



Addressing gender inequalities from the early years of education

Key findings

- **Despite global gender parity in access to pre-primary education, girls and boys continue to have different classroom experiences.** Gender biases and stereotypes are frequently reproduced in teacher-student interactions, play, pre-primary education curricula, and teaching and learning materials.
- **There is a need to proactively and explicitly incorporate gender-responsiveness into the design and implementation of pre-primary education services and boldly promote gender-transformative strategies with a system-wide perspective.**
- **Policies should be aligned to the five core components of quality pre-primary education systems:** planning and budgeting, curriculum development and implementation, workforce development, family and community engagement, and quality assurance.
- **Teachers play a crucial role in building gender-transformative pre-primary education systems and influencing caregiving practices in homes.** Practitioners should bring gender awareness to their classroom practices by reflecting on any gender stereotypical attitudes they may have, especially towards children, and by being critical on how the teaching and learning materials they select could perpetuate gender biases.

Context

Access to pre-primary education has increased significantly in the past two decades and, based on current global enrolment rates, boys and girls are participating equally. However, despite this gender parity in access, the pre-primary education system does not always deliver on its potential to tackle gender inequalities and address harmful gender stereotypes and norms while they are being internalized and formed by the youngest learners. There is, therefore, a need to proactively incorporate gender-responsive and gender-transformative strategies into the design and implementation of pre-primary education systems to address gender inequalities.

What do we know?

Gender stereotypes and biases can appear from the first years of a child's life. As early as the ages of two and three, children begin to gain insight into certain cultural gender stereotypes.¹ They begin to acquire gender stability around three-and-a-half years old,² and gender biases about girls' and boys' intelligence may be formed as early as age six.³ It is important to deconstruct these biases and stereotypes from a young age, as doing so can become more difficult with the onset of puberty due to an increased desire to comply with social expectations and pressures related to gender.⁴

Current global pre-primary enrolment figures reflect gender parity, with boys and girls enjoying almost equal access in most instances.⁵ The early childhood education (ECE) system, therefore, has significant potential to play a role in tackling gender inequalities and gender socialization processes, addressing gender stereotypes and harmful gender norms at the time they are being acquired.

Children's experiences in pre-primary education may, however, reinforce and reproduce gender stereotypes. Behind overall gender parity figures, boys and girls might still have different classroom experiences. Studies have found that pre-primary educators often uphold gender stereotypes through their interactions with children, their selection of learning materials, and through gendered childhood play.^{6,7}

Pre-primary teachers and educators play a crucial role in supporting gender equality at the preschool level. Studies from a range of contexts^{8,9} have observed that pre-primary teachers give more attention to boys and have lower expectations of girls. Assessments undertaken by Plan International in 11 Asian countries found that teachers held stereotypical attitudes about boys' and girls' achievements and roles. For example, they attributed academic achievement in girls to hard work but in boys to natural ability or competency at certain subjects.¹⁰

Gender bias and stereotyping in textbooks are among the biggest challenges in the road to gender equality in education.^{11,12} This is a particular challenge in developing countries, where research shows that teachers rely heavily on textbooks, reproducing rather than contesting stereotypes contained within.¹³

Gender roles are assigned by society, and reflect cultural, religious and political beliefs.¹⁴ Gender norms are learned through life, but parents and caregivers are the primary agents of socialization, especially at an early age.¹⁵ The interactions and behaviours children observe among their caregivers influence how they see the world, and themselves in it.¹⁶ Parents and immediate family may consciously or unconsciously transfer gender norms to their children through different paths.¹⁷

What should we do?

There is a need to proactively incorporate gender-responsive and gender-transformative strategies into the design and implementation of ECE systems. Without this explicit attention, the pre-primary education system may instead reinforce and reproduce gender inequality. To develop effective gender-transformative ECE systems, policies should target all five components of the system (as outlined in UNICEF's Build to Last Conceptual Framework),¹⁸ with specific strategies including:

Planning and budgeting



Application of gender mainstreaming in the planning, budgeting and management processes of financial, human and physical resources to integrate gender in all steps of national policy and programming, and ensure the equitable and efficient provision of pre-primary education. Gender-responsive planning and budgeting aim for resources to be equitably distributed between boys and girls,¹⁶ thus contributing towards mitigating gender inequalities and improving prospects and opportunities for gender equality and empowerment.¹⁴

Curriculum development and implementation



Gender equality should be a high priority in pre-primary curricula to ensure that girls and boys have equal opportunities to learn, and that teaching materials and textbooks do not reinforce gender norms and stereotypes. A gender-focused lens can be used for curriculum development, review or reform to actively promote gender-transformative perspectives. Revision of textbook materials is also important to ensure they adopt a focus on learning through play, and to remove illustrations that preserve gender stereotypes (such as showing men in STEM positions and portraying women primarily as caregivers).

Workforce development



This includes the implementation of gender-responsive recruitment, and professional development and retention strategies targeting teachers and other personnel. These measures should ensure that both men and women engaged in the delivery of pre-primary education at different levels in the system have the necessary competencies and support to promote children's development and learning, alongside opportunities for growth in a gender-transformative environment.¹⁷ Training teachers in gender-transformative pedagogy and enabling men and women to play non-stereotypical roles are important ways to bring gender awareness to the classroom and to respond to children's specific needs. A variety of tools and guidelines have been developed to help pre-primary education practitioners incorporate gender considerations into their practice.

Family and community engagement



Early learning programs have a huge potential to engage parents and families to examine gendered roles, aspirations and expectations and influencing parents' actions, practices, beliefs and knowledge to create the environment and conditions for positive gender socialization of the child. Moreover, well-designed ECE provision can also contribute to youth livelihoods, families' economic empowerment and women's employment opportunities.

Quality assurance



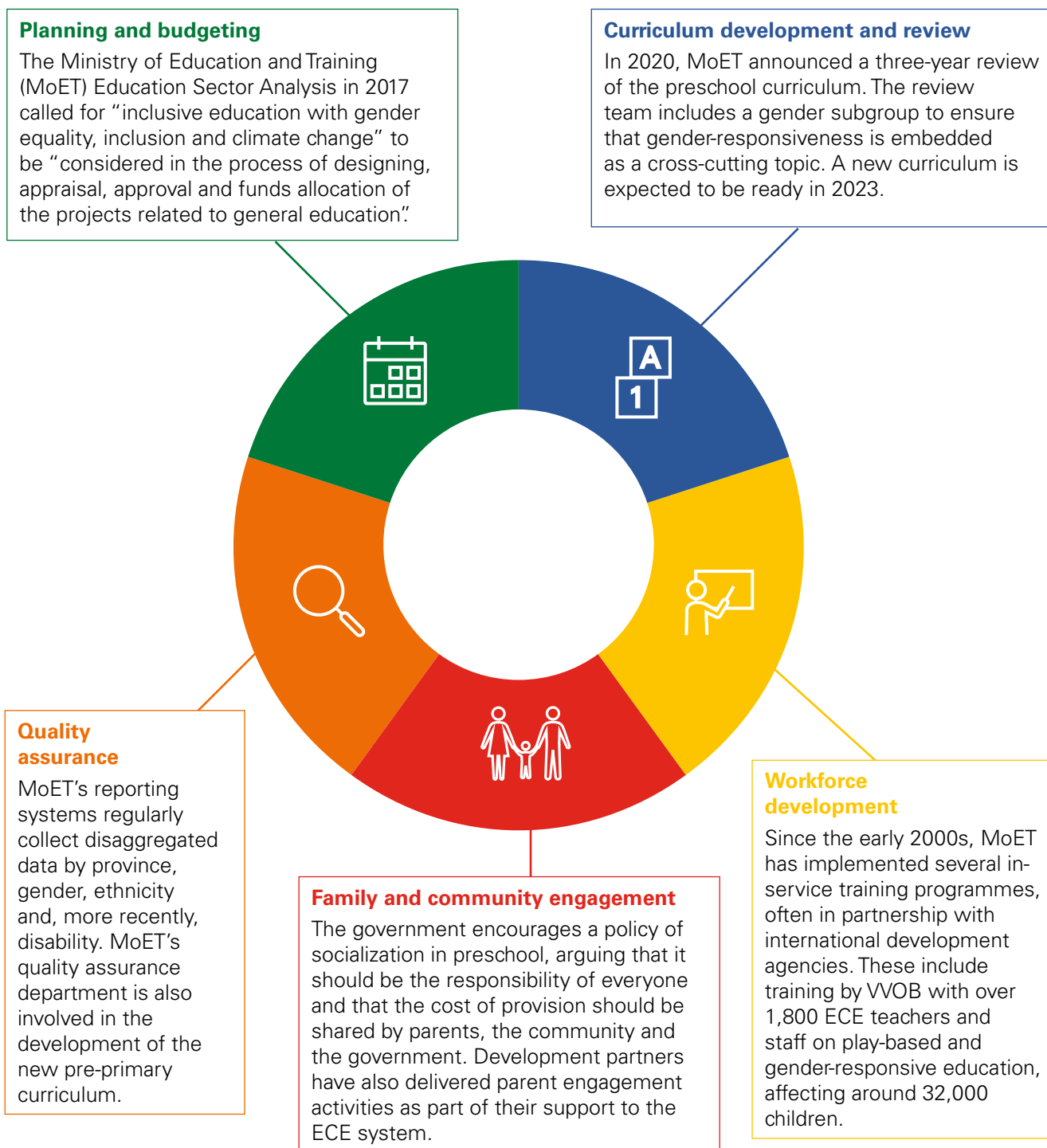
Pre-primary education quality assurance mechanisms should be gender-responsive. This can be achieved by developing gender-transformative quality standards and indicators, and by collecting sex-disaggregated data that informs how gender plays a role in access, enrolment and pedagogical practices in the classroom.

All strategies and policies summarized above are presented in more detail in the 'Tackling gender inequality from the early years: strategies for building a gender-transformative pre-primary education system' report and associated briefs (see Further Reading, below). While the strategies are outlined separately, building a coherent and gender-transformative pre-primary education system would require them to align with one another.

What are some examples of good practice?

Incorporating a gender perspective is essential for achieving gender-transformative ECE. Viet Nam is one of the few countries with high coverage of pre-primary education (gross enrolment rates above 92 per cent) with gender parity.¹⁹ Government strategies to build a more gender-transformative ECE system in Viet Nam are aligned and integrated into multiple components of the system. Some of these activities are summarized below:

Figure 1: Strategies to address gender equality through the pre-primary education system in Viet Nam



What are the remaining evidence gaps?

Evidence on effective advocacy strategies for achieving high-level political will or buy-in of gender-responsive and gender-transformative measures at the system level. It is necessary to understand what strategies work across different contexts to engage governments, private providers and other institutions, such as pre-service and in-service teacher training providers, to generate a supportive, enabling environment that incorporates gender-responsiveness into pre-primary education systems and promotes gender-transformative approaches through early learning settings.

Further reading

Tackling Gender Inequality from the Early Years: Strategies for building a gender-transformative pre-primary education system. Nugroho, Anindita, Delgado, M., Baghdasaryan, B., Vindrola, S., Lata, D. and Mehmood Syed, G., UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, 2022.

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Correspondence should be addressed to:

Divya Lata, Education Specialist
– Early Childhood Education,
UNICEF Programme Division,
dldata@unicef.org

Bella Baghdasaryan, Education
Researcher, UNICEF Innocenti,
bbaghdasaryan@unicef.org

UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office
of Research and Foresight
Via degli Alfani, 58
50121 Florence, Italy

www.unicef-irc.org

@UNICEFInnocenti on Twitter,
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