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18

Mainstreaming gender equality in curricula and teaching and learning materials



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Objectives

The objectives of this tool are to:

- highlight the importance of critically analysing curricula and teaching and learning materials from a gender equality perspective;
- offer guidance on how to carry out such an analysis;
- offer guidance on how to make appropriate adaptations to curricula and materials.

A. Curriculum



Setting the scene

The national curriculum determines the content to be taught and learned in schools. Good quality curriculum documents outline objectives, teaching content, desired learning outcomes, and suggested means of delivery, and they guide teachers in how to deliver the curriculum to achieve the desired outcomes. The curriculum is therefore an ideal opportunity to promote a greater focus on gender equality within education.

The curriculum can reinforce the status quo in terms of gender inequality, or be used to support transformations in gender relations and promote gender equality. A gender-focused review of the existing curriculum is an important starting point in understanding how the current curriculum promotes or hinders gender equality in education.

Not all teaching and learning is controlled directly by the national curriculum. Teachers are meant to interpret and adapt the curriculum, both to match the local context and to suit the needs of their learners, and schools often run co-curricular programmes. Nevertheless, it is vital that every effort is made to develop a national curriculum that is gender responsive.



Important considerations

The following systemic issues need to be considered when developing a gender-responsive curriculum:

- Ensure the curriculum documents and teaching and learning materials do not perpetuate existing gender bias and discrimination in society. Gender audits may guide important reviews and revisions of curricula and materials.
- Ensure the national curriculum and teaching and learning materials are relevant to the gendered needs of boys and girls.
- Include gender-responsive content and concepts in the development of the national curriculum so that girls and boys learn about gender equality at all levels. This is done with a view not only to changing their attitudes, values and behaviours, but also those in the wider society.

Develop and reform the curriculum

Prioritize gender equality

The first step is to ensure that gender equality is a high priority in the curriculum reform or development process. This requires political will. There needs to be a clear statement from policy-makers that all curriculum reform and development efforts will acknowledge and address gender equality principles to meet the needs of all learners, regardless of their sex or gender identity. This also needs to be communicated to all stakeholders in the curriculum reform and development process.

The following questions need to be considered:

- Does the political will exist?
 - If so, who are the main allies or supporters who can help facilitate a greater focus on gender in the curriculum reform or development process?
 - If not, where are the barriers, and how can these be addressed? How can political will be strengthened?
- Who are the key stakeholders involved in the curriculum reform or development process?
 - Do the key stakeholders have sufficient awareness of the need to make the new curriculum gender responsive?
 - Do they have expertise or experience in the area of gender equality?
 - If not, what can be done to raise their awareness and skills in this regard?

Review the curriculum

It may be necessary to start with a baseline study or situation analysis of the gender-related needs of learners. This should find out about the knowledge, attitudes and skills required for success in school and for making the transition from school to the world of work, starting a family, living healthy productive lives and becoming an active citizen. It is vital that any needs assessment process conducted during curriculum planning equally

reflects the voices of both boys and girls on these matters.

A curriculum review complements this. It should include a review or a gender audit of the formal curriculum and teaching and learning materials in use (how do they treat boys and girls), and classroom practices and learning environments (do these demonstrate any kind of gender bias). The process should be holistic and go beyond simply reviewing the curriculum documents.

The gender assessment review process needs to be carefully planned, with high-level commitment and support in the ministry of education. A team is usually established to conduct the assessment, and a workshop held to discuss the mechanism for conducting the assessment. The process involves reviewing the current curriculum framework and teaching and learning materials, details of which are provided in the following sections.

Ensure the national curriculum does not perpetuate gender bias and discrimination and is relevant to the needs of both girls and boys

All work to reform existing curricula or design new ones must be carried out with gender equality in mind. There needs to be consideration of:

- The **content of the curriculum** and key messages conveyed.
 - Is the content gender biased (for instance, do history and science lessons feature only male historical figures or scientists; are key statistics taught in subjects such as geography or social studies sex-disaggregated; are specific roles portrayed in stories and illustrations limited to only boys or girls?
 - Does the curriculum suggest ways in which the teacher can engage boys and girls in particular subjects by making the content more relevant to the different interests and life experiences of boys and girls? For instance, are there suggestions on how to engage girls more in science subjects?

- Does the national curriculum offer gender-responsive content consistently through all levels and types of education, from early years to adult education?
- The **teaching approaches and activities** recommended to teachers in the curriculum.
 - What practices are teachers expected to use in the classroom to ensure they apply gender-responsive pedagogy in their delivery of the curriculum?
 - Are recommended activities gender biased or gender responsive? Are there options in activities so that both girls and boys can access the same content at the same level, but using differentiated engagement methods with which they feel comfortable? Does the curriculum recommend differentiated activities that perpetuate stereotypes about what activities girls or boys should engage in? Does the curriculum suggest activities that encourage girls and boys to work together, in contexts where this is culturally appropriate, and thus learn to respect each other?
- Does the curriculum provide teachers with guidance on creating a gender-responsive **learning environment** in which both girls and boys feel welcome and comfortable?
- Are there any **barriers** to effective implementation of a gender-responsive curriculum in schools, and how can these be tackled?

Ensuring gender equality is embedded as a learning objective in the national curriculum

As well as modeling gender equality through its content and activities, the curriculum can help girls and boys to learn about gender issues and become supporters of gender equality. There are different ways in which this can be done, such as:

- integrating gender-responsive learning objectives and outcomes across all curriculum subjects;
- integrating gender-responsive learning objectives and outcomes in selected 'carrier' subjects, such as social studies, health

education, life-skills education, sexuality education, human rights education, citizenship education and religious studies;

- focusing on gender-responsive learning objectives and outcomes in one specific subject.

The most effective option is likely to be if every curriculum subject helps children to learn about gender equality. However, there may be certain subjects that offer greater opportunities.

A comprehensive approach will not only help children to acquire age-appropriate knowledge about gender equality, but will also help shape their attitudes and build skills to promote and defend gender equality.

In reviewing curricula, the following questions need to be asked:

- What objectives for promoting gender equality are set in the curriculum?
- What thematic content on gender norms, values and behaviours is explicitly included in the curriculum?
- What competences are set that are relevant to the achievement of gender equality?
- How is the learning on gender equality assessed? Are there minimum competences or benchmarks to be achieved?
- Is the gender content in the curriculum, as reflected in the resulting teaching and learning materials, applicable and likely to be effective in promoting gender equality in teaching and learning?



Self-study and/or group activity

On your own or in a group, read the table in **Handout 1**. This table suggests some ways in which gender can be integrated into the curriculum, so that students learn about gender equality and develop the skills to promote equality and identify discrimination. This example looks specifically at gender equality in the sexual and reproductive health curriculum.

- Choose one age group from the table.
- Think about your own country and national curriculum.
- In which of your curriculum subject(s) could you include the learning objective suggested for this age group? Would you change the learning objective at all, and if so, how?
- Develop some ideas for curriculum messages/content and activities that could be used with this age group to achieve the learning objective.
- If you have time, think about how you could adapt these curriculum messages and activities for other age groups and for children with different abilities.

Managing a curriculum review process

Ideally, a gender-focused curriculum review includes participation from a range of stakeholders, including:

- the ministry of education;
- other ministries (e.g. labour, planning, women's affairs, social welfare);
- curriculum experts;
- teacher educators;
- gender specialists and/or gender focal points;
- social scientists;
- educational authorities at regional and district levels;
- school principals;
- teachers;
- parents and community members;
- students;
- NGOs, especially those which work actively on gender equality.

A steering committee is often set up to oversee the curriculum review. The following questions need to be considered in relation to such a committee:

- How many men and women are involved in the steering committee? Are there equal numbers? How could an imbalance be addressed?
- Are any of them specialists in gender equality?
- Have the steering committee members had any training on gender-mainstreaming?
- Do those who chair committee meetings encourage open discussion and sharing of diverse opinions from both women and men?
- Have subject experts who contribute to or advise the committee had training in gender mainstreaming?

B. Teaching and learning materials

Setting the scene

Teaching and learning materials can play a key role in promoting gender equality. However, such materials often portray ideas and images that perpetuate gender stereotypes and encourage acceptance of entrenched norms. For example, school books that portray only men as doctors are likely to instill the belief that only men can become doctors. As with curricula, teaching and learning materials must be reviewed for gender bias, and revised accordingly.

Given their central role in teaching and learning, research on gender in textbooks has been ongoing since the 1970s. In a literature review on addressing gender inequalities in curriculum and education, Levtov¹ found that studies analysing textbooks across many countries present consistent results in terms of the representation of gender. Common findings include:

- **Fewer images of women and girls than men and boys:** Generally, the proportion of female representation decreases as grade level increases. Men also have more text space devoted to them, for example, through longer stories about men.
- **Men and women are generally portrayed in stereotypical roles and professions:** Women are often shown in the home, engaging in domestic and caregiving tasks, while men are portrayed in leadership or professional roles. These representations rarely accurately reflect the current roles (and changes in roles) of men and women in society, and thus serve to reinforce traditional or outdated perceptions of their roles.
- **Men and women are often described with gender-stereotyped attributes:** For example, men are described as brave and strong, while women are passive, self-sacrificing and caring. In some cases, there are negative portrayals of

women, as having an easy time at home with her children while her husband works hard, or even as gossipy or mean-spirited.

- **Contributions of important women are often ignored** or given less consideration, as are those of minority groups.

Some countries have taken action on these matters. For instance, they have instituted policies forbidding gender discrimination and stereotyping in the curriculum and textbooks, and have revised textbooks. Evaluations of textbook reforms indicate some success: the representation of women has increased and more overt sexism has been removed. However, more subtle issues around gender roles and representations remain, and are exacerbated in higher grades. There remains a need for evaluations of the impact of gender bias and reform initiatives on student and teacher attitudes and outcomes.

Developing and revising teaching and learning materials

Various strategies have been used to remove gender bias from textbooks and other materials. These include:

- working with and training the developers of teaching and learning materials on gender issues such as stereotyping;
- promoting greater female participation in writing, editing and illustrating materials;
- providing guidance materials and gender equality training for teachers so they can use materials in a more gender-responsive way.

¹ Levtov, R. 2014. Addressing Gender Inequalities in Curriculum and Education: Review of literature and promising practices to inform education reform initiatives in Thailand. *Women's Voice and Agency Research Series* 2014 No.9. World Bank.



Box 1

“On the policy level, many countries, including Thailand, have instituted policies forbidding gender discrimination in the curriculum and textbooks including specific directives to remove gender stereotypes, and have undertaken revisions of the textbooks. In the global south, the World Bank and other organizations (e.g. Ford Foundation in China) have funded studies and explicit initiatives to eliminate gender bias from textbooks. Generally, the aim is to more accurately reflect the diversity of roles in a society.”

“Many countries have examined or intervened in the process of textbook development... There is limited research on the impact of the gender composition of textbook authors/developers: a study in Pakistan found a positive correlation between female authors and the representation of females in textbooks in some subjects ... a study in Spain found no impact of the gender composition of the editorial teams on stereotyping in the textbooks ... While achieving gender equity in the profession of textbook development may be a worthy goal in and of itself, these findings ... suggest that the simple presence of women on development teams will likely not be sufficient to reduce gender discrimination in textbooks. Instead, training on gender equality for textbook producers may increase awareness of stereotyping issues, and result in less biased textbooks.”

Source: Levto, 2014, pp.7-8.²

As with the curriculum, reviews of teaching and learning materials are best conducted in a participatory way, with input from a range of stakeholders. Reviewers should develop a checklist of issues to consider so that they can assess materials in a consistent way. Existing materials need to be analysed to determine whether or how their continued use should be encouraged. Analyses then need to be compiled and clear instructions for improvements developed and shared with everyone who writes, illustrates and publishes teaching and learning materials. There may be a need for revisions to existing materials or for the development of completely new materials. All new and revised materials should be assessed using the same criteria before being finalized and released for use in schools.

² Levto, 2014, pp.7-8.

The checklist below offers suggestions for questions to ask during the analysis:

General considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the materials easy to read and understand? • What part(s) of the materials promote gender equality? How do the materials do this? • What parts(s) of the materials seem to perpetuate gender bias and stereotypes? How do the materials do this? • Do the materials encourage girls' empowerment? • Do they equally encourage desirable values and behaviours of boys? • Do they provide role models for both boys and girls? • Do they depict equal partnerships between men and women? • Do the materials say anything about the spectrum of gender? • Do they promote positive values relating to the acceptance of gender diversity? • Is there any gender bias or stereotyping in the representation of characters in text and images?
Frequency of appearance of female and male characters	<p>Through characters, teaching and learning materials convey gendered representations which can either support a shift towards gender equality or maintain the status quo of stereotypes. The frequency of appearance of male and female characters is one indicator of gender balance and, potentially, gender equality. Consider the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many women and men are portrayed or mentioned in the texts and pictures? • When and how often do female characters appear compared with male characters? • When does the first named male appear? When does the first named female appear? Female characters often appear without being named, while male characters are more often named, which gives the impression that male characters are more important.
Nature of female and male characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of activity (productive/reproductive/community) is each character involved in? • How are women and men portrayed (e.g. as nurturers, economic producers, leaders, victims)? Are they portrayed differently? • What psychological traits (resourceful, smart, brave, cowardly, gentle, etc.) are attributed to female and male characters? Are these traits different for males and females? • How are family roles distributed between male and female characters (e.g. which characters care for or play with children, help children with their homework, clean the house, cook, repair things, etc.)? Is this distribution typical of gender stereotyping?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what specific activities are girls and boys involved? How are their activities different? Is there equality of status in their activities? Are boys always shown as helping their fathers, while girls are shown helping their mothers with chores?
Illustrations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are both females and males portrayed in pictures and drawings? How do females appear in comparison with males, especially in terms of their picture sizes or frequency of pictures? Is there any difference? • Are the illustrations culturally appropriate and/or gender responsive? Do they suggest gender equality or inequality in relations? • Do the illustrations portray both females and males positively and in ways that are free from gender bias?
Settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where is the action/activity taking place within pictures or text? Is it in a public area or in the private domain? • Which places signify importance and why? Are female and male characters both portrayed in these places? Are there any settings where males only or females only are depicted? • What impact does the positioning of each person in a picture have on his or her visibility?
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the implications of the activities in which characters are involved in terms of hierarchy, prominence and portrayal of gender relations? Do they suggest equality or inequality? • Are males and females portrayed on an equal footing? • Are female characters presented as autonomous individuals, or only shown in relation to males? • What issues are prominent? Here are some examples to consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The multiple roles of women/girls; – Women taking initiative to control their lives; – Women/girls questioning their life conditions; – Women leaders/girls as leaders in school, workplace or community; – Women/girls as equal partners of men/boys; – Women and men in non-traditional employment and girls and boys in non-traditional roles.
Concluding analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the content realistic in terms of female and male roles and responsibilities in your community? • What kinds of individual role models are presented for both girls and boys? Are there any differences you can note? • Can you see any changes in the respective roles of women and men in society based on the teaching and learning materials? What are these changes? • Would these same changes be possible in your own community? Why or why not?

- Do the teaching and learning materials promote gender equality and girls' empowerment?
- How do the teaching and learning materials promote equal partnership between women and men, girls and boys?
- Do the teaching and learning materials reinforce gender stereotypes? If so, in what way?
- Is there anything you would like to improve in the teaching and learning materials to make them more gender responsive and better at promoting gender equality?



Self-study and/or group activity

- On your own or in a group, select at least one teaching and learning material currently in use in your schools. It can be from any grade and subject, and a book or a different type of resource such as a poster or audio-visual resource.
- Use the questions in the table above to analyse the material.
- If you are working in a group, does everyone agree on the analysis? Or are there any aspects of the materials that you feel are ambiguous and difficult to categorize as definitely gender responsive or definitely gender biased or stereotyped? If so, each person should present her/his perspective and see if you can reach a consensus.
- Once you have completed the analysis using the questions, pick one section or page from the material (or each person in the group can pick a different section or page) and think about how you would rewrite the text and/or redraw the pictures.
- If possible, write the new text or sketch or describe the new images that you think are needed.



Optional extension activity for self-study and/or group work

- Work on your own or in a group.
- Consider the situation in your context. Draw a mind map to record the following:
 - Who is responsible for curriculum and material development?
 - Is there an existing mechanism for reviewing curricula and materials from a gender equality perspective?
 - What is the mechanism, and who is involved, at national, district and community level?
 - Is this mechanism effective; what are the pros and cons?
 - Who else could be involved?
 - If there is no mechanism, what needs to be done, and with whom, in order to create one?
 - What role, if any, could you play in establishing or improving the mechanisms for reviewing and revising curricula and materials?



Further reading

- IBE. 2017. *Training Tools for Curriculum Development: A resource pack for gender-responsive stem education*. Geneva: IBE-UNESCO. Module 2 on Gender-sensitive STEM curricula.
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- UNESCO IBE. 2013. *IBE Glossary of Curriculum Technology*. UNESCO International Bureau of Education. Geneva: UNESCO IBE.



Handout 1³

Age Level	Learning objectives	Key ideas
5–8 years	Define gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families, schools, friends, media and society are sources of learning about gender.
9–12 years	Explore ways in which gender inequality is driven by boys and girls, women and men	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social and cultural norms and religious beliefs are some of the factors which influence gender roles; Gender inequalities exist in families, friendships, communities and society e.g. male/son preference; Human rights promote the equality of men and women, boys and girls; Everyone has a responsibility to overcome gender inequality.
12–15 years	Explain the meaning and provide examples of gender bias and discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal values influence one's beliefs about gender bias and discrimination; Gender equality promotes equal decision-making about sexual behaviour and family planning; Different and unequal standards sometimes apply to men and women.
15–18 years	Identify personal examples of the ways in which gender affects people's lives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sexual orientation and identity are widely understood to be influenced by many factors; Gender inequality influences sexual behaviour and may increase the risk of sexual coercion, abuse and violence.

3 UNESCO, 2009. *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*, Volume II, p. 19.



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