7. GENDER EQUALITY

 Educators must recognize their own gender stereotypes and reflect on whether their teaching methods, language and interaction with boys and girls reflect the gender equality they are striving to convey.

What is gender equality?

An important human rights issue, gender equality means equal empowerment and participation for both men and women in all spheres of public and private life. This does not imply that both sexes are the same but rather that they are equal in rights and dignity. As with all human rights, gender equality must be constantly fought for, protected and encouraged.

For more than a hundred and fifty years, the women’s emancipation movement has focused on eliminating the pervasive discrimination experienced by most women and attaining more equal participation of men and women in the life of the community. As a result, the lives of most European women and men today differ considerably from those of a century ago. Key areas of advancement for women are:

- equal access to education
- women entering the labour market in large numbers
- the economic status of women
- distribution of work in the home and childcare
- family structure
- youth culture
- new information and communication technologies.

Although significant progress has been made in terms of gender equality and related attitudes, a number of obstacles to gender equality are still a daily reality in Europe.

What is gender?

Sex and gender are not the same thing. Sex is a biological fact. Almost all human beings are born in one of two biologically differentiated types: a girl or a boy. Gender, on the other hand, is a social condition.

As the World Health Organisation (WHO) explains:
‘Sex’ refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women. ‘Gender’ refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women.

To put it another way:

‘Male’ and ‘female’ are sex categories, while ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are gender categories.

Some examples of sex characteristics:
• Girls will begin to menstruate while boys do not;
• Boys have testicles while girls do not;
• Women will be able to breastfeed a baby but men cannot;
• After puberty most boys develop greater muscle capacity than girls.

Some examples of gender characteristics:
• In Europe, women earn significantly less money than men for similar work;
• In many countries, girls dance more while boys play more football;
• In the whole world, women and girls do more housework than men and boys;
• Boys more often suffer from corporal punishment than girls.

An important part of one’s identity and individuality, gender roles are formed through socialisation. Today, not only the family, school and workplace influence such socialisation, but also the media, including new information technologies, music and films. Both traditional and such new socialising forces serve to preserve and transmit gender stereotypes.

**Gender equality is far from being a reality in Europe**

Traditional gender stereotypes remain deeply rooted in European culture and manifest themselves in daily practise. As a result, men and women still have unequal opportunities. Britta Lejon, former Minister for Democracy and Youth in Sweden, illustrated in a presentation how this inequality is a reality amongst young people in Europe:

• Young men earn approximately 20% more than young women;
• When young men and women live together, women do twice as much housework as men;
• Very few young fathers take parental leave in countries where it is possible.

Men continue to take part in many more key decisions than women. In spite of several affirmative measures, women’s political participation is still very low: in Europe only 21% of parliamentarians are woman, ranging from 4.4% in Turkey to 45% in Sweden. Because men hold the key roles in politics, in the financial world and in the media, they are able to set the political agenda and the public discourse. In general, men continue to be regarded as the human norm and standard of performance.

**Gender stereotypes**

Many institutions of society reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. In the media, for example, women predominantly appear as objects of action, as victims and as caretakers, whereas men are usually portrayed as creative, strong, clever and full of initiative. While the media highlights a man’s power and achievement, a woman, even an accomplished woman, is usually first evaluated by her appearance. In these ways the media, which includes television, radio, schoolbooks, children books, magazines, films and many forms of electronic communication, preserve and transmit stereotypes about men and women.

As with the media, the family, schools and leisure centres also have responsibilities for reinforcing gender stereotypes. A recent study shows teachers more often evaluate boys positively if they are dynamic, aggressive, independent, explorative and competitive, while girls often receive positive feedback for being obedient, kind, gentle, passive and positive to the community. Because such gender stereotypes
are principally formed during school years, many girls are discouraged from taking independent action, from competing and from engaging themselves in the public sphere. Girls who do not conform to stereotypical expectations can experience criticism, ostracism and even violence.

Traditional gender stereotypes can hurt boys as well as girls. Stereotypical male expectations of strength and competition often conflict with a boy’s daily experiences such as living in atypical family structures, male unemployment or women’s growing presence in the public sphere. Such conflicts can confuse the development of boys’ gender identity. Boys who do not fit the typical male stereotypes can suffer from bullying, exclusion and discrimination.

**QUESTION:** To what extent does our community conform to traditional gender stereotypes? How do these stereotypes affect children’s lives? Your life?

## Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence is a term that can be used to describe any form of violence, be it physical, sexual, psychological, economic or sociocultural, that has a negative impact on the physical or psychological health, development and identity of a person, and that is the result of gendered-power inequities that exploit distinctions between males and females, among males, and among females. Gender-based violence may affect both men and women, but it disproportionately affects women and girls and, therefore, gender-based violence is often simplified to the term ‘violence against women’.

Gender-based violence is present in every country and cuts across boundaries of culture, class, education, ethnicity and background. For example, statistics show that 12% to 15% of girls and women in Europe face violence in the home every day. Bullying and sexual harassment towards women are also present in various life settings, including educational institutions and workplaces.

However, of course, gender-based violence affects men as well. For example, boys and men who do not practise traditional ‘male virtues’ face teasing and violence. Similarly, gays and lesbians are also often subject to physical and verbal violence, particularly in schools where children and young people are discovering sexuality.

Gender-based violence poses a serious obstacle to equality between women and men and is a human rights violation. Acts of gender-based violence are generally committed by individuals often close to the victims. State institutions, however, have a key role and responsibility in responding to the victims and working towards the prevention of all forms of gender-based violence. One of the most important human rights instruments in working towards this goal is the United Nations’ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which, currently, 185 countries are party to.

According to the United Nations, “The Convention provides the basis for realizing equality between women and men through ensuring women’s equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life – including the right to vote and to stand for election – as well as education, health and employment. States parties agree to take all appropriate measures, including legislation and temporary special measures, so that women can enjoy all their human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

## What is gender education?

Gender education, especially if it addresses both girls and boys, can be a positive force for creating gender equality in modern society. It seeks to change the roles that girls and boys and women and men play in private and public life. By reducing gender stereotypes, gender education assists children in build-
ing a genuine civic equality where males and females live in relationships of cooperation and in mutual respect.

Gender education starts with building gender awareness. This means recognizing the negative impacts of gender stereotypes and addressing the inequalities that arise from them. The outcome of gender education for girls is greater self-confidence, assertiveness, independence and engagement in the public sphere. The outcome for boys is overcoming fear of failure, learning to be less aggressive, becoming more sociable and responsible and engaging more in the private sphere.

An important function of gender education is to distinguish between facts and beliefs or opinions. By analysing stories or their own activities, children can quickly accept as normal that girls can be boyish and boys can be sensitive and vulnerable. All children need to accept themselves as complex and unique individuals with a wide range of characteristics. Stereotypes and rigid gender expectations can hinder individual development and the realisation of the full potential of both girls and boys.

Gender education is an ongoing process that cannot be limited to specific educational activities. Educators must avoid gender stereotypical activities from early childhood and ensure that girls and boys have the same opportunities for participation and interaction in any activity. Girls should be encouraged to compete in both academics and sports while boys should participate in caring activities. Both sexes should be encouraged to participate in all kinds of activities, e.g. choirs, drama and dance, woodwork, cooking, hiking, and chess. Girls should receive positive feedback on their achievements, and boys for being caring and showing solidarity.

Another important aim of gender education is to help children recognize the social value of traditional female activities, such as motherhood, and characteristics such as caring, attention, cooperation and tolerance. This recognition can lead to genuine partnerships between men and women, which is a key goal of gender education. In this way, children learn that the different contributions of men and women to family and society are equally important and that both men and women have equal rights and responsibilities.

To be effective at gender education, educators must recognize their own gender stereotypes and reflect on whether their teaching methods, language and interaction with boys and girls reflect the gender equality they are striving to convey.

Relevant human rights instruments

Council of Europe

The Council of Europe recognizes equality between women and men as a fundamental human right. Article 14 of the European Convention of Human Rights declares that, "the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, language, religion political or other opinion...". This article provides the basis for extensive action for the organisation. The responsible body is the Steering Committee for Equality, between Women and Men (CDEG), which carries out analyses, studies and evaluations, defines strategies and political measures and, where necessary, decides on appropriate legal instruments.

Through awareness raising efforts and campaign such as the ‘Stop Domestic Violence Against Women’ campaign, the Council of Europe actively addresses gender-based violence. The Council’s programme ‘Building Europe for and with Children’ targets various forms of child sexual abuse: incest, pornography, prostitution, trafficking in human beings and peer sexual assault.

United Nations

The first legally binding international document prohibiting discrimination against women and forcing governments to take steps in favour of equality for women and men is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This treaty was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979 and has been signed by most countries around the world. It is a comprehensive document that seeks to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and to promote gender equality. The treaty includes provisions on the rights of women and girls in areas such as political representation, equal pay, access to education, and protection from violence.

The implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women requires cooperation between governments, civil society organizations, and women's groups to promote gender equality and to ensure that women's rights are respected and protected. The treaty provides a framework for the promotion of gender equality and the protection of women's rights, and it is an important tool for advancing gender equality around the world.
nation of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)\textsuperscript{12}. Since coming into force in 1981, CEDAW comprehensively addresses the fundamental rights of women in politics, health care, education, law, property, marriage and family relations. Countries that have ratified or acceded to the Convention are legally bound to put its provisions into practice. They are also committed to submitting national reports at least every four years on measures they have taken to comply with their treaty obligations. Since 2000, individual women or groups of women have been able to file complaints of rights violations with the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which can initiate inquiries in case of serious or systematic violations.

**QUESTION:** Is your country a state party of CEDAW? If so, when did it submit its last report? Did any groups submit a ‘shadow report’ offering alternative opinions to those of the government? Try to find out!

In 2000, the United Nation launched the Millennium Development Goals,\textsuperscript{13} one aim of which is to “eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015”. This programme has relevance for Europe, where equal access to education and full participation of girls in decision making processes is still not a reality.

**The Convention of the Rights of the Child**

Article 2 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child affirms that the rights safeguarded in the convention shall be ensured without any discrimination, including the child’s sex. Article 18 aims at a more balanced role of parents in family and childcare stating that, “both parents share responsibility for bringing up their children and should always consider what is best for their child”.

**Useful Resources**

- *Gender Matters – A manual on addressing gender-based violence with young people*: Council of Europe, 2007
Useful websites

- Building Europe for and with Children: www.coe.int/t/transversalprojects/children/violence/sexualAbuse_en.asp
- Equality Between Women and Men: www.coe.int/T/e/human_rights/equality
- Sexual Abuse of Children...hurt for life: Council of Europe: www.coe.int/t/transversalprojects/children/violence/sexualAbuse_en.asp
- Stop Domestic Violence against Women: www.coe.int/t/dc/campaign/stopviolence/default_en.asp
- Stop Violence against Women: http://web.amnesty.org/actforwomen/index-eng
- UN Development Fund for Women: www.unifem.org
- UN Millennium Development Goals: www.un.org/millenniumgoals
- Young Women from Minorities: www.scas.acad.bg/WFM/default.htm
- What Do We Mean by “Sex” and “Gender”? World Health Organisation: www.who.int/gender/whatisgender/en

References

1. See “What do we mean by "sex" and "gender"?” www.who.int/gender/whatisgender/en
4. Thun, Eva, Gender Stereotypes in the School, Hirnők Feminist webportal, Hungary, 2002
6. The Council of Europe Campaign to Combat Violence against Women, including Domestic Violence, Fact sheet: Council of Europe, 2006
7. www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw
9. See Equality Between Women and Men: www.coe.int/T/e/human_rights/equality
10. See Stop Domestic Violence against Women: www.coe.int/t/dc/campaign/stopviolence/default_en.asp
13. See UN Millenium Development Goals: www.un.org/millenniumgoals