

Education



Relevance of gender in the policy area

Education is a catalyst for social change and a condition for the achievement of fundamental human rights. It increases cognitive and non-cognitive skills, improves productivity and provides individuals with a greater ability to further develop their knowledge and skills throughout their lives. It also makes women and men better equipped to secure steady, well-paid jobs and thus combat the risks of social exclusion. Furthermore, education can better prepare individuals to recognise and handle difficult situations. Economic independence makes it easier to leave a difficult situation, such as a violent home. At the same time, educated citizens – both women and men – benefit entire societies. They make substantial contributions to the economy and contribute to the improved health, nutrition and education of their families.

Mainstreaming gender equality in education and training policy remains crucial in countries where equal access to education is taken as a given, which is the case in the majority of EU Member States. Figures on social inclusion and employment rates, and job quality indicators show that women remain at greater risk of social exclusion, unemployment and low-quality jobs in the EU. Women also remain, on average, slightly more likely to be unemployed than men with the same level of education. This situation contrasts sharply with the overall higher success rates of girls and women in the EU in terms of completing school education, accessing higher education or participating in lifelong learning. This should translate into more women being in better jobs.

Challenging gender prejudices and stereotypes throughout the education cycle, from primary school to lifelong learning, can reduce gender imbalances in other spheres of life. For example, gender segregation in the labour market as a result of different educational and professional choices in schools and universities, both for pupils and teachers, is widespread. Gender-based violence and sexist language also occurs in educational settings. Therefore, it is essential that gender-based stereotypes are deconstructed and challenged in the areas of education and training.

Gender stereotypes are also still present in teaching materials. Textbooks contain many stereotypes providing examples through gendered images diminishing the role of women. This is especially the case when men and women are depicted in professional contexts. Also linked to the issue of gender stereotypes is how to better mainstream gender in school curricula. In many cases, this is still left to the single interpretation of schools and teachers. The only way of integrating or mainstreaming gender issues into the curriculum should be directly through the teachers and the leadership of schools at an institutional level. However, one of the main problems remains how to motivate teachers and school leaders, and how to make this a normal part of the curriculum at each school level.

Gender equality in education and training continues to be affected by a number of factors:

- gender-based different choices across study fields
- the feminisation of the teaching profession v. the masculinisation of teaching in tertiary education
- gender stereotypes in education
- gender and low achievement in school
- gender and early school leaving
- gender and training
- gender-based violence at school.

Gender inequalities in the policy area - Main issues

Gender-based choices across study fields

Different choices across study fields between women and men is still a relevant characteristic of gender differences in education patterns in the EU-28. The current share (2014) of people 30 – 34 with tertiary education attainment is 37.9%. Among these, 42.3% of women have attained a tertiary education compared to 33.6% of men (2014). Women are, however, under-represented in some fields of study. Degrees in STEM fields are much more prevalent among men, whereas social sciences and humanities are much more common among women.

The number of top-level women graduates (ISCED 6: post-graduate programmes above master's level) grew at a faster rate than the number of men graduates in the years up to 2012. At EU-28 level, the number of women graduates grew by 4.4 percentage points (p.p.) between 2003 and 2012, whereas the number of men graduates has grown by 2.3 p.p. annually (ISCED 6). Nevertheless, major differences remain in the study fields/subjects selected by girls and boys. Indeed, while girls have better grades on average and often outnumber boys among new university graduates, many women students still tend to study subjects that lead to careers with lower pay and lower status. The uneven distribution of women and men students across disciplines and academic curricula can also affect future employability and employment conditions and/or choices.

In 2012, women outnumbered men in most academic fields, representing 77% of graduates in education and training, 73% in health and welfare and 65% in the humanities. At the EU-28 level, the gender gap in the above-mentioned fields has been relatively constant for the period 2005 – 2012, remaining at around 22 – 23 p.p., reflecting women's persistent over-representation. Yet the share of men still greatly exceeds that of women in natural sciences, mathematics, computing, and above all, engineering. For example, women's representation in engineering, manufacturing and construction remains low, at 28%. This segregation leads to a considerable lack of female talent in mathematics, science and technology (MST) and information and communication technologies (ICT). It also prevents boys and men from embracing curricula predominantly regarded as feminine, thus simultaneously creating an under-representation of boys and men in the humanities. The participation of women and men is most balanced in agriculture and veterinary fields.

Across OECD countries, boys are still marginally better represented than girls in upper secondary vocational education. Similarly, 15-year-old boys and girls hold different expectations for the field in which they expect to be working as young adults. Boys are significantly more likely to expect to work in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) occupations; parents are more likely to expect their sons, rather than their daughters, to work in a STEM field, even when boys and girls perform at the same level in mathematics. On average across OECD countries, 16 – 65 year-old men surveyed in the 2012 survey of adult skills are, on average, 5 times more likely than women of the same age to have studied engineering, manufacturing and construction (38% of men reported that they had studied these subjects, compared to only 7% of women) and are 3 percentage points more likely to have studied science, mathematics and computing (10% of men, compared to 7% of women). In contrast, 16 – 65 year-old women are around 4 times more likely than men to have studied health and welfare (15% of women compared to 4% of men), around 3 times more likely to have studied education and to have enrolled in teacher training (9% of women and 3% of men), and around twice as likely as men to have studied humanities, languages and arts (10% of women and 5% of men).

One of the reasons for this situation is the persistent labelling of study areas and work as either 'feminine' or 'masculine'. According to the Nesse Network of Experts:

Young people wishing to affirm both their sexual and gender identities at the formative stage of adolescence are expected by peers to choose subjects that affirm their identities as females or males. Dominant (hegemonic) gender norms governing what are the ideal-type masculine and feminine identities impact strongly on educational choices.

Gender differences in student performance, as well as perceptions that some fields of education are more 'suitable' for either women or men, need to be addressed if greater gender equity in education outcomes is to be achieved.

To tackle gender segregation across study fields, various measures are being implemented in the EU Member States. The Polish Government supports the girls as engineers and girls as scientists campaigns of the Perspektywy (Perspectives) Educational Foundation and the Conference of Rectors of Polish Technical Universities which encourage women and girls to study technical and scientific subjects. The Austrian Public Employment Service (AMS) offers tailored programmes to reduce barriers and inspire girls and young women to opt for educational/vocational training and careers, and atypical professions. Associations such as Sprungbett – Counselling Centre for Girls and Young Women in Austria (Vienna) are supported to foster women’s and girls’ access to vocational training, further training, technology and science. In Germany, the annual event girls’ day – future prospects for girls – is government-funded and motivates girls and young women to opt for training or studies in fields traditionally not attracting women. Enterprises, universities, and research institutions organise an open day for girls aged 10 to 17, offering an insight into, and practical experience in, a wide range of careers and professions. This broadens the range of vocational choices for girls, as it is mainly STEM careers that are concerned. Germany has an initiative called new paths for boys and boys’ day that encourages young men to open up new perspectives for their future, to widen the range of both their role options and their career choices – including teaching.

The feminisation of the teaching profession v. the masculinisation of teaching in tertiary education

Differences in education choices between women and men are also reflected in the teaching profession. The new international classification of education allows for a closer look at the current share (37.9%) of 30 to 34-year-olds with tertiary education attainment. Tertiary education attainment includes bachelor’s and master’s degrees, as well as short-cycle tertiary education and doctoral degrees. However, more women have short-cycle, bachelor’s and master’s degrees than men in all Member States. Moreover, women are over-represented, as previously mentioned, in social sciences and humanities and, at the same time, they have attained a much higher education degree in teaching compared to men (around 4 times higher than men).

In most EU Member States, women are over-represented as teachers at the levels of primary and lower secondary education. With a few exceptions, such as Finland where there is a near gender balance, the share of women teachers in primary schools usually exceeds 75%. This figure is 66% for upper secondary education. The proportion of women teachers at upper secondary level has increased in most countries since 2000.

Gender segregation in education is widely acknowledged as one of the causes of different choices made by women and men in research fields of study. In spite of the efforts to change this situation over the last decades, choices of fields of study remain largely gendered. According to data gathered in She figures, gender segregation in research is eroding; however, major differences among subject areas are still persistent. While men comprise the vast majority of those at the masters and PhD levels in natural science and technology subjects, women tend to dominate in medicine and health sciences. As for scientific research, women still remain a minority, accounting for 33% of researchers in the EU-28 in 2012. However, the proportion of women is growing faster than that of men (4.8% annually over the period 2005 – 2011, compared with 3.3% for men).

Despite the over-representation of women in this professional category, their representation within decision-making positions is rather low, especially in tertiary education. The over-representation of men in senior academic positions, which prevails in most EU Member States, continues to undermine the status of women in tertiary education. Gender imbalance in senior positions in academia was shown in the 2010 She figures data; there appeared to be clear vertical segregation in academic and research institutions. Women constitute over half of university graduates, but this changes at PhD level, with more men receiving a PhD degree on average in the EU. Differences become much more pronounced in the highest positions in academia. At the same time, the lack of men teachers in primary and secondary education can reinforce stereotyped gender roles in the classroom.

The 'sticky floor' and 'glass ceiling' phenomena – both of which are evident in universities – describe a situation in which women encounter difficulties in achieving senior positions. This not only concerns disciplines where women are heavily under-represented as students and professors, such as MST or ICT, but also those where they are present in greater numbers, such as the social sciences or law. According to EIGE's gender equality index, from 2005 to 2012 human health, social work and education were the most women-dominated sectors, with 30% of women and 8% of men employed in these sectors in the EU-28. This indicates a significant gender gap (22 p.p.) between women and men workers aged 15 to 64 in these fields in the EU-28.

The glass ceiling index (GCI) measures women's relative chances, compared to men, of reaching a top academic position. It compares the proportion of women in grade A positions (full professorship) with their proportion in academia as a whole (grades A, B and C), with a score above 1 pointing to a glass ceiling effect. In 2010, the average GCI in the EU was 1.8. It exceeded 2.8 in Cyprus, Lithuania and Luxembourg. This situation is also confirmed by figures included in EIGE's database Women and men in the EU, which show that women represent only 20% of academic staff in grade A.

Women are over-represented in relatively lower status positions that are sometimes identified with care-giving (such as primary teaching), whereas men are concentrated in better-paid, higher-status positions (in academia) that hold greater influence in policy and decision-making.

Gender stereotypes in education

Gender stereotyping occurs when a person is expected to enact a series of norms or behaviours based on their sex. Gender stereotypes refer to a cultural and socially constructed set of beliefs about what it means to be female or male. Gender stereotypes are complex and vary along the different and interrelated dimension of traits, role behaviours, physical characteristics and occupations.

According to the European Parliament:

... traditional gender roles and stereotypes continue to have a strong influence on the division of roles between women and men in the home, in the workplace and in society at large, with women depicted as running the house and caring for children while men are depicted as wage-earners and protectors.

In the area of education and training, sexist stereotypes are reinforced both by teachers and by the educational support material that teachers are given. Access to formal primary, secondary and tertiary education, as well as the content of the curriculum as taught to girls and boys is a major influencing factor on gender differences and, correspondingly, on choices and access to rights. The stereotypes that still exist with regard to the educational and professional options available to women help to preserve inequalities. This has serious repercussions on the labour market, limiting career diversification and often placing women in occupations that are less valued and remunerated.

... young women students are expected to be more passive and inactive than boys ... further studies in Finland and England found strong evidence that teenage girls are treated differently and expected to behave in ways that encourage good academic results but constrain personal development and autonomy.

In many countries, gender differentiation continues to be a principle that shapes the practices and curricula of schools as many school staff are not trained to address gender-related topics. However, the lack of attention paid to this subject by school staff is not the only explanation for the reproduction of gender roles. Peer pressure to conform to gender patterns also plays a significant role as children are likely to react when other children do not replicate gender-typical behaviours. Non-stereotypical behaviours displayed by boys are more likely to be met with negative reactions from peers.

Gender bias in education extends beyond socialisation patterns. Bias is embedded in textbooks and teacher interactions with students. How students and teachers construct gender in the classroom, reflecting the social norms of the society in which they live, impacts on the learning environment.

Gendered structural inequalities in education are not only reinforced by teachers' own stereotypes but are also deeply entrenched in the history of each discipline. The underlying message being conveyed to students is that women are under-represented among the achievers and inventors in science, technologies, the arts and humanities. Women's history and their contributions to society have been omitted from national curricula. Taken together, these factors can reinforce belief systems, patterns and norms of behaviour that favour the persistence of stereotypical gender attitudes and perceptions.

Varied measures for tackling gender stereotyping within the curriculum are being implemented in the EU Member States. Gender roles, stereotypes and equality are, for example, discussed in social studies or history subjects in the Danish Folkeskole. The Czech gender equality situation under the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and the proposal of the mid-term strategic plan for gender equality is addressing the consequences of gender stereotypes as one aim of education policy. In Croatia, the standards for textbooks prescribe that “textbooks must prepare both sexes for effective and equal participation in all areas of life” and “promote gender equality”. The Pedagogical Institute, the Greek authority for production of school materials, has taken steps to remove offensive stereotypes of women through the inter-thematic integrated curriculum frameworks (2004). The Hungarian national curriculum includes a focus on teaching human rights, including awareness of, and attitudes towards, equality between women and men. Horizontal and vertical segregation is addressed by several Member States targeting choices of girls and boys in compulsory education. The Ministry of Education and Children in Cyprus prepared an action plan on gender equality (based on the national action plan for gender equality), to achieve a comprehensive and systematic approach to gender equality policies in education and training. The Finnish equality programme (2008) promotes and coordinates measures aimed at improving gender equality with a focus on increased equality awareness in schools and alleviating segregation.

Gender and low achievement in school

Gender stereotypes can considerably impact on the preferences expressed by girls and boys for certain disciplines or curricula. While actual differences in performance tend to diminish in secondary education (especially for girls in MST), gender stereotypes maintain differences in both sexes’ perception of their abilities.

Rather than ‘natural’ inclinations, gender stereotypes and gender roles imposed through the socialisation process may therefore explain, for instance, performance gaps between girls and boys. PISA test scores find that new gender gaps in education are opening as young men are significantly more likely than young women to have low skills and poor academic achievement. In 2012, 14% of boys and 9% of girls in OECD countries on average did not attain the PISA baseline level of proficiency in any of the three core subjects measured in PISA – reading, mathematics and science.

Looking at gender differences in educational performance reveals that in reading literacy, girls greatly outperform boys in all Member States. Moreover, when it comes to educational poverty at age 15, boys are over-represented: the share of boys across the EU who show underachievement in all three domains tested in PISA is 61.1% higher than that of girls.

Across OECD countries the gender gaps had narrowed. However, girls still outperformed boys in reading by an average score difference of 38 – the equivalent of one year of school – as they have done consistently throughout all the PISA cycles since 2000. Boys continued to outperform girls in mathematics by an average of 11 points (across OECD countries) – equivalent to around 3 months of schooling. Moreover, PISA results show that boys continue to perform better than girls in mathematics, among the highest-achieving students. While gender differences in science and problem-solving performance are small, on average, boys tend to be over-represented among the highest achievers.

Gender and early school leaving

The EU regards upper secondary education attainment as a prerequisite for better labour market integration, lowering chances of poverty and social exclusion, and setting a minimum guarantee for continued personal development and active citizenship. Data on educational attainment show that in 2014, around 82% of the EU-28 population aged 20 to 24 had completed at least an upper secondary level of education, a figure that reached 84.7% for women.

However, early school leaving still remains a relevant issue at the EU level (people 18 to 24 years old who fail to reach the upper secondary education attainment are called early leavers from education and training).

Early school leaving is an obstacle to economic growth and employment. It hampers productivity and competitiveness, and fuels poverty and social exclusion. Young people who leave education and training prematurely are bound to lack skills and qualifications, and face serious, persistent problems on the labour market. Recent figures show that 11.1% of people aged 18 to 24 (12.7% of men and 9.5% of women) were early leavers from education and training, with at most a lower secondary education. The overall share of early leavers from education and training fell by 3.1 p.p. between 2007 and 2014. This improvement, if continued, means that the Europe 2020 target of less than 10% for early leavers from education and training (aged 18 – 24) is within reach.

Gender patterns are also at play in terms of educational attainment. Women now outperform men in educational attainment, as shown by the percentage of women and men at EU level who have completed tertiary level education. The Eurydice report on gender differences in educational outcomes showed that boys are more likely to repeat a school year (although data on repeating a school year is not systematically collected) or drop out from school.

The long-term consequences of early school leaving are very different for women and men. One of the main reasons girls leave school early is because of pregnancy or, in the case of some girls from ethnic minority backgrounds, early marriage. In many cases, early school leaving leads to pregnancy and the consequent spiral of poverty for those women and their children. Boys who drop out of education also experience difficulties, but the various consequences and challenges for girls and boys need to be addressed separately.

Gender and training

A major strategic goal set by the European Council at the Lisbon Special European Council in March 2000, Towards a Europe of innovation and knowledge, was to make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. Training is a key ingredient of this strategy. One of its recommendations for several European countries is to modernise educational systems and increase the percentage of individuals participating in lifelong education and training. Accomplished international enterprises spend a significant share of their budget on staff training. However, in an age of austerity and despite the continuing existence of subsidies for training, firms may conclude that their returns from training investment in human capital are not particularly high. They may therefore decide to 'select' specific employee target groups in which to invest. In this case, women might be discriminated against.

EIGE's research shows that, on average in the EU in 2010, approximately a third of workers (33% of women and 32% of men) benefited from training provided by their employer (or by themselves, if they are self-employed). The gender gap of 1.1% for the EU-28 in 2012 indicates that gender inequalities in formal and non-formal education and training are small, but that marked differences exist among Member States. Between 2005 and 2012, the EU-28 saw an average decrease in the provision of formal and non-formal education and training. While 18.7% of women and 17.5% of men participated in lifelong learning in 2005, only 17.1% of women and 16% of men did so in 2012. The gender gap slightly increased between 2005 and 2010, from 1.2 p.p. to 1.4 p.p., but it decreased to 1.1 p.p. in 2012. Therefore, while women and men in 2012 were more equal in terms of access to education and training, they were nevertheless less likely to benefit from training than in 2005.

Gender-based violence at school

Educational institutions are not immune to gender-based violence in the form of sexist language, sexual harassment or physical violence. Gender-based violence at school includes verbal or sexual harassment, sexual abuse, corporal punishment, stalking, cyber-harassment and bullying. It can result in increased absenteeism, poor performance, school dropout, low self-esteem, depression, pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections such as HIV, all of which have a detrimental impact on the learning and well-being of students.

The Nesse Network of Experts states that "there is considerable evidence that sexual and other forms of harassment and bullying are quite common in schools in different countries ..." and that "sexual harassment is a pervasive problem for girls in schools, particularly in adolescence".

While studies on sexual violence show a greater prevalence rate among girls, further research reveals that boys are also at risk and experience discrimination, bullying and violence, especially due to sexual orientation, disability or ethnicity.

Bullying is one of the most widely documented types of violence in schools. Students are bullied when they are repeatedly exposed to aggressive behaviour from their peers and this behaviour intentionally inflicts injury or discomfort. Bullying can include physical violence, verbal abuse or intent to cause psychological harm through humiliation or exclusion. The ways in which bullying is expressed or experienced are frequently gendered and reflect unequal power relations. Moreover, students may be targeted for bullying because of non-conformity to expected gender norms or their real or perceived gender identity.

Existing gender-equality policy objectives at EU and international level

Education and training fall within the responsibilities of each Member State. However, in a context of global competition for skilled workers in knowledge-based societies, European societies are facing common challenges in this area. It is thus the objective of the European Union to support the efforts of Member States to address those challenges. This support takes many forms. These include opportunities for Member States to share good practices and learn from each other, gathering and sharing of data and evidence that can support policy reform. The Directorate-General for Education and Culture also coordinates the implementation of the Erasmus+ funding programme for education, training, youth and sport.

EU level

European Commission

The education and training 2020 strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET2020) was adopted in May 2009. It guides the European Commission's policy cooperation with the Member States in this field to 2020. The gender equality dimension is mainstreamed in the ET2020 strategic framework and in the relevant European funding programmes, in particular Erasmus+, the EU funding programme for education, training, youth and sport.

In the March 2015 Paris Declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education, EU Education Ministers and the European Commissioner for education, training, youth and sport agreed to strengthen their actions with a view to promoting, inter alia, gender equality in education.

In the Commission/Council 2015 joint report on progress in the implementation of the ET 2020 strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training the Commission and the Member States agreed a new set of priority areas for work until 2020. These include tackling the gender gap in education and promoting more gender balanced choices in education.

The Commission's annual Education and training monitor provides gender-related cross-country comparisons and trends in relation to the relevant Europe 2020 headline target and other benchmarks in education. The education and training monitor 2015 shows that a considerable disparity remains between male and female early school leaving rates, with boys clearly at higher risk of leaving school before finishing upper secondary education than girls. The female/male difference has slowly decreased over time (from 3.8 percentage points in 2009 to 3.2 percentage points in 2014), but is still prominent in most Member States (except in BG, CZ, SK, SE). The monitor also shows a gender pattern in tertiary education attainment (with a significant, almost 10 percentage point advantage for women in 2014 and a considerable advantage of women over men in all states except DE, where men are 1.2 points in the lead). It confirms that gender differences in tertiary education spill over into labour market imbalances.

The Commission's analysis of PISA 2012 (issued in December 2013) shows that gender differences in mathematics and science are small and keep shrinking. Also that the persistently large reading skills disadvantage of boys is a main cause for slow progress in reducing low achievement. The analysis of adult participation in lifelong learning shows that the latter is higher for females (11.6%) than for males (9.8% in 2014).

The lifelong learning programme (2007 – 2013) supported a large number of transnational cooperation projects on gender issues in education and enabled gender-sensitive learning mobility. Erasmus+, the new EU funding programme for education, training, youth and sport 2014 – 2020, provides new opportunities for gender-related work.

Building from the previous stages of implementation, the ROMED II programme (2013 – 2015) for community empowerment with the support of mediators' support provides training for Roma mediators in the fields of school, culture and health. It is jointly funded and managed by the Council of Europe and the European Commission. It has a strong focus on women/mothers to help address gender imbalances in literacy and gender-based discrimination in traditional settings. Inter alia, the programme aimed to help mothers (who are often illiterate themselves) to understand the value of education for both boys and girls and to convey the value of education to their children, especially to girls (traditionally viewed as less valuable than boys).

In the context of its work with the ET2020 working groups in the field of education and training, the Commission issued two working group reports in 2013: a) Early school leaving and b) Tackling low achievement in basic skills. These two reports include analysis of gender patterns in early school leaving and in reading literacy respectively.

The European tertiary education register (ETER) is a project funded by the European Commission. The project started in August 2013. The second phase of the project runs between summer 2015 and summer 2017. The purpose is to build a complete register of higher education institutions in Europe, providing comparable data on the number of students, graduates, international doctorates, staff, fields of study, income and expenditure as well as descriptive information on their characteristics, with a breakdown by gender for most variables.

The European Commission has launched an initiative Science: it's a girl thing to promote STEM disciplines among young girls.

Within the EU Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions (MSCA) for the training and career development of researchers are widely regarded as best practice in promoting gender balance. Nearly 40% of MSCA fellows are women, a share significantly higher than the European average.

Within the European Commission strategy for equality between women and men (2010 – 2015), the first priority of the strategy – equal economic independence – includes actions focused on reducing gender segregation in education and training, in particular in the scientific and ICT fields. In that context the EU has increasingly paid attention to gender inequalities and differences in access to education and to the segregation of tertiary education. In particular, it has been especially concerned with the issue of bridging the gender gap in MST and ICT, due to the need for qualified workers in science and technology. Several Member States have set objectives in this respect. This commitment has also been maintained in the new Commission's staff working document Strategic engagement for gender equality 2016 – 2020, which includes education-related actions in order to promote:

gender equality in all levels and types of education, including in relation to gendered study subject choices and careers, using existing policy cooperation tools and funding instruments as appropriate, in line with the priorities set out in the 'Education and Training 2020' framework (2016 – 2019).

While primarily focusing on gender equality in tertiary education at the EU level, the European Commission also emphasises equal access to education in non-EU countries as a major area for development. In doing so, it connects its efforts in this area with policy priorities adopted by international agencies. These objectives on education were set out in the EU plan of action on gender equality and women's empowerment in development (2010 – 2015) and have been confirmed in the new EU plan of action, the new framework for gender equality and women's empowerment: transforming the lives of girls and women through EU external relations (2016 – 2020).

European Parliament

In June 2015 the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the EU strategy for equality between women and men post-2015, which reaffirms there are still educational institutions that practise gender segregation. It also points out that educational materials often contain stereotypes that help to perpetuate the traditional but different roles assigned to girls and boys. It indicates the decisive role that education and empowerment play in combating gender stereotypes and ending gender-based discrimination. This includes highlighting the positive impact of education for women, as well as for society and the economy at large.

In September 2015 the European Parliament adopted a further resolution on empowering girls through education in the EU. The FEMM Committee's report requested that the resolution highlight the fact that although significant progress has been achieved in terms of equal attainment and access to education, differences between girls and boys persist. Education is to be seen as a tool for challenging gender stereotypes and for the empowerment of women, and it is important to put in place specific strategies that address school curricula. Education and training are considered a fundamental human right. Focus is also placed on discrimination against women and girls with disabilities and with special educational needs, and on the significance of informal education.

In its resolution on the EU and the global development framework after 2015, the European Parliament also emphasises the central role women will play in the global development framework post-2015. It underlines the importance of enhancing girls' access to all levels of education and removing gender barriers to learning.

International level

Council of Europe

From its inception, the Council of Europe has considered equality between men and women in all spheres of public and private life as a fundamental principle of human rights and democracy. More specific in the field of promoting gender equality in education is the Council of Europe gender equality strategy 2014 – 2017. The Council of Europe action will focus, inter alia, on promoting and disseminating education syllabuses and teaching practices which are free from explicit and implicit gender stereotypes.

In 2007 the Council of Europe issued a recommendation on gender mainstreaming in education, which encourages Member States to implement over 50 specific recommendations including, among others:

1. Incorporating the principle of equality between women and men into national laws on education, for the purpose of giving girls and boys equal rights and opportunities at school, and promoting de facto equality between women and men in society as a whole.
6. Ensuring that the statistics produced by education ministries and authorities are broken down by sex, and published regularly.
30. Encouraging teachers to analyse, challenge and so help to eliminate sexist stereotypes and distortions that ... textbooks, materials and products may convey in their content.
35. Encouraging girls and boys to explore new roles, activities and areas, and ensuring they have equal access to all parts of the curriculum and to the same learning experiences.
36. Ensuring that non-sexist language is used, and account taken of the gender dimension in teaching practice and throughout schools.
46. Raising the awareness of education staff and training them to detect, analyse, respond to, and combat all forms of sexist violence.
49. Making school principals and teachers aware of violence rooted in custom and culture, affecting either women or men, so they can analyse and act on it.

United Nations

In ratifying the United Nations convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW, 1979), states undertook, inter alia, commitments to ensure equal rights for men and women in the field of education (Article 10). This included the elimination of any stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education by encouraging co-education and other types of education that will help to achieve this aim and, in particular, by the revision of textbooks and school programmes and the adaptation of teaching methods.

Furthermore, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women urged governments to take action to combat the continuous discrimination against women, which still persisted across countries as they prepared to enter the twenty-first century. Strategic objective B12 of the Platform for action, ensure equal access to education, outlines a number of actions to be undertaken by governments.

Following the 1990 World Conference on Education for All, world leaders recognised the urgent priority of ensuring access to, and improving the quality of, education for girls and women and to removing every obstacle that hampers their active participation.

In 2005 the Dakar Framework for Action included among its 6 goals one on eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005. It includes achieving gender equality in education by 2015 with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to, and achievement in basic education of good quality. The text of the Dakar Framework for Action states that gender-based discrimination remains one of the most intractable constraints to realising the right to education. Without overcoming this obstacle, education for all cannot be achieved.

In 2015, it was launched and adopted the Education Framework for Education 2030 (FFA). The FFA provides guidance to countries for the implementation of the Education 2030 agenda. It aims to mobilise all stakeholders around the ambitious education goal and targets, and proposes ways of implementing, coordinating, financing and reviewing the 2030 education agenda – globally, regionally and nationally – to guarantee equal educational opportunity for all.

Subsequently, at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit, Member States formally adopted the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, committed “to providing inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels – early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary, technical and vocational training”, underscoring that all people “should have access to lifelong learning opportunities”. The agenda comprises a set of 17 bold, global sustainable development goals (SDGs) including goal 4 on education which encapsulates the aims of Education 2030.

Moreover, the proposed SDG5 is a standalone goal to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”. It addresses the issues of:

ending all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere

enhancing the use of enabling technologies, in particular ICT

adopting and strengthening sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality

the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

Along with the standalone goal, there is an effort to integrate gender equality concerns throughout the other priority areas and goals, such as SDG4 on ensuring “inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all”. This goal includes several gender-sensitive targets related to women and girls’ access to education, among which is:

4.5: By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations.

4.6: By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy.

4.7: By 2030, ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

4.8: Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender-sensitive, and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

The United Nations girls' education initiative (UNGEI) is a multistakeholder partnership in support of the MDGs and EFA goals on girls' education and gender equality. It is committed to (i) working towards policy impact through collective advocacy and coordinated action; (ii) improving effectiveness through knowledge exchange and sharing of evidence-based solutions; (iii) achieving results through strengthened partnerships and collaborative approaches.

Policy cycle in education

How and when? Education, training and the integration of the gender dimension into the policy cycle

The gender dimension can be integrated in all phases of the policy cycle. For a detailed description of how gender can be mainstreamed in each phase of the policy cycle [click here](#).

Below, you can find useful resources and practical examples for mainstreaming gender into education and training policies. They are organised according to the most relevant phase of the policy cycle they may serve.

Practical examples of gender mainstreaming in education and training

Sweden

In 2008 the Swedish government presented an ambitious gender equality programme for schools, with a budget of SEK 110 million. This programme entailed the establishment of a special gender equality committee, gender equality training measures for teachers, and measures to enhance both children's health and to attract greater numbers of male teachers. The remit of the gender equality committee included analysing gender differences in educational results and evaluating means for overcoming traditional gender roles.

The National Agency for Higher Education was also given the task of analysing gender differences in specialised study choices in teacher training. The analysis included:

reasons why more men than women choose to break off their studies in this training field
the proportion of men who work as teachers on completion of their training
factors that influence women's and men's study choices in teacher training.

France

In 2012 the French government engaged in a more systematic gender mainstreaming approach to be endorsed by all ministries. One of the achievements of this strategy, coordinated by the Inter-Ministry Council for Gender Equality and the Ministry of Women's Rights, consists of an inter-ministry convention for the equality between girls and boys, women and men, in the educational system (Convention interministérielle pour l'égalité entre les filles et les garçons, les femmes et les hommes dans le système éducatif, 2013 – 2018). This approach aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Building and transferring a gender equality culture through mainstreaming gender equality in pedagogical programmes and curricula, and training the academic community.
- Strengthening education towards gender equality and mutual respect between girls and boys, women and men. This objective is to be attained through the refined monitoring of gender-based violence at school and improved education about sexuality in order to promote equality.
- Moving towards a greater gender balance in all disciplines and at all academic levels, by preventing any gender stereotype in the information given on respective curricula and disciplines, and actively fostering female participation in ICT and MST.

This strategy is to be implemented by 4 ministries in charge of different components of the educational system, including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, the Ministry of Employment, Lifelong Learning and Social Dialogue, and the Ministry of Agriculture. It is monitored by the Ministry of Women's Rights.

Timeline

The key milestones of the EU education and training policy are presented below.

The European action scheme

Launch of the European action scheme for the mobility of university students (Erasmus).

1987 - 1987

Council Directive 89/48/EEC

Council Directive 89/48/EEC of 21 December 1988 on a general system for the recognition of higher education diplomas awarded on completion of professional education and training of at least three years' duration (ECTS). Read it [here](#).

1988 - 1988

The Maastricht Treaty

The Maastricht Treaty anchored educational policy in articles 149 and 150 of the Treaty of the European Union and thus a legal basis for general and vocational education. Read it [here](#).

1992 - 1992

White Paper

White Paper on Teaching and learning: towards the learning society (COM [1995] 590). Read it [here](#).

1995 - 1995

Bologna Conference

Launch of the process aiming at the creation of a European higher education area – EHEA.

1999 - 1999

Lisbon Strategy

Lisbon Strategy objective of increasing gender balance among people learning MST. Read it [here](#).

2000 - 2000

European benchmarks in education and training

Communication from the Commission of 20 November 2002 on European benchmarks in education and training: Follow-up to the Lisbon European Council COM(2002) 629 final. Read it [here](#).

2002 - 2002

Copenhagen Declaration

Copenhagen Declaration to improve transparency of qualifications and competences of European workers as well as at the maintenance of voluntary minimal quality standards in vocational education and training. Read it [here](#).

2002 - 2002

Recommendation for lifelong learning

Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning. Read it [here](#).

2006 - 2006

Council Conclusions

Council Conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) [Official Journal C 119 of 28.5.2009]. Read it [here](#).

2009 - 2009

Europe 2020

Europe 2020 targets of reducing school dropout rates below 10% and achieving at least 40% of 30- to 34-year-olds completing third-level education. Read it [here](#).

2010 - 2010

Erasmus+

Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing Erasmus+, the Union programme for education, training, youth and sport. Read it [here](#).

2011 - 2011

Current policy priorities at EU level

The overarching policy priorities of EU policy for education and learning can be summarised as follows:

- making lifelong learning and mobility a reality
- improving the quality and efficiency of education and training at any stage from early education to high education and training
- promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship
- enhancing creativity and innovation at all levels of education and training.

Early education

Improving the quality of preschool services

For early childhood education, the European Commission has set out the priority of improving access to and the quality of services from birth to the start of compulsory schooling. By 2020 at least 95% of preschool children aged four years or older should participate in early childhood education.

Primary and secondary education

Enhancing basic skills to support smart and inclusive growth (target of 15%)

[The Europe 2020](#) strategic agenda aims at promoting smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Literacy, numeracy and building basic skills in science and technology are key elements. In 2010, EU ministers set out an agenda for European policy cooperation on basic skills and a working group on MST was set up with a particular emphasis on low-achievers.

In this area, the target is to reduce the rate of young people (15 years old) who are not equipped with the necessary basic skills (literacy, mathematics, science and technology) from 20% to 15% (measured by the PISA tests).

Reducing early school leaving to less than 10% by 2020

Since early school leaving is directly correlated with unemployment, social exclusion and poverty, EU Member States have committed to reducing the average proportion of early school leavers among young people aged 18 – 24 (13.5% in 2011) to less than 10% by 2020. In 2010 they established a common framework for comprehensive and evidence-based policies to tackle early school leaving.

Higher education

Broadening the access to higher education and reducing dropout rates

As part of the Europe 2020 strategy, EU Member States have agreed to set a target of 40% of those aged 30 – 34 to achieve a higher education qualification (or equivalent) by 2020. In order to achieve this EU level target, Member States have set their own national targets to be reached by 2020.

Raise the proportion of students completing study or training abroad to 20%

EU ministers agreed to double the proportion of students who study abroad by 2020, bringing this rate to 20%. To achieve this aim, they made support for mobility a core focus of [Erasmus+](#) (2014 – 2020), which has been granted €14.7 billion.

Focusing the Bologna process on mobility, employability and quality

The Bologna process supports the modernisation of education and training systems to make sure these meet the needs of a changing labour market, as the proportion of jobs requiring high skills grows. As it primarily consists of strengthening quality assurance and the mutual recognition of qualifications across the EU, the Bologna process also aims at enhancing mobility.

Lifelong learning and training

Raising the participation of adults in lifelong learning from 9% (2012) to 15% in 2020.

This objective has been set as part of the Europe 2020 strategy, and is to be monitored through the indicators set to support its implementation.

Ensuring the validation of non-formal and informal learning for the youth sector

[This objective was set in the Council recommendation](#) on the validation of non-formal and informal learning of 20 December 2012.

Want to know more?