

**EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON EQUALITY OF THE GIRL CHILD****Ms. Neeta Sharma (Professor Flame University)****Dr. Namrata Kamble (Assistant Professor, MIT Art Design & Technology University)**

The commitment to tackle discrimination and exclusion and advance children's rights and equality for girls is the mainstay of global policies around the world. The drive to tackle the exclusion and gender inequality is in response to the fact that most of the countries have entrenched gender inequality, discrimination against girls and women, and son preference as salient features. These affect the care and access to services and opportunities provided to girls, right from birth. (Plan International, 2017) This paper aims to respond to the fact that Early Childhood Development (ECD) initiatives and programmes, both within the country and outside, often appear to give limited attention to gender inequality and discrimination. Furthermore, initiatives to promote girls' rights and gender equality often pay little attention to early childhood, instead they focus on older girls and adolescents. It is true that the most significant gender-specific rights violations and gaps usually affect older girls, adolescents and young women. Data procured from global sources do not indicate significant differences between girls and boys in terms of infant mortality, under-five malnutrition or enrolment in pre-school. But if we focus just on the global data, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that in many communities and right from birth, gender discrimination affects girls disproportionately which threatens girls' chances to realise their rights and to live a life of dignity. In such a case, boys too imbibe a life of harmful notions of masculinity.

The current paper aims to describe why gender inequality and discrimination matter so much for the early years' development of children, especially the girl child, and the reasons why gender-transformative Early Childhood Development programming is of fundamental importance for promoting the rights of girls and boys and for challenging gender inequality and discrimination.

Early childhood development matters for children's rights and for gender equality. There is overwhelming scientific evidence that the first years, the period below the age of eight years, are the most important years of a child's life. This is the period when 90 per cent of a child's brain is built and when the child learns social, emotional, cognitive and language skills that are the foundations for health, development, wellbeing, healthy relationships and productivity into adulthood (p.4). This is also the period when children learn the gendered norms, attitudes and expectations of their community and society, meaning that by the time they reach primary school, girls and boys may already have a clear idea of how they are expected to behave, how they are valued and what their future role will be.

In many contexts, gender inequality and discrimination establish women's low status, their poor physical and mental health and their limited opportunities to make choices for themselves and their children. This in turn results in their children having fewer chances of surviving and thriving during early childhood. In countries and communities where gender discrimination and son preference are significant, girls often receive lower quality care and attention right from birth and grow up at a disadvantage, with lifelong implications that affect the next generation.

Gender-transformative programmes have the explicit intention to transform unequal power relations. Their focus goes beyond improving the condition of women and girls: they seek to improve the social position of girls and women (how they are valued in society) as well as the full realisation of their rights.

When ECD programmes are gender transformative, they engage parents, caregivers, community leaders and educators to change the way that girls are taught so that unjust gendered norms and attitudes are challenged from an early age; they work to ensure that girls are provided with equal care and opportunities as boys. They offer, a key window of opportunity to promote young children's development as well as to advance gender equality – with potentially long-term impact. This evidence has been gathered from external reports and sources, and based on the findings from research conducted in six countries (Ethiopia, Mozambique, Pakistan, Uganda, Kenya and Bolivia) on the gender dimensions of early childhood development.

Despite all the evidence demonstrating the importance of ECD, this is the period of a child's life in which governments often invest the least. Globally, an estimated 250 million children under five years of age – 43% of the under-fives growing up in low- and middle income countries – will probably not develop to their full potential because they grow up facing a number of risk factors (Black, 2007). These include poverty; poor health and under-nutrition; inadequate responsive care and learning opportunities provided within the home; exposure to violence, abuse and neglect; and lack of access to quality Early Childhood Development (ECD) services, including pre-primary schooling.

Girls with impaired cognitive, social and emotional development in early childhood are more likely to do poorly in school and leave school early: subsequently, as adults, they are more likely to have low incomes, high fertility and provide poor healthcare, nutrition and stimulation to their own children (Grantham-McGregor, S., 2007). Supporting girls to develop to their full potential also, therefore, contributes to breaking the inter-generational transmission of discrimination, disadvantage and poverty.

Gender Equality and Women's rights have a bearing on early Childhood Development. As mentioned earlier, millions of girls are failing to develop to their potential due to multiple risk factors. Poverty is a key structural cause of this situation. But gender discrimination, in many communities, props gendered

social norms and expectations about the role and behaviours of women *and* the denial of the rights of women who are primary caregivers, impacting in turn on the development of their girls. Of the 800 women who died every day from maternal causes in 2015, 99 per cent were from developing countries (UNICEF & WHO, 2015). Most maternal deaths are directly related to complications during delivery that could have been prevented through access to quality essential obstetric care. Social norms mean the shared expectations and informal rules of a particular group, community, or society about what is appropriate behaviour for people. Gendered social norms are the shared expectations and informal rules about how each gender should behave. (Plan International, 2017)

Women's under-nutrition is related to gender inequality, further aggravated by poverty and lack of access to resources. In many cultures, boys and men traditionally eat first, and girls and women eat the leftovers. They are also the first to make nutritional sacrifices when faced with economic difficulties.

Adolescent birth rates are highest where child marriage is most prevalent: young girls forced early into marriage rarely have a say regarding when they will get pregnant. Despite near-universal commitments to end child marriage, in developing countries, one in three girls is married before the age of 18 and one in nine girls before the age of 15.

Family environments are a major predictor of child development outcomes. There is a large body of non-experimental evidence showing that adverse family environments substantially impair child development outcomes. The likelihood of parents and caregivers being able to provide the responsive care, nutrition, stimulation and protection to the girl child is reduced when families are poor; the girls' chances of surviving and thriving are also reduced when their mothers face societal violence or conflict, or are displaced; and when the mother is suffering from maternal depression or has low levels of education and limited intra-household bargaining power. Supporting a woman's health, nutrition, wellbeing and decision-making power and her children's survival, growth and development are intertwined. Promoting women's empowerment means supporting the girl child.

Witnessing domestic violence as a child represents a key risk factor for toxic stress which can affect the child's brain development with potentially long-term impacts on social, emotional and cognitive development. Children who grow up in families where there is violence may suffer a range of behavioural and emotional disturbances. Ultimately, witnessing violence against women gives girls clear messages that they are of lower worth and can expect to be treated this way in adulthood, and gives boys the message that they are superior and can expect to use violence over others as a means of control and of asserting power in their adulthood.

Son preference is a reality not only in India but in many other countries as well. While it is usually considered to be particularly strong in certain regions – East Asia, Central and South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa – it has also been noted in communities in Central and South America and in

Sub-Saharan Africa. The extent to which sons are preferred over daughters and the causes for son preference differ depending upon the countries.

- Sons are seen as having a higher wage-earning capacity (especially in agrarian economies) with more potential to add to family wealth and property (while customs dictate that daughters drain it through dowries).
- Sons continue the family line and often take responsibility for the care of parents in illness and old age, while daughters are married away to another household.
- Sons perform important religious roles.
- Sons are expected to defend or exercise the family's power while daughters are viewed as requiring protection, creating a perceived burden on the household.
- Producing sons is seen as a reaffirmation of a father's manhood, and failure to produce sons is seen as a woman's failure.

In most contexts, the fact that son preference is prevalent does not mean that families do not love and want to care for their daughters. What it more usually means, particularly among families with a limited income, is that they choose to invest more of the scarce resources they have in the care and education of their sons. Research in India has also found that women's education is the single most significant factor in reducing son preference (ICRW, 2006). More recently, with the expansion of medical technology to ascertain sex before birth, sex-selective abortion has increased, particularly among middle and upper income families that can afford diagnostic services. Different studies and authors have estimated that between 60 million and 106 million females are "missing" from the projected populations in Asia, including in Bangladesh, China, India, Pakistan, South Korea and Taiwan, due to sex-selective abortion and female infanticide (UNICEF & WHO, 2011). While a number of countries, including India, South Korea and Nepal, have placed criminal bans on sex-selective abortions, the evidence suggests that these are ineffective and have not succeeded in halting this practice (Vogel, 2012). Furthermore, bans may "distract attention from the real issue and fail to combat the underlying societal attitudes that devalue girls and underlying cultural pressures that cause individuals and couples to pursue sex-selective abortions" (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2007). In India and sub-Saharan Africa, there exists gender bias in breast-feeding: girls are weaned several weeks earlier than boys in some communities in order that the mother can get pregnant more quickly and hopefully bear a son (Chakravarty, A. (2012).

Girls from rural areas or poor families mostly have less access to schools than their brothers. In cases where the family values sons more than daughters and is unable or unwilling to fund all children through school, daughters may be deprived of early childhood education or be given a lower-cost, and often lower-quality, option.

Multiple barriers – both on the supply and demand side – explain why girls, particularly from poor, rural communities, are less likely to enter primary school or to start school on time. They include: gendered norms and expectations about the future role of girls and boys which result in families with limited incomes opting to invest in boys' education (given expectations that men will earn higher incomes than women)(Rao, N.,&Sweetman, C., 2014), the decision to keep the girl out of school in order that she can take care of younger siblings; and parents' concerns about the lack of separate hygiene and sanitation facilities in schools, as well as the safety of their daughters both within and en route to school (UNESCO &UNICEF, 2015).

The burst in action to remedy a traditional malady in countries like Bangladesh, in particular, followed by India, Pakistan and Nepal, has been the result of the confluence of numerous factors – a more conducive international aid environment that has seen significant amounts of aid disbursement to primary and basic education, governments are more aware of the importance of promoting gender equality, supported by international processes such as the Beijing Conference of 1995, feminist movements having pushed for greater attention to issues of gender equality and women's empowerment having seen a major boost, amongst others. India has the highest survival disparity in favour of boys. These disparities widen at secondary and tertiary levels. The gap at secondary level is particularly disturbing. The transitions between primary–upper primary and upper primary–secondary are the weak links in the chain of gender equality; and they coincide with the time that a girl's future opportunities are crucially determined.

Sri Lanka and the Maldives achieved high rates of education and gender parity through systemic reforms that helped promote more effective management of service delivery. Yet in the remaining countries of the region, the development of systemic capacities, structures and appropriate processes remains caught up in cultural stigmas as well as political and institutional failures. These provide the challenges to which this paper is broadly addressed.

The situation at the macro level needs to be studied. These include donor agencies, governments and international and national NGOs that have a role and voice in shaping policy. First, what is meant by 'better girls' education'? Increasing access is not a sufficient indicator of a better policy for 'better girls' education', though it is an important starting-point. What is more important is to question what kind of education is being provided, and under what conditions. Merely getting girls to school is no guarantee of qualitative outcomes. Gender equality must be a part and parcel of the social order.

(Subramanian, R., 2007) refers to Mainstreaming Gender for Better Girls' Education: Policy and Institutional Issues as comprising ten areas:

Gender-sensitive targeting: Those sections of the population that require attention must be addressed. These are sub-groups that are need to be shown a new light by giving preferential focus to girls in

order to remove distortions of resources normally allocated to boys. The girls' families are therefore encouraged to invest in their future and will surely have an impact on their education.

Deepening understandings of gender equality: This often runs counter to target-based approaches to education. It is not an easy task to rid society of the underlying social resistances to gender parity. The value of educating girls requires time and effort to understand.

Reconceptualising learning: The existing modes of learning, the curricula, must be made more relevant to individuals and communities. Education must respond to the processes of life and not merely be theoretical in nature. This is linked to the need to make schooling more responsive to local needs through recognizing the diversity of learners,

and recognizing that different children will have different needs through the learning-cycle and may be differentially supported by their home environment.

Making schools more responsive to local needs: Schools must realize that they do not function in a vacuum and that their curricula need to bridge the gap that currently exists in education. More practical instruction and skill-based training will go a long way to promote inclusiveness of the girls. A bad school environment can deter girls from attending school and also negatively impact on the quality of education girls receive. The school environment refers not just to the physical infrastructure of the school premises but also the wider learning environment. Inadequate and unsafe infrastructure, particularly the lack of toilets, gender-segregated toilets, changing facilities, and access to safe drinking water may discourage girls from attending school.

Child-centeredness and the empowerment of girls' mothers in decision-making: The focus of child education must be child-centred pedagogy with the girl child at the centre. This will help children deal with the adverse consequences of social prejudice and judgement, where required. The girls will be empowered to learn new skills where they will be brought into the education process, given responsibilities as well as involved in the decision-making process.

They will gain confidence to postpone child marriage and therefore, continue further with their schooling. Mothers have been consistently identified as a key driver for change, especially for improving daughters' educational prospects. They should also be involved in their daughters' school activities as well as in decision-making in order to hone the skills of their daughters.

Intervening in social spaces to influence change: Most mainstreaming 'machinery' looks the same irrespective of the country; most is located at the national level, rarely reaching sub-state levels where development change may be more manageable, and may more closely reflect the needs and priorities of particular sub-groups (Subramanian, R., 2007). Discrimination occurring outside the schooling space must be addressed. A common platform for parents, teachers and children, as for local body administrators must be created in order to discuss the expectations and aspirations for girls' education,

their problems and path to change. Issues of gender must take centre-stage so that patriarchal interests and traditional resistance are not institutionalized. Budgetary allocations by ministries must take into consideration the special needs of the girl child (Kabeer, 2003).

Empowering and resourcing teachers, especially women teachers: Along with parents and primary caregivers, it is widely recognised that teachers at all levels of the education system, from pre-school upwards, play a critical part in shaping children's understanding of gender roles. Teachers' attitudes, practices and different expectations of boys and girls in school can reproduce gender stereotypes and affect girls' and boys' motivation, participation and learning outcomes. The limited official data available suggests, however, that too little is being done within public pre-school programmes to challenge, rather than reinforce, the way children are taught unjust gendered norms and attitudes from the earliest age.

Perhaps one of the most significant barriers to an inclusive and quality learning environment is the lack of female teachers particularly in low and middle income countries, which is itself a manifestation of the historical lack of access to education and harmful gender stereotypes about the role of women. Women teachers have a positive impact on girls' education, because in some conservative communities, parents will not allow their daughters to be taught by a male teacher. The presence of women in schools can impact positively on girls' retention in school and on their achievement. At the school policy level, women teachers may act as advocates for girls, representing their perspectives and needs, and promoting more girl-friendly learning. Women teachers provide new and different role models for girls, breaking down harmful gender stereotypes.

Ongoing monitoring, legalizing rights, there is unlikely to be sustainable gender parity, and meaningful movement from gender: The international community has recognised the equal right to quality education of everyone and committed to achieving gender equality in all fields, including education, through their acceptance of international human rights law. This means that states have legal obligations to remove all discriminatory barriers, whether they exist in law or in everyday life, and to undertake positive measures to bring about equality, including in access of, within, and through education.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) applies to children under 18. It recognises education as a legal right to every child on the basis of equal opportunity. Its Article 28 guarantees free compulsory primary education for all; progressive free secondary education that should in any case be available and accessible to all; and accessibility to higher education on the basis of capacity. It encourages international cooperation in matters related to education, in particular elimination of ignorance and illiteracy and access to scientific and technical knowledge. Its Article 29 defines the aims of education and recognises also the liberty of parents to choose the kind of education they want

to give to their children and the liberty to establish and direct educational institutions, in conformity with minimum standards laid down by the State (United Nations General Assembly, 1989)

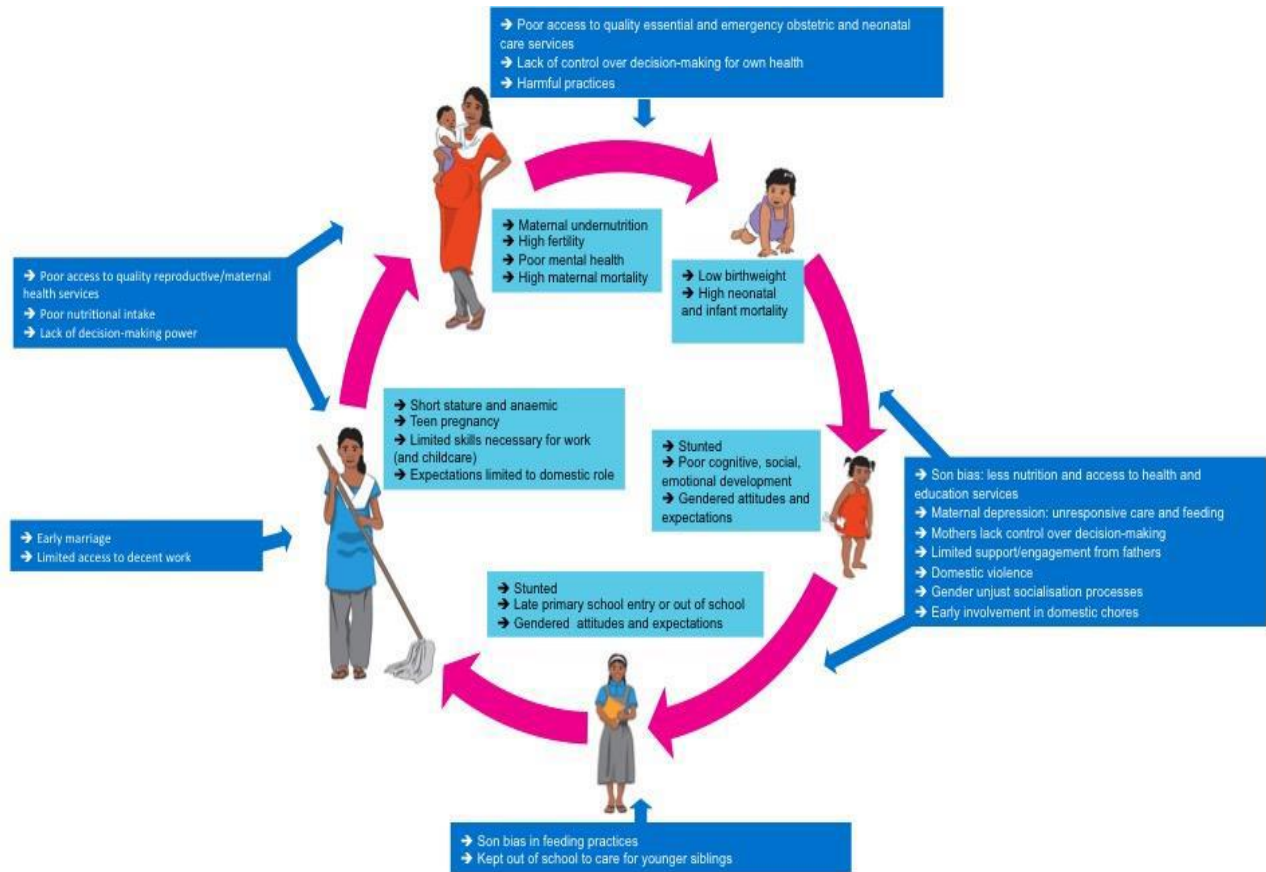
Girls and boys receive equal attention and respect. It is ensured that during the day the tone of voice and comments given, wait time provided for answering questions, feedback provided, opportunity in classroom tasks are same for both boys and girls. As a result, they learn to value themselves and others equally. Equal treatment sends messages that each child is worthy and valued regardless of her or his sex or other differences. Active learning must be facilitated as much as possible through play and other activities which are free of gender bias. Stories, songs, activities and facilitation aids should depict girls and boys in the same roles and men and women in all professions. Both women and men should appear as leaders, heroes and problem solvers.

Girls do some things that boys don't do and some things more or less than the boys. Boys and girls have different ideas, experiences and behaviours. However, pre-schoolers enjoy imitating adults and role plays are good ways for them to show the different things they do and know. Girls like to pretend to be boys or fathers and boys like to role play female roles. While enacting they understand the other sex and teachers/caregivers can explore what feelings girls and boys have, build the comfort of both sexes in discussing their feelings too. As the educator treats each child well, it may be easier to get children to listen to each other, to share and to play respectfully. Boys can also be impacted negatively by teachers' expectations for their gender. For instance, in some cases early grade teachers explained that they paid more attention and dedicated more time to girls, as they were more cooperative and willing and able to learn.

ECCE is now emerging as a significant equity issue in the Indian context. With the limitation of public resources, priority has to be given to primary education. The field reality often is that the absence of ECCE centres leads to younger children "crowding into" primary schools and affecting the classroom quality in terms of both space and teacher-pupil ratio and increasing drop-out and repetition rates in primary schools. About 9.3 percent of children are found to be 'under age' in the primary schools (Mehta, 2007). Also, expanding primary education without providing adequate early childhood education centres also leads to children coming into schools without attaining adequate school readiness, more so girls.

The sections above have described how gender inequality impacts on women's rights and in turn on the development of girls. They have also described how gender discrimination and gender socialisation start at birth, affect the girl's whole life course and are transmitted onto the next generation, as illustrated in the diagram below.





Plan International, (p. 22)

Making up for opportunities lost during this early years “window of opportunity” is not impossible. However, correcting developmental deficits later on, to enable a child to develop to her or his full potential, will require much greater resources – both time and financial. For this reason, it is much more cost-effective and efficient to prevent inequalities in development from occurring during the earliest years, rather than remedying them later (Harvard University Centre on the Developing Child, (2007).

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