

REGIONAL COMPENDIUM
**BEST PRACTICES OF
GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE
PROGRAMMING IN
EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA**

UNICEF EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA REGIONAL OFFICE

MAY 2023



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was developed by the UNICEF ECARO Gender Section. Acknowledging Fatma Khan, Gender Specialist Consultant towards framing the content, Sheeba Harma, Regional Gender Adviser for overall leadership and technical guidance, Haley Powers, Gender Programme Consultant for editing and proofreading and Rui Nomoto, Gender Specialist Consultant for designing the report.

Acknowledging the contributions, reviews and inputs received from gender focal points and colleagues in the country offices: Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kosovo (UNSC resolution 1244), Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, Serbia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Copyright © UNICEF May 2023 All rights reserved.

Photo credits

Page 7: © UNICEF/Kyrgyzstan

Page 10: © UNICEF/2022/RuslanKostykin

Page 12: © UNICEF/Bosnia and Herzegovina

Page 14: © UNICEF Montenegro/DuškoMiljanić/2022

Page 16: © UNICEF Serbia/2021/Pančić

Page 19: © UNICEF/Kosovo

Page 21: © UNICEF/UNI390069/Pancic

Page 23: © UNICEF/Armenia

Page 25: © UNICEF/Kyrgyzstan

Page 27: © UNICEF/Bulgaria

Page 30: © UNICEF/Kyrgyzstan

Page 33: © UNICEF/Tajikistan

CONTENTS

Acronyms	4
Glossary	5

Section I: Introduction	7
1.1. Gender-transformative programming in UNICEF context	7
1.2. Gender-transformative approach to programming	8
1.3. Change strategies for gender-transformative programming	8
1.4. Understanding gender transformation through the gender integration continuum	8
1.5. ECARO countries on the gender integration continuum	9
1.6. ECARO gender-transformative programmes – best practices	9

Section II: Gender-transformative programmes – best practices examples	10
2.1. Gender equality through STEM and digital skills	10
2.1.1. Space arena exploration by girls (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan)	10
2.1.2. Equipping girls with digital and IT skills and confronting gender bias in teaching norms (Bosnia and Herzegovina)	12
2.2. Gender socialization	14
2.2.1. Countering the social norm of parent’s violent disciplining practices through caring families programme (Montenegro)	14
2.2.2. Transforming gender roles among parents of young children (Serbia)	16
2.2.3. Promoting positive gender socialization through sizable social services work force strengthening (Kosovo (UNSC resolution 1244))	19
2.2.4. Facilitating parenting through digital media products – mobile application Bebbbo (Europe and Central Asian countries)	21
2.3. Harmful traditional practices	23
2.3.1. Tackling gender biased sex selection (GBSS) and GBV (Armenia)	23
2.3.2. Countering child marriage and Ala-Kachuu (Kyrgyzstan)	25
2.4. Gender-based violence prevention and response	27
2.4.1. Delivering on ending GBV and focusing on risk mitigation in humanitarian action (Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Serbia)	27
2.5. Gender equitable education system	30
2.5.1. Promoting gender equitable education systems (Kyrgyzstan)	30
2.5.2. Whole school approach to make schools free of violence (Tajikistan)	33

Endnotes	35
-----------------	-----------

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ECARO	Europe and Central Asia Regional Office
ECD/I	Early Childhood Development/Intervention
GAP	Gender Action Plan
GBSS	Gender Biased Sex Selection
GBV	Gender-based Violence
GFP	Gender Focal Point
GPR	Gender Programmatic Review
GRP	Gender-Responsive Pedagogy
HVN	Home Visiting Nurses
ICT	Information, Communication, Technology
KAP	Knowledge Attitude and Practices
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
NGO/CSO	Non-Government/Civil Society Organization
PLH	Parenting for Lifelong Health
SBC	Social Behavior Change
SGBV	Sexual Gender-Based Violence
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematic
VAC	Violence Against Children

GLOSSARY

Adolescent Empowerment	refers to a personal journey during which an adolescent (aged 10-19), through increased assets and critical awareness, develops a clear and evolving understanding of themselves, their rights and opportunities in the world around them and through increased agency, voice and participation have the power to make personal and public choices for the improvement of their lives and their world. ¹
Gender-based violence	is an umbrella term for any harmful act - including acts that inflict physical, mental, or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercions and other deprivations of liberty whether occurring in public or in private life - perpetuated against a person based on socially ascribed gender difference between males and females.
Gender bias	is a preference or prejudice toward one gender and results in unequal expectations, attitudes, language use and treatment. Bias can be conscious or unconscious, and may manifest in many ways, both subtle and obvious.
Gender discrimination	refers to denying opportunities and rights to individuals based on their gender.
Gender equality	refers to equal outcomes for women, men, girls, boys and gender-diverse people.
Gender mainstreaming	refers to a strategy for making the needs and interests of all genders an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes, policies and organizational processes, so that everyone can benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated.
Gender norms	refers to the collective beliefs and expectations within a community or society, at a given point in time, about what behaviours are appropriate for women and men, and the relation and interactions between them. ²
Gender	refers to the culturally defined roles, responsibilities, attributes and entitlements associated with being (or being seen as) a woman or man in each setting along with the power relations between and among women and men.
Gender-responsive pedagogy	refers to teaching and learning processes that pay attention to the specific learning needs of girls and boys. These can be identified by assessing the challenges and gaps in skills and knowledge for both genders. This approach calls for teachers to take an inclusive gender approach in the processes of lesson planning, teaching practices, classroom management and performance evaluation. ³
Gender-responsive programming	deliberately responds to the needs of adults and children of different genders, accessing the gendered context and taking measures to actively address specific needs.
Gender roles	are the expected roles, including behaviours, activities, and responsibilities, associated with each sex.
Gender-sensitive programming	acknowledges gender inequalities and may act on gender analysis in so far as needed to reach programme objectives but does not necessarily prioritize girls and women's needs specifically or address structural causes of gender inequality.
Gender socialization	refers to the processes through which individuals (especially children and adolescents) learn to behave according to gender norms. It is a multi-dimensional and complex process which begins at birth, continues through childhood, and intensifies during adolescence until individuals have internalized traditional gender identities and begun to impart them to future generations. ⁴
Gender stereotypes	are generalizations about the characteristics of a group of people based on gender. ⁵

Gender-transformative programming	actively aims to promote gender equality and women's and girls' outcome objective as a primary objective by deliberately tackling discriminatory and harmful gender norms, roles, structures and institutions that perpetuate gender inequalities and gendered risks in the long-term. ⁶
Intersectionality	A framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities combine to create different forms of discrimination and privilege. These identities include gender, race, ethnicity, ability, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, and age among other issues. ⁷
Nurturing care	refers to five inter-related and indivisible components that are important for children in reaching their full potential. These components are good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving and opportunities for learning.
Parenting	is defined as the interaction, behaviour, emotions, knowledge, belief, attitude and practices associated with the provision of nurturing care. This refers to the process of promoting and supporting the development and socialization of the child.
Sex ratios at birth	the number of girls born for every 1,000 boys born. The biologically normal sex ratio at birth ranges from 102 to 106 males per 100 females. Ratios that skew higher than these values indicate high number of males versus females and vice versa.
Sex selection	is the attempt to control the sex of the offspring to achieve a desired sex. Sex selection can take place before a pregnancy is established, during pregnancy through prenatal sex detection and selective abortion, or following birth through infanticide or child neglect. ⁸
Social norms	are the perceived informal, mostly unwritten, rules that define acceptable and appropriate actions within a given group or community, thus guiding human behaviour. They consist of what we do, what we believe others do, and what we believe others approve of and expect us to do. Social norms are therefore situated at the interplay between behaviour, beliefs, and expectations. ⁹
Violent discipline	Any physical (corporal) punishment and/or psychological aggression (such as shouting, yelling screaming, or calling a child offensive name) by a caregiver or authority figure.



Gender equality is one of the most critical organizational priorities for UNICEF. It is embedded as a core part of UNICEF’s mandate to promote the realization of equal rights for all children. Gender is identified as a normative principle and a cross-cutting programming priority that supports UNICEF’s vision of leaving no one behind. UNICEF has continuously reaffirmed its commitment to gender equality and adolescent girl’s empowerment through a range of ambitious, evidence-driven, and rights-based policy documents, guidelines, and action plans. These documents - [UNICEF Gender Policy 2021-2030](#), [UNICEF Strategic Plan](#) and [Gender Action Plan \(2022-2025\)](#) and [UNICEF Adolescent Girl’s Strategy \(2022-2025\)](#)¹⁰ represent the organization’s vision and commitment to continue strengthening and improving its work towards gender equality and adolescent girl’s empowerment.

1.1. GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE PROGRAMMING IN UNICEF CONTEXT

The current Gender Action Plan (GAP) (2022-2025) represents the third Gender Action Plan in UNICEF. The two previous GAPs (2014-2017 and 2018-2021) aimed to enhance the integration of gender equality within programming as well as improving the internal environment (including building the gender architecture and corporate systems for gender) for gender equality, mainstreaming employment of a twin track approach of gender mainstreaming and gender targeted intervention. UNICEF carried out an internal evaluation of the first two GAPs in 2019. The evaluation noted a growing awareness of gender-transformative approaches across UNICEF, and increased integration of the concept in programmes. It identified several actions taken by UNICEF to address structural barriers to access and efforts to challenge social norms. The evaluation further called for revamped focus on gender-transformative programming intent and gender-transformative approaches.¹¹ Embracing this intent, the GAP 2022-2025 focuses on the expansion of transformative approaches in programming, as well as in institutional policies, partnerships and capacities. It highlighted several areas for more ambitious and transformative results, including in child protection to address violence and harmful practices; in supporting girls’ leadership and skills in education and learning, and through transformative social protection and care programmes. Moreover, new features of the GAP (2022-2025) also include enabling gender-based violence (GBV) as an organization wide priority, investing in social norms change across the life course and partnerships with boys and men to promote positive masculinities. With this new, transformative approach, UNICEF is continuously engaged in integrating gender equality commitments throughout its programming and systems while increasing investments in sex-disaggregated data and analysis as well as targeted, differentiated programming in such areas as the empowerment of adolescent girls as a means of ensuring that no child is left behind.

1.2. GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH TO PROGRAMMING¹²

Gender-transformative approaches aim to address the structural and social root causes of gender inequality and thereby promote more equitable outcomes for children in all their diversity. In so doing, they aim both to change overall structures that underpin gender inequality and contribute to lasting change in individuals' lives. As per the definition of the Inter-agency Working Group for gender equality,¹³ a transformative approach promotes gender equality by: fostering critical examination of inequalities and gender roles, norms and dynamics; recognizing and strengthening positive norms that support equality and an enabling environment; promoting the relative position of women, girls and marginalized groups and transforming the underlying social structures, policies, systems and broadly held social norms that perpetuate and legitimize gender inequalities. A gender-transformative approach is concerned with redressing gender inequalities, removing structural barriers, such as unequal roles and rights, and empowering disadvantaged populations. In practice this means working for change in laws and policies; systems and services; distribution of resources; norms, beliefs and stereotypes; and behaviours and practices.

1.3. CHANGE STRATEGIES FOR GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE PROGRAMMING¹⁴

The following are some of the identified strategies for gender-transformative programming in UNICEF:



Strategies that work to challenge the structural barriers that uphold gender inequality. These include discriminatory norms, stereotypes and values; unequal gender roles; inequalities in access to and control of resources; discriminatory laws and policies and unequal power.



Build the individual and collective agency of women, girls, and people of diverse gender identities through targeted actions so that they are empowered with physical, social, and financial assets to claim and exercise their rights. This can be done through strengthening their knowledge, confidence, skills, decision-making capacities and access to and control over resources.



Ensure that girls and women in all their diversity and people of non-conforming gender identity, especially marginalized groups have a voice and can influence and/or lead programme implementation and measurement and evaluation as contextually relevant.



Work with boys and men to embrace gender equality and exercise positive and diverse masculinities.



Work intersectionally which entails considering other intersecting factors that may also increase vulnerabilities including those related to caste, class, religion, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, refugee or migration status etc.



Work at all levels: policies and laws, systems, services, communities, families and individual.



Take a life course and intergenerational perspective.



Work at multi-sectoral and intersectoral levels.



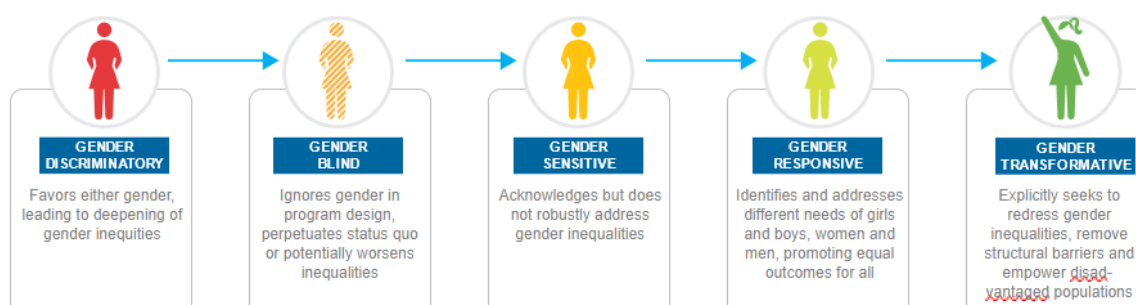
Focus on approaches that will have an impact at scale.

1.4. UNDERSTANDING GENDER TRANSFORMATION THROUGH THE GENDER INTEGRATION CONTINUUM

Figure 1 represents the pictorial demonstration of the Gender Integration Continuum. The term 'gender-transformative approach' first arose during the HIV/AIDS pandemic, from concerns that gender dimensions

were being overlooked in the pandemic response.¹⁵ This led to the development of a Gender Integration Continuum which is now widely used by several organizations including UNICEF as a diagnostic tool to locate or characterize the gender equality efforts within a programme along a spectrum from gender discriminatory to transformative.

FIGURE 1: GENDER INTEGRATION CONTINUUM¹⁶



1.5. ECARO COUNTRIES ON THE GENDER INTEGRATION CONTINUUM

The application of the gender integration continuum in the context of the Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO) was thoroughly assessed as part of an extensive and ongoing [Gender Programme Review \(GPR\)](#) process that started in 2019 and made a thorough analysis of 17 country programmes in the ECARO region from the gender perspective. The GPR made the following observations, overall ECARO programmes fall somewhere between the helm of gender sensitive and gender-responsive, with some countries demonstrating evidence of strong and evidence backed gender-transformative interventions showcased in this report. One of the biggest limitations experienced by UNICEF at the Country Office level is that interventions which could be classified as gender-transformative could not yet be undertaken at scale due to many constraints such as gender backlash in some country contexts, shrinking financial space, lack of prioritization by decision makers, lack of data, middle income country context, lack of clarity around UNICEF’s mandate versus the mandate of other UN agencies and lack of implementation of gender priorities by some donors and influencers. It was further noted that among the countries, where the GPR was undertaken, there is an ambiguity in terms of what constitutes gender-transformative programming, how to make gender-transformative programming interventions and what makes it different from gender-responsive programming. During the GPR process, many countries requested a regional reference document to understand or reflect on good and best gender-transformative practices within the region. Under this backdrop, UNICEF ECARO embarked upon collating a compendium of best practices of gender-transformative programming from the Europe and Central Asian (ECA) region.

1.6. ECARO GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE PROGRAMMES – BEST PRACTICES

The eleven selected practices documented in this report represent a mix of case studies from the Western Balkans, Central Asia as well as EU accession countries and hence could be considered as a representative sample of the region due to granularity and the diversity of the sub-regional context. These practices have been chosen based on meeting the criteria of at least two change strategies for gender-transformative programming noted above. The case studies represent a mix of promising early programming and maturing approaches and hence represent a sample of programmes that are working on or towards gender-transformative programming. Moreover, the selection is also based upon the following additional criteria:

- Availability of evidence of the impact of the interventions such as evaluations, data as per Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Knowledge, Attitude and Practices (KAP) findings, human interest stories etc.
- Recommendation from the Regional Gender Advisor.
- Pre-documented or identified as best practices in UNICEF global level documents.
- Continuous high rating of the intervention by the ECARO Gender Section in the annual gender review process of the Country Office Annual Results Reports.
- Documented as good practices in the country GPR process.

With an ambition of showcasing the work of the reference countries it is hoped that case studies will be an inspiration not only for the UNICEF programmers but also for donors and external stakeholders to stimulate a chain of action for achieving gender-transformative results in the region.

SECTION II: GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE PROGRAMMES – BEST PRACTICES EXAMPLES

2.1. GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH STEM AND DIGITAL SKILLS



2.1.1. SPACE ARENA EXPLORATION BY GIRLS (KAZAKHSTAN, KYRGYZSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN)

CONTEXT

Gender disparity in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) sectors has been an ongoing global discussion not only as a human rights issue, but increasingly as a development issue. This discussion has become more evident in the face of shifting labour market trends due to technological progress, automation, and climate change, which makes it imperative to attract youth (boys and girls equally) in STEM related fields.¹⁷ Gender segregation in occupational choices, prevalence of glass ceilings, gender wage gaps and underrepresentation of girls in STEM careers and professions are all well-noted trends across Central Asian countries. There are also noted patterns of a gender digital divide in some countries of the sub-region. Educational and career choices made by girls and boys are strongly shaped by societal expectations, social norms, and values often connotating the non-compatibility of STEM career pathways and fields with women's care giving roles and gender stereotypes. Traditional education and occupation choices made by girls are also often compounded by lack of female mentors, role-models, peers, and lack of a conducive operative environment for girls.

INTERVENTION

Such or similar trends are prevalent in the three Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. With a key objective of debunking and dispelling myths and stereotypes around appropriate gender roles and career pathways and to steer girls towards non-traditional career pathways especially in the arena of aerospace, UNICEF in these three countries embarked upon a pioneer initiative - UniSat Nanosatellites educational project for girls and young women. This skills-based programme develops the knowledge and competencies of girls and young women aged 14-35 years in the development of nanosatellites. It further improves transferrable skills including teamwork, public speaking, time management and creativity. Almost 3,000 girls from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have taken a UniSat Nanosatellite education course and learnt spacecraft design, 3D modeling, engineering, software, and hardware development skills, as well as critical life skills such as communications and teamwork through this initiative. While the UniSat Nanosatellites educational project is only one layer of the multiple interventions, the three countries have a much broader focus on girls'

skills development in STEM fields through a combination of hard, soft and transferable skills development components.

Following the successful launch of one nanosatellite to the stratosphere in October 2020, with many to follow, and the adaptation of the course to an online learning modality to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic the three countries have launched the scaling-up of the UniSat Nanosatellite educational programme with support from the UNICEF Office of Innovation, Dubai Cares and Naza Alakija. In 2022, UNICEF Kazakhstan, in partnership with Al Farabi Kazakh National University, opened the Turkistan learning hub - that will serve as a networking community for girls in STEM and help connect more girls with learning, mentoring, career support, and networking opportunities. With the support of partners, the Turkistan UniSat Learning Hub is being equipped to ensure that it serves as a cross-border platform for nanosat events, tournaments, competitions, and hackathons with other regions and countries. Further, the Hub will help professionals scale up UniSat +, an interactive, innovative, and personalized educational course which uses an existing national learning management system to ensure sustainability and provide continued support to past and present cohorts of female programme participants. Through the UniSat online learning platform, UNICEF reached 846 girls and young women. In the second phase of programme development, 238 girls and young women from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, including those from remote rural areas, completed a 10-day in-person workshop where they assembled, tested, and launched nanosatellites into the stratosphere. Following

course completion, 190 young women and girls engaged in nanosatellite data analysis, further confirming their genuine desire to continue their career paths in the aerospace, technology and science industries and contribute to tackling environmental and social challenges.¹⁸ Establishing this learning platform will significantly extend programme reach and facilitate access for geographically remote girls and young women. Additionally, it means that in the longer-term, students will be able to complete the online component of the programme from anywhere in the world.

IMPACT

With a strategic gender focus the skills development programmes is already showing transformative results by steering girls towards non-traditional career pathways in areas corresponding to STEM, digital skills, and frontier tech. Beyond the immediate and significant achievement of building and launching a nanosatellite, the girls and young women reported that the programmes helped them to believe in themselves and to be more resistant to societal perceptions of female-appropriate roles. Moreover, UNICEF's monitoring and evaluation data suggests¹⁹ that the initiative empowered the girls and young women to gain clarity around their future goals and significantly supported them to enter careers in STEM. Since the end of the project many participants have selected the space arena as their chosen career path, some already started post graduate degrees in the space arena and became key speakers, advocates and spokespeople in high level forums and in regional policy development promoting STEM opportunities for girls and women in Central Asia.



2.1.2. EQUIPPING GIRLS WITH DIGITAL AND IT SKILLS AND CONFRONTING GENDER BIAS IN TEACHING NORMS (BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA)

©UNICEF/Bosnia and Herzegovina

CONTEXT

In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), prejudices remain about the participation and career progression of girls in STEM fields and Information, Communication and Technology (ICT). The general belief that ICT and science is for boys is underpinned by social norms and formal educational practices. These inequities are reflected in women being more computer illiterate than men - computer literacy among girls and women is only at 66.8 per cent in BiH. Although girls and boys seemingly have the same access to technology, girls are less likely to pursue ICT careers. Such patterns and behaviours have also been reinforced by lower competences of the available female Information Technology (IT) teachers, lack of mentorship opportunities and positive role models available to adolescent girls. Women in the STEM and ICT industry are considerably underrepresented in BiH, with three times more men than women working in ICT. There is a gender wage gap in the labour market where women make up less than a third of staff in ICT companies despite this being one of the fastest growing industries with a huge demand for a skilled labour force.

INTERVENTION

The IT Girls Initiative has evolved from a volunteer effort inspired by the 2015 United Nations innovation challenge to a fairly well-resourced initiative of UNICEF BiH with a potential of scaling up. The programme is gender-transformative in the sense that it aims to include girls in the world of programming and programming languages, facilitate interest in the ICT Sector and increase the probability of females taking on an ICT education and career path.

IT Girls provide high-quality digital skills to girls and women, working with elementary and secondary schools, teacher trainings and equipment, vocational training, employment, and workplace standards that promote gender equality and create links between girls' IT skills and local businesses, and advocacy and confidence building through mentorship for girls and networking among women in ICT. The activities are delivered through IT Girls Clubs as extra-curricular activities in 30 primary and secondary schools powered by Arduino electronic prototyping platforms, with "IT Super Girls" as active mentors in the IT Girls workshops. They are now expanding to an additional 150 schools across BiH.

UNICEF's monitoring of the IT Girls initiative determined that teachers and educators have the tendency to reflect gender stereotypical and gender biased approaches in their behaviours as a reflection of the social norms in the country. Identifying teachers as important agents of gender socialization and their gender biased behaviours as a key risk to the effective implementation of the IT Girls initiative, UNICEF focused on addressing gender biases in teaching methodologies through the introduction of Gender-Responsive Pedagogy (GRP), in addition to the provision of hard IT skills. Gender-Responsive Pedagogy was based on the analysis of an expert group that carefully analyzed existing teaching content, textbooks and methodologies. Based on the results, UNICEF developed a manual to improve teaching processes from the perspective of gender-responsive teaching. The implementation process revealed that introduction of such an approach – aimed to transform the dominant social teaching norms often exhibiting gender bias, has not been fully welcomed in all segments of the country. Some administrative units showed more resistance and even complete rejection than others. Despite resistance, UNICEF has been successful in implementing such an approach in select cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) and in a few schools of Brcko District (BD). By the end of 2022, 52 teachers were trained in gender-responsive teaching methods, dismantling their conscious or unconscious biases and incorporating gender-responsive teaching practices in the classroom, encouraging girls equally as boys to pursue careers in STEM. In 2022, UNICEF BiH conducted a comprehensive GPR that made concrete recommendations for employing gender-responsive pedagogical approaches outside of the STEM teaching context and identifying innovative strategies to meet any resistance or backlash in the introduction of such approaches.

IMPACT

IT Girls has managed to build a sustainable programme with potential for scale with strategic partnerships, operational products and new practices, and a growing knowledge base on the changing attitudes on the perception and role of girls and women in ICT. Achievements include IT Girls Clubs established in 30 primary and secondary schools with more than 405 adolescents (311 girls) attending. Through this initiative, UNICEF further formalized its partnership with private sector Bit Alliance, an association of the 45 largest IT companies in BiH. IT Girls identified 10 companies to participate in the pilot elaboration process of analysis in compliance with Women Empowerment Principles (WEPs) - that offers guidance to business on promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in the workplace, marketplace, and community. #PostaniITGirl training for girls aged 13-15 on 3D modelling and virtual reality has become a sub-brand of IT Girls and has attracted around 200 participants. Participants voice satisfaction with training and commend its applicability and utilization potential in development of knowledge, skills, and business ideas. UNICEF continued supporting youth engagement in the World Summit - Young Innovators awards through the IT Girls programme, focusing on mobile and web-based projects.

Today, IT Girls is moving on to more systemic interventions in the form of a joint UN programme for long-term transformations and supporting sustainable reforms. Currently, active resource mobilization efforts are being undertaken, civil society organizations are being sought for greater outreach, and a specific approach is being prioritized to engage minorities, marginalized and hard-to-reach groups in IT Girls activities. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are being explored to track engagement of all girls participating in IT Girls Clubs and their chosen life pathways after school graduation.

2.2. GENDER SOCIALIZATION



©UNICEF Montenegro/Duško Milijanić/2022

2.2.1. COUNTERING THE SOCIAL NORM OF PARENT'S VIOLENT DISCIPLINING PRACTICES THROUGH CARING FAMILIES PROGRAMME (MONTENEGRO)

CONTEXT

UNICEF is consistently working towards addressing violence against children (VAC) and violent disciplining. It is a practice that unfortunately remains a dominant and widely accepted social norm in many countries globally, including ECAR. The case of Montenegro is no exception. However, they are one of the examples continuously targeting this social norm through highly systematic, evidence driven and at scale interventions from one country programme cycle to another - all with a gender-transformative lens. While representing only one prong of the multiple strategies employed by UNICEF Montenegro, the Caring families programme – a localized version of the Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH) Programme, is an interesting example with demonstrated impact.

UNICEF Montenegro is continuously tracking the trends and gender drivers of VAC through regular and on-going MICS, including modules to demonstrate key trends among Roma population settlement in Montenegro. MICS data indicates that during the period 2013-2018, around two-thirds of all children (1-14 years) experience some form of physical punishment/psychological aggression by an adult household member. As per the recent MICS (2018), there is a perception among men and women that physical punishment is needed to bring up or educate a child properly. MICS data further demonstrated that there is a general level of

acceptance of violence within families and there are interesting variations among different income groups. As far as GBV and domestic violence (where intergenerational consequences upon VAC is concerned) MICS 2018 shows that the acceptance of the social norms to physically discipline a wife is negatively correlated with social class - wealthier households showing lower acceptance and vice-versa. Moreover, conforming with the traditional gender norms, in Montenegro, mothers have a dominant role in raising children. As per MICS 2018, mothers (84 per cent) and more engaged than fathers (44 per cent) with a child (2-4 year) in activities that promote learning and school readiness.

INTERVENTION

In response to the high prevalence of violent discipline and in the context of legal reform that prohibits corporal punishment in all settings including by caregivers, UNICEF Montenegro made considerable progress in implementing the parenting programme, making PLH a key strategy of the Country Office. PLH for Children is grounded in social learning theory and behavioural change techniques. It aims to strengthen parenting skills and behaviours that help parents and caregivers provide adequate support and care to their children. It is a group-based parenting programme that aims to establish and sustain nurturing relationships between parents and caregivers, thereby

preventing and reducing the risk of VAC and maltreatment at home and in the community. The programme further contributes to reducing parental stress and depression. Employing a life cycle approach, the Caring Families Programme targets the parents of the following age groups - infants until 16 months including late pregnancy, children 2-9 years and adolescents 10-17 years of age. The UNICEF Montenegro programme promotes positive parenting skills before discipline, positive reinforcement to promote good behavior, positive instruction giving, ignoring negative attention seeking behavior and non-violent limit-setting.

As the PLH techniques are not in conformity with the traditional ways of child up-bringing in Montenegro, in the beginning, UNICEF was cognizant of the risk or possible backlash towards the introduction of a such a parenting approach in the country context. Through careful analysis, this threat was addressed with a mixed approach of a slow introduction of the positive parenting techniques to small groups and piloting of a package of training for professionals (kindergartens, health centers and NGOs) before implementing at large scale. The initial piloting in 2018 showed very promising results in significantly reducing physical and emotional punishments, dysfunctional parenting and showed improvements in child and parents well-being as per pre and post assessments. The 2018 pre-post evaluation of the programme found an overall 70 per cent reduction in harsh and abusive parenting. There were improvements in supporting positive behaviour (11 per cent) and limit setting (14 per cent), with reductions in dysfunctional parenting (25 per cent), child behaviour problems (31 per cent), and significant reduction in parental, particularly maternal, depression (45 per cent). Programme attendance as well as the overall satisfaction level of the parents was also recorded to be very high as per the assessment of the pilot. The Country Programme Evaluation (2017-2021) further noted that the PLH has had a very positive uptake on positive parenting and couples reported improved positive and supportive relationships with children. Responding to the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic the country office developed a sister programme - [ParentChat](#) - an online adaptation of PLH delivered via conferencing and chat sessions, for the uninterrupted continuity of this intervention during the pandemic. In 2018, the Parliamentary Committee for Human Rights and Freedoms recommended scaling the programme to all municipalities. In 2021, the Government Strategy on Preschool Education included measures to expand Caring Families in preschool institutions.

IMPACT

With a slow but steady expansion of the programme the PLH programme in Montenegro is upscaled and now covers 12 municipalities with a special focus on socially excluded groups such as Roma and Egyptians. Programme facilitators are delivering the programme as psychologists, pedagogues, nurses, preschool teachers and social workers at Primary Healthcare Centres, kindergartens, NGOs, and a few other relevant service providers, in agreement with relevant line ministries. Through nine cycles of the Caring Families Programme, delivered between 2018 and summer 2022, a total of 848 parent and caregiver participants have been recruited, of which 724 (85%) received certificates of completion. As mothers are primarily responsible for childcare, especially in early years, there is a large engagement of women (mothers/ female facilitators) in this programme. However, UNICEF is undertaking targeted initiatives for further encouragement and inclusion of male care givers and fathers in this programme through mixed care givers and fathers only groups as well as gender-transformative communication messages and approaches. These interventions are already showing promising results and there has been a considerable increase in father's engagement. The percentage of fathers in this programme has already increased from 5% in 2018 to 18% in 2021.

Furthermore, in 2021, UNICEF Montenegro published a [Feasibility Assessment](#) to document programme implementation and results, provide a costing analysis, and advocate for sustainable scaling up of the programme as part of regular service provision. The development of the forthcoming Early Childhood Development Strategy presents an opportunity to address some of the recommendations of the feasibility assessment to sustainably scale up the programme as part of regular service provision. The Strategy will enable multi-sector and multi-disciplinary commitments on parenting in general and the future expansion and embedding of the Caring Families Programme.

Other interventions to address harmful social norms include CSO Parents Helpline that directly reached 1,350 mothers and fathers (30% fathers and 70% mothers) in 2022 and a mobile application, *Bebbo*, which was launched in February 2022 and has been downloaded 10,000 times (15% male caregivers).



2.2.2. TRANSFORMING GENDER ROLES AMONG PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN (SERBIA)

CONTEXT

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is a period of unprecedented growth and is a key milestone in a child's brain development process. This is also a critical period during which the multi-dimensional and complex process of gender socialization - beginning at birth and continuing afterwards - by which individuals internalize traditional gender identities and learn to behave according to gender norms, plays a very imminent and foundational role. Evidence also suggests different agents of gender socialization, that change during the entire life course of an individual, play an important role in the transmission of the intergenerational cycle of gender inequality, harmful gender norms and definition of gender roles and stereotypes. As parents and care givers represent one of the most salient and key foundational agents of gender socialization, especially in the early childhood phase when gender identity is initially formed, programme interventions that engage, target and transform the behaviors of these agents as well as their influencers are extremely important for gender-transformative perspective.

INTERVENTION

Under this backdrop, UNICEF Serbia's Playful Parenting Programme is identified here as one of the very good examples of gender-transformative parenting programmes in the ECA region. As part of a global initiative,²⁰ UNICEF Serbia's Playful Parenting Programme introduces innovative

parenting support practices focused on fostering the capacities of caregivers of young children for responsive, playful and gender-transformative parenting. This is done through promotion of cross-sectoral care for child development, early learning through play and family well-being. This programme is implemented in cooperation with the Government of Serbia (2019-2024), the support of the LEGO Foundation and an extensive network of more than 300 national and local institutions and organizations.

The Republic of Serbia has a well-developed legislative framework across sectors that support social and educational inclusion and universal health coverage of all children, including children with developmental delays and disabilities. Owing to the fast and declining population trends in the country, there are many state run programmes, including those that provide social benefits and assistance to encourage women of reproductive age to have more children. Although these programmes provide a good operating environment for parenting initiatives they can subliminally reinforce women's reproductive role or further confine women within these functions. Moreover, parenting support programmes in Serbia are mainly implemented at a project level and not at scale. In such an environment, UNICEF Serbia's Playful Parenting programme not only aims to transform gender roles and stereotypes in parenting and professional practises, but is also offered at scale. It covers a total of 29 municipalities, representing one fifth of the country coverage, presents a unique case

study and is also highly endorsed among key ECD stakeholders²¹ in the country.

According to Serbia's MICS (2019), less than half of young children between 2-4 years benefit from father's engagement in early learning activities. In addition, development of young children from the poorest households lag eight months behind children from the richest quintiles, where fathers' engagement lacks even more. The Playful Parenting implementation research further noted that male care givers engagement with children increases with the age of the child, with fathers engaging more with children of 13-24 months as compared to 6-12 months and play is perceived as an adult directed activity.

UNICEF Serbia has clearly demonstrated parenting as its clear niche area inclusive of cross-sectorality both internally and externally. With a targeted focus on engaging fathers and male care givers, nearly all outcome areas of the country programme are contributing towards the positive parenting agenda.²² Externally, UNICEF Serbia engages inter-sectoral platforms (including health, social welfare, pre-school education and kindergartens etc.) at both national and municipal levels with a key focus on challenging the gender and social norms of the practitioners engaged in ECD and Early Childhood Interventions (ECI). One of the main programme messages is that both mothers and fathers are equally capable to parent from the very first day, and it brings benefit to all - mothers, children, and fathers. For evidence-based interventions, UNICEF Serbia is measuring changes in parental and fathers' engagement through different data sources such as MICS with Roma specific modules and KAPs, etc. Playful Parenting and other components of ECD programming are also broadly aligned with [UNICEF's Vision for Elevating Parenting](#) that calls for moving beyond approaching parents as recipients of information or education to a more collaborative partnership.

UNICEF Serbia has so far been more successful in implementing the Playful Parenting Programme among the general population whereas gender-transformative parenting is met with some resistance among more traditional communities and population groups such as Roma communities. UNICEF is cognizant of the fact such a resistance is partly due to the nature of gender-transformative strategies employed in the Playful Parenting Programme that alters gender relation, roles, and responsibilities within the households. To meet these challenges UNICEF Serbia is supporting Roma health mediators – who are the trusted communication and service provision channels for Roma communities,

through interventions such as capacity building and advocacy for the institutionalization of the health mediators within the national health system.

Playful parenting is only one part of UNICEF Serbia's multi-level intervention to target gender roles in parenting. Other salient interventions include the mobile application *Your Partner in Parenthood* to support the learning journey on responsive, gender-balanced, playful parenting. The app offers both mothers and fathers the opportunity to rely on the personalized content related to their child and get timely notifications for the same child on different devices. After only 6 months of its launch in February 2022, the app has already been registered by more than 22,000 users, out of which 2,000 are fathers/male care givers. Moreover, advocating for adoption of family-friendly policies in the private sector employing parents of young children is one of the priority intervention lines in the forthcoming years - for which UNICEF Serbia has already paved ways and undertaken foundational work.

IMPACT

The programme is showing impact in changing parental and professional practices of home visiting nurses, pediatricians, social workers, foster advisors, teachers, medical nurses, and expert associates in preschools towards a family-centered approach. As of 2022, innovative practices that focus on playful and responsive parent-child interaction, support for gender-transformative parenting and nurturing of caregivers' mental health brought a change in the daily lives of over 20,000 children and caregivers of young children, of which approximately 30 per cent were fathers (as compared to 20 per cent in 2021).²³ There is an improvement in father participation also in online counselling (established to mitigate the service disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic). In the last two years, 30 per cent of sessions have been organized with fathers. Findings from research regarding the Home Visiting Nurse Video Counseling, conducted in February 2022, reveal that more than 70 per cent of caregivers believe they have improved their knowledge and skills and changed some parental behaviors and habits. They feel the support they received through video counseling from visiting nurses had the effect of reducing anxiety and increasing self-confidence and improved their knowledge about the importance of play and the role of the fathers in raising a child.

The implementation of the Playful Parenting Programme is a learning journey for UNICEF about parenting practices in Serbia, and based on the findings the programme is continuously evolving. Preliminary findings of a baseline study on Parental KAP led by the Institute of Psychology at the University of Belgrade shows the following trends - father engagement has increased in Serbia compared to previous generations: both mothers and fathers recognize the importance of father engagement for child development and there is large, noted differences among families from different socio-economic profiles in terms of father engagement. The research further demonstrated mothers are still perceived as primarily responsible for the care of sick and disabled child. These findings hence bring out a targeted focus on women and care of the caregivers as a very important entry point for further expansion of UNICEF Serbia parenting initiatives. The second and the third wave of the study on Parental KAP is planned to be carried out to further guide programme directions.

Having undertaken a recent GPR process in 2022, UNICEF Serbia further evaluated different entry points for gender-transformative interventions within the scope of the Playful Parenting Programme. The review noted that while UNICEF Serbia's ECD has a very strong focus in engaging fathers in early stimulation and care giving, to move one step forward towards further gender transformation, UNICEF should now consider innovative interventions for engaging fathers and male care givers in non-traditional areas of masculine care giving such as caring for the sick child or caring for children with development delays and risks. In the following years UNICEF Serbia will not only embrace these recommendations but also endeavor towards employing a life course lens through an integrated multi-level programming and explicit articulation of gender-responsive approaches in its parenting initiatives.



2.2.3. PROMOTING POSITIVE GENDER SOCIALIZATION THROUGH SIZABLE SOCIAL SERVICES WORKFORCE STRENGTHENING (KOSOVO (UNSC RESOLUTION 1244))

©UNICEF/Kosovo

CONTEXT

Using the case study of Serbia in the previous section, the importance of targeting the primary agents of gender socialization - parents and caregivers - within gender-transformative programming has been highlighted. To further substantiate the importance of engaging a different set of gender socialization agents and operating at the community level of the socio-ecological framework, UNICEF Kosovo presents an interesting example.

The MICS (2020) of Kosovo depicts a rather grim picture with regards to early stimulation and responsive care for children in Kosovo in their home environment, and with strong gender role divisions for child-care and engagement. According to MICS, about 1 in 2 children are engaged in early learning activities with their mothers, while just 1 in 10 girls and boys are engaged with fathers. The differences are more striking for the poorest quantile and among the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities, among whom only 1 in 20 children (5 per cent) are engaged in early learning activities with their fathers. It is worth noting that gender bias and gender discrimination of the social service workforce is recognized as one of the key barriers in undertaking gender-transformative programming in the region.²⁴ In order to directly address this barrier as well promote the engagement of fathers and male caregivers in child care and development, UNICEF Kosovo is

mainly targeting two categories of social service workforce – Home Visiting (HV) nurses and early childhood educators as key agents of gender socialization for children, parents and caregivers through a variety of gender transformative interventions.

INTERVENTION

The HV Programme of Kosovo, integrated within the system of Primary Health Care, was initiated in 2014 with the support of the Government of Luxembourg. The objective of the program is an assessment of mothers and children's health and well-being, assessment of the family's health and nutritional needs, education of families, as well as referral and coordination with various community support schemes. The programme is unique in the sense that it provides the opportunity for the most direct and interpersonal communication channel with men, women, and children at the household level in Kosovo. Identifying gender bias in the routine practices of the HV nurses, UNICEF Kosovo strategically targets these health workers through on-going capacity building on gender socialization, gender equality and the importance of male caregivers' involvement in childcare and development. Through these interventions the HV nurses are encouraged and stimulated to critically reflect on their own understanding of gender norms that directly influence their work with parents and children. These trainings are provided as part of the Supporting Families for Nurturing Care training package, developed by

UNICEF. They address topics²⁵ not routinely covered in pre-service or in-service nursing and medical education and empower health workers to promote nurturing care and gender-transformative relationships between the caregiver and the child. The modules have been accredited by the chamber of doctors and nurses in Kosovo and are now being integrated in the curricula of the Faculty of Education of the University of Prishtina.

UNICEF Kosovo's gender-transformative interventions do not stop at the level of health care social services workforce development but also targets other agents of gender socialization such as early educators. Using the opportunity of recent national attention to early education programmes, UNICEF Kosovo is undertaking initiatives to promote Gender-Responsive Pedagogy in the country. In collaboration with the University of Prishtina and the partner civil society organization, training modules on gender equality in early childhood education (ECE) and the involvement of fathers in early childhood development and education have been adapted and accredited for continuous professional development of educators in Kosovo.

IMPACT

UNICEF's advocacy resulted in the country wide expansion of the HV programme in 2022. As part of this initiative, about 500 health workers from all municipalities – representing around 10 per cent of the total number of family doctors and nurses in Kosovo – have already been trained in the gender socialization and fathers' involvement modules during the past three years. The HV Programme was able to reach about 9.5 per cent of children from the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian minority communities in 2022,²⁶ representing a significant milestone in UNICEF Kosovo's untiring efforts for the social inclusion of vulnerable groups. In addition to achieving at scale gender results, the case of Kosovo presents a good example of how gender-transformative parenting practices can be integrated into the national information system. UNICEF has been successful in including fathers' involvement as an indicator in the monitoring and evaluation framework of the HV programme. The data in the first 6 months of 2022 shows that in 17 per cent of cases, fathers actively participated during the visit of HV nurses.²⁷ Such an evidence-base provides a good platform for measuring social norm change to guide programme directions. The information derived from this system will be able to guide the policy directives of the Ministry of Health and other relevant stakeholders.

The module on involvement of fathers has been customized for delivery to parents, with primary focus in rural areas and marginalized communities. The training modules on gender equality and fathers' involvement in ECE are in the process of integration in the pre-university educational content, in selected courses and across all 5 Faculties of Education in Kosovo, expected to be endorsed in 2023. Through training sessions initiated in October, around 10 per cent of in-service educators and social workers have enhanced their knowledge on education practices free from gender bias at this very sensitive period of early development and around 8.5 per cent of in-service educators and 183 parents (66 per cent male) have increased their capacities on the role and importance of active engagement of fathers for children early development and learning.

In the following years, UNICEF Kosovo will continue providing training to health workers engaged in the HV programme as continuous professional development of HV nurses and doctors. In addition, the modules will be digitalized to enable refreshment of knowledge for previous participants, and training of new participants. Similarly, the training for educators will continue to be provided as part of the pre-service education programme as well as continued professional development of educators through the Institute for Research and Development in Education. UNICEF is fully committed towards achieving gender-transformative results in Kosovo and will continue studying the impact of these intervention in undertaking and sustaining the desired social norm change - addressing gender bias among service providers and enhancing the role of fathers and male care givers.



2.2.4. FACILITATING PARENTING THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA PRODUCTS - MOBILE APPLICATION BEBBO (EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES)

© UNICEF/UN1390069/Pancic

CONTEXT

The use of digital technology and the internet to search for online parenting information has emerged as a new norm. Many parents resort to these sources to investigate the different aspects of a child's growth and development. However, the amount of information is so vast that it often becomes challenging for parents to filter or process the information or to make any meaningful decision about their children from these sources. Although little is known about parent's behaviour in the use of digital media for child's health and well-being (especially outside of the Scandinavian countries), existing research and anecdotal information point towards the high use of digital media for seeking such information, but in addition to, and not in replacement of, print media and personal contacts.²⁸ Many parents are skeptical about the accuracy of online information, unsure about their interpretive understanding and often ask for information or validation from the health service provider and pediatrician.²⁹

Moreover, the impact of COVID-19 in limiting and/or transforming the traditional service provision is very well-documented. During the pandemic, routine service provision such as for child health and development, routine immunization, antenatal visits etc., were compromised, leaving parents in a situation where they relied more and more upon digital media and internet for seeking information. Recognizing the gender division of digital

parenting, the trend became more burdensome for mothers as the traditional caregivers. Internet connectivity issues in parts of the region, in addition to the gender digital divide, make digital solutions more difficult. To address some of these barriers, UNICEF ECA developed a free and reliable user-friendly mobile application – Bebo. It is available in both online and offline modalities and supports parents and other care givers with reliable information tailored according to their children's (0-6 years) needs.

INTERVENTION

The innovative intervention of the mobile app provides parents with expert advice on a large range of child health and development issues such as nutrition and breastfeeding, early learning and the value of play, responsive parenting, protection, safety and care giver's mental health. This initiative was inspired by a UNICEF supported pre-existing phone helpline for parents called Halo Beba - operational in Serbia since 2001. The lessons learned from this service indicated that the majority of parents who used the phone helpline asked fairly simple questions that did not require direct contact with medical staff and child development specialists and could be simply answered via a mobile app, saving resources. Hence, UNICEF undertook several consultations with childhood development professionals and focus group discussions with groups of parents to inform the design of the new mobile application – Bebo. From the gender

perspective, the app fills three key gaps of traditional child development support. First, it replaces the need for parents, often mothers, to physically visit healthcare professionals or facilities for simple matters freeing time and resources, especially for resource constrained families and women who are often dealing with time poverty issues. Second, Bebo provides reliable information together with a trusted UNICEF brand that prevents delays in accessing relevant information from the wealth of information available online. It further addresses access and discrimination³⁰ related bottlenecks and barriers, often confronted by women and mothers from marginalized groups in health settings. Third, Bebo contains rich materials (articles, activities, etc.) on encouraging more engagement of fathers in child care.

From Halo Beba, which was the first version of the app developed by UNICEF Serbia to the Bebo, the app has substantially evolved to become multilingual and features many new functionalities.³¹ It was an intense journey led by UNICEF ECARO that included several rounds of pretesting and many technical challenges and bottlenecks. The process started in early 2020 immediately after the onset of COVID-19 and was completed by late 2021. The pretesting process included User Acceptance Testing sessions with multiple UNICEF countries. Following the intense period of app development, including the optimizations of the Content Management System and development of new features, the Bebo Parenting App was made available in [Apple](#) and [Play](#) stores by the end of October 2021. The process of its deployment at the country level started from November 19, 2021. A [special webpage](#) is devoted to Bebo on the UNICEF ECARO website featuring the app as part of broader communication efforts.



IMPACT

Between the day the app was launched in app stores and March 2023, 450,000+ people have downloaded it. Bebo has been launched in 14 countries in partnership with the governments of Albania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Greece, Kosovo (UN SC Resolution 1244), Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. The latest data from Google analytics shows mothers are much more likely to use the app than fathers and other caregivers. On average 86 per cent of all app users are mothers. This number varies from country to country ranging from 59 per cent in Tajikistan to 96 per cent in Ukraine. Activities, games and tracking children's development milestones are the most frequently used features of the Bebo app. So far, the results of the Bebo user satisfaction surveys indicate that the overwhelming majority of users (80 per cent) who complete surveys are overall satisfied or very satisfied with the app. Users who use the app at least once a week report substantial improvement in their knowledge and changes in their parenting practices.

Bebo complements current government systems and decreases pressure on service providers. The app works in online and offline modes, enabling global usage, even by the most vulnerable families without internet coverage. The app is a cost-effective intervention, a single content platform that is easily translatable and adaptable for all countries. The monitoring of data of Bebo app users has provided participant countries with a new reference for monitoring their parenting related initiatives with a gender lens. The data can also provide evidence for conducting important gender related surveys and studies such as time use surveys,³² of which there are few in the region. The UNICEF Regional Office will continue its advocacy for including this data source for gender-responsive monitoring and evaluation of Country Offices' parenting initiatives in participating country's country programme results frameworks.

2.3. HARMFUL TRADITIONAL PRACTICES



2.3.1. TACKLING GENDER BIASED SEX SELECTION (GBSS) AND GBV (ARMENIA)

CONTEXT

Sex ratios at birth favoring boys have been documented in a growing number of countries. In many cases such practices conform to patriarchal social norms that not only prescribe a lower social status to women and girls but could also exhibit toxic patterns where family decision makers resort to extreme measures such as selectively aborting girl children before birth. GBSS can be measured using sex ratio at birth, a comparison of the number of boys born versus the number of girls born in each period. The biologically normal sex ratio at birth can range from 102 to 106 males per 100 females. In the ECA region, Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Montenegro have the greatest gender imbalances in favour of boys. This imbalance seems to be related to the patriarchal tradition of son preference and the prevalent social norm of lower status among women in society.

With sex ratio at birth of 108.8 boys per 100 girls especially for third and fourth pregnancies, Armenia has one of the highest rates of GBSS in the world. There have been modest improvements since early 2000 when the SRB rate stood around 116. As a result, girls are missing from families, classrooms, and communities. Over the past 7 years, it is estimated that more than 4,000 girls who would have been born in Armenia were not, due to the persistent preference for sons. To counter the

challenges of the harmful social norm of GBSS and wide-spread GBV often perpetuated against girl children, UNICEF Armenia is heavily engaged in undertaking innovative programming using edutainment, the power of digital media and community mobilization approaches.

INTERVENTION

Since 2015, with the support of the UNICEF National Committee for Switzerland and Liechtenstein (Swiss NatCom) and UNICEF HQ, UNICEF Armenia focused on addressing and reversing the social norms of negative attitudes towards the girl child. UNICEF Armenia generated robust evidence through ground breaking research - [the structure of son bias in Armenia from implicit association to explicit behaviour](#), commissioned by UNICEF in collaboration with University of Zurich, Women's Resource Center and the Statistical Committee of Armenia. The findings of the research showed a stronger bias for sons among fathers than their wives and mothers and further explored deeply entrenched norms that still value sons more highly than daughters as a key driver of GBSS. Based on this evidence, in 2018, UNICEF Armenia continued with the second phase of the Missing Girls project and undertook further targeted initiatives to address this issue. Tackling GBSS would entail challenging and changing gender norms, diverting away from harmful

practices, not only for girls and women, but also for boys and men, thus targeting the root causes of gender bias through a social and behavior change campaign (SBC). To do this, UNICEF Armenia targeted gender stereotypes and discrimination in education and in the media through gender-transformative programming and community engagement, coupled with policy advocacy.

Identifying the importance of edutainment and community engagement approaches for social norm change, UNICEF closely collaborated with the media. With a key focus on empowering the girl child and targeting harmful social norms as a core engagement strategy, UNICEF partnered with public television and produced a series titled “[Lost Diary](#)”. Since March 2021, 16 episodes of this TV series targeting girls and harmful social norms have been aired. With an estimated more than 4 million views, the TV series has reached over 300,000 viewers, including adolescent girls and boys.

The results from the TV series showed viewers explicitly rejected GBSS however as social norms are sticky and need long term interventions to change, it is not surprising son preference remains deeply prevalent in the country. Through this initiative, UNICEF learned that for viewers to gravitate towards the new norm and to acquire the suggested behaviour change, there is a need to continuously undertake repetitive messaging through multiple channels at various levels, which is resource intensive. Linked to this and based on the findings, it was clear that there is a need to show more women and girls in strong roles with non-conforming gender identities through multiple interventions targeting different levels, individuals and institutions of the socio-ecological framework.

Parallel to the above-noted nation-wide media campaign, UNICEF Armenia identified that teachers exhibit implicit and sometimes explicit gender bias in teaching methodologies. Identifying teachers as key agents of gender socialization and making use of the ongoing curriculum reform process in the country, as the right moment of intervention, UNICEF directly targeted teachers with Gender-Responsive Pedagogical (GRP) approaches. As part of this intervention UNICEF Armenia partnered with Teach for Armenia in the development of a gender module to be introduced into the existing teacher training module and toolkit on inclusive education for in-service training of teachers. The modules build the capacity of teachers to learn the basics of GRP, targeting gender bias in communication, gender-responsive lesson

planning and gender-transformative in classroom behavior employing methods. In 2022, more than 500 history teachers received resource packs and mentorship to practice gender-responsive project-based teaching. Gender-responsive project-based learning monitoring framework and learning and teaching methodologies were tested for further scale-up with the National Center of Education Development and Innovation. The testing of the teacher training tool showed that teachers needed constant support, preferably through more advanced peers, to reflect on their practices, identifying hidden gender and social bias in their communication and actions.

In addition to this initiative, in 2022 UNICEF Armenia developed a virtual safe space - [Safe you App](#), for GBV prevention and protection of adolescent girls. The App has been developed together with like-minded partners such as the Coalition to Stop Violence against Women, Child Protection Network, UNFPA and Impact Innovation Institute. Moreover, through social media and viber, UNICEF Armenia reached 249,000 girls between 18-45 age with messages focusing on GBV prevention and protection.

IMPACT

Overall, the social and behaviour change communication strategy resulted in signs of positive shifts, which must become the focus of interventions targeting gender bias in Armenia. Measurements within the project showed that working with two key social institutions, i.e., the media and schools, who are responsible for the socialization and direct engagement and empowerment of young girls and boys, can be great tools for driving socially conducive behaviors.

Since UNICEF Armenia has demonstrated edutainment and SBC approaches can bring about social norms change, the office will continue its interventions to address GBV with a special focus on addressing the issues of GBSS.



2.3.2. COUNTERING CHILD MARRIAGE AND ALA-KACHUU (KYRGYZSTAN)

© UNICEF/Kyrgyzstan

CONTEXT

Despite a key violation of a child’s human rights, child marriage remains a common practice in Kyrgyzstan where 18 per cent of girls are married before 18. The practice is more prevalent in certain regions where poverty, lower education levels and religion (practice of Islamic Nikkah at home) are the known drivers of child marriage in Kyrgyzstan. In addition, the country is also known for the harmful traditional practice of forced abduction for marriage called Ala – Kachuu (meaning pick up and run away) where young women are taken against their will to marry their kidnappers. Although Ala-Kachuu has been outlawed since 2013 it is still widely prevalent in Kyrgyzstan. It is estimated that 1 in 5 marriages are the result of bride kidnapping. Such a practice leaves girls in a particularly vulnerable position and many times there is little possibility of the family and societal reintegration of these girls due to perceived shame for the family.

INTERVENTION

UNICEF Kyrgyzstan has been heavily engaged in eliminating the practice of child marriage as well the practice of Ala-Kachuu through multiple interventions at various levels. One such example is “Spring in Bishkek,” an interactive mobile game developed by UNICEF together with Open Line Foundation. The content and sequence of the game is based on real life

stories of Ala – Kachuu survivors. Through this gaming focused edutainment approach, boys and girls in Kyrgyzstan are educated about this practice and girls are prepared to assess and respond to such risks as well as available services should such a situation occur. Within six months of its release, Spring in Bishkek was downloaded more than 161,000 times, 70,000 in just one month. The game has received very positive feedback from users who wait excitedly for new updates. Additionally, there is some anecdotal evidence to show girls have used the information learned from the game to prevent real bride-kidnappings.

The above is only one example of UNICEF Kyrgyzstan’s multiple interventions at various levels of the socio-ecological framework to address the harmful social norm of child marriage in Kyrgyzstan. Other examples include SBC approaches, community mobilization, engagement of women and girls based civil society organizations and social norm change focused work at institutional and policy level to address child marriage.

With a vision of providing access for girls to engage with the community of girls’ and women rights advocates and dismantle the harmful perceptions around girl-led activism and feminism, the Country Office is partnering with several girls and women’s rights NGOs (such as Bishkek Feminist Initiatives, DIA – an Osh-based NGO and Open Line Public Foundation). These organizations are playing a proactive role in

defining UNICEF's child marriage programme priorities. The Country Office is engaged in SBC strategies at the community level to promote girls' education as an alternative to child marriage through a community-based project promoting education for girls in Chui, Naryn and Osh provinces.

IMPACT

As a first attempt to measure and document results of the use of SBC tools for social norms change, UNICEF conducted an SBC study in 2022 using participatory and control versus participant group methodologies. The initial results showed a significant and positive difference in self-confidence of adolescents to denounce child marriage cases and to openly discuss this issue within the family. Moreover, through UNICEF's support, 68 women-members of local councils developed an action plan for their municipality to improve opportunities for girls' education.

At the institutional level, in 2022 UNICEF Kyrgyzstan supported the Gender Unit of the Ministry of Labour, Social Welfare and Migration in monitoring and reviewing the previous action plan on ending child marriage. Simultaneously, the next action plan was developed - 2022-2023 - which has been submitted for approval to the Cabinet of Ministers. The implementation of the roadmap to end child marriages also had continued in six target locations of the Spotlight Initiative.

There is enough evidence to suggest that social norms do not change overnight and take years of tireless efforts and long-term programming to make any substantial impact. Through continuous resource mobilization and evidence generation UNICEF is fully committed and strategically well-positioned to make the desired social norm change that will directly impact the lives of adolescent girls in Kyrgyzstan.

2.4. GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND RESPONSE



2.4.1. DELIVERING ON ENDING GBV AND FOCUSING ON RISK MITIGATION IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION (BULGARIA, GREECE, ITALY, SERBIA)

© UNICEF/Bulgaria

CONTEXT

GBV is one of the most pervasive yet least visible human rights violations in the world. In all societies, women and girls have less power than men – over their bodies, decisions, and resources. Social norms that condone men’s use of violence, as a form of discipline and control, reinforce gender inequality and often perpetuate GBV. Across the globe, women and girls, especially adolescents, face the greatest risk. Although GBV can occur at any point in a person’s life, in times of peace or in stability, in crisis settings such threats soar even further. Armed conflict, natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies resulting in population displacement can significantly weaken a society’s social fabric and ability to protect women and girls from GBV.³³ UNICEF has a clear organizational commitment³⁴ towards addressing and ending GBV in humanitarian settings by ensuring inclusive, effective, efficient, and empowering responses. It is well recognized that gender inequalities exist before a crisis and while humanitarian contexts may exacerbate pre-existing gender inequality, the crisis also represents an opportunity for bringing gender transformational change into the lives of women and girls.

The vast number of refugees and migrants (from

the Middle East, North Africa, West and East Africa, and South Asia) entering Europe with a hope of find security, protection, and better life opportunities especially in the last decade is well-known. Refugees are often escaping a life of violence and persecution at home, and hence resort to undertaking life threatening journeys via extremely dangerous routes. Such trends made Italy, Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece popular sites for refugee arrivals.³⁵ UNICEF programme experience in these countries has shown that refugee and migrant women and girls have been exposed to different and often high levels of GBV risks throughout their journey. Many refugee and migrant women and girls have already fled violence, including child marriage, sexual violence, domestic violence, female genital mutilation (FGM) and trafficking in their home country. The global COVID-19 pandemic further increased their specific vulnerabilities and the risk factors that expose them to GBV. Due to a specific set of vulnerabilities, unaccompanied, and separated girls are at particular risk of sexual exploitation or sexual abuse throughout their journey and afterwards. It is also known that once in Europe, many refugees and migrants live in sub-standard and often overcrowded conditions, with limited privacy and access to water, sanitation and health care facilities and often lack access to other basic services including GBV response services.

All these factors further exacerbate the risk of GBV even after the journey has concluded.

INTERVENTION

To respond to the risks of GBV faced by refugee and migrant women and girls on the move, UNICEF launched a multi-country programme 'Action Against Gender-based Violence Affecting Refugee and Migrant Women and Children' in Europe. With the support of the US Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (BPRM), the programme started in late 2017 in Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia and Italy. The programme followed a multi-country model and was led by the GBV coordination team who ensured quality GBV service provision based on a survivor-centered and standardized approach. The programme review confirmed that this approach helped to achieve higher quality GBV programming, in line with UNICEF's global GBV standards. The coordination team not only provided overall coordination and technical support to the programme, but also helped to identify and address common GBV risks across the region. The team enabled quick and contextualized technical support and encouraged the coherent exchange of information and resources among the participant countries. The multi-country programming approach is not unique within UNICEF, but the strong focus on technical support and capacity development to promote GBV standards proved critical in providing an opportunity to reflect on effective ways to support GBV programming at different levels, both within and outside of UNICEF, in different country contexts.³⁶

The overall objective of the programme was to ensure that survivors of GBV and those at risk of such violence benefit from high quality and life-saving care, support, protection, prevention, and risk mitigation services. A specific focus of the programme was on addressing the root causes, social norms and underlying conditions that lead to GBV by engaging directly with governments and relevant ministries through system strengthening approaches. The programme aimed to create an enabling legal, policy and institutional environment that promotes the right of girls and women, prevents, and effectively responds to GBV. To reach the most vulnerable, UNICEF deployed outreach teams in border areas, transit points and informal settlements. These teams provided specialized services, prompt referrals and safe spaces for women and girls, including unaccompanied and separated (UAS) girls. Additionally, resources were developed targeting non-specialized frontline

professionals, to support the identification of unaccompanied girls and support service provision for boys and young men.³⁷ Responding to the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on GBV service provision, UNICEF and its partners quickly adapted and made rapid transition to the remote service delivery modalities and in some cases combined remote support with continued in person service and response provision. Ranging from continuous knowledge generation to evidence building and advocacy, the programme put diverse strategies in place to transform the harmful social norm of GBV, by targeting diverse sets of stakeholders at different levels of the socio-ecological framework.

IMPACT

Action Against Gender-Based Violence Affecting Refugee and Migrant Women and Children has been an incredibly successful programme especially in terms of reaching out to the survivors of GBV and other individuals at risk. The following are some key results of the programme during October 2017 - June 2021. Over 12,221 GBV survivors and individuals at risk accessed GBV services (well over the targeted 9,250) across four countries. These services included outreach and information dissemination, case management, psychosocial support, material assistance, referral to specialized services and prevention activities. The programme assessment with regards to the quality of GBV services showed that 91 per cent of the services met UNICEF's standards for support. During the same period, 2,037 front line workers (reception site staff, health care workers, social workers, teachers, and linguistic and cultural mediators) were trained in GBV prevention and survivor-centred response approaches.³⁸ UNICEF was able to reach out to these stakeholders despite the impact of COVID-19 and related social distancing measures. UNICEF's review on the [Impact of Covid-19 on GBV: Refugee and Migrant Response](#) confirmed that UNICEF and its partners filled gaps in the provision of COVID-19 information and basic necessities as services were disrupted. A total of 286,763 women, girls, men and boys received information on GBV (including gender friendly COVID-19 related risk communication) through innovative approaches and tools such as [U Report on the Move](#) in Italy, Facebook and WhatsApp groups in Serbia and Bulgaria and multi-lingual [Podcasts in Greece](#).

The programme also prioritized system strengthening work to ensure refugee and migrant women and girl's protection concerns were effectively addressed within the national

protection systems. In Greece for example, UNICEF developed a strategic partnership with the General Secretariat for Gender Equality. As a result of this partnership, data of the women survivors of GBV and their children benefiting from the national network of service was collected, analyzed, and reflected in the national reports and quarterly newsletters. In Serbia and Bulgaria, UNICEF worked with partner non-government organizations and the University of Belgrade, University of Sofia and Plovdiv to strengthen the capacity of professionals on GBV through curriculum development and implementation. In Italy, in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior, International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) UNICEF developed a [pocket guide](#) on how to provide initial support to GBV survivors based on global best practices. Evidence generation on what works in addressing GBV in emergencies remained a key programme priority. UNICEF ECARO and partners developed a [short video](#) to raise the voices of unaccompanied and separated girls in Europe along with a situation analysis report, [Making the invisible visible: the identification of unaccompanied and separated girls in Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Serbia](#), in five languages.³⁹

The programme had a snowball effect in the sense that many of its interventions are still being carried out by UNICEF country offices as part of their commitments to address GBV as a cross-sectoral organizational priority. For example, through this programme UNICEF Greece identified that there is quite a broad scope of information on violence against women and GBV in Greece but collected in a fragmented, non-standardized and piece meal manner. To address this bottleneck, in 2022 UNICEF Greece supported the General Secretariat for Gender Equality on data collection, including for the purpose of reporting on article 11⁴⁰ of the Istanbul Convention and adapted the GBV pocket guide digital app to the Greek context.

Overall, through this programme UNICEF made important contributions in supporting accessibility to mainstream services for GBV survivors without creating parallel systems, supported data collection and analysis on GBV at national levels, enhanced capacities of the professionals on GBV and brought the needs of unaccompanied and separated girls under the limelight. Equipped with a background of sound GBV programming in refugee and migrant context, firmly established partnerships with women rights and girls led organizations and enhanced capacities of the front-line workers (equipped with country specific tools and guidelines) UNICEF stands ready to not only effectively respond to GBV components of the Ukraine refugee response but also achieve gender transformational changes in the lives of refugee women and girls.

2.5. GENDER EQUITABLE EDUCATION SYSTEM



CONTEXT

There is generally a broad consensus that organization and learning about gender occurs through several agents of gender socialization. These can be broadly classified into the following four categories - parents/caregivers, school/peers, community (e.g., service providers, faith leaders, local decision makers etc.) and media. Each agent reinforces gender roles by creating normative expectations for gender specific behaviour. It is also known that different agents of gender socialization can change during the entire life course of an individual and play an important role in the transmission and formation of gender identity, gender roles and definition of gender norms and stereotypes. Schools are critical agents of gender socialization because children spend large amounts of time in such settings. Schools affect gender socialization via two primary sources: teachers and peers who directly influence gender differentiation by providing boys and girls with different learning opportunities and feedback.⁴¹

Unfortunately, teachers receive relatively little training in recognizing and combating gender stereotypes and prejudices—their own and others. As a consequence, teachers often model, expect, reinforce, and lay the foundation for gender differentiation among their pupils. Thus,

most schools create and maintain—rather than counteract—traditional gender stereotypes, biases, and differences.⁴² While modest progress has been made in Kyrgyzstan in making education and learning environments more gender-responsive, it is yet an unfinished agenda. Noting the persistent gender stereotypes in the education system, the CEDAW committee recommended Kyrgyzstan focus on providing training on women’s rights and gender equality for teaching personnel at all levels of the education system, and review school textbooks, curricula and teaching materials with the aim of eliminating discriminatory gender stereotypes. The committee further recommended specific measures to encourage women and girls to choose non-traditional fields of education and career paths, such as STEM fields.⁴³

INTERVENTION

Supporting gender equality in teaching and education systems is one of the key priorities of UNICEF Kyrgyzstan Country Office. The Country Office is implementing these priorities through many interventions including within and outside the framework of the UN Spotlight Initiative, that aims to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls. Since 2020, UNICEF Kyrgyzstan has worked as part of the multi-agency initiative and is responsible for the implementation of the

Spotlight Initiative's Pillar 3 area of work. Pillar 3 work corresponds to gender equitable social norms, attitudes and behaviours change at community and individual levels to prevent sexual gender-based violence (SGBV) and harmful practices.

This case study is an illustration of UNICEF Kyrgyzstan's foundational intervention (within the Spotlight Initiative) of undertaking a value-based training series. The training focuses on addressing deeply held values and gender norms of educational frontline workers, and includes reflection, sharing and practicing the new norms and values by participant. The intervention that targets pre-school educators is guided by the Gender Action Learning Systems (GALS) methodology. GALS is a community led empowerment methodology that aims to promote more harmonious and violence-free relationships in families and communities. It aims to connect and build synergies between various groups of people in pursuit of the common vision of promoting a harmonious life, free of GBV for women and girls, at the family and community level of the socio-ecological framework. The methodology provides practical tools and inclusive participatory processes and platforms for individuals and groups to analyze their lives with a gender perspective and take practical steps to address gender inequalities such as the division of labour between women and men, decision-making about income, expenditures and assets, and relationship with the family members. A key focus of this intervention is breaking gender-based barriers at the individual level and challenging gender inequalities within the family or community level.

Building on the positive results of the value-based training of school teachers undertaken in 2022, UNICEF expanded the scope of this training to include 23 teachers and staff of the Ministry of Education at national and local levels in 4 target locations based on the same GALS methodology. The intervention includes four subsequent training sessions, which are spaced out to allow time for practicing the tools by the participants with their family members, colleagues, and children. The participants are mentored and coached to jointly reflect on individual challenges, biases and stereotypes and receive recommendations as how to meet these challenges. Following each training the participants are tasked to revise one lesson plan to integrate gender-responsive content, and one play-based activity for students. To do so, participants search for existing literature, poems, stories, and folklore that promote positive gender roles. The value- based series of trainings also

enables these teachers to support parents and caregivers in promoting positive gender socialization in their own homes. The revised lesson plans, inclusive of play-based activities and a compendium of gender-responsive literature collected via this exercise will inform the revision of the national early child development curriculum in Kyrgyzstan.

UNICEF Kyrgyzstan has not only strategically positioned gender equality in teaching and education systems via the Spotlight initiative, but also through various other interventions that directly correspond to the above noted CEDAW committee observations. For example, in 2022, UNICEF partnered with the Scientific and Pedagogical Centre to embed anti-discrimination and gender equality provisions in teacher training and textbook development. UNICEF's technical support included the development of a package of online learning course and other technical resources on anti-discrimination and gender for curriculum writers, higher school administrative staff and teachers in Kyrgyz, Russian, Tajik and Uzbek languages. The training package has been used for the capacity development of teachers and other education experts engaged in the development and assessment of subject standards, national textbooks, and supplemental teaching and learning materials. Under a ministerial order, all primary school subject standards and selected new school textbooks have been reviewed in compliance with the new standards. In addition, UNICEF also supported the Ministry of Education to institutionalize gender-responsive teacher training for STEM subject teachers, which was rolled out nationally by the Republican Teacher Training Institute. Close to 650 teachers have so far completed the training. The integration of the training in the national in-service training plan will support continued scale up through 2023 and beyond and support revised lesson plans and more gender-responsive subject materials.

IMPACT

As the majority of the workforce at the teaching level in the education sector consists of females, the above Spotlight Initiative intervention has so far been more successful in engaging female pedagogues as primary beneficiaries. However, the gender balance becomes fairer at the level of secondary beneficiaries. UNICEF Kyrgyzstan is aware of this barrier and will continue trying to engage more men as the primary participants of this training.

So far 23 pre-school pedagogues (one male) participated in the GALS trainings. These participants further practiced the tool with 291 persons (191 women, 100 men) from their families and colleagues. The trained pedagogues who revised lesson plans with a gender lens and integrated gender responsive tools, games and literature promoting gender equality principles in their classes, directly reached 316 children (160 boys, 156 girls). At the end of the intervention, 24 lesson plans will be revised and a compendium of gender-responsive literature will be produced, presented, and recommended for replication. Such an information base will inform the revision of the national early child development curriculum in Kyrgyzstan.

Anecdotal evidence shows that participants have changed their pedagogical practices by removing sex-segregated classroom settings and use of gender restrictive toys and play activities in schools because of this training. There is also some anecdotal evidence to suggest that participants have changed gender relations within their families to more gender equitable terms; have started to better reflect on their own stereotypes and biases and are now better able to spot discriminatory content in the materials they use for teaching. The intervention is expected to end in June 2023 and results will be presented to the Ministry of Education to discuss potential ways of upscaling.



2.5.2. WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH TO MAKE SCHOOLS FREE OF VIOLENCE (TAJIKISTAN)

CONTEXT

As registered in a majority of the countries in the ECA region, VAC especially as a form of disciplinary punishment, often because of deep-rooted gender inequalities and intergenerational cycles of violence, remains widespread yet underestimated⁴⁴ in Tajikistan. According to the 2017 Demographic Health Survey of Tajikistan, 69 per cent of children aged 1–14 experienced some type of violent discipline, and 26 per cent of youth reported at least one incidence of violence, including physical violence, shaming or peer-to-peer violence. Boys are slightly more likely to be violently disciplined than girls in Tajikistan.⁴⁵

The key barriers noted in this regard is a tendency to perceive violence as a norm rather than a problem needing urgent attention; patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes of the perceived role of women in society and the socialization of strict masculine and feminine gender identities, which often contributes to the reinforcement of men’s entitlement to engage in aggressive behaviours and act as the power holder and predominant decision maker.⁴⁶ The situation is also greatly affected by low knowledge of child rearing and gender-responsive and positive disciplining methods among parents, who often legitimize violence in the name of disciplinary punishment. A study conducted by UNICEF in 2016 on Knowledge, Attitudes, Behaviours and Practices related to

children and women with disabilities noted that 35.3 per cent of study respondents believed disciplining children through corporal and other forms of punishment is part of their normal upbringing. Similarly, violence against women with its inter-generational consequences also remains widespread in the country.⁴⁷

School environment can play an instrumental role in violence prevention and response. School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) is a phenomenon that affects many children, families, and communities. There is considerable evidence to suggest that across the globe students experience high rates of physical, sexual, and psychological violence within or around the school environment. This may include teacher perpetuated abuse such as corporal punishment or peer perpetuated violence, bullying and discrimination. Peer-to-peer violence is also widespread across Tajikistan and can often be observed in school settings. Moreover, minimal services exist to respond to boys and girls who experience violence, and where they do exist, access and referrals are weak.⁴⁸

INTERVENTION

To address school related violence, UNICEF Tajikistan established a comprehensive VAC/SGBV prevention mechanism for school children, especially girls and local communities under the Spotlight Initiative. With multiple stakeholders, target audiences and entry points the programme employs a 'whole school approach', meaning students, teachers, parents, school governance bodies, and wider local communities work together against violence and GBV. As part of this initiative, UNICEF together with its partners established a comprehensive student complaint and referral mechanism to receive and redress appeals from boys and girls, in 45 schools of Tajikistan (with approximately 90,000 students). The complaint mechanisms under each school includes the following features: a complaint box, hotline (usually mentors' phone) and a complaint redressal mechanism that consist of a complaint revision committee comprised of a mentor, two teachers, a local police inspector, and representatives of the local community. Members of this committee have been trained on how to review, address, and refer the cases. The committee members have also been sensitized and trained on the basics and approaches of managing gender sensitive, confidential, and reliable complaint and referral mechanisms such as confidentiality, impartiality, gender sensitivity, best interest determination and do no harm etc.

Under each school, UNICEF also supported establishing and/or strengthening a local student council of at least 26 members. In the majority of these councils there is an equal representation of male and female students and also includes representatives from more vulnerable backgrounds (e.g., children with disabilities) and/or socially excluded backgrounds (e.g., Roma), as appropriate to the local context. Student councils have also been trained on the Convention on the Rights of Children, gender equality concepts and principles, ethical guidelines on how to detect and report the cases of sexual violence and GBV, based on survivor-centred approaches. Using the stepping-stone methodology,⁴⁹ student council members also convey SGBV prevention messages to their peers and nearby communities. As a result, every year, these student councils can reach thousands of their peers and local communities with these messages. In addition, they also share their experiences with nearby schools where complaint mechanisms are not yet functional. To instill the culture of speaking up among the students to advocate for zero tolerance on SGBV, UNICEF and partner organizations also

announced micro grants (USD 300 max per grant) for select student councils. With these grants some student councils prepared radio and TV shows with messages to challenge harmful social norms, harmful traditional practices, and gender stereotypes.

This initiative also includes working with Parent Teacher Associations, so that parents are also aware about SGBV, positive parenting and play a contributing role to ending SGBV. These school-based complaint mechanisms have not only received, but also resolved, hundreds of complaints coming from children, especially girls. There is some evidence to suggest that with the support of UNICEF's established whole school approach some children, mainly girls, and also in a couple of cases girls with disabilities, at risk of dropping out have been able to return to school.

IMPACT

As a result of this initiative a comprehensive VAC and GBV complaint and referral mechanism has been established in 45 schools in Tajikistan and is fully operational to receive and address complaints. Now the students, especially girls, have a safe and confidential space to report experiences of SGBV. Moreover, capacity development on issues such as gender equality, social inclusion, positive parenting and disciplining has already benefitted 1,170 students, 45 mentors and 700 teachers. The SGBV prevention campaigns conducted by mentors, and girls and boys has reached more than 50,000 people at schools and local communities. Anecdotal evidence demonstrates that the level of bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment in school, has substantially decreased and the role of the girl child in school governance and decision making has improved. An endline study conducted by UNICEF demonstrates perception levels of application of corporal punishment have decreased to 10 per cent in contrast to 36 per cent before introduction of these mechanisms. So far these complaint mechanisms have received and successfully resolved over 200 cases, including the provision of free legal aid to 7 survivors (5 girls and 2 boys) of sexual violence. The complaint and referral mechanisms are envisaged to be scaled up to 430 new schools in 2023.⁵⁰ For the preparation phase, UNICEF has already provided training for 177 school directors and education department employees in Sughd Oblast.

ENDNOTES

1. UNICEF Office of Research Innocenti (2021) Being intentional about gender-transformative strategies reflections and lessons from UNICEF Gender Policy and Action Plan (2022-2025) - A compendium of papers.
2. UNICEF (2021) Defining social norms and related concepts.
3. UNICEF (2018) Gender Responsive Pedagogy a toolkit for teachers and school (2nd edition).
4. UNICEF, ODI (2020) Advancing positive gender norms and socialization through UNICEF programmes: Monitoring and Documenting change.
5. Ibid.
6. UNICEF Office of Research Innocenti (2021) Being intentional about gender-transformative strategies reflections and lessons from UNICEF Gender Policy and Action Plan (2022-2025) - A compendium of papers.
7. Ibid.
8. WHO, OHCHR, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women (2011) Preventing Gender Biased Sex Selection.
9. Ibid.
10. The strategy focuses on three intersecting areas: promoting adolescent girls' health and nutrition; advancing adolescent girls right to quality education and skills development; protection from violence, exploitation, and abuse (offline and online) and preventing harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) child marriage and early unions.
11. UNICEF (2019) Realizing Potential: Evaluation of UNICEF's Gender Action Plans. Final Report. New York, NY: UNICEF.
12. This section is taken from UNICEF Office of Research Innocenti (2021) Being Intentional About Gender-Transformative Strategies Reflections and Lessons from UNICEF Gender Policy and Action Plan (2022-2025) A compendium of papers.
13. Interagency Gender Working Group. 2017. The Gender Integration Continuum. Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau.
14. This section is also taken from the above source.
15. [UNICEF Gender-transformative programming selected case studies](#)
16. Adapted from World Health Organization (2011) Gender Mainstreaming Manual for Health Managers: A Practical Approach.
17. UNICEF ECARO (2021) Regional mapping STEM and digital skills for girls in Europe and Central Asia.
18. UNICEF Kazakhstan (2022) Country Office Annual Report (COAR).
19. [Building big dreams UNISAT NanoSatellites skills for girls and young women](#)
20. The programme is also being implemented in Zambia, Bhutan, Rwanda, and Guatemala.
21. As validated by the UNICEF Serbia Gender Programme Review (2023) process.
22. The education team is engaging parents with an objective of mobilizing parents to be allies in inclusive and gender responsive education approaches. Child protection's focus is towards the engagement for supporting parents in non-violent disciplining and private sector fundraising in supporting parents with a perspective of the family friendly policy provisions etc., documented in detail in UNICEF Serbia's (2023) Gender Programme Review report.
23. UNICEF Serbia (2022) Country Office Annual Report.
24. Validated by the extensive Gender Programme Review process in ECARO.
25. The following topics are covered - understanding gender; identifying the role of home visitors in challenging gender norms, roles, and practices; gender-responsive parenting; the importance of working with marginalized groups; how gender norms shape violence and how gender equitable norms can be promoted.
26. UNICEF (2022) Kosovo Country Office Annual Report.
27. Ibid.
28. Jaks, R., Baumann, I., Juvalta, S. et al. Parental digital health information seeking behavior in Switzerland: a cross-sectional study. BMC Public Health 19, 225 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-6524-8>.
29. Ibid.
30. Gender discrimination in assessing health services especially by Roma communities in some countries of the region is very well documented in various research pieces including UNICEF Gender Programme Reviews (e.g North Macedonia GPR) as well as in the ODI (2009) Roma Health Mediators Success and Challenges etc.
31. The new functionalities include information on wholistic child development, tailored advice on child's development needs, possibility to navigate between multiple child profiles, and parent advice and tips on taking care of child's and parents well-being etc.
32. Time use surveys are used for investigating how women and men divide their time between paid work, housework, study, personal care, family tasks, and leisure activities.
33. <https://www.unicef.org/protection/gender-based-violence-in-emergencies>
34. Translated via a specific commitment to end GBV and risk mitigation in the global framework of the Core Commitments for Children (CCC) that guides UNICEF's humanitarian action.
35. Between January and December 2020, 94,800 refugees and migrants arrived in Europe through Italy, Greece, Spain and Bulgaria, with 35,730 arriving between October and December.

36. UNICEF ECARO (2021) Regional Fact Sheet Action against GBV affecting refugee and migrant women and children in Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Serbia, October 2019 – June 2021.
37. As part of evidence generation the programme developed A Field Guide on Sexual Violence against Boys for practitioners to support adolescent boys who have survived sexual violence or who are at high risk of violence.
38. Data extracted from UNICEF's monitoring system in the BPRM funded GBV programme, covering Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Serbia, 2021.
39. UNICEF ECARO (2021) Gender Results Report.
40. The article refers to the coordination of data collection and dissemination of data on violence against women.
41. Bigler,R.,Hamilton,V., Hayes,A. (2013) The role of schools in early socialization of gender differences, Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development.
42. <https://www.child-encyclopedia.com/gender-early-socialization/according-experts/role-schools-early-socialization-gender-differences>
43. CEDAW (2021) Concluding Observations on the fifth periodic report of Kyrgyzstan Ref CEDAW/C/KGZ/CO/5.
44. There is yet no centralized data on VAC in Tajikistan. The prevalence estimates are derived from health or justice system administrative data.
45. Tajikistan Country Programme Document (2022-2025).
46. Tajikistan Gender Programmatic Review (2020).
47. According to Tajikistan 2012 DHS 19% of women (aged 15-49) reported experiencing physical violence at least once since age 15.
48. Tajikistan Gender Programmatic Review (2020).
49. Steppingstones methodologies include working with parents and caregivers to improve their knowledge on positive parenting and non-violent ways of communication and prevention of SGBV.
50. UNICEF Tajikistan Country Office Annual Report 2022.



**United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
Europe and Central Asia Regional Office**

Route des Morillons 4, 1211
Geneva, Switzerland
Phone: +41 22 909 5111
ecaro@unicef.org