

Equality from day one : The transformative power of ECCD to address gender inequality.

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Executive Summary

The first 1,000 days of a child's life are defining. This is a period of rapid development and learning when [socialising norms and gendered expectations](#) are as influential as appropriate nutrition and suitable sanitation. Consequently, Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) is inseparable from gendered explorations of the care, parenting and education of the very youngest in society.

This report, inspired by the 2019 Conference of the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood, will examine how ECCD caregivers in the Asia-Pacific region can help to bring an improvement to gender. It will establish four recommendations which, if implemented, should help release young girls from the limited and discriminatory norms forced upon them from conception (Rodger, 2019).

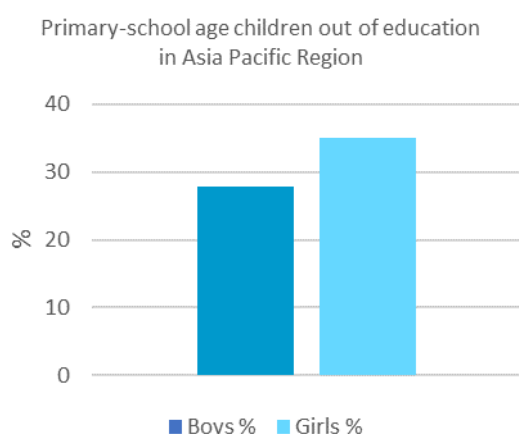
The intended audience of this report is the governments, NGOs (such as Plan International and UNICEF) and ECCD experts within the Asia-Pacific region. However, its recommendations can be applied across the globe since gender inequality is a widespread parasite, one which we should consistently strive to stamp out.

Problem Statement

In this section of the report I plan to analyse the issue of ECCD and gender inequality and establish its importance. My analysis will begin by setting out how the relationship between a parent and a young child can contribute towards gender inequality. Then I will analyse the issue by examining the consequences of establishing limiting gender norms in early childhood from a social and economic perspective.

Parents and caregivers are a child’s first and most influential teacher. It is through contact with their principle caregiver that girls first begin to internalise harmful gender attitudes and expectations, and this [begins as soon as a girl is conceived](#). A disturbingly common trend in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) is that of male babies being [‘favoured, prioritised and valued’](#) over female ones. In LMICs this stems from economic and cultural rationale due to beliefs that [a girl will never be the breadwinner and cannot pass on the family name](#). From the moment a girl is born these harmful gender stereotypes are used to place her on a completely un-level playing field with the boys around her. Poverty seriously exacerbates this issue. When there is a shortage of money, food, medicine and access to education, the boys in LMICs are nearly always prioritised, leaving girls dropping further and further behind in regard to their health, nutrition and education.

Improving ECCD programming is [one of the most productive decisions a country](#)



can make in order to improve human, social and economic development. In the context of gender inequality, ECCD plays a vital role: the way in which a young girl is raised determines her physical, social and economic wellbeing.

Fig. 1 - Data source: UIS (2018)

Research collated by Plan International highlights that gaps caused by gender inequality are [disproportionately wider in poorer countries](#). Across the globe over 130 million girls are out of education including over [30 million girls of primary school age](#). In the Asia-Pacific region, girls are 1.25 times less likely to be in primary education than boys (see Fig. 1). Moreover in low-income countries, [less than 60% of girls complete their primary education](#). Women who had no education at all [earn 14% to 19% less](#) than those with primary education. This illustrates how impactful the early childhood period can be on the future of young girls.

This should be reason enough to improve ECCD through a gendered lens. However to incentivise governments to take this research into account I would like to stress that gender inequality [limits the human capital growth and sustainable development](#) of a country. In fact some countries [lose more than \\$1b billion every year](#) when they fail to educate girls to the same level as boys.

Therefore improving ECCD using gender as a framework ought to be a priority of Asia-Pacific states since it should benefit their economies.

The final area of analysis involves appreciating that it is not just the primary caregiver, i.e. the parents, who reinforces gender norms. Teachers and community leaders also play a very significant role. [Research by Plan International](#) on the gendered aspects of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programmes in 11 countries including Bangladesh and Myanmar discovered three things:

- Differing, gendered beliefs and aspirations held by parents, teachers and other caregivers for boys and girls resulted in them treating them differently.
- Within the class room, these beliefs resulted in different activities and different expectations for boys and girls.
- The majority of staff in ECCE were women. This was unchallenged due to gender expectations which dictate that care is a woman's role.

These three insights suggest that there is a need for ECCE (as a sub-discipline of ECCD) to be improved using a gendered lens. The aim is to break down the restrictive beliefs and expectations placed upon young children based on their gender. As well as examining how we can do so through parents, it seems crucial to provide training to educators

as well. Moreover there needs to be a cultural and social shift in the dialogue surrounding 'care' work, such as teaching. It is [assigned low value and low status](#) meaning very few men are involved in ECCE. Having a majority of female teachers subconsciously plants the seed within a child's head that women are only suited to care giving roles. Reforms to education training and the way it is perceived are necessary if we are to use ECCD as a manner to address gender inequality.

Policy and Strategy Alternatives

CURRENT AND PROPOSED POLICIES/ STRATEGIES

Gender inequality is a widely researched and discussed topic and the way in which it can be addressed can be approached from a huge variety of perspectives.

One approach is through labour legislation covering aspects from equal pay to freedom from discrimination. [Mongolia](#), for example, passed a law with provisions on equal pay for work of equal value in 2015 and [Vietnam](#) has developed a code of conduct on sexual harassment in the workplace.

Other approaches to gender inequality in the Asia-Pacific Region have included [community-based training to improve the employability of women](#), such as in Bangladesh, and economic assistance. [India](#), for example, has a programme of

preferential interest rates and credit guarantee schemes for women entrepreneurs.

All the above approaches have one thing in common: they attempt to solve gender inequality through adult women. I argue that this is much too late. In order to address gender inequality sustainably and effectively it is crucial to start at the very beginning of a child's life during the ECCD period. By the time they are attempting to enter the workforce, whether formally or informally, it is already too late.

I will now assess a selection of current and proposed policies which do address gender inequality using an ECCD framework.

Current Policy: The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Goal 4,

Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
Target 4.2: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.
Indicator 1 :Proportion of children under 5 years of age who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being, by sex
Indicator 2: Participation rate in organized learning (one year before the official primary entry age), by sex

Target 4.2.

Box 1: SDG 4.2 - Source: UN Stats (2019)

Whilst not a policy as such, the SDGs are an important strategy to examine in regard to ECCD and gender inequality. They were adopted by all UN member states in 2015. Goal 4 encompasses aims to achieve equal education and opportunities for both genders. Within this Target 4.2 covers the ECCD element which will be so important in moving towards a more equal future (see Box 1). Goal 5 specifically covers gender equality however in the context of ECCD, it is Goal 4 which is most relevant for analysis.

Strategies such as the SDGs are crucial in guiding policy. During 2019's ARNEC Conference, SDG 4.2 was returned to repeatedly as a guiding objective for improving ECCD and moving towards gender equality. Its importance cannot be denied since joint aims are necessary in order to promote global change.

However, nearly five years into the SDG plan, [not a single country is on track to achieving SDG 4 by 2030](#). There is still enough time to achieve the goal, but I would argue that even if it is achieved, there is a fundamental issue with goal, specifically with target 4.2.

It is not enough to get girls into quality education. Even well-trained teachers, good resources and equal boy: girl ratios are not enough to move towards gender

inequality. Rather this requires a cultural shift in the thinking behind educational practices. Only when can girls and boys equally profit from their education that the real potential of education to be [‘gender transformative’](#) will be realised.

Proposed Policy: Plan International

During the 2019 ARNEC Conference, Nicole Rodger from Plan International Australia set out the organisations proposed policy regarding ECCD as a way to address gender inequality in the Asia-Pacific region. The key point she communicated was that parenting programmes are an entry point to address broader challenges like violence and gender inequality (Rodger, 2019).

Their proposed policy mainly focuses on using parent ‘training’ programmes to educate parents in the Asia-Pacific region on how best to raise their child in a ‘gender-responsive’ way (Rodger, 2019). The policy committed to the following actions:

- To work with male caregivers and grandparents as well as mothers.
- To embed sessions in local infrastructure to ensure that they are sustainable and ensure buy in from local community i.e. use local schools, church or homes.
- To always consider risks and do no harm - for example make sure working with men doesn’t undermine women’s autonomy.

- To encourage parents to use [‘gender-equal socialisation processes’](#).
- To connect women with maternal wellbeing services.

These five key actions from Plan International are a very solid start in the move towards using ECCD to address gender inequality. The equal attention to male and female caregivers ensures that this policy should break down gendered roles within the household. Moreover the policy should be sustainable and accepted within communities as long as local institutions and involved and all risks are considered.

However there are two problems with this policy. Firstly it does not touch on staff and teachers involved in ECCE in the Asia-Pacific region, such as community nurseries and pre-primary schools. It is important to train those involved at all levels of ECCD especially education. As already highlighted, the earliest stages of education can be the most impactful in entrenching gender inequality. My recommendations will address this gap.

The second issue with Plan International’s proposed policy is the way in which it approaches male caregivers. They propose working with male caregivers as well as women, however this statement does not appreciate the challenges that need to

be overcome before we can do so. There currently is [not enough data on fathers](#) in LMICs to be able to work with them effectively. This is because research often refers to ‘parents’ [without disaggregating outcomes by gender](#). This significantly limits how policy can attempt to interact with male caregivers since we have little concrete knowledge of the situation.

CHALLENGES

Analysis of current and proposed policies/strategies reveals three key challenges to addressing gender inequality using ECCD. These will inform my recommendations.

- 1) There is a lack of data on male caregivers.
- 2) Gender norms are ‘sticky’:
 - a. They are very culturally embedded especially in Asia-Pacific countries.
 - b. Caregivers and teachers are products of their own gendered socialisation (Rodger, 2019).
- 3) Addressing primary caregivers doesn’t not do enough - teachers must also be a target.

Recommendations

Undertake further research on male caregivers in the Asia Pacific region: In order to be involve men in using ECCD to address gender inequality we need to better understand their roles, beliefs

and expectations in regard to child-rearing. This will better prepare us to design ECCD programmes to meet the aim of gender equality

‘Bring men in’ rather than creating new programmes for men: involve male caregivers in the same ECCD programmes as women in order to create equality in the dynamics between male and female caregivers. As part of this, ensure that all programmes are based within the local community of male caregivers to encourage them to get involved.

Address culture not just numbers: it is not enough to get more girls into education. ECCD must also be adapted to address the cultural prejudices placed upon young girls from parental expectations to menstruation taboos. All of these restrict girls from reaching their potential.

Design gender-transformative ECCD training programmes for educators and staff: early education teachers are often as influential as parents so their training must also be improved using a gendered lens.

Conclusion

The 2019 ARNEC Conference highlighted the transformative potential which ECCD possesses to improve the world for the

youngest and most vulnerable. Discussions ranged from climate change to humanitarian crises to gender inequality in the Asia-Pacific region.

It is now the responsibility for governments, international organisations, researchers and activists to utilise the potential of ECCD by designing programmes which aim to address the most poignant issues facing our time.

This report focused upon gender inequality - an issue which is long overdue a resolution. Equal education, opportunities and aspirations between the genders should be a given within society and therefore my recommendations aim to improve ECCD in the Asia-Pacific region in order to raise a generation which is no longer limited by discriminatory gender norms.

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