

# Ending Gender Stereotypes in Classrooms

## The Challenge

All children should be able to dream about their future without limits or restrictions. Yet there is a pervasive and universal force in the world that constricts children's aspirations and affects violent behaviour: gender stereotypes. Stereotypes are widely held beliefs about the character and behaviour of all members of a group.<sup>1</sup> Gender stereotypes create negative influence on children in their choice of career decision and in leading to harmful relationships which can be violent.<sup>2</sup> For example, boys feel pressure to go into high-earning sectors because they learn early on that men are expected to provide for their households. Girls often gravitate to careers in the care economy because women are associated with caregiving.

Stereotyped roles often get entrenched and normalised, so that deviance from the norm invites violence and backlash. The notion of girls' and women's sexuality is seen as an object of purity so that violence against women and girls' is regarded with shame, to be hidden. Where women's chastity comes to embody family honour itself, it promotes censure, gossip or even gender-based violence in response to any transgression.<sup>3</sup> Stereotypes associated with male dominance and aggression is a norm where violence, sexual harassment and rape are condoned and expected behaviours that women and girls' need protection from. Studies find that masculine stereotypes effect men as much as they do women. Men who strongly prescribe to norms of a "real man", are more likely to both experience and perpetrate bullying - online, physically and verbally. They are also more likely to report perpetrating sexual harassment against a woman or girl.<sup>4</sup>

While gender norms can affect all children, they disproportionately affect girls and LGBTQI children. According to Save the Children, more than 575 million girls live in countries where inequitable gender norms violate their rights<sup>5</sup>. A 2021 OCED study of 4,000 five-year-old children in England and Estonia found that girls and boys imagined gender stereotyped futures for themselves. As children grow older, these stereotypes impact not just children's aspirations but also their self-esteem, educational progress and career choices, *especially for girls*.<sup>6</sup> For girls, boys and gender non-conforming children, stereotypes can also increase the likelihood of experiencing violence. The Global Early Adolescent Study found that gender stereotypes were universal across 10-14 year old girls and boys in 15 countries and became entrenched before the age of 10.<sup>7</sup>

## The solution: School play-based programming to end gender stereotypes

Evidence shows that when children are taught to recognize the social and not biological origin of gender norms, they learn to question and reject them. An independent evaluation of a play-based programme that reached 1,900 kindergarten-age children in the UK in 2017-2018<sup>8</sup> showed that children underwent the following changes with regard to toy appropriateness for all children (versus just for girls or just for boys):

- Toy kitchens: 41% to 74%

<sup>1</sup> 2015, Igbo, Onu, Obiyo, SAGE, *Impact of Gender Stereotype on Secondary School Students' Self-Concept and Academic Achievement*

<sup>2</sup> 2005, Francis, B., Skelton, C, RoutledgeFalmer (USA), *Reassessing gender and achievement*

<sup>3</sup> 2019, Heise, L., Greene, M. E., Opper, N., Stavropoulou, M., Harper, C. et al. (USA) 'Gender inequality and restrictive gender norms: framing the challenges to health' in *The Lancet: Gender Equality, Norms and Health* 393(10189): 2440–2454. (doi. org/10.1016/S0140-6736(19)30652-X).

<sup>4</sup> <https://promundoglobal.org/resources/man-box-study-young-man-us-uk-mexico-key-findings/?lang=english>

<sup>5</sup> Save the Children website (<https://www.savethechildren.org/us/charity-stories/how-gender-norms-impact-boys-and-girls>)

<sup>6</sup> 2006, American Association of University Women (USA), *Drawing the line: Sexual harassment on campus*

<sup>7</sup> 2017, Lane, Brundage, Kreinin, *Journal of Adolescent Health, Why We Must Invest in Early Adolescence: Early Intervention, Lasting Impact*

<sup>8</sup> 2019, Lifting Limits (UK), *A Whole School Approach to Challenging Gender Stereotypes and Promoting Gender Equality in Primary Schools*

- Football: 22% to 70%
- Doll: 37% to 59%

Two studies from India (*Taaron ki Toli* and *Jagriti*)<sup>9</sup> found that interactive, play-based programming with adolescent girls and boys led to:

- 7% increase in positive attitudes towards women's paid employment outside the home. (*Taaron ki Toli*)
- 4% increase in positive attitudes towards girls' education (*Taaron ki Toli*)
- Decrease from 22% to 6% - boys who believe that boys are naturally better at studies than girls (*Jagriti*)
- Decrease from 23% to 2% - boys who believe that it's more important to educate boys than girls (*Jagriti*)
- Decrease from 40% to 13% - fathers who believe that girls shouldn't go to school because of fear of sexual violence (*Jagriti*)

### **The programme: Ending gender stereotypes in classrooms**

In 2022, UNGEI will implement the first multi-country programme through the education sector to pilot school curricula on ending gender stereotypes, Ending Gender Stereotypes in Classrooms (EGSC) in primary and secondary schools. Even though ad hoc, small scale programmes on this have demonstrated strong results, no organization has yet sought to demonstrate these results across countries in one integrated programme. Results of this output can support and guide programming by and related work of other organizations including GPE, ECW, UNICEF and UNESCO.

Drawing from existing literature and prototypes of curricula, UNGEI will pilot programming through UN country offices and other implementing partners in Bangladesh, India and a GCI country.<sup>10</sup> The programming will use play-based curricula to teach children to question gender stereotypes. Through this programme, UNGEI seeks to drive momentum around ending gender stereotypes in schools and ultimately contributing to gender equality in and through education. This will be done in two ways: (1) harnessing the successes of the pilot programme for policy advocacy with donors, ministries of education and development partners, (2) driving a research and learning agenda through a coalition of partners working on the theme.

### **A Partner Coalition to build momentum**

UNGEI will establish an intergenerational coalition of partners who have a strong track record implementing similar programs. The coalition will help build a robust learning agenda to capture evidence and work on gender stereotypes beyond the pilot countries. The coalition of partners will bring technical expertise, knowledge, and experience in the area of gender stereotypes in schools. Coalition members will work together towards the following objectives: (1) develop a learning agenda to capture evidence and insights on gender stereotypes programmes; (2) build momentum globally on ending stereotypes using play-based curricula in classrooms through joint advocacy and communication; (3) develop and promote evidence-based programmes and interventions including the results from coalition led programmes. The outcomes expected from this initiative are to have a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) approach and a common results framework, and implement a joint advocacy strategy, to expand investment in programmes on gender stereotypes at scale.

<sup>9</sup> 2018, Breakthrough India, J-PAL and the Government of Haryana jointly implemented *Taaron ki Toli* reaching 18,000 government school children. 2020, UNICEF India, Mamta Foundation, Relaxo Foundation and the Government of Haryana jointly implemented *Jagriti* reaching 10,000 government school children.

<sup>10</sup> Gender at the Centre Initiative, a gender-responsive-education programme under implementation by UNGEI (and UNESCO IIEP) in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone.