in the recent UNICEF report on Gender Transformative Education, education has massive transformational power ([UNICEF, 2021a](#)). The pre-primary education system, in particular, has significant potential to play a role in tackling gender inequities and gender socialization processes, addressing gender stereotypes and harmful gender norms at the stage that they are being formed. Globally, enrolments in ECE access have increased in the past two decades.⁹ Current enrolment figures reflect gender parity, with boys and girls participating almost equally in most instances ([UNICEF, 2019a](#)).

However, the pre-primary education system does not always deliver on this potential. Behind the overall gender parity figure lie differences in how boys and girls access quality provision and their experiences in the classroom. Studies have found that pre-primary educators often uphold gender stereotypes through their interactions with children, selection of learning materials, and gendered childhood play ([Meland & Kaltvedt, 2017](#); [Mweru, 2012](#)). For ECE to realize its gender-transformative potential, there is a need to proactively consider gender quality in the design and implementation of ECE systems. Without this explicit attention, ECE can instead reinforce and reproduce gender inequality.

This report proposes a systems perspective in advocating for gender-responsive and transformative¹ policies and practices in pre-primary education. It is **organized into the five components** of the Build to Last Conceptual Framework listed above.² Each section highlights gender-responsive or gender-transformative elements in that component, including country-level examples. The report was informed by a literature review, supplemented by interviews with UNICEF country offices.

¹ The terms gender-responsive and gender-transformative are used intentionally in this report to describe approaches that taken together can build a gender-transformative pre-primary education system. See discussion of key terms in Box 1.

² The Build to Last Conceptual Framework outlines the key building blocks of an effective pre-primary system to ensure children's optimal learning and development in early childhood education programmes ([UNICEF, 2020a](#)).



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Box 1: Overview of key concepts in this report

Pre-primary educational programmes are designed for children aged between three and six years old and occur in a crucial development stage of a child's life. Pre-primary education is a component of ECE that refers to the period of formal or informal learning from birth to eight years of age. Consistent with the UNICEF global report on ECE, this report focuses on pre-primary education but uses both terms interchangeably to mean organized learning programmes for children aged three to six years old ([UNICEF, 2019a](#)).

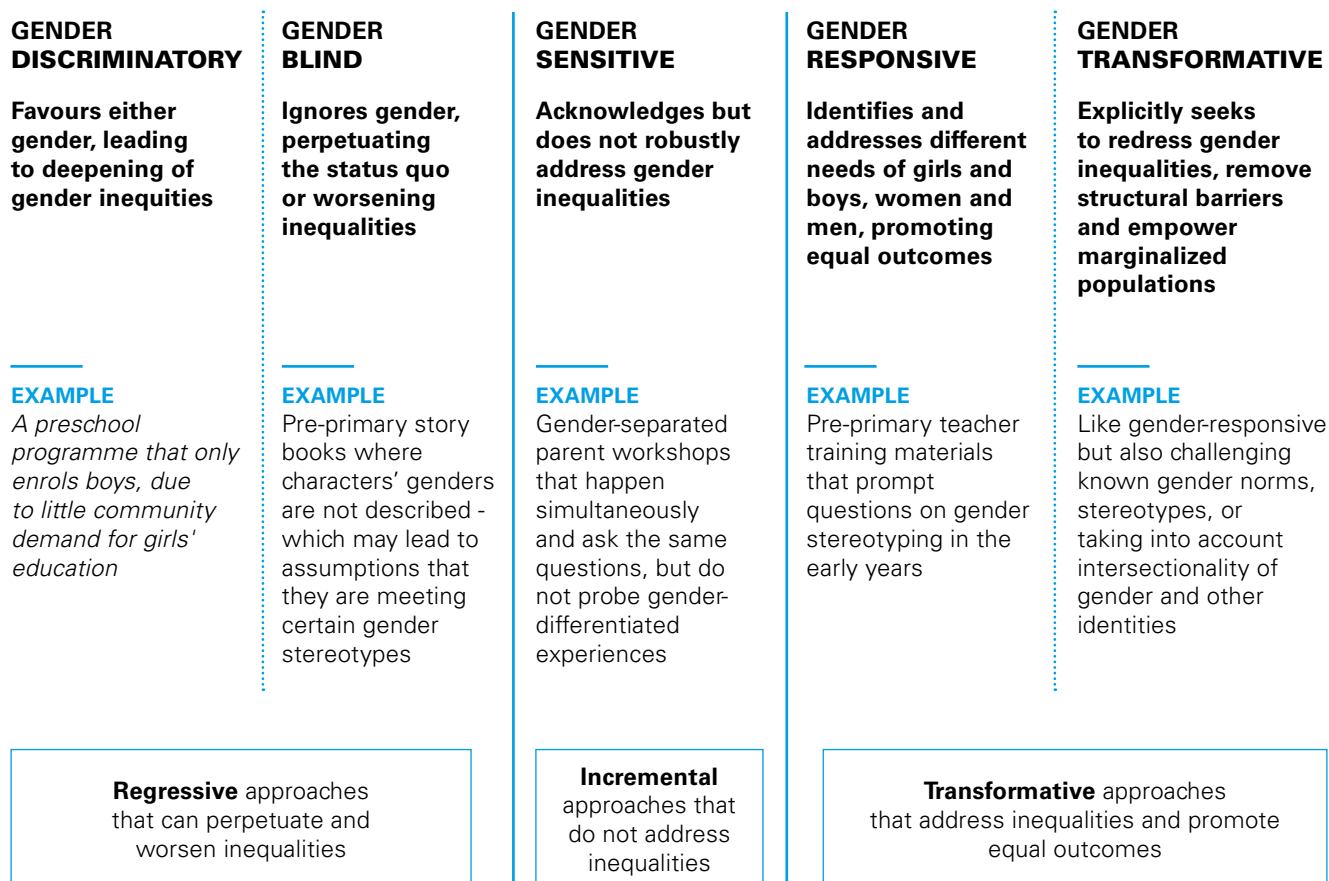
UNICEF programming aims to be transformative – either gender-responsive, identifying and addressing the different needs of girls, boys, women and men to promote equal outcomes, or gender-transformative, explicitly seeking to redress gender inequalities and empower the disadvantaged population ([UNICEF, 2019b](#)).

These concepts form part of the gender integration continuum, which conceptualizes the range of efforts to integrate gender into policy or programming (*see Figure 1 with examples from ECE*). At the other end of the continuum, gender-discriminatory and gender-blind approaches are regressive and can worsen inequalities by not recognizing any extra supports needed by one group, while gender-sensitive approaches acknowledge but do not address such inequalities making little progress towards gender equality, if any.

The continuum of approaches should not be seen as linear, but instead as a spectrum in which approaches can overlap and be used at the same time ([van der Burg, 2019](#)). This applies particularly to the use of 'gender-responsive' and 'gender-transformative' approaches.

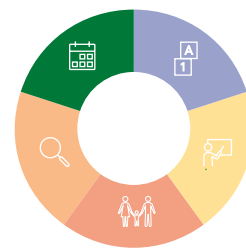
The overall aim of this report is to identify, discuss and promote the idea that pre-primary education can have a transformative power over gender inequalities. Some of the strategies and practices presented in this report aim, or were developed, to be gender-responsive – considering and addressing the consequences of gender inequalities. Some strategies, such as gender-responsive planning and budgeting for the ECE system, are commonly accepted approaches to achieving gender equality. Individual strategies may not in themselves address the underlying structural barriers, attitudes and norms that challenge gender equalities. Taken and applied together, however, they can form a gender-transformative pre-primary education system in which all parts – from planning, curriculum and workforce to community engagement and quality assurance work towards the goal of gender equality.

Figure 1: Approaches within the gender integration continuum, with ECE examples



Other key concepts and terms used in this report, relating to education in the early years and gender policy and programming, can be found in Appendix 1.





1

PLANNING AND BUDGETING

Careful planning, budgeting and management of financial, human, and physical resources ensure the equitable and efficient provision of pre-primary education ([UNICEF, 2020a](#)). Gender-responsive planning and budgeting aim for resources to be equitably distributed between boys and girls ([VVOB & FAWE, 2019](#)) and contribute towards mitigating gender inequalities and improving prospects and opportunities for gender equality and empowerment ([UNESCO, 2015a](#)).

This section discusses **two key strategies**: (1.1) gender-responsive education sector planning and (1.2) gender-responsive budgeting, including gender-responsive public expenditure management.



1.1. Gender-responsive education sector planning

Gender-responsive education sector planning (GRESPE) is a whole-system approach to achieve gender equality in and through education. It includes multiple activities, such as advocacy, awareness, policy design and implementation, training, monitoring and evaluation ([GPE & UNGEI, 2019](#)). The guidelines for developing a GRESPE provide a practical tool to help planners and practitioners address gender issues by engaging in gender analysis of the education sector, gender-responsive plan preparation, and gender-responsive plan appraisal ([GPE, UNGEI & UNICEF, 2017](#)). The guidance is aimed at all education systems, including pre-primary education.

The importance of identifying and addressing gender issues through education sector plans is also emphasized in the Education Sector Analysis (ESA) Methodological Guidelines. The ESA is an evidence-based examination of the education system which helps to identify gender disparities and contributing factors across all sectors within the education system (*ibid.*). For pre-primary education, this could, for example, include collecting sex-disaggregated data on pre-primary enrolment and early childhood development outcomes at the start



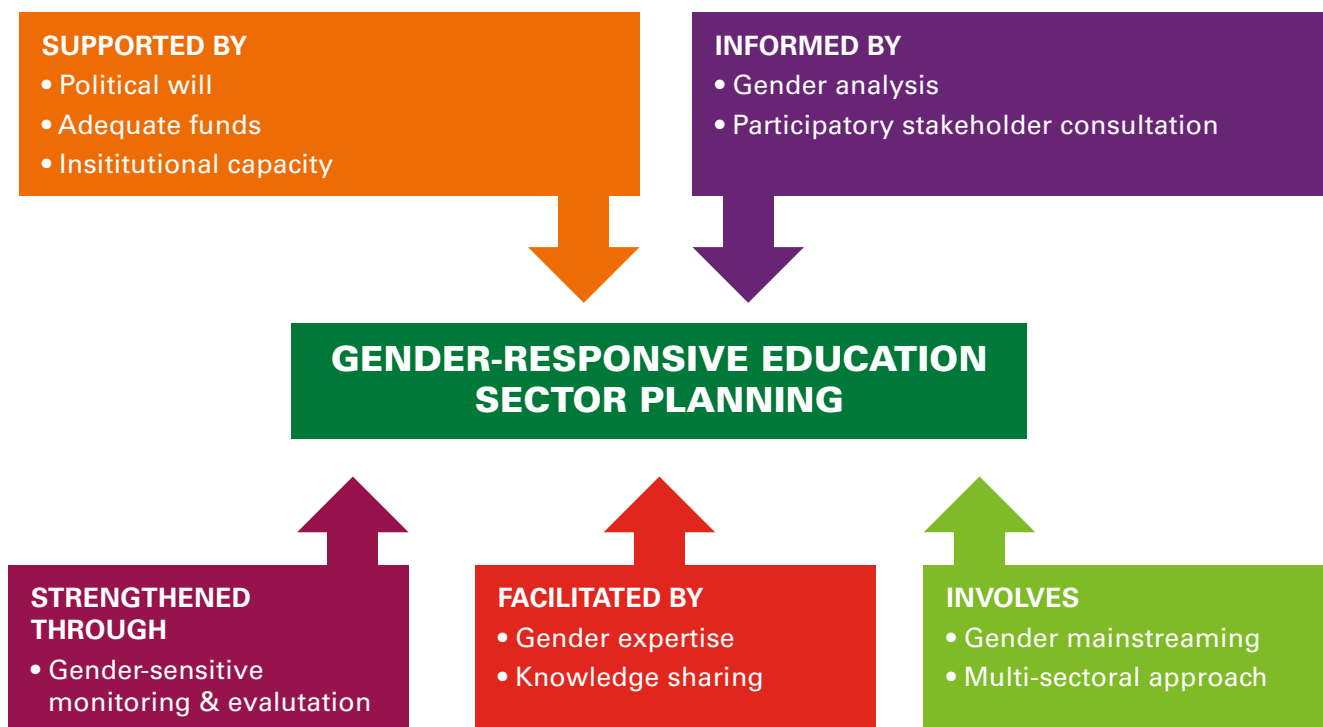
of primary school, and gender analysis of the status of children's rights and the causes of any gaps and violations to their rights in relation to education. An application of this approach is the use of the gender analysis pathway tool in Indonesia (*see Box 2*).

Where the ESA includes robust gender analysis, it can, in turn, address gender barriers through the Education Sector Plan (ESP), a strategic document that provides the long-term vision and medium- to long-term policy priorities in the education sector. It also includes the strategies, activities and expected outcomes that will be measured through specific indicators ([UNICEF, 2020a](#)). The ESP is the foundation for planning and designing strategies and interventions that guide resource allocation, improve some elements of the education system, and define monitoring approaches ([GPE & UNGEI, 2019](#)).

The **ESA is an evidence-based examination of the education system which helps to identify gender disparities** and contributing factors across all sectors within the education system (*ibid.*).



Figure 2: Building blocks of gender-responsive education sector planning



Source: [GPE & UNGEI, 2019](#).



The ECE Accelerator Toolkit³ provides open-source strategies and tools for a pre-primary education system analysis, developing a system plan, and for monitoring and review, taking into consideration gender equality as a cross-cutting issue. The toolkit suggests some guiding questions and considerations to support a gender-responsive analysis, including, for example (UNICEF, 2020b):

- To what extent do gender considerations feature in ECE policies and normative documents? Do ECE policies or documents show commitment or intent to address girls' education and/or gender equality? Are there other policies that do not mention gender but might affect boys and girls differently, or their caregivers?
- Are there minimum quality standards for ECE services professionals? Are such standards gender-responsive (that is, do they reflect gender-related aspects, such as the need for a workforce with male and female teachers)?
- Is there a code of conduct for ECE teachers? Is there a specific policy or instrument to increase gender parity in the ECE workforce? Do policies or instruments ensure a gender-responsive ECE curriculum, teaching and pedagogy?
- How are parents, caregivers and educators teaching children gendered norms, attitudes and expectations in the way they model gender roles and relationships, respond to children's

behaviours, and communicate with young children?

- Do ECE services offer girls and boys equal opportunities to learn and develop social, emotional, physical and cognitive skills?

These topics are explored further in this report. For example, balancing the often highly feminized pre-primary education workforce and supporting more gender-balanced recruitment is discussed in **Section 4**, while efforts to engage parents and caregivers – including male caregivers – are discussed in **Section 5**.



The toolkit also suggests three strategies to prioritize best practices in the planning process: (i) reduce costs paid by the family or opportunity cost, (ii) ensure quality ECE is accessible equally for boys and girls, and (iii) enhance ECE quality with a gender-responsiveness lens (UNICEF, 2020b).

3 The ECE Accelerator Toolkit aims to support countries in consultatively developing and mainstreaming evidence-based ECE system plans into the broader education sector plans and budgets; and build capacity in basic ECE data analysis, prioritization, planning, and costing for enhanced overall ECE system development. It can be found on: <https://www.ece-accelerator.org/>



1.2. Gender-responsive budgeting

Integrating the costs of gender-responsive strategies and interventions into ESPs is critical to achieving goals relating to gender equality and the education of girls ([GPE, UNGEI & UNICEF, 2017](#)). Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) includes taking a gender-based perspective in the analyses of budgets at all levels of the budgetary process, and restructuring revenues and expenditures to promote gender equality ([Pescina et al., 2021](#)). GRB seeks to ensure that gender-related issues are considered and addressed in all government policies, including in the education sector ([GPE, UNGEI & UNICEF, 2017](#)), and can be a strategy to reduce gender inequalities in participation in decision-making processes ([Yulaelawati, 2016](#)).

Decisions on education sector financing can promote gender equality in several ways, through three types of expenditures: (i) gender-targeted expenditures, (ii) staff-related expenditures, and (iii) general or mainstream ([GPE, UNGEI & UNICEF, 2017](#)). One example of general expenditure decision-making that promotes gender equality is increasing the funding allocated for ECE. Not only does this bring benefits to young children, but also to women and older girls by reducing their childcare burden ([Oxfam, 2005](#)).

Finally, financial resources should account for the different needs and backgrounds of students, such as the family's income and cultural background, and special needs of children. This can be done by including community members – parents, leaders, teachers – in the planning and budgeting process ([VVOB & FAWA, 2019](#)).

A helpful tool is gender-responsive public expenditure management (GRPEM), which acknowledges the difference in impact of education spending on girls and boys, and redirects spending to remedy imbalances and, as a result, improve gender-responsiveness in the allocation of funds. In the education sector, successfully implemented GRPEM integrates gender in all four stages of the budget cycle: (1) preparation, (2) approval, (3) execution and (4) oversight ([Pescina et al., 2021](#)).

The public education budget is ruled by a country's legal framework and by laws that outline the steps of the budget cycle, involving interaction between the education ministry and other ministries, including those responsible for finance and/or central planning ([Pescina et al., 2021](#)). See the example from Indonesia ([Box 2](#)) on how this coordination and cooperation took place for gender-responsive planning and budgeting.

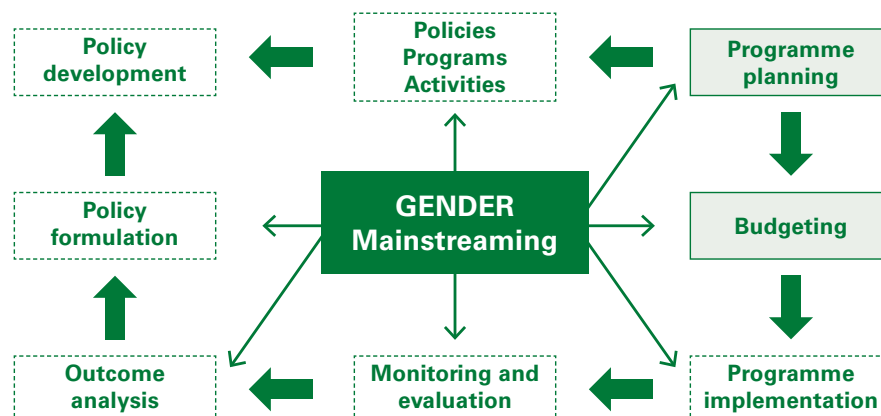




Box 2: Gender-responsive planning and budgeting in Indonesia

Indonesia has developed a holistic framework of gender mainstreaming in planning and budgeting. This started at the top, with a presidential decree on gender mainstreaming issued in 2000 ([Kemenpppa, 2011](#)). Subsequent national steps to take this further included the adoption of gender indicators in the National Development Plan and guidelines that outlined specific steps for implementing gender issues into development programmes and policies at all government levels ([Kasidi, 2016](#)).

Figure 3:
Gender mainstreaming in planning and budgeting cycle in Indonesia



Source: Extracted from the presentation of Kasidi, 2016.

The push for gender mainstreaming involved coordination and cooperation between different ministries. For example, the Ministry of National Development Planning and the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection developed a gender analysis pathway tool ([Nurhaeni, 2007](#)). The tool takes policymakers through the process of identifying the gender issues related to a particular policy area, formulating policy goals and plans of action, and identifying baseline data and indicators to monitor success. The Ministry of Home Affairs mandated the use of gender analysis for all government agencies in the budgeting process, further elaborated by the Ministry of Finance to incorporate Gender Budget Statements ([Kemenpppa, 2011](#)).

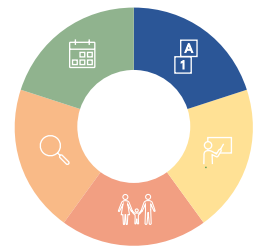
Gender mainstreaming in Indonesia is mandated through the Presidential Decree on Gender Mainstreaming in National Development 9/2000. The Ministry of Education was one of the first ministries involved in developing a gender mainstreaming plan, producing a position paper in 2005, followed by Ministerial Regulation No. 84/2008 for the sector. An important initiative in 2010 was the Finance Ministerial Decree 119/2009 on the implementation of gender-responsive budgets in seven pilot government agency programmes including education.

The Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) was one of the first ministries involved in developing a gender mainstreaming plan, identifying a gender focal point and producing a ministerial regulation for the sector ([Kemenpppa, 2011](#)). This subsequent ministerial regulation, in 2008, encompasses all levels of education including pre-primary. The Directorate General of Early Childhood Education, Nonformal and Informal (PAUDNI), has designed and facilitated provincial and district gender mainstreaming pilot projects funded through block grants from both national and provincial budgets, aimed at capacity-building and promotion of gender equality including in ECE ([BAPPENAS, 2013](#)). A pilot programme in one ECE centre saw boys and girls participating in role-playing activities including cooking and caring for babies/dolls, and the avoidance of textbooks and learning materials that were found to enforce gender stereotypes (*ibid.*).

The Directorate of Early Childhood Education Development has published a series of guidebooks for early years gender mainstreaming, including a pocket book on gender-responsive planning and budgeting ([Kemendikbud, 2016](#)). MoEC has also published a series of guides on gender mainstreaming in education, including a guide on gender-responsive ECE aimed at ECE service management, teachers and education personnel, and parents or other caregivers ([Kemendikbud, 2016](#)).



2



CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

A curriculum framework sets out the principles and pedagogic approach for fostering children's development through ECE programmes. A consistently implemented, developmentally appropriate curriculum with a focus on learning through play will guide and support pre-primary staff, facilitate communication between teachers and families, and ensure continuity between pre-primary and primary school levels ([UNICEF, 2020a](#)). Teaching and learning materials support the implementation of the pre-primary curriculum, enabling it to come to life in the classroom (ibid.).

Another important element of curriculum implementation is the workforce – or the degree to which educators are resourced and able to apply the curriculum in practice. The hidden curriculum theory, for example, speaks of how schools transmit norms, values and beliefs to students in the classroom and school environment beyond the formal curriculum. This may be through textbook examples and illustrations that reinforce negative gender stereotypes or through biases in how teachers implement the curriculum in ways that reflect their own personal beliefs ([UNICEF, 2014](#)).

In addition, teachers, through their behaviour and interaction with students, can reproduce and reinforce gender norms and expectations about girls' and boys' behaviours, their abilities and future roles. While the former factors are covered here, the latter will be expanded upon in the next section.

This section discusses **two strategies in relation to gender-responsive curriculum in pre-primary education**: (2.1) **Developing a gender-responsive pre-primary curriculum** or reviewing and reforming an existing one; and (2.2) **Reviewing teaching and learning materials** for gender bias and stereotypes.





The main objective of the curriculum adaptation is to facilitate learning through play and other activities free of gender bias. These could include identifying gender stereotypes in class materials, using gender-neutral play and learning materials ([VVOB & Fawe, 2019](#)), featuring men and women in the same professional roles, and showcasing them as heroes and problem solvers ([UNESCO, 2007](#)). The process can also encompass inclusion more broadly, including examining the representation of people with diverse abilities and different races. In both country case studies featured in this report (*see Appendix 2*), for example, addressing gender norms within curricular reviews took place as part of reaching broader inclusive ideals. Pre-schoolers are at a crucial stage of developing their identities and should be encouraged to make choices within a framework of balanced learning.

2.1. (Re-)designing a gender-transformative pre-primary curriculum framework

With the role of the early years in shaping children's views on gender, gender equality should be a high priority in a pre-primary curriculum development or reform process. This requires political will and the engagement of all stakeholders ([UNESCO, 2019](#)). A gender-focused review of the curriculum should be included in other curriculum reforms, and should take into account the time required to update teacher training curricula and to train/retrain teachers ([GPE, UNGEI & UNICEF, 2017](#)).

This process typically includes considerations of the content of the curriculum or the curriculum framework, the teaching approaches and activities recommended, and the learning outcomes embedded in the curriculum.

The Gender in Education Network in Asia-Pacific (GENIA) toolkit in mainstreaming gender equality in curricula and teaching and learning materials proposes the following questions to guide this process (UNESCO, 2019):



The **CONTENT OF THE CURRICULUM**:

- Is the content gender-biased (for instance, are specific roles portrayed in stories and illustrations limited to only boys or girls)?
- Does the curriculum suggest ways in which the teacher can engage boys and girls in particular activities by making the content more relevant to the different interests and life experiences of boys and girls?
- Does the national curriculum offer gender-responsive content consistently through all levels and types of education, from early years to adult education?



The **TEACHING APPROACHES** and **ACTIVITIES RECOMMENDED TO TEACHERS** in the curriculum:

- What practices are teachers expected to use in the classroom to ensure they apply gender-responsive pedagogy in their delivery of the curriculum?
- Are recommended activities gender-biased or gender-responsive? Are there options in activities so that both girls and boys can access the same content at the same level, but using differentiated engagement methods with which they feel comfortable? Does the curriculum recommend differentiated activities that perpetuate stereotypes about what activities girls or boys should engage in? Does the curriculum suggest activities that encourage girls and boys to work together, in contexts where this is culturally appropriate, and thus learn to respect each other?
- Does the curriculum provide teachers with guidance on creating a gender-responsive learning environment in which both girls and boys feel welcome and comfortable? Do the classroom setting and daily routine provide equal access to girls and boys to learning corners, outdoor play time and equipment?
- Are there any barriers to effective implementation of a gender-responsive curriculum in schools, and how can these be tackled? Is the curriculum accompanied by teacher training to ensure teachers' ability to implement the curricula and provide girls and boys equally with opportunities to learn and develop?



The **LEARNING OBJECTIVES** embedded in the curriculum:

- What objectives for promoting gender equality are set in the curriculum?
- What thematic content on gender norms, values and behaviours is explicitly included in the curriculum?
- What competencies are set that are relevant to the achievement of gender equality?
- How is the learning on gender equality assessed? Are there minimum competencies or benchmarks to be achieved?
- Is the gender content in the curriculum, as reflected in the resulting teaching and learning materials, applicable to and effective in promoting gender equality in teaching and learning?

The development of a new ECE curriculum may take place in the context of gender equality being a priority in the education sector, as was the case in Sweden in the late 1990s (*see Country case study 1: Sweden*). In many cases, however, the starting point of designing a gender-transformative ECE curriculum would begin with a gender-focused review of how the existing curriculum promotes or hinders gender equality in education ([UNESCO, 2019](#)). This is the case with gender-transformative ECE curriculum reviews taking place in Sri Lanka and Viet Nam ([UNICEF & ODI, 2020](#)).

While revision of the curriculum does not happen very often, it is essential to regularly collect information on the effectiveness and ongoing relevance of the curriculum to children's needs and skills to suggest future revisions and improvements ([UNICEF, 2020a](#)). Even in Sweden, where the challenging of gender stereotypes was already embedded in the objectives of the first national preschool curriculum, it still underwent reviews and revisions to further achieve positive gender socialization ([Skolverket, 2019](#)).

Curriculum revision should be organized in parallel with teacher training and capacity-building activities to ensure educators' readiness to implement new curricula. In Viet Nam, for example, teacher training institutions were engaged in consultations during the curriculum revision process. This was in recognition of the expectations that pre-service teacher training will need to be adjusted to align with the new curriculum (*see Country case study 2: Viet Nam*).

Curriculum revision should be organized in parallel with **teacher training and capacity-building activities** to ensure educators' readiness to implement new curricula.



2.2. Reviewing materials for gender bias and stereotypes

Gender bias in learning materials and textbooks forms part of the 'hidden curriculum' ([Blumberg, 2008](#)). Beyond the curriculum framework documents themselves, the main objective of gender-focused curriculum review adaptation, therefore, is to facilitate learning through play and other activities free of gender bias. This could include identifying gender stereotypes in teaching and learning materials, which can take place at the school or classroom level ([VVOB & FAWE, 2019](#)) as well as the system level.

Gender bias and stereotyping in textbooks have been referred to as one of the biggest challenges on the road to gender equality in education ([Blumberg, 2008](#); [UNGEI, 2010](#)). It creates a particular challenge in developing countries, where research shows that teachers rely heavily on textbooks, reproducing rather than challenging the stereotypes contained within (Page & Jha, 2009, cited in [Islam & Asadullah, 2018](#)). Therefore, it is crucial to identify the stereotypes and biases present in teaching and learning materials beforehand. Content analysis is a research methodology that can facilitate this process by systematically analysing and interrogating texts to identify meanings, discourses and/or the theories underpinning them ([Cohen et al., 2018](#)).

One of the specific strategies for content analysis is based on the 4C process – coding, categorizing, comparing and concluding – proposed by Cohen et al. ([Cohen et al., 2018](#)). The process consists of first choosing content (text or pictures) to analyse, identifying the unit of analysis (words, sentences, etc.), coding the texts in categories, counting the occurrences, and concluding with a statistical analysis ([Islam & Asadullah, 2018](#)).

In addition to government- or donor-backed screening of textbooks and other ECE literature for gender representation and stereotypes, resources exist to support teachers and school leaders to do so themselves in order to select materials to use at their institution and provide feedback to stakeholders. For example, a toolkit for gender-responsive pedagogy in ECE produced by VVOB and Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) provides guiding questions for teachers and school

leaders to help them decide whether to use a book and how ([VVOB & FAWA, 2019](#)):

- How many characters in the book are male and how many are female?
- How often are male and female characters mentioned or shown in the book?
- How are the male and female characters portrayed – do they have stereotyped male or female behaviours?
- Do some of the pictures break the gender stereotypes in your society? (such as girls playing football, a man caring for a child, a female community leader)
- How are roles and relationships between male and female characters portrayed – are they stereotypical or not?
- What adjectives are used to describe male and female characters? (For example, men are often characterized as strong, while females are portrayed as caring and beautiful)
- Do the illustrations reflect the diversity of society? Is there a variety of people with, for instance, different skin colours, clothes, heights and body shapes? Are minorities such as people with disabilities represented?

Meanwhile, a Nordic Council of Ministers' resource provides guidance forms for pre-primary educators to analyse whether children's books expand or confirm traditional gender norms. The guidance outlines six different analysis strategies, including counting the gender of the main and subordinate characters, examining how the characters' gender and environment are pictured, what gender norms the book represents, and asking a child what she or he thinks about the book ([Nordic Council of Ministers, 2015](#)).

Numerous studies have conducted content analyses of textbooks or children's reading books to examine gender representation and stereotypes. These are largely small-scale, focusing on manual review and analyses of a defined set of materials, and frequently found that females are disproportionately underrepresented ([Blumberg, 2008](#)). While female characters have been found to be more prevalent in materials for younger children (*ibid.*), reviews of gender representation in pre-primary materials in the United States ([Weitzman et al., 1972](#)), Ireland ([Filipović, 2018](#)) and the Philippines ([Tarrayo, 2014](#)) established that materials for the youngest learners also frequently include gender-stereotypical depictions.

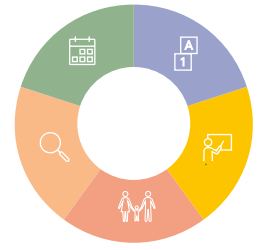
Among different countries, evidence has been found of gender imbalances in textbooks. Similar patterns of gender bias appear worldwide: women and girls are strongly underrepresented, or if represented they appear in highly stereotyped roles, or in a passive and more observant role compared to the courageous and confident role of boys and men ([Blumberg, 2015](#)). Unfortunately, in more gender-unequal countries these tendencies are higher. In many developing countries, such as Syria, men were pictured engaging in a busy world, while women in servitude, degraded and victimized ([Islam & Asadullah, 2018](#)). Similarly, in China, primary school textbooks overrepresented males in all roles and occupations ([Wang, 1998](#)).

Some countries have acted upon those findings, among them Pakistan, Georgia, Thailand and Chile. However, they have not achieved the policy objectives as planned. Reforming a country's textbooks to eliminate gender bias is costly, and it often needs international support. More importantly, it requires political will to implement and continue the reform after a change in administration ([Blumberg, 2015](#)). In Chile, following research into gender representations in school textbooks, the University of Chile recommended informing publishers of different mechanisms by which gender bias can be perpetuated, providing specific training on how to assess gender bias in textbooks, and being explicit about the requirements of gender content for publishers (*ibid.*).

Recently, a group of researchers at the University of Chicago and Columbia University utilized new artificial intelligence methods to measure the representation of race, gender and age in award-winning children's books in the United States ([Adukia et al., 2021](#)). They found that males, particularly white males, are persistently overrepresented and that while females were increasingly present, this was more so in images than in text. This emerging method has not been used in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), but it may be a cost-effective alternative to manually conducted content analysis in contexts where digital or digitized textbooks are available ([Smart & Jagannathan, 2018](#)).



3



WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Workforce development consists of the recruitment, development and retention of teachers and personnel, and primarily ensuring that pre-primary school staff has the competencies, training, and support to promote children's development and learning, and the opportunities for growth ([UNICEF, 2020a](#)).

Pre-primary teachers and educators play a crucial role in determining how the pre-primary education system contributes to gender equality. Studies from a range of contexts (e.g. [Bayne, 2009](#); [Nabbuye, 2018](#)) have observed that even in settings with gender-responsive curricula, pre-primary teachers still provide more attention to boys and hold lower expectations from girls.

This section describes **three key strategies** around pre-primary workforce development that supports gender equality: (3.1) **Gender-responsive pedagogy in the early years**; (3.2) **Improvement of pre-primary teaching employment conditions**; and (3.3) **Gender-balanced pre-primary teacher recruitment**.



3.1. Gender-responsive pedagogy and teacher training

As discussed in the previous section, even with gender-responsive curriculum and materials, the hidden curriculum plays a crucial role in influencing children's learning experiences, especially through teachers' actions. Providing teachers with gender awareness is crucial for building a gender-responsive pre-primary education system. For instance, assessments undertaken by Plan International in 11 Asian countries found that teachers held stereotypical attitudes about boys' and girls' achievements and roles, such as attributing academic achievement in girls to dedicated work but in boys to natural ability or inherent competency in certain subjects, such as assuming boys are naturally better at mathematics ([Plan International, 2017](#)).

Teachers' attitudes and practices can influence pre-primary-aged children's own gendered views and behaviours, even after a short period. A study in the United States exposed three- to five-year olds to either classrooms where teachers frequently used gender nouns to refer to students and classroom materials and activities that highlighted gender, or classrooms where teachers were discouraged from using gendered language or classroom organization. After only two weeks, children in the highly 'gender salient' classrooms showed increased gender stereotyping and reduced play with the opposite sex ([Hilliard & Liben, 2010](#)).



The Gender-Responsive Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education (GRP4ECE) toolkit is an open educational resource developed by non-profit organizations VVOB and FAWE. It aims to provide ECE teachers and school leaders with a set of practical and low-cost instruments to reflect on their own gender biases, as well as tips to introduce gender-responsive pedagogy in their schools and

classrooms. The toolkit is available for download from [the VVOB website](#). It has been endorsed by the African Union and UNESCO-IICBA. While it was developed as a self-teaching material, the toolkit is also being piloted as an approach for capacity-building and professional development in South Africa, Viet Nam and Zambia ([VVOB, 2020](#)).

Box 3. Gender-responsive pedagogy strategies in ECE

The strategies and practices for teachers and educators to promote gender equality and reduce gender biases in the early years of schooling include:

Reflection and observation of teachers' own beliefs and practices

As a starting point, as well as continued practice improvement, teachers and educators are asked to reflect on their own gender beliefs and biases. This could be supported by observation of their current practices. The Gender-Responsive Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education (GRP4ECE) toolkit suggests that teachers film themselves teaching, or ask a colleague or school leader to observe their teaching, to reflect on their use of gendered language. In Sweden, where this approach is frequently employed, footage consistently revealed that even when teachers believed that they were gender-neutral in their interaction with children, they in fact employed gender-specific patterns, including more verbal communication with girls and more urgently responding to boys' needs ([Bayne, 2009](#); see *Case study 1: Sweden*).

Mixed-gender classroom organization

The GRP4ECE suggests, where possible, having mixed-ability and mixed-sex groupings within classrooms. Such arrangements encourage learners to participate equally and influence cross-sex friendship. A study in England found that mixing classroom groupings by ability and sex resulted in stronger cross-gender associations among children, who became more inclined to play and communicate with children of the opposite gender ([Jacklin & Lacey, 1997](#)).

Use of gender-neutral language

The use of gender-responsive language can make all learners feel respected and valued, while inappropriate use of language can transmit negative biases and messages that may prevent learning ([VVOB, 2020](#)). In Sweden, instead of the masculine pronoun 'han' (he) or feminine pronoun 'hon' (she), preschool teachers would often use the gender-neutral 'hen', while in the England study above, teachers would use gender-neutral groups such as 'helicopters' and 'airplanes' rather than boys and girls when moving between spaces.

Play and learning activities

Designs of activities in the pre-primary classroom to support gender equality include: focusing on gender-neutral activities such as giving girls and boys similar tasks and chores, encouraging children to engage in activities that go against gender stereotypes ([VVOB, 2020](#)), rotating play stations so children play with different toys, and compensatory pedagogy – often used in Sweden – which gives boys and girls the opportunity to practise what they are least trained in, usually in single-sex groups ([Bayne, 2009](#)).



Pursuing a gender-transformative approach in the classroom and **providing teachers with opportunities for continuous professional development** in gender-responsive pedagogy are critical factors in augmenting and improving the gender-responsiveness of the teaching and learning processes in schools ([VVOB & FAWE, 2019](#)).



When teachers have the opportunity to receive gender-sensitivity training, girls benefit the most. For example, the implementation of a gender-responsive pedagogy in African countries found that girls' self-esteem was enhanced when teachers brought gender awareness to the classroom and tailored teaching to the needs of their students ([Chi, 2018](#)).

In developing countries, where the pre-primary education system does not always have the systems or capacity to provide teachers with training and supervision, these policies to integrate gender training into teacher education are largely funded by donors or international NGOs ([UNESCO, 2015b](#)). Plan International Canada, for example, has developed a Gender-Responsive Pedagogy Teacher Training (GRPTT) pack, containing materials for a 10-day teacher training programme. While this was not initially developed for the ECE, it is currently being contextualized for this purpose. The programme starts by introducing general concepts related to gender. It then provides guidelines for including gender considerations in teaching, covering areas such as classroom management, lesson planning, and evaluation and assessment of practices. It has been used in South Sudan and Mozambique ([Denton and Donville, 2016](#)). Gender-responsive pedagogy training by FAWE, which also developed the GRP4ECE) has reached thousands of teachers. Governments that have made efforts to include gender training in formal teacher education policy and programmes include Bangladesh, Kenya, Mexico and Papua New Guinea ([UNESCO, 2015b](#)).

An example of how gender-responsive pedagogy can be incorporated in workforce development at the system level comes from Ghana. Several studies into gendered relations in colleges of education were conducted as part of the government's Transforming Teacher Education and Learning (T-TEL) programme, which sought to reform initial teacher education (ITE) institutions ([Agbevanu et al., 2021](#)). Subsequent studies have found that the coverage of gender-responsive pedagogy in ITE programmes has increased ([Ananga, 2021](#)). In 2018, through the support of T-TEL, the Ministry of Education published the country's first National Teachers' Standards to guide teacher preparation and practice in the country ([Ministry of Education Ghana, 2017](#)). The document presents examples of each standard in action and provides indicators for teacher's performance, making reference to gender-responsive practices, including the use of Gender-Responsive Scorecard for Teachers, throughout.

Teachers' and educators' ability to implement gender-responsive pedagogy and practices goes beyond training. They require follow-ups and continued support in the classroom and school environment. In Uganda, school teachers who have gone through gender-sensitive training still faced challenges implementing what they had learned in the classroom, due to lack of support from administrators and fellow teachers as well as broader challenges including large class sizes and lack of time ([Nabbuye, 2018](#)).



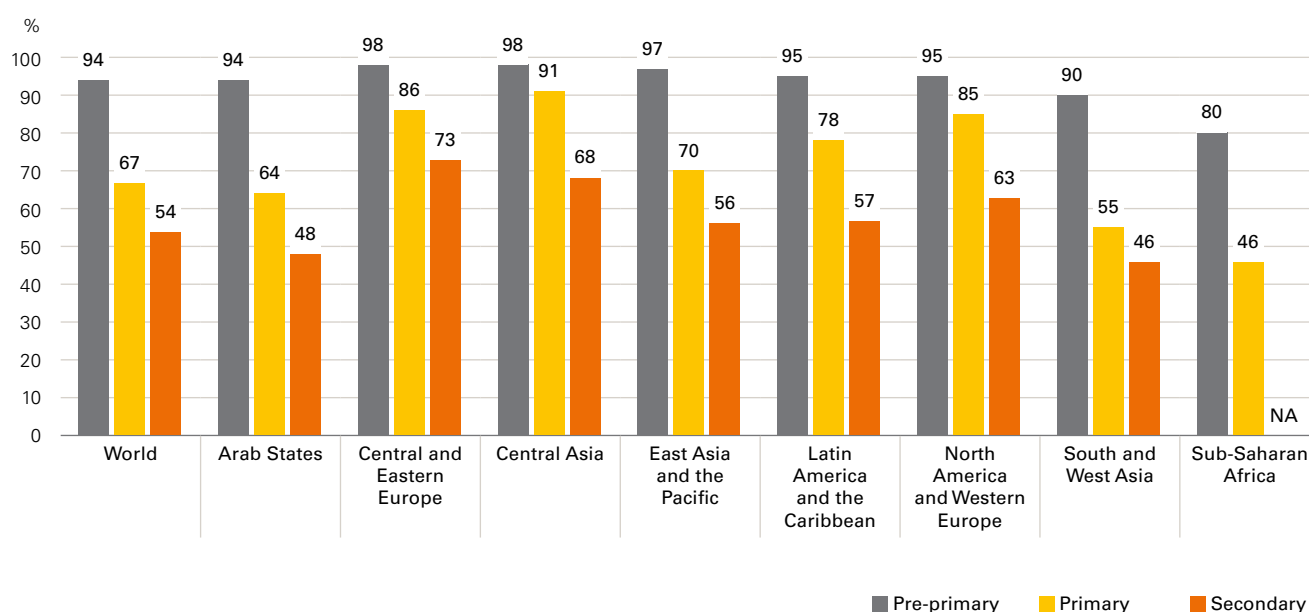
3.2. Improving pre-primary employment conditions

Pre-primary education teachers are a highly feminized workforce: 94 per cent of pre-primary teachers globally are female (*Figure 4*). Even compared with other parts of the education sector, it attracts a lower salary and staff receive fewer benefits, training opportunities and other support, particularly in low-and middle-income countries (*UNICEF, 2019a*). Some studies have suggested that these factors may be related, finding that feminized occupations and those focused on caregiving, including teaching young children, attract a wage penalty – paying less than other occupations even after taking into account education levels and employment experience (*England et al., 2002, England et al., 2007*). Considering this degree of feminization, and how it reflects on the status of work to support young children, improvements to working conditions and professionalization of the pre-primary teaching workforce can contribute to gender equality.

The International Labour Organization's policy guidelines on the promotion of decent work for ECE personnel encourage countries to set wages that allow for a decent standard of living, provide teachers adequate time for preparation and training, establish occupational safety and health policies specific to ECE institutions, and set limits on staff-to-child ratios. These are system-wide approaches that should be incorporated in gender-transformative education sector planning (and budgeting) for the pre-primary education system (*ILO, 2014*).

The ECE Accelerator Toolkit includes a framework to guide governments in the process of scaling up or improving provision for pre-primary education. The framework is organized around three pillars that are essential to supporting a comprehensive pre-primary workforce strategy: qualifications, pre-service training and continuing professional development (*UNICEF, 2019a*).

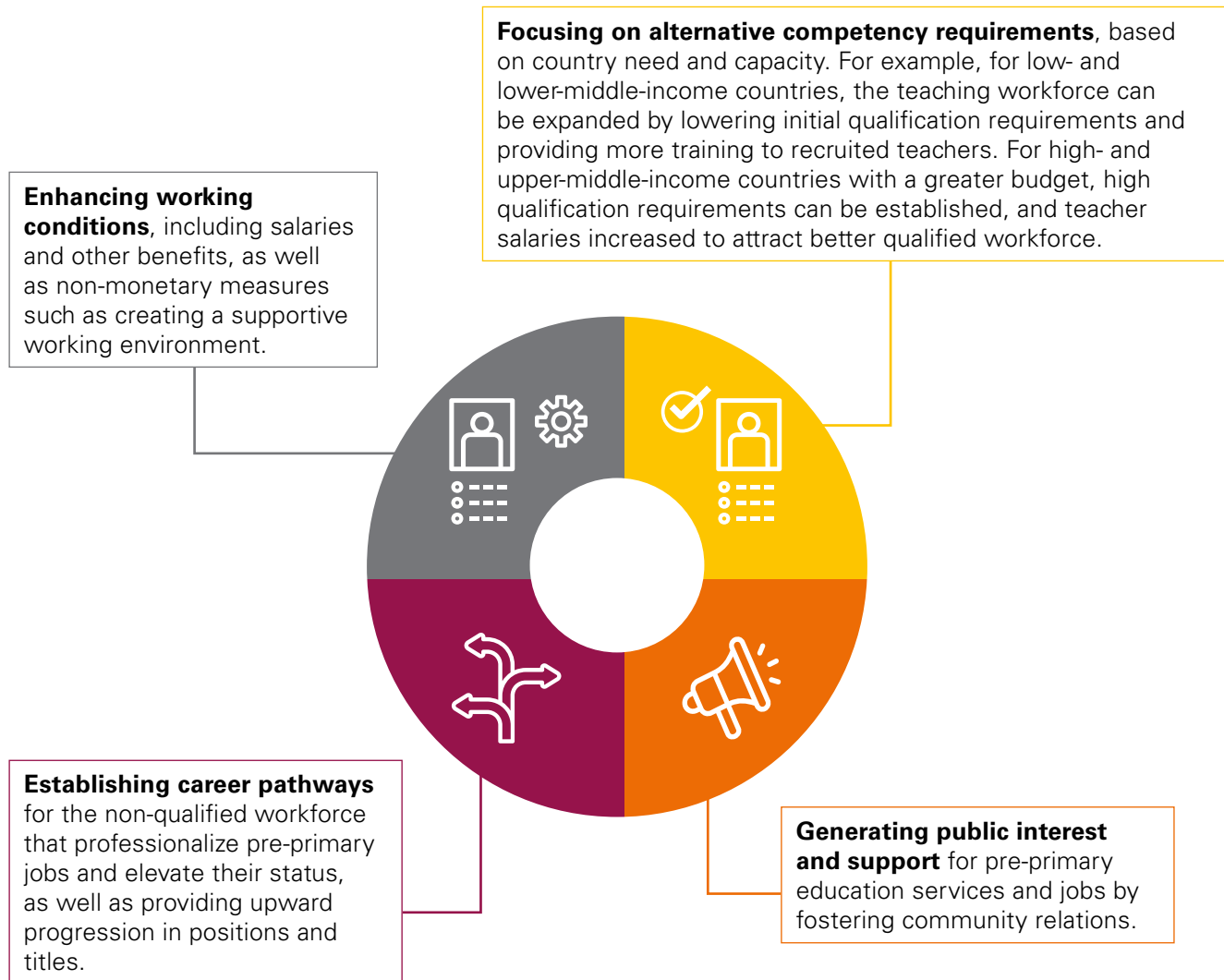
Figure 4: Percentage of female teachers, by education level and region, 2019



Source: *UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021*



This technical guidance was informed by a White Paper on pathways to strengthen the pre-primary workforce, particularly in low- and middle-income countries ([UNICEF, 2019a](#)), which proposes **four strategies for attracting and retaining pre-primary personnel:**



Evidence from several countries shows that these strategies could work in practice. For example, salaries for ECE teachers in Moldova doubled between 2002 and 2008, while in Uruguay and Egypt, public pre-primary teachers could receive bonuses that made up nearly half of their annual salary ([UNESCO, 2015c](#)). In 2012, the Ecuadorian Government began rolling out training for community caregivers, who were previously considered volunteers and received stipends well below minimum wage. The training allowed them to obtain a technical degree after three

years of part-time study. Their title became child education promoters, and they began receiving the minimum wage and full social security benefits ([Staab, 2019](#)). Meanwhile, the non-profit Network for Early Childhood Development of Lesotho is working on the unionization of ECE teachers, only 40 per cent of whom are trained, to support the professionalization of the workforce ([Zinecda, 2021](#)).



3.3. Gender-balanced pre-primary teacher recruitment

A gender-balanced pre-primary workforce can give young children the stimulating and pedagogical environment they need, widening gender role models ([Peeters et al., 2015](#)). Moreover, the interaction between teachers can influence how boys and girls interact and treat each other – a significant opportunity for pre-primary schooling to have a gender-transformative effect on children. Men, as part of the ECE workforce, can counteract traditional views of women in child caring, and ensure that school and learning continue to be gender-neutral ([OECD, 2012](#)).

Recognizing that the highly feminized ECE workforce also means that it provides employment opportunities for women, these efforts will need to also take place alongside approaches to address other parts of the education sector where women are underrepresented. In many countries this is the case for secondary and tertiary education, as well as the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) teaching workforce ([Alam & Tapia, 2020](#)).

The uneven gender balance in the pre-primary teaching workforce is dependent on a range of factors. There is a positive correlation between per capita GNP and the percentage of female teachers (UNESCO, 2003), for example, and in regions in developing countries, high unemployment conditions might lead to recruitment of males as teachers ([Wallet, 2007](#); [UNICEF, 2019c](#)). The low proportion of men as pre-primary teachers can also be explained due to the historical and cultural perception of caring as a maternal task ([Shaeffer, 2015](#)). This pattern can also perpetuate itself through the effect of role models, with studies finding that boys in countries with a smaller proportion of male teachers were less likely to aspire to become teachers ([Han, Borgonovi & Guerriero, 2020](#)). Furthermore, parents and the community may hold negative attitudes towards the capabilities and motivations of men working in a field that involves the care of young children ([Plan International, 2021](#)).

Figure 5: Measures taken to increase number of men in early childhood education and care

	NORWAY	BELGIUM	GERMANY
	Since 2001 four Action Plans included measures for recruiting more men.	In 2001, the Government launched a media campaign to motivate men	Interest in the issue since 2005
	Networks for Men in Kindergarten (MIB) was established	Vocational guidance and training	In 2011, the 'More men in Kitas' program initiated projects, such as vocational training, media campaigns.
	Successfully recruited more men to ECE from 2210 in 2000 to 6716 in 2013	In Flanders the number of men employed rose from 193 in 2002 to 875 in 2010	Increase mostly in urban regions

Source: ([Peeters et al., 2015](#))



Several countries have taken steps to try to understand the root causes of gender imbalance in the ECE workforce within their specific contexts and develop measures to address them (*see Figure 5*). These measures include communication campaigns, gender-sensitive vocational and career advice, the establishment of networks, as well as screening and reviewing pre-service training curricula and culture to make them more male-friendly (Peeters et al., 2015). In Sweden, municipalities began with individual gender-responsive activities then moved to work together on longer-term transformative strategies that involve the community and private sector to target broader gender norms in the community (*see Country case study 1: Sweden*).

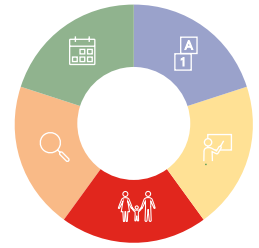
Concerted efforts such as those described above are rarely found in low- and middle-income countries. Some countries have seen increases in the number of ECE teachers without concerted government action. This occurred in Turkey, and has been linked to the growth of the ECE system, with strong academic requirements and good wages (Peeters et al., 2015). In Madagascar, the proportion of male pre-primary teachers went from 6 per cent in 2013 to 18 per cent in 2017. The cause of this increase has not been studied in detail but has been observed to coincide with a push to increase

the number of community preschool teachers (interview with Ministry of Education preschool representatives). As the Ministry of Education subsidizes the salary of some of these positions and plan to integrate some of them into the civil service (*Ministère de l'Éducation nationale de Madagascar, 2018*), this could be seen as a pathway to a secure civil service employment. Such security would be particularly appealing during periods of drought and significant decline in agriculture production (FAO & WFP, 2016). These possible explanations illustrate the complexity of the push and pull factors of men's employment in ECE, particularly in LMICs.

In addition to workforce recruitment, a gender lens should also be applied to the distribution of staff roles and responsibilities within pre-primary institutions. Emerging evidence from primary education in low- and middle-income countries shows a positive association between the presence of female school leaders and students' educational outcomes, despite the remaining underrepresentation of women in leadership roles (Bergmann et al., 2022). However, there is a significant data and knowledge gap on whether women are occupying these leadership positions at the pre-primary education level.



4



FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Families and the community play a crucial role in children's learning and development. This core function ensures that they are active participants in supporting children's learning and development and are engaged with services and practices during early learning years (UNICEF, 2020a). Gender norms are learned through life, but parents and caregivers are the primary agents of socialization, especially at an early age (UNICEF, 2021c). The interactions and behaviours children observed among their caregivers influence how they see the world, and themselves in it (VVOB & FAWA, 2019). Parents and immediate family in general, may consciously or unconsciously transfer gender norms to their children through different paths (UNICEF, 2021c), which is why it is important to engage communities in reflection on gender norms.

This section presents **two strategies** for family and community engagement in pre-primary education: (4.1) **Pre-primary education provision that supports gender equality** and (4.2) **Engaging parents equally in gender-responsive parenting through pre-primary programming**.



4.1. Pre-primary education provision that supports gender equality

Households, and particularly mothers, invest significant time in their children's education. However, the structure of pre-primary education delivery can benefit not only children's outcomes, but also families', and particularly women's economic and employment opportunities.

A recent review (Evans et al., 2021) found that early childhood interventions can have significant implications for caregivers and their income. Although most studies do not capture the impact of such programming on women's labour-force participation, four studies that did – in Brazil, Ecuador, Kenya and Nicaragua – reported positive impacts. The differences in the size of effects may depend on differences in job opportunities and other contextual factors.

From the perspective of ECE provision, the **when** and **where** of the programming that is on offer can make a difference in supporting caregivers' employment. The duration of pre-primary programmes run during the day can have important implications for opportunities to take up employment. Too few hours a day will not allow primary caregivers, most often mothers, to strengthen their labour-market chances. A recent



report from the International Labour Organization highlights that only 33 countries across the world provide full-time national pre-primary education services ([ILO, 2022](#)). Most of these countries are in Europe and Central Asia, with some in the Americas and Asia and the Pacific. In Africa and in the Arab States, no reporting countries supply full-time national pre-primary education services (*ibid.*, p. 237).

One approach to this issue is the **Chile Crece Contigo** or ‘Chile Grows with You’ integrated child protection strategy, which included the government’s commitment to a significant expansion of formal ECE services. Additionally, service modalities were adjusted to better fit the needs of working mothers with new facilities encouraged to provide full-time and extended care ([Staab, 2019](#)).

The location of ECE provision can also support greater employment opportunities. For example, to increase women’s participation in the workforce, the Malaysian government proposed tax incentives for employers to encourage the establishment of workplace childcare centres ([Ting, 2018](#)). In many instances this was delivered through public-private partnerships, with private providers running the workplace-based childcare facilities.

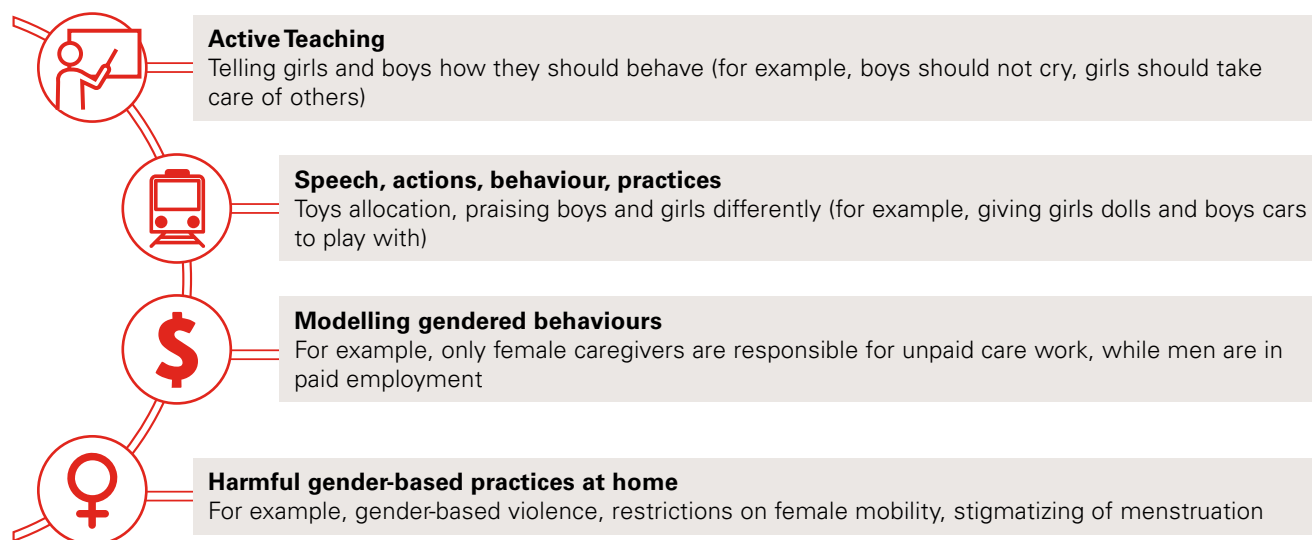
4.2. Engaging parents equally through pre-primary programming

Gender-responsive parenting refers to “the principles such as gender equality and inclusion that promote positive gender norms and socialization to transform imbalanced power structures in families” ([UNICEF, 2021c, p. 4](#)). This means supporting and creating the environment and conditions for positive gender socialization of the child, through parent’s actions, practices, beliefs and knowledge.

For pre-primary aged children, family context and experiences are important for gender role socialization and the development of gender stereotypes ([McHale et al, 2003](#)). Parents play a key role in this process, particularly in the early childhood period when gender identity is being formed (*see Figure 6*). A meta-analysis of over 170 studies found significant sex differences in the way parents encouraged play activities and toy choices, which reinforced female and male gender stereotypes ([Lytton & Romney, 1991](#)). Formal and informal education can provide parents with the resources and competencies to understand the differences between boys and girls, to stop



Figure 6: Ways that parents socialize their children with gender norms



Source: Extracted from *Gender-Responsive Parenting Technical Note* (UNICEF, 2021c). This resource also includes *Tip Sheets on Gender-Responsive Parenting* (UNICEF, 2021d).

discrimination, and to not perpetuate gender stereotypes (UNESCO, 2007). Moreover, parenting programmes are a way for parents to become more aware of gender stereotypes and how they can harm children's development, to understand the importance of equity and respect, and to recognize individual strengths (UNICEF, 2021c). Pre-primary schools can be used as avenues for parenting education, with the potential to support gender-responsive parenting.

Compared with mothers, fathers tend to be less engaged in their children's early learning activities as care continues to be seen as a 'female' role (McWayne et al., 2008; Tulananda et al., 1994). However, studies have found that fathers' involvement has a positive contribution for children's early learning outcomes (Bago et al., 2020; McWayne et al., 2013; Rollé et al., 2019). In family and school engagement, pre-primary teachers and staff should be supported in how to address gender dynamics in families, acknowledging they may have different structures (UNICEF, 2021c). Encouraging and supporting the engagement of parents, both fathers and mothers, often requires specific efforts.

Plan International's programming and influencing package on Promoting Men's Engagement in Early Childhood Development provides a set of recommendations and steps to support ECE programmes to better engage fathers. These start with understanding prevailing attitudes and practices related to men's engagement, followed by awareness-raising and pre- and in-service training, promoting men's engagement as part of a

broader process to build stronger family-preschool relationship, supporting educators and other staff to invite and include fathers in parent activities, making spaces more welcoming for fathers, and recognizing that making these cultural and gender norm changes is a long-term process. It is essential to support men's involvement in young children's learning and education through strategies, such as community critical reflection or social and behaviour change communication, to address inequitable gender norms including the notion that caring for young children is 'women's work' (Plan International, 2021).

In one example from Sweden, preschool teaching teams report modifying their practices in order to engage mothers and fathers equally, including calling both when a child is sick, or raising issues with whichever parent who is present at school instead of waiting for the mother (Karlson & Simonsson, 2008). Another example comes from the evaluation of the Accelerated School Readiness programme in Mozambique. The programme includes parent-to-parent education sessions, which were integral to its success. However, the evaluation identified that these sessions were largely attended by mothers. The evaluators made several recommendations to involve fathers in the process, such as (1) organizing separate sessions for fathers and mothers; (2) providing incentives to parents who attend the activities; (3) incorporating discussions about household decision-making processes around childcare in the sessions to facilitate behaviour change (Bonilla et al., 2019).



Be Modern
আধুনিক হও



Be Smart
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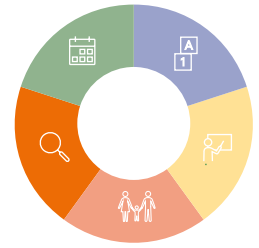
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5



QUALITY ASSURANCE

Quality assurance ensures that a coherent framework for monitoring and assuring the quality of pre-primary education is in place and is used to support continuing improvements in the pre-primary education system ([UNICEF, 2020a](#)). Quality assurance serves several purposes, including accountability, managing and improving performance, informing parents' choices regarding pre-primary options, and strengthening policies to ensure they are responsive to the needs of national and local contexts. It assesses the extent to which the policy design is implemented as intended, and helps identify areas where additional focus and resources are needed ([The Lego Foundation & UNICEF, 2018](#)).

This section focuses on **two key strategies** for gender-transformative quality assurance systems in pre-primary education: (5.1) **Gender-responsive quality standards and indicators**; and (5.2) **Collecting and analysing sex-disaggregated data**.



5.1. Gender-responsive quality assurance standards

Quality assurance cannot be separated from other pre-primary core functions, including planning, curriculum, workforce, and family and community engagement. The development of a quality assurance system and quality standards should therefore be linked with the development or strengthening of the pre-primary education system as a whole ([UNICEF, 2019d](#)). In Viet Nam, different stakeholders, including universities and the quality assurance department, are involved in the revision and implementation of the pre-primary curriculum. This will allow the quality assurance system to reflect the aims and principles of the new curriculum, including gender-responsiveness (*see Country case study 2: Viet Nam*).

Systems that aim to be gender-transformative should similarly reflect this goal in their quality assurance standards. In Sweden, for example, amendments to the preschool curriculum are reflected in the quality assurance and documentation practices that take place at the national, municipal and preschool levels, with inspection tools and self-assessment forms that explicitly ask to what extent preschools are addressing gender stereotypes (*see Country case study 1: Sweden*).



It is important to involve gender experts in the process of designing and implementing quality standards and systems (GPE, UNGEI & UNICEF, 2017). Additionally, it is important to create a shared vision and ownership of the quality standards among the stakeholders – parents, teachers and service providers – that will also ensure some measures of accountability (UNESCO, 2007). Data collected should be shared with parents and educators, providing them with information about children’s behaviours, attitudes, values and learning processes regarding gender interactions (VVOB & FAWA, 2019). The information from quality assurance systems can also be used by different levels of government to design and inform policies and determine budget allocation for the provision of services (UNICEF, 2020a).

5.2. Collecting and analysing sex-disaggregated indicators

To assure monitoring and quality in a gender-transformative ECE system, quality standards for pre-primary education should, at a minimum, include process-level indicators and sex-disaggregated data (The Lego Foundation & UNICEF, 2018). Measures to capture the effects of gender equality policies, however, tend to focus more on access and enrolment, rather than indicators such as the number of teachers by sex that have received gender training, the number of teachers implementing gender-responsive pedagogy, or use of gender-sensitive language and illustrations (Nabbuye, 2018). An example of gender bias indicators can be found in Teach ECE, a new free classroom observation tool developed by the World Bank to monitor and improve teaching quality in early childhood education (see Figure 7), that can be incorporated into external monitoring of system quality.⁴

Figure 7: Gender bias indicators, extracted from Teach ECE Observer Manual

LOW	MEDIUM	HIGH
■ The teacher exhibits bias or reinforces stereotypes in the classroom ■ The teacher could show this by providing children with unequal opportunities to participate in classroom activities, or by expressing unequal expectations for children’s behaviors or capabilities. ■ For example: the teacher seats girls exclusively in the back of the classroom or only asks boys to share their work with the rest of class. Alternatively, the teacher calls equally on children of both genders to share their work, but only assigns girls to tidy up.	■ The teacher does not exhibit bias but does not challenge stereotypes either. ■ The teacher provides children of both genders with equal opportunities to participate in the classroom and has similar expectations for all children. ■ For example: The teacher asks all children to tidy up and calls equally on boys and girls to answer questions in class. ■ The teacher praises and/or disciplines all children in the same manner as other children in the classroom.	■ The teacher does not exhibit bias AND challenges stereotypes in the classroom ■ For example: The teacher assigns cleaning tasks to all children and calls equally on boys and girls to participate in classroom activities. In addition, the teacher uses examples and explanations that portray girls and boys in non-stereotypical fields (for example, female scientists and male chefs)

Source: [World Bank, 2021](#).

⁴ For more information on this tool visit <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/teachers/brief/teach-ece-helping-countries-track-and-improve-teaching-quality-in-early-childhood-education>



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Linking quality assurance to pre-primary education system planning allows also for the monitoring and evaluation component of ECE to take place after the strategies, activities, indicators, and targets in education sector planning (ESP) have been established (UNICEF, 2020a). This process allows policymakers and practitioners to gather more knowledge and understanding of gender disparities and inequalities, and to make evidence-based decisions in gender-responsive planning and budgeting.

Collecting and analysing quality assurance indicators require data to be consolidated and reported regularly to monitor progress and determine whether modifications are needed (UNICEF, 2020a). Countries have gathered information related to gender parity by collecting key indicators such as school enrolment, attendance, progression and learning outcomes. Nevertheless, there is a scarcity of information on hidden gender disparities and data related to the processes or investments needed to sustain gender equality, such as classroom experience and interactions, participation, achievement, and development of capacities (GPE, UNGEI & UNICEF, 2017).

Data to inform gender analysis could include multiple sources to complement pre-primary school records, such as those in the Education Management Information System (EMIS). Among these potential sources are census data; administrative data from other ministerial and national statistics offices that may provide information on disability or other additional indicators of marginalization; learning outcomes information from national, regional or international assessments; household survey data; or other research studies and evaluations from third party institutions.

Recognizing the **intersection between gender and other factors of disadvantage**, data on these dimensions should also consider disaggregation by gender as well as caste, race, socioeconomic status and other factors of disadvantage relevant to the particular context.





CONCLUDING REMARKS

The preceding sections of this report presented 11 key strategies to support the development of a gender-transformative pre-primary education system. They were organized around the five action areas presented in UNICEF's Build to Last framework ([UNICEF, 2020a](#)). It is important to recognize that these are interconnected areas. A gender-transformative pre-primary education system would require these areas and strategies to align and refer to each other. The report includes some examples of how countries have done this, including ensuring quality assurance indicators are linked to targets in pre-primary education system plans, expected outcomes in curriculum documents and pre-primary workforce standards.

Coherence also refers to the engagement of all levels of government or ministerial structure that are involved in the delivery of pre-primary education, from national/central bodies to subnational and local structures. Engaging the private sector is also particularly important for the pre-primary education system, considering that globally 40 per cent of pre-primary education providers are private ([UNICEF, 2019a](#)). The above strategies for transforming harmful gender norms and stereotypes should also encompass private providers and engage other institutions such as pre-service and in-service teacher training providers. The examples provided throughout this report highlight the importance of partnerships between governments and non-profits, private sector and international organizations.

Finally, a supportive enabling environment has played an important role in countries that have incorporated gender-responsiveness into their pre-primary education systems. This has taken the form of high-level political will or buy-in, guidance from national policies and legislation, financial support including from international donors, increased advocacy and research, and public demand, such as from parent organizations and grass-roots organizations supporting female labour participation.

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Appendix 1

KEY CONCEPTS AND TERMS

Early Childhood Development (ECD): Period from conception to eight years. 90% of a child's brain is developed by the age of five. Quality nurturing care – nutrition, good health care, protection, play and early education – is vital for children's physical, cognitive, communicative, and socioemotional development and to reach their full potential ([INEE, 2021](#)).

Early Childhood Education (ECE): Period of formal or informal learning from birth to below the age of entry to primary education ([UNICEF, 2019e](#)).

Gender: The socially constructed, culturally appropriate and context-specific attributes and opportunities associated with being men and women, and the relationship between them, which can change over time and within society ([UN Women, 2001](#)).

Gender awareness: Considering the needs of both girls/women and boys/men when discussing a project, programme or issue ([European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016](#)).

Gender bias: The unfair distinction in the way women or men are treated. It exists when beliefs, attitudes, activities and practices support stereotyped practices or discriminate against one gender. Biases can be conscious or not and can occur unintentionally ([UNESCO, 2015a](#)). Gender bias is mostly deep-rooted in past experiences, culture and the media, and can be intergenerational ([VVOB & FAWA, 2019](#)). In pre-primary, the attitude of teachers, for example their expectations of their students, can affect learning outcomes. Gender bias is associated with double standards, blaming and moralizing.

Gender blindness: Interventions that ignore gender roles, norms and relations. This is based on the assumption that views expressed by men would hold for women as well ([Brown, 2010](#)).

Gender discriminatory: Unequal or disadvantageous treatment of an individual or group of individuals based on their gender, that excludes them from needs specific to their gender. Gender-discriminatory interventions intentionally or unintentionally take advantage of gender stereotypes, reinforcing gender inequalities ([United Nations, 1979](#)).

Gender diversity: An umbrella term referring to those who do not conform to either of the binary gender definitions of male or female, as well as those whose gender expression may differ from standard gender norms ([Prospectors & Developers Association of Canada, 2019](#)). Although this report recognizes that gender is not binary, for ease of reading we refer to women, men, girls and boys throughout.

Gender equality: Refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women and men, and girls and boys, and that their rights do not depend on their sex. It also recognizes the different needs and interests of both men and women, and the role they play in society ([UN Women, 2001](#)).

Gender equity: The process of being fair to men and women, boys and girls and, importantly, the equality of outcomes and results. Gender equity may involve the use of temporary special measures to compensate for historical or systemic bias or discrimination. It refers to differential treatment that is fair and positively addresses a bias or disadvantage that is due to gender roles or norms or differences between the sexes. Equity leads to equality ([UNICEF, 2017](#)).

Gender mainstreaming: Strategy to integrate gender concern in all the steps of the national development process (design, planning, budgeting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation) of national policies and programme. The goal is to reach equality between women and men and girls and boys and address discrepancies in societies product of cultural norms and practices ([UN Women, 2001](#)).

Gender norms: Informal rules and shared social expectations that define socially acceptable roles, expected behaviour and responsibilities of men and women and girls and boys, as well as the relationships between them ([UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, 2020](#)).

Gender-responsive pedagogy. Teaching and learning processes that consider the needs of girls and boys ([VVOB & FAWE, 2019](#)). It motivates teachers to reflect on their own practices regarding gender roles, and provides them with the necessary tools to address gender issues inside and outside the classroom.

Gender sensitive: The capacity to perceive and acknowledge gender differences, issues and inequalities between men and women. It means that a programme or policy acknowledges the important effects of gender norms, roles and relations; however, it does not address existing gender inequalities ([UNICEF, 2019b](#)).

Gender socialization: Process through which individuals learn to behave according to gender norms. This process begins at birth, and continues through life, intensifying during adolescence ([UNICEF, 2021c](#)).

Gender transformative: Policies and activities that challenge and explicitly seek to redress existing, biased, or discriminatory systems, transforming gender roles, norms and relations ([UNICEF, 2019b](#)).

Gender stereotypes: Structured set of beliefs about the personal qualities, attributes, behaviours and roles of a specific social group – ethnic, nationality, cultural or racial – which is expected to exhibit these attributes regardless of their individual inclinations and qualities ([VVOB & FAWE, 2019](#)). They are socially constructed beliefs about men and women.

Intersectionality: the understanding that a person's identity is made up of multiple, intersecting factors such as age, gender, poverty, class, race, ethnicity, caste, language, migration or displacement status, HIV status, disability and/or sexual orientation, which combine to both benefit and disadvantage them, and which cannot be separated ([Crenshaw, 1989](#)).

Sex: Biological difference between men and women.

Appendix 2

COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

Case 1

SWEDEN

Sweden was a **pioneer in establishing a gender-sensitive education approach at all educational levels** and has made a concerted effort to emphasize equality in education from a very young age. This approach has a long tradition in Sweden, with the 1968 Commission on Nursery Provision proposing the introduction of a progressive pedagogy that incorporates values of democracy, gender equality and solidarity into children's upbringing ([Korpi, 2017](#)).

It is an example of how a country can implement different bottom-up strategies to strengthen and develop gender equality in preschool, raise awareness of the potential of pre-primary education in this area and become a reference worldwide.

Sweden's gender-transformative pre-primary curriculum

A comprehensive curriculum for Swedish preschools was developed for the first time in 1998, when preschools became the responsibility of the Swedish Ministry of Education and Research ([Bayne, 2009](#)). The curriculum clearly stated countering gender stereotypes as one of its objectives: 'Preschools should work to counteract traditional gender and gender roles' (Skolverket 2006; translated in [Bayne, 2009](#)). There were precedents for this elsewhere in the education sector. The curriculum for the nine-year comprehensive school (i.e. primary and secondary), developed in the 1960s, already included changing stereotypical gender roles as one its objectives.

This curriculum has since undergone several reviews and revisions, each time maintaining a strong gender focus. The current preschool curriculum calls for preschools to "actively and consciously promote the equal rights and opportunities of all children, regardless of gender, [and] combat gender patterns that limit children's development, choices and learning" ([Skolverket, 2019](#)).

Gender-responsive pedagogy

An evaluation of the preschool curriculum found a gap between the national curriculum and how professionals implement those concepts in their classroom, accentuating the need to train teachers to achieve gender equality in their pedagogical activities (Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2010).

Following the move of preschools to be part of the education sector, the Ministry allocated funds to development projects to strengthen gender equality through preschools, including developing tools for preschool staff to examine and analyse pedagogical materials from a gender perspective and increase the recruitment of male preschool teachers ([Korpi, 2017](#)). The Council for Equality in Preschools awards projects and conducts gender-based analysis of early childhood teacher policy ([Chi, 2018](#)).

Since the 1990s Sweden has made several efforts to reach gender equality, implementing different projects. Bayne describes some of the strategies implemented by Swedish preschools. These included removing some of the gender-specific toys like cars and dolls, and replaced them with more gender-neutral ones, and setting up play stations and let children rotate between them at regular intervals so everyone could use the various resources. The preschools also invited in men and women with different occupations, especially those who did not fit the stereotype for their role ([Bayne, 2009](#)).

One of the strategies used widely involved video recording teachers' practice in the classroom ([Bayne, 2009](#)). This method was proposed in 1991 by Susanne Rithander. Footage consistently revealed that:

- Teachers believed they were gender-neutral in their interaction with children, however, footage revealed that teachers showcase gender-specific patterns
- Girls were addressed with extensive verbal communication while boys received less verbal communication
- Boys' needs were met more urgently at the expense of girls' needs
- Adults, parents and educational staff often did not realize that stereotypical gender roles were embedded in their everyday practices and interactions with children
- Boys took up more space and made themselves heard more than girls

Teachers have certain expectations surrounding gender roles. For example, girls are expected to be pretty, caring and compliant, while boys brave, mischievous and strong ([Bayne, 2009](#)). The video recordings demonstrated that change and gender-sensitivity re needed not only among children, but also in the pre-primary workforce. Sweden has continued implementing several projects raising awareness of gender issues and stereotypes, becoming a reference for other countries. Several books have been written on the subject in recent years, gender pedagogy has gained media attention, and there is a general understanding from the Swedish national government to proceed with gender pedagogy ([Bayne, 2009](#)). University courses for teachers include gender equality requirements and ECE teachers participate in training related to the Discrimination and Education Acts ([Chi, 2018](#)).

Recruiting male preschool teachers

A study in seven Swedish municipalities (kommon) that had formed a network to increase the number of men working in preschools, found that municipalities often started with individual activities or initiatives to retain men who already work in preschools ([Heikkilä, 2019](#)). Before long, however, these are deemed insufficient and it became clear that longer-term and more complex strategies are needed to change attitudes, structures and monitoring measures.

Some of the initiatives and time-limited processes cited in the study included creating gender-neutral brochures or web-based information on what it means to work in preschools, critically examining the recruitment processes to uncover any gender-biased aspects, and introducing new methods to obtain information from the criminal records database. The study observed that, in rare instances, municipalities engaged in multidimensional processes that elevated the challenge to a municipality-wide issue, involving interaction and communication between several stakeholders. These processes included engaging with external stakeholders (such as sending male preschool employees to a large, male-dominated local company that was about to make several redundancies, to share information about working in preschools), having men act as role models for other men (such as a mentorship scheme between a higher education institution and municipality to reduce dropout from a preschool teaching programme) and engaging young men who need contact with the labour market (such as unaccompanied male refugees seeking work placements).

Men do not want to be singled out as "men in preschools" but simply to be known as preschool teachers. Normalizing the presence of men in preschools while simultaneously working to increase the number of men is both important and possible.

Gender-responsive parenting

A gender-approach in preschool has grown in Sweden thanks to close and frequent interaction between families and institutions. Karlson and Simonsson studied the Swedish cities of Crownbay and Heatherfield which developed strategies for family and community involvement with gender-responsive education in pre-primary ([Karlson and Simonsson, 2008](#)).

School staff in Crownbay and Heatherfield organized informal and formal learning platforms for parents. They communicated constantly about the school approach and about gender, developing parents' knowledge about gender relations. Moreover, they also organized formal activities and classes for parents. Crownbay offered a six-month project focused on gender and values education. Discussion and self-assessment among parents were also encouraged.

Preschool staff traditionally gave advice to parents, especially mothers, about their children's upbringing. However, now they are focusing on involving mothers and fathers equally in their preschool children's education. For example, if a child is ill, they used to telephone the mother, but now the father is called first to get them more involved. Overall, for daily routines, they talk to and notify the parent that arrives first, while previously it was more common to wait for the mothers.

Quality assurance

In 2011, amendments to the preschool curriculum added a section on monitoring and evaluation of the quality of the preschool ([Korpi, 2017](#)). Quality assurance and documentation practices take place at the national, municipal and preschool levels and at all levels these are related to the preschool curriculum. At the national level, the Schools Inspectorate has the responsibility to exercise external inspections ([Vallberg-Roth, 2015](#)).

The national level documentation tool and assessment form include a focus on basic values and influence. This asks whether the preschool works systematically to establish the values that [Swedish] society is based on, including empathy and concern for others as well as openness and respect for differences in people's beliefs and ways of life. This work includes counteracting traditional gender patterns, managing conflict, understanding one's rights and obligations, and taking responsibility for common rules.

Similarly, the self-assessment tool for principals prior to a Schools Inspectorate visit includes the questions: "In what ways is the preschool working for equality? Will girls and boys in the preschool have the same opportunities to develop and explore their abilities and interests, with no restrictions on gender stereotypes?" (abbreviated version of documentation tool and assessment form at the national level, from [Vallberg-Roth, 2015](#), p. 95).

In 2012, School Inspectorate audits of preschools in 46 municipalities showed that the curriculum, including its gender equality components, was still not feeding into preschool activities. Every fifth municipality in the audit received criticism for how they implemented gender values in their preschools, with the inspections finding a lack of awareness of gender knowledge and gender-specific play activities at these preschools.

Case 2

VIET NAM

Background

ECE in Viet Nam has a long history. Even prior to independence, **kindergartens and nurseries were established to support women in undertaking agrarian work** and later also to contribute to the resistance war efforts ([Boyd & Phuong, 2017](#)). Around the time of independence, there were nearly 33,000 nurseries and 32,600 state-run kindergarten classes.

Subsequently, the aims of ECE became more than just supporting women to work, with more of a child-centred focus for education and lifelong learning. In the late 1980s, the management of preschools became the purview of the Ministry of Education ([Vu, 2021](#)). The 2005 amendment to the Education Act made ECE part of the education system for children aged 0-6, as well as mandating the development of a universal, high-quality ECE system ([Abbott et al., 2019](#)).

Viet Nam has achieved high coverage of pre-primary education, with gross enrolment rates above 92 per cent, with gender parity ([UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2021](#)). The majority of ECE enrolments, particularly among four- and five-year-olds, are at public kindergartens, established and fully funded by the state ([Boyd & Phuong, 2017](#)). Some groups face disadvantages, and these intersect with gender. UNICEF-UNESCO found that there was inequity for some minority ethnic groups: for example, girls were less likely to attend school than boys, and migrant groups were less likely to attend schools than non-migrants ([Singh & Krutikova, 2017](#)).

Planning and budgeting

As part of the plan to universalize ECE for five-year-olds, the Government of Viet Nam established a target of allocating 10 per cent of total public education expenditure to preschool education for the period 2010–2015 ([UNICEF, 2019a](#)).

The Education Sector Analysis produced by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) for the general education sector in the 2011–2015 period, called for “inclusive education with gender equality, inclusion and climate change” to be “considered in the process of designing, appraisal, approval and funds allocation of the projects related to general education” ([Ministry of Education and Training, 2017](#), p. 15). While this ESA did not explicitly cover pre-primary education – which only became mandatory and considered part of general education in 2018 – it set a gender-responsive precedent in education sector planning.

Curriculum development and review

The first ECE curriculum was introduced as part of the 1998 Education Act. Since then, Viet Nam has adopted a dual-pronged approach to ECE provision, increasing access and improving quality, including officially launching a more play-based curriculum in 2009 ([Abbott et al., 2019](#)). A significant challenge faced by the education sector in Viet Nam was the move from a traditional view of teacher-centred approaches to learner-centred approaches, which are seen by some to challenge deeply-rooted Confucian beliefs on adult or teacher authority (Hien, 2018, cited in [Abbott et al., 2019](#)).

In 2020, MoET announced a three-year review of the preschool curriculum. This review will include the development of a 10-year ECE strategy, review of the implementation of the existing curriculum, and review of early learning outcomes. UNICEF and VVOB, as co-chairs of the early childhood development working group, supported the development of five background policy papers to support the MoET team in this process, including one on gender equality. As a result, a gender subgroup within the team of experts developing the new curriculum is continuing to examine the topic and ensure that gender-responsiveness is embedded as a cross-cutting topic. Although

some of the activities were delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the potential impact indicators include gaining explicit commitments to gender equality in the ECE curricula, introducing gender sensitization in ECE educator training and classroom observations of gender-equitable practices ([UNICEF & ODI, 2020](#)). The new curriculum is expected to be ready by 2023, and incorporate gender-responsiveness, socioemotional learning orientation and digital literacy as cross-cutting themes.

Gender-responsive pedagogy

Since the early 2000s, MoET has implemented several policies to improve the quality of education including in-service training programmes. This is often done in partnership with international development agencies, including the World Bank, UNICEF and Save the Children, and local partners including the Vietnam Women's Union ([Abbott et al., 2019](#)).

Through funding from the European Union (EU) and Government of Belgium, VVOB worked with central MoET as well as provincial and district-level education departments to implement gender-responsive teaching and learning in the early years (GENTLE). The project ran from June 2018 until May 2021 in 15 mountainous districts in Viet Nam ([European Commission, 2021](#)). Over 1,800 ECE teachers and staff participated in capacity-building exercises and training on play-based and gender-responsive education, affecting around 32,000 children in Viet Nam ([VNA, 2021](#)).

The project mostly focuses on teacher's capacity development, providing them with the required skills and knowledge to challenge established gender norms through play-based and innovative ways of teaching ([VVOB, 2018](#)). This process contributed to the development of the Gender-Responsive Pedagogy for ECE toolkit (*see Box 3*). In addition, the pilot project also included an advocacy campaign to make gender-responsive learning part of the nationwide ECE curriculum and a parent-school sensitization model on gender-responsive play-based learning.

An evaluation is being conducted to assess the impact of the project. However, initial feedback collected from participants has been positive. In particular, teachers mentioned that the toolkit and training helped them to understand how to implement non-gendered play in their classroom, they started to use gender-neutral language with children and noticed some changes in children's behaviour too ([VVOB, 2021](#)).

The involvement of MoET in the implementation of gender-responsive pre-primary programmes such as these is crucial in allowing key lessons to be embedded in national policy frameworks. For example, in response to COVID-19, MoET worked with UNICEF and private sector partners to increase connectivity for boys and girls, especially those hardest to reach. The involvement of MoET allowed this ongoing work to be integrated into the development of the new curriculum ([UNICEF, 2020c](#)). According to the UNICEF Viet Nam country office, another important component in supporting this link between programming and policy is to build flexibility in budgeting to allow promising findings and lessons from the field to be incorporated into national planning. Additionally, as part of the development of the new curriculum, MoET is partnering with institutions that will be engaged in implementation, including national teacher colleges.

Family and community engagement

The Government encourages a policy of socialization at preschool, arguing that it should be the responsibility of everyone and that the cost of provision should be shared by parents, the community and the government. In Viet Nam, household contributions accounted for 21 per cent of total national pre-primary expenditure.

There are no formal channels for local NGOs to build support for ECE. The Women's Union, a mass sociopolitical organization led by the regime, plays a key role in mobilizing parents to run community-based ECE ([Abbott et al., 2019](#)). It is represented at all levels of government (commune, district, province and central) as it is mandated to represent women widely, but in practice it acts as a facilitator of change within the government to build support for government policies.

Several current and recent activities by international development partners are also supporting family and community engagement in ECE:

- In parallel to working with teachers, VVOB's GENTLE project also involved parents, especially male caregivers, to ensure that children will be free from harmful gender stereotypes at home. Around 25,000 caregivers participated in the project through nationwide communication, advocacy campaigns, leaflets and trainings organized by schools. Initial findings indicate that these parents tend to notice the importance of gender equality and were more involved in their child's learning. In addition, many fathers mentioned that they started to take on household chores to set an example for their children ([VVOB, 2021](#)). An earlier VVOB project supporting ECE in Viet Nam had partnered with the national and provincial Women's Union to support transition between ECE and primary education, and raise awareness among parents about this topic ([VVOB, 2016](#)).
- World Vision International supported a pilot project in collaboration with the government to train ethnic minority 'mother assistants' (local language collaborators) working in preschool classrooms, to build their capacity to help ethnic minority children develop reading and comprehension skills in Vietnamese ([World Vision, 2017](#)). An evaluation of the model showed significant improvement in the language readiness of the ethnic minority children. The provision has now been mainstreamed into the national education system, and local language collaborators are employed in preschools in the 43 provinces where ethnic minority children live.
- UNICEF has worked with the government to implement a nationwide awareness-raising programme to help parents understand the importance of nurturing care. This forms part of a series of activities designed to develop an integrated early childhood development programme; to increase young children's access to services; to improve the quality of services, including expanding services to children under three, and to provide parenting education ([Abbott et al., 2019](#)).

Quality assurance

The World Bank-funded School Readiness and Promotion Project aimed to address quality issues in the Vietnamese ECE system, including through the introduction of preschool self-assessment ([World Bank, 2019](#)). By the end of the project in January 2019, 96 per cent of preschools had completed a self-assessment and 41 per cent attained Level 1 accreditation. Aspects assessed in this process included organization and school management; qualification and training of managers and teachers; physical facilities, equipment, utensils and toys; relationship between school, family and society; and results of nourishment, care and education. The experience demonstrated that quality assurance and improvement require targeted efforts on behalf of MoET and a commitment to strengthening the ability of the system to generate regular and adequate data on early childhood education ([UNICEF, 2019a](#)). The degree to which this process is gender-responsive is unclear. However, the World Bank observed that MoET's reporting systems regularly collect disaggregated data by province, gender, ethnicity and, more recently, disability ([World Bank, 2019](#)). MoET's quality assurance department is also involved in the development of the new pre-primary curriculum, as it is expected to incorporate the curriculum outcomes in quality assurance indicators.

For every child, a fair chance

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