

The importance of gender in early childhood education policy^[1]

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The international development community has placed adolescent girls and secondary schooling at the center of girls' education policy, and has given less attention to gender realities of girls and boys in early childhood. This oversight begs the following question: Can gender and education issues at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels and beyond be tackled without paying attention to interventions in the early years? My project at Brookings highlights the gaps and opportunities in bringing a gender perspective into early childhood teacher policy, particularly in the context of China, where I have been working in the field of girls' education and early childhood development for many years.

Policymakers and educators worldwide should not underestimate the importance of early childhood education on the development of deeply engrained gender norms. It is important to consider the cognitive and affective formation of gender identity which develops in early childhood. The types of skills, personality attributes, and career aspirations learned through teacher-child interactions and childhood play can form stereotypical masculine and feminine attitudes toward gender roles, which develop before adolescence.

Evidence shows that educators need to have gender awareness to be open to girls' and boys' choices in learning and development, help children explore who they are, and make connections to people around them, as well as gain self-confidence, well-being, peer acceptance, and social support. Research in Asia and Africa on teachers' attitudes and expectations toward girls' performance in mathematics and science has shown that training teachers with a gender-sensitive approach can improve equal participation of all children in a learning environment. In spite of this, actual policy and practice on incorporating a gender perspective in early childhood teacher training has been overlooked.

Education and gender equality in China has been grounded in the promotion of girls' education in compulsory education. Despite the achievement in gender parity and in some cases that girls outperform boys in primary and secondary education, gender gaps in China persist. Additionally, the preference for boys, for example, resulted in the world's most imbalanced sex ratio. This contributed to China's rank at the bottom of the health and survival indicator on the Global Gender Gap Index, which measures economic participation, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. Outcomes such as this are heavily tied to gender inequalities rooted in deeply entrenched gender norms, which demand gender awareness in teaching and learning in the early years.

In order for China to fulfill its education plan and achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals set forward by global education agendas, it not only needs to support girls' and boys' development of core competencies, but also their long-term cognitive and socio-emotional development—free from gender constraints. As China makes rapid progress in early childhood education and develops policy to build up the teacher force, it is important to have pathways to incorporate gender equality into teacher policy.

Drawing from a review of China's early childhood care and education (ECCE) policies and global examples, my discussion paper concludes by outlining policy pathways at the system and teaching level in China. These pathways include establishing a local approach for ECCE teacher training in poor rural areas, and a strong teacher support network focused on sharing technology-based learning resources, content knowledge, and pedagogical practices to ensure gender-responsiveness in ECCE teaching and learning.

Issues around gender equality, quality education, early learning, and poverty reduction are at the top of many international organizations' agendas. Adding a focus on gender in ECCE, especially for the role of teachers, may be of interest to international adolescent girls' initiatives to transform gender stereotypes and cultural norms through early interventions. It could also help make gender issues in the international arena more visible.

In summary, incorporating a gender perspective into early childhood teaching unlocks children's potential at the very foundation of their development, and the policy value goes far beyond teacher policy itself. It can build a sustainable approach to gender equality and quality education, and foster the development of human resources for the whole society. With a little effort, the impact can go a long way.

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