



SYNTHESIS REPORT

RESEARCH INTO GENDER EQUALITY
AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT
IN ELEVEN COUNTRIES IN ASIA

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report summarises the findings from the pilot application of a tool developed by a team of Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) and Gender specialists from Plan Finland, Plan Australia and the Asia and the Eastern Southern Africa Regional Offices together with the consultant Di Kilsby. The pilot application of the tool in Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Timor-Leste – and subsequent strengthening of the tool based on feedback following the pilot application - would not have been possible without the leadership and support from ECCD, gender and monitoring evaluation specialists together with the program directors in each of these countries. Many thanks to all involved!

More information about Plan's Gender and ECD resources, including the revised Gender and ECD assessment toolkit, can be obtained from <https://plan-international.org/publications> (under the Healthy Start area) or by contacting melanie.swan@plan-international.org

About Plan International

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world.

We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected.

As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children.

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INTRODUCTION

Between 2014 and 2015, Plan and partner organisations conducted research on the gender dimensions of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) initiatives in 11 countries – Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Timor-Leste.

The research was conducted in order to analyse the current situation, as a first step towards identifying how existing interventions need to be strengthened in order that the Early Childhood Development (ECD) programming implemented by Plan together with partners is at a minimum gender aware and in time is gender transformative. This was felt to be an urgent need across the region, recognising that:

- **Gender socialisation starts at birth.**¹ By the time girls and boys reach primary school, many already have a clear idea of how they are expected to behave, what the consequence might be for not conforming to these expectations, how they are valued based on their sex, and what roles they are expected to fulfil throughout their lives.
- **ECD programming has gender transformative potential** offering an entry point to: sensitively challenge the ways that girls and boys are socialised into stereotypical attitudes and expectations about the roles, behaviours and value of their sex; promote changes in the gender roles and relationships among the adults who surround and care for young children; encourage caregivers and educators to value and care for girls and boys equally.
- **The gender transformative potential of ECD programmes is often not being leveraged:** While research has found that a growing number of Plan offices were explicitly considering gender socialisation and equality in their ECD projects, a concern was that many continued to reinforce gendered norms and stereotypes.²

GLOSSARY

- **Caregivers:** includes adults – usually family members – who have primary responsibility for the care and protection of the young child when the parents are absent, or who share significant responsibility with the parents.
- **Educator:** refers to the community volunteer or para-professional trained and supported to provide care, play and learning opportunities for young children in community-based non-formal spaces.
- **Community-based Early Childhood Care and Education Centre:** refers to community-managed spaces that offer care and opportunities for play and learning to children of pre-school age, including playgroups and play spaces.
- **Early grade:** refers usually to grades 1 – 3 of primary school, attended by children under eight years of age.
- **Facilitator:** refers to the adult responsible for organising and moderating community-based parenting education groups and programmes.
- **Gender aware:** programming that seeks to improve the daily condition of women and girls by addressing practical gender issues. It does not, however, try to transform gender relations.
- **Gender transformative:** programmes that have the explicit intention to transform unequal power relations. The focus goes beyond improving the condition of women and girls and seeks to improve their social position (how they are valued in society) as well as the full realisation of their rights.
- **Parent:** refers throughout to mothers AND fathers (not mothers only): these may be biological or adoptive parents or the child's legal guardian
- **Pre-school:** refers to formal, public pre-primary school services.
- **Social norms:** the shared, informal understandings, beliefs, expectations or customary rules of a particular group, community or culture about how people should behave in specific situations, which are accepted as normal and to which an individual is expected to conform. For example, "real men" do not help with care work and childrearing; "real men" resolve conflict with violence.
- **Teacher:** refers to the paid public provider working in the formal pre-school setting.

¹ Early childhood is a crucial time for the development of a child, including girls' and boys' sense of themselves and their place in the world. From the moment children are born, they are taught the stereotyped gender norms, attitudes and expectations of their community and society by parents/caregivers, educators and other influential adults – through the way they model gender roles and relationships, respond to children's behaviour and communicate with young children.

² For instance, studies supported by Plan Finland and Plan Australia in six countries (Uganda, Kenya, Bolivia, Ethiopia, Pakistan and Mozambique) found that, without very specific attention to ensure that ECCE projects explicitly address gender inequality and discrimination, they tend to be 'gender-unaware' and, therefore, to reinforce existing inequality and injustice. Kilsby D. (2014) *Synthesis report: research into gender in ECCD in six countries*. Plan Australia and Plan Finland

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was predominantly qualitative. Most countries conducted the assessments over a short period of five consecutive days, using and testing a **Gender and ECCD self-assessment tool** developed by Plan that contained several qualitative (and one quantitative) tools. The research was conducted in areas in which Plan and partners were already working and took place following approval from community leaders and local education authorities. See Appendix 1 for information about each country, the geographical areas covered and the groups/institutions included.

Depending on existing programme interventions, the research in each country involved some or all of the following:

- **Focus group discussions (FGD) with parents and primary caregivers** (predominantly female) enquiring about the gendered distribution of care work and decision-making in their homes; the care and opportunities provided to sons and daughters; and expectations for the behaviours, potential and future roles of their sons and daughters.
- **Focus group discussions with the educators and teachers working in community-based early childhood care and education (ECCE) centres, pre-schools and the early grades of primary schools**, enquiring about the care and treatment provided for children in the spaces – and whether this is different based on the child’s sex – and their expectations for the behaviours, potential and future roles of the girls and boys.
- **Focus group discussions with the facilitators of parenting education groups** enquiring about the content of parenting education sessions and the participation of men and women in these groups.
- **Observations of the community-based ECCE centres, pre-schools and the early grades of primary schools**, including review of printed learning materials to assess the extent to which these are gender aware, and observation of a complete session at the centre/school during which researchers observed girls’ and boys’ use of the classroom, learning corners and play materials – as well as the educators’/teachers’ interactions and communications with the children.
- **Analysis of quantitative data** about: the number of girls and boys enrolled in/attending regularly the community ECCE centres and pre-schools; the sex distribution of educators, teachers and managers or directors working in these spaces; the number of men and women participating in parenting education groups.
- **Individual staff and organisational self-assessments** in order to understand to what extent Plan and partners had the policies, procedures and competent staff in place to implement gender aware and gender transformative ECD programming.³
- **Validation of the data and findings**, through sharing and discussion of the data and preliminary results of the analysis with the different actors involved in the early childhood development programming.

Data was collated by the field research teams and analysed jointly by Plan and partner ECD, gender and monitoring and evaluation staff. Conclusions from the findings were used for the development of action plans to strengthen the gender equality approach of the ECD programming, as well as to address staff and organisational capacity gaps.

These country assessments were not intended or planned to be rigorous research projects. The teams were piloting and testing newly developed qualitative tools. As it was a pilot, in all countries bar Bangladesh (where a study with external researchers was commissioned) Plan and partners opted to validate each tool with a limited number of focus groups/pre-schools etc. The fact that participants and facilitators of parenting groups as well as ECCE centre/pre-school teachers are virtually all women in many countries meant that in some countries the majority of the respondents were female and the perspectives of men were not covered to the same extent. Several countries noted challenges in applying the tools because respondents didn’t understand the questions. In some cases, the reports note that this was because respondents had never equated early childhood with the possibility of there being “gender issues”: girls and boys were believed to receive the same care and opportunities, and the gendered distribution of care work and any gender disparities were seen as being “natural”. In the case of Sri Lanka, participants explained that gender equality was perceived as an external concept alien to the local culture. Finally, assessment teams in several countries noted that pre-school/primary school enrolment and attendance records were incomplete and/or did not include sex-disaggregated information.

The findings must, therefore, be interpreted with care, and *are not generalisable to the overall population in the areas studied*. They do, however, provide a useful “snapshot” and suggest that there are possibly many commonalities across these different contexts, in terms of the gendered distribution of care work and the gender socialisation processes which teach girls and boys – from the youngest age – gendered attitudes and expectations about their behaviours, their potential and their future role in society.

³ The findings from the staff and organisational self-assessments have not been synthesised in this report. However, as the last section of this report notes, countries concluded that existing interventions needed to be strengthened in order to ensure that these are, at a minimum, gender aware and progressively gender transformative. As noted on this page, action planning took into consideration how to address the organisational/staff capacity gaps identified, including those that were obstacles to implementing gender transformative projects.

MAIN FINDINGS

Distribution and value of care work within the household

“(Men) are the decision-makers, earners, providers, protectors, and community participators.”
FGD participant Myanmar

Across all countries, **women were primarily defined in their roles as wives and mothers, and were exclusively or virtually exclusively responsible for care work including domestic chores and care for their young children.** In all countries, respondents perceived that men’s primary responsibility to their family was generating income, making the major decisions and disciplining the children when necessary.

In India, women explained how men continue to provide little support with care work and childrearing even when the women have to assume additional productive responsibilities alongside their domestic responsibilities, for instance during harvest season. During these periods, women are forced to make “trade-offs” between productive and domestic responsibilities, and some are left with no option but to leave their young children at home unaccompanied. In Myanmar, women explained how their roles are characterised by long hours and hard work, with limited time for leisure, social or political activities. A FGD respondent reported that “They start from an early age and continue into old age, with grandmothers participating in child-caring activities, such as walking the children to school.” In contrast, men have more free time for rest and leisure.

There were a few examples of men’s limited involvement in childcare, but these were not generalised. In several countries – Bangladesh, Pakistan, Laos, Myanmar and India – respondents reported that fathers sometimes bring or collect children from school and attend parent–teacher meetings. In Myanmar, mothers and fathers were observed coming to the ECCE centre at lunchtime to help with feeding their children. In Thailand, interviewees reported that men are involved whenever there are interactions with public service providers and government institutions, for instance at the time of registering the child’s birth or accompanying children’s visits to the health centre. In many of these cases, however, men’s involvement did not reflect recognition of the importance of men sharing the burden of care work – rather it was because women experienced obstacles in undertaking these tasks themselves. For instance, among the Thai communities visited, women have higher illiteracy levels and many do not speak Thai and are unable to communicate with public service providers that speak only Thai. In Pakistan and Laos, women face restrictions on their movements outside their home or their community.

Even where respondents referred to the negative implications of this gendered distribution of care work, it did not appear to be challenged. Across all countries, both men and women showed strong adherence to the naturalisation of discriminatory gender norms by explaining that it was normal, natural and correct that women take on the care work and childrearing responsibilities. Reasons given for this included:

- Women are natural caregivers – they know by instinct how to take care of young children, and they are “soft and patient to take care of little kids” (Bangladesh).
- Men are *not* natural caregivers – they have the wrong temperament and they don’t have enough patience to provide loving care to their children. For instance, in Bangladesh fathers mentioned that they needed to learn “how to control their anger and temperament” before being more involved.
- Men are too busy as they have to work to provide for the household.
- Women do work that is less important than the work that men do: in several countries – including Indonesia, Laos and Myanmar – respondents reported that care work, childrearing and community work are all valued less and are seen as less important than the productive work undertaken by men.

Decision-making power within the household

“Mothers can take small decisions but as they don’t have money and power to implement decisions, they have to depend on [the] father in that case.”
(FGD participant, Bangladesh)

Across all countries, respondents reported that men have principal responsibility for making household decisions – including what women should do with respect to employment and use of their “spare” time. Women may be able to make minor decisions involving small financial outlays (for instance, with respect to the day-to-day running of the household) but any more major decisions with more significant financial implications are made by men. In Myanmar, women reported that

even though they also work to contribute to the household income (for instance, by raising and selling pigs and chickens), they have no control over the income generated, save the small amounts they are given for day-to-day purchases.

There were a few exceptions to this rule noted: for instance, in China and Laos, respondents explained that mothers and fathers were equally responsible for deciding whether to send their children to ECCD centres/pre-schools.

This lack of decision-making power in the household extends to the community level. In Laos, when men and women attended training sessions, the men dominated and controlled the discussion, in spite of their smaller numbers, and women appeared to be reluctant to share their ideas and opinions. In Myanmar, respondents commented that when women participate in community activities, it is in place of their absent husband and they have limited opportunities to express their opinions.

Again, in most cases where this was discussed, respondents (who were predominantly women across most of the countries) continued to show strong adherence to the naturalisation of discriminatory gender norms by suggesting that it was normal, natural and correct that men make the decisions. Reasons given for this were because:

- Men are more naturally capable of taking decisions. They are also more confident and less shy about speaking in public. For instance, in Laos, the village leader explained that men are expected to contribute more to community development work and meetings than women, because “women cannot make decisions”.
- Men have greater mobility: they are not confined to the household, they are able to move around in public spaces and, as a result, are more knowledgeable about external issues and better suited to make decisions.

If men make a wrong decision, they will not be blamed: in Bangladesh, respondents talked about how making decisions could be risky for women as they would be blamed/punished, while this is not the case for men. In India, it is felt that that women taking decisions might not be very conducive for the marital relationship - as there will be conflicts between husband and wife.

Parents'/caregivers' expectations for their sons and daughters

“Girls have to go to another home after marriage. That is why it is critical that she learns 'normal behaviour' and is trained to be patient. Boys are stubborn and it is good for them as they have to face the outside world.”

Parent, Pakistan

A common narrative was found across all countries in terms of parents'/caregivers' expectations for their children's behaviour. Girls were expected to be – and were valued for being – quiet, obedient, disciplined and well-mannered. Boys were expected to be noisy, independent, active and naughty. There was a sense that “bad behaviour” was condoned because “boys will be boys”, and because they need to learn how to take risks and be strong and daring, in order to be good providers and leaders in the future.

Likewise, a common narrative was found across most respondents in terms of their hopes for their children's futures, including the sort of work they would have and their role in society. Across multiple countries, parents/caregivers expressed hopes that their sons would be able to lift themselves and their families out of poverty and would become pilots, engineers or similar professions. When they imagined future employment for their daughters, they referred to them working in the “caring professions”, as teachers, doctors, nurses, midwives. In several cases – India and Pakistan most notably – a more dominant narrative was of the girls' future as a caring mother and wife: none mentioned expectations for their sons becoming good fathers/husbands beyond the role of being a good economic provider.

Very few country assessments involved asking parents/caregivers questions related to how much they value their sons and daughters (although comments on the inferior value of care work as compared to the work that men do provide hints as to son preference). In Myanmar, respondents reported that girls and boys, and women and men are valued “equally but differently” (with the exception of monks and nuns who hold a higher position); the assessment team noted that this is the dominant narrative in a country where gender equality is said to have cultural and religious roots. At the same time, in Myanmar it is considered desirable to have a son as the first-born child as boys will be the successor of the family, and the “inheritor of the next generation”. Meanwhile in Sri Lanka, respondents reported that both girl and boy children are valued in Sri Lankan culture, and that when the first-born child is a girl, this is a sign of luck: however families “will be unhappy if they have no boy children”.

Parents'/caregivers' care and treatment of their sons and daughters

“We do not educate our daughters to become career women. We want them to become good human beings and to be able to run their households efficiently once they are married.”

Parent, Pakistan

In interviews with parents/caregivers from the different countries, they described that in some respects they treat all children the same, regardless of their sex. In other respects, they described different, gendered patterns of care for girls and boys, explaining that these were necessary because:

- boys and girls are physically and biologically different – girls are weaker and boys are stronger – and therefore have different needs: for instance, girls need to be kept safe and protected from violence more than the boys;
- boys and girls need to learn different things in order to be prepared for adult life;
- boys and girls have different temperaments and personalities – which means that they respond differently to different types of reward and punishment.

The fact that across the different countries, girls are seen as being weaker and less able to protect themselves – and in addition they need to be “marriageable” later – meant that the following patterns of care were referred to frequently.

- Many families opted to limit the amount of time that girls could run around and play in the community, citing safety concerns.
- Parents opted not to send their daughter to pre-school, if this meant that she would have to walk more than a short distance unaccompanied (while this was not mentioned as an obstacle to boys going to school).
- Girls were expected to stay at home – both to stay safe but also to support mothers in their domestic chores (including cleaning, taking care of younger siblings etc.). For instance, in Pakistan respondents reported that girls as young as five help their mothers with domestic chores and a nine-year-old takes care of most of the housework.

In contrast, parents/caregivers in several countries explained that young boys were given much more freedom to roam around, explore and play in the community, right from an early age. These differences in treatment and mobility have lasting consequences in boys' and girls' ability to create social networks, to build social capital, and to feel confident and to develop a healthy sense of self-esteem: all necessary qualities for children to reach their full potential.

At the same time, parents/caregivers in most countries seemed to attach equal importance to education for both girls and boys and be equally willing to send sons and daughters to community-based ECCE centres/pre-schools (this was also confirmed by the enrolment figures below). However, as the more in-depth research in Pakistan shows, parents' motivations for sending girls and boys to school may be different. Here, parents/caregivers explained that they valued pre-school education opportunities for boys on the one hand because “boys are usually naughty and soon become a nuisance at home” or because they literally want to take their sons “off the streets” and see pre-schools as places where they will learn discipline, self-control and respect for elders and cultural values. On the other hand, parents expect that pre-schools are where their sons will begin to learn in order to gain admission to good schools later, and in adulthood provide for the family – and for them in their old age. Meanwhile, while some parents/caregivers explained that they valued pre-school education for girls in order that they could continue schooling and would be able to earn a decent livelihood later (should the need arise), more parents focused on schools as a place to prepare girls for life as a mother and wife. Others referred to wanting to make the most of the fact that early childhood is a time of relatively greater freedom for girls: as one mother said, “When my daughter gets older, there will be restrictions placed on her mobility; I want her to enjoy all opportunities before that time”.

Overall, there was the sense that what girls do, where they go, and how they behave is controlled much more rigorously by parents/caregivers right from early childhood. In Pakistan, the researchers noted how “parents and other family members ... keep reconfirming gender roles and conveying to children what is acceptable gendered behaviour in Pakistani society; for instance that boys do not play with dolls; that girls do not play cricket; that make-up is not for boys. When girls and boys want to behave in ways that do not fit with acceptable gendered behaviours, then the level of tolerance for [this] so-called 'aberration' is higher for boys than for girls...”.

In other countries too, young boys seem to be given much more scope to decide what to do and how to behave. For instance, respondents in Myanmar and Laos explained how “naughty boys” are allowed to skip school when they want to: “parents have lots of things to do and they [try] hard to motivate the boys, but if they resist then [there is] nothing they can do about it” (Myanmar).

Parents'/caregivers' gendered expectations for their children result in negative implications for boys also. In Pakistan, parents expressed concern at the large amount of schoolwork that boys receive right from an early age. In Sri Lanka, the team noted that the boys are not given sufficient attention, are allowed to run around without accompaniment and are vulnerable to risks: furthermore boys are given the risky or hard jobs and chores without regard to their protection. In

several countries – most notably Myanmar – respondents mentioned that parents use harder, physical punishments for boys when they misbehave and punishments referred to as “soft”, such as household duties, for girls.⁴

Parents'/caregivers' participation in parenting groups

“Productive work or farming is far more important than wasting time sitting and listening [at a parents group].”
FGD participant, Timor Leste

In all countries, a significant majority of participants in the parenting education groups were women and in several cases there was no male participation at all. The mothers/female caregivers interviewed explained that as a result, men were often poorly informed about the care and attention their young children need to develop.

Different reasons were given to explain why men do not attend these groups, most of which showed women's own perceptions of their work and time as being less valuable than that of the men in their families, for example:

- parenting education is not relevant for men because the care of young children is women's responsibility;
- men have more important things to do and are busy with earning income for the family;
- men have not been invited to the sessions and do not feel welcome in them;
- parenting group sessions are not organised at times when men can attend;
- men have migrated away from the village for work.

In most, though not all cases, the facilitators of the parents' groups were also women. Again this was explained as being because women are better caregivers naturally, and therefore better able to teach other women about early childhood development. In Thailand, men also explained that the fact that the parenting group facilitators were called “mother volunteers” was a barrier to their involvement. Having all-female facilitators for all-female groups is not bad programming practice per se, and is actually advisable when groups are purposely all-female. However, the fact that men were not involved because of the normalisation of women as caregivers denotes programming that is gender-unaware. Laos was the only country where the facilitators were all male, but this was because women are usually not allowed to travel outside the village and men traditionally take on the voluntary roles – not because the projects were trying to challenge stereotypical gender roles.

Sex distribution of ECCE centre/pre-school educators and teachers

“Men are unwilling to choose ECCD as their profession because on one hand, dealing with kids is considered as women's work; on the other hand, ECCD teacher is a low-paid and under-valued job which is not attractive to men.”
Focus Group Discussion Respondent, China

In all countries, a significant majority or all of the educators and teachers working in the community-based ECCE centres and pre-schools were women. In only one country – China – did the assessment team find that there had been explicit efforts to increase the number of men working as educators and pre-school teachers; however, in this case they had met with little success.

Across all countries, this situation was seen as being natural and right for a number of reasons that continue to show adherence to stereotypical gender attitudes about what constitutes appropriate work for males and females. These attitudes are deeply grounded in gender norms that describe women's nature as caring, and men's nature as aggressive and uncontrollable, even though in fact these are all learned behaviours.

- Both parents/caregivers and teachers themselves reported that women make better early childhood carers and educators – because they “possess a maternal instinct by nature”; are more caring and able to nurture and protect young children.

⁴ Giving household duties such as sweeping and cleaning was described as a form of “soft punishment” for girls in Myanmar and the punishment used for both girls and boys attending pre-school in Thailand. While this is not a physically violent form of discipline it does underline the menial and undervalued nature of domestic work, reinforcing the low status of women who are associated with this kind of work.

- In contrast, in some countries (such as Thailand and Pakistan), parents/caregivers expressed concern that male educators and teachers would be more aggressive, and more likely to harshly discipline or even sexually abuse their young children.
- Men are not interested in working as early childhood educators because ECCE/pre-school teaching jobs are seen as being synonymous with caregiving and therefore are undervalued and seen as women's work; and because the profession is poorly paid.
- Early childhood education is seen as a better fit for women who need to take care of their families, cannot travel and "cannot take challenging roles" – furthermore women's contribution to the household income "is only complementary" (Bangladesh).

The result is that the early childhood education workforce is predominantly female, and since this is seen as 'less valuable' or 'less important work', the jobs are poorly paid. The same is not necessarily true for decision-making about the ECCE centre/pre-school. In Myanmar, the assessment teams found that both men and women participated in the school management committees, and that in most cases it was the men who made the decisions. In Laos, while all the teachers were women, all the school principals were men.

Girls' and boys' enrolment and attendance in community-based ECCE centres and pre-schools

Across all countries (with the exception of Nepal and Myanmar), enrolment rates at the ECCE centres, pre-school and early grades or primary were more or less equal for girls and boys. Where more girls were attending than boys (or vice versa), this was because there were more girls living in the community than boys. In Nepal and Myanmar, enrolment rates at the pre-school level were **higher among girls than boys**: in the case of Nepal, the explanation for this is that parents invest in sending sons to a private kindergarten (rather than the community ECCE centre/public pre-school assessed) believing that the private school offers a higher quality early education.

Likewise, while children's attendance rates were worryingly low in some countries (such as Nepal, Indonesia⁵, Pakistan), the research did not reveal consistently lower attendance rates among girls than boys or vice versa. Where attendance rates were higher for one sex, this usually favoured girls (such as in India and Thailand).

In several countries, respondents reported that boys and girls not attending ECCE spaces, pre-schools or primary were more usually those from the poorest families, children with a disability or children who had to travel longer distances to reach the school. In Thailand, the fact that parents were not used to leaving their children in the care of others – and their concerns for the safety of their children – also seemed to be a factor.

Respondents in India and Pakistan did, however, refer to the particular barriers that girls face in accessing a quality pre-school education. In India, parents explained that if household income is sufficient, they would invest this in sending sons to a higher quality private pre-school, while keeping daughters in the lower-cost and lower quality public institution. In Pakistan, a small number of parents explained that they kept daughters as young as five years old at home to look after their younger siblings while they worked. Several mentioned that they were unwilling to send daughters to school until they were at least six years old, because of concerns about their safety and security travelling to and from the school.

Finally, attendance data from Sri Lanka, India, Laos and Indonesia revealed that both girls and boys missed school for long periods during the harvest season. In these countries this phenomenon was explained by the fact that mothers also worked in the fields during harvest: this meant that mothers either didn't have the time to prepare the child for school or to bring and collect them (and therefore opted to leave them at home), or that they took the children with them to the field.

⁵ Please note that the findings from this small sample in Indonesia do not reflect official data from the Ministry of Education and Culture, which shows a gross enrolment for children age 3-6 of 70.10% (2016) but higher rates of attendance amongst boys (54%) than girls (46%).

ECCE centre/pre-school printed materials and their gender sensitivity

“The pictures in the teaching material clearly illustrate that men assume the occupations/professions involving the use of power and authority such as soldiers, policemen whilst women take on roles that require or assume less power and decision-making such as school teachers, nurses.”

Gender and ECCD report, Laos

With few exceptions, the printed learning materials (storybooks, picture books, posters) on display and in use in the ECCE centres and pre-schools depicted girls/women and boys/men in gender-stereotypical roles and behaving in conformity with gendered attitudes and expectations for their sex.

- In all countries, most or all of the printed materials depicted boys as powerful, smart, active, physically strong and often in the foreground. They were depicted playing with “gendered” toys and games – running around, playing with kites, building blocks or toy cars.
- In all countries, most or all of the printed materials depicted girls as soft, pretty, comparatively weak, fearful and relegated to the background. They were compared to butterflies, flowers etc. Just like boys, they were depicted playing with “gendered” toys and games – sat quietly (or dancing), playing with dolls or toy kitchen sets.
- In all countries, most or all of the printed materials depicted men as strong and adventurous leaders, in public and community roles, engaged in intellectual activities (such as reading the newspaper) and working in professions of power and authority – doctors, engineers, policemen, soldiers and pilots.
- In all countries, most or all of the printed materials depicted women as soft, beautiful, comparatively weak and busy with housework and childcare. Where women were depicted in employment, this was usually as teachers, nurses and saleswomen.
- In Nepal, the ECCD guidelines developed by government refer to children throughout, without any gender perspective.

This level of adherence to stereotypical gender roles in printed learning materials cannot be overstated, and highlights the opportunity of changing teaching materials as a strategy to leverage the gender transformative potential of ECD.

ECCE centre/pre-school educators and teachers: their expectations for and interactions with boys and girls

Across all countries, the educators and teachers working in the ECCE centres, pre-schools and early grades of primary school reported that they try to provide girls and boys with equal opportunities to learn and play. However on probing, many explained that this did not mean that they treated girls and boys equally. The sense was that they treated girls and boys differently because they believed that:

- girls and boys by nature have different temperaments and characteristics
- girls and boys inherently have different aptitudes and abilities
- girls and boys have different preferences for play and learning.

A common narrative was found across all countries in terms of educators’ and teachers’ expectations for the children’s behaviour. Girls were expected to be quiet, disciplined, helpful, diligent, obedient and cooperative. Boys were expected to be naughty, smart, energetic, active, difficult to control, strong, prone to fighting, and loud.

In the majority of countries, the educators referred to the fact that, overall, girls are better learners and perform better academically – attributing this to the fact that they are more obedient, polite, hardworking, able to concentrate and apply themselves to the tasks (in no report was the fact that girls are also intelligent mentioned). In some countries (India, Indonesia) this meant that teachers preferred to spend more time with the girls because they were easier to teach. In other countries (Bangladesh, Nepal, Timor Leste) teachers reported that they dedicated more time to the boys: “managing” and supervising them and trying to keep them engaged in the activity to the end.

In several countries, teachers also reported that girls and boys are better in different subjects. In virtually all cases, boys were considered to be better at mathematics, science, technology and activities requiring physical strength and active participation. Girls were reported to be better at arts, dance, singing and languages. In Nepal, teachers explained that these were inherent aptitudes of boys and girls – not something they had learned – and were observed to be focusing with girls and boys on the respective subjects for which they were believed to be “naturally” more able.

In a few countries – China, India and Indonesia – educators and teachers were asked what sort of work they thought girls and boys hoped for in the future. Their perceptions reflected those of the parents/caregivers mentioned above: they

believed that girls usually wanted to become teachers, doctors, nurses and midwives in the future while boys dreamed of becoming soldiers, policemen, engineers and pilots.

Across the countries studied, educators and teachers also described how girls and boys have inherent preferences for different types of play and different learning/play corners. They explained how girls prefer the “imagination/make-believe” corner and like to play with dolls, or pretend cooking. Boys instead prefer playing with blocks, cars and physical games – and need more space for their play. No report mentioned any discussion about how children who did not conform to these roles would be treated, although as seen below, observations provide insights on the strong role played by educators in demanding these gendered behaviours from boys and girls.

During the play session/classroom observations, the researchers noted gendered differences in the way educators and teachers treated and interacted with boys and girls, including:

- Gendered differences in praise and rewards. In Sri Lanka, teachers were observed praising girls – but not boys – for being quiet, calm, obedient and for their singing and dancing. In China, teachers were also observed complimenting girls on their obedience, appearance and singing and dancing – while boys were praised for their smartness.
- In China, the educators at the community-based ECCE centre called exclusively on the girls to help with cleaning the classroom and organising activities.
- In Bangladesh, Laos, Myanmar, Pakistan and Thailand, teachers and educators were observed calling on the boys more often to answer questions. Boys had more space to speak out and were asked more often to the front of the room – both as an acknowledgment of their good “performance” but also to speak to other children in the class.
- In Sri Lanka and Myanmar, all the boys were sent first to wash their hands, and then the girls were. In Myanmar, the community ECCE centre attendance sheet listed the names of the boys before the girls – meaning that boys’ names were called out before the girls’ when attendance was taken at the beginning of the session.
- In classes observed in China and Thailand, the female teachers instructed boys and girls how to sit properly – with girls expected to sit with a more elegant and demure posture, and boys with a more relaxed posture.
- In Sri Lanka and Thailand, educators and teachers actively discouraged or prohibited girls from using play equipment considered not suitable for their gender – such as the climbing equipment and tricycles/bicycles.

During observations of the sessions with children, differences in the play behaviour of girls and boys were noted.

- Boys were more likely to use the learning corners with blocks, cars and to play with other boys. They moved around a lot more within the classroom – for instance, between the learning corners – and used the outdoor play space much more extensively, running around and taking up a lot of the space. In Laos, boys were observed dominating the learning corners and the limited play materials available, despite the efforts of the educators to ensure that these were shared equally.
- The girls were more likely to use the home corner, to play with dolls and to play with other girls. They moved around less and in some cases even stayed in the classroom during the outdoor play session.
- In most countries (with the exception of Sri Lanka and Thailand as mentioned above), educators and teachers were not observed reinforcing or promoting these gendered patterns of play. **At the same time, only in Myanmar did observers note that the educator actually tried to challenge these gendered patterns and ensure that girls and boys made equal use of the space and toys, encouraging girls to use toys/games traditionally seen as being for boys and vice versa.**

A CAUTIOUS INTERPRETATION OF THESE FINDINGS⁶

In this section, we offer a cautious interpretation of these findings, recognising the limitations of the methodology explained earlier, and what they tell us about:

- **Roles:** What are men and women expected to do in these communities with respect to care work, childrearing and supporting the family – and how long does this role take? Are some roles more powerful than others? What do parents/caregivers and teachers expect young girls’ and boys’ future roles to be?
- **Resources:** To what extent do women have access to, and control over, resources for the care and wellbeing of themselves and their families, compared to men? To what extent do girls and boys have different levels of access to the care, supports and services they need to develop to their full potential?

⁶ We emphasise that these findings and this interpretation cannot be generalised even to the population in the local area studied, let alone more widely. At the same time, the fact that there were such marked similarities in attitudes, expectations and behaviours across the different contexts studied, does mean that drawing some tentative conclusions from these “snapshot” findings seems valid.

- **Value:** How much are women, and the work they do, valued compared to men? What implications does the fact that men and women are valued differently have for how girls and boys are valued?
- **Participation:** Who participates in making the decisions that are important for young children and their development? Do men or women have more decision-making power? Why is this?

The study findings *suggest* that:

In the communities studied, women were primarily defined in their roles as wives and mothers. There is a clear gendered division of labour with women primarily responsible for care work, childrearing and community work, and the men primarily responsible for income generation and decision-making. Men's involvement in the care and development of their children is extremely limited. Women's work is hard work, requiring long hours (while men have more time free for leisure and rest). When women are also expected to play a productive role and contribute to household income, this responsibility is added on to their existing parental/caring and community roles, rather than these responsibilities being shared by others.

In the communities studied, the different roles and contributions of men and women are valued differently. The productive work of men is more important, while "women's work" – care work and childrearing – is of lesser value. As a result, men are more important – and men are in control and make the decisions, even when these relate to childrearing or early childhood education – areas in which they are otherwise very little involved. Women's access to and control over resources for the care and wellbeing of themselves and their families – as well as their decision-making power – is extremely limited. When women do enter the workforce, it is usually in 'caring roles' that are less valued and poorly paid.

In the communities studied, adults – parents/caregivers/teachers – attribute to girls/women and boys/men inherent qualities, characteristics and abilities that reinforce the maintenance of gendered roles and the gendered division of labour described above. They believe that girls/women are naturally good at the creative arts, languages and caring for others and as a result, it is natural that they assume (lower value) caregiving roles, including in the workplace. Similarly, boys/men are considered naturally good at maths, science, activities requiring strength and decision-making – and so it is natural that they should make the decisions and work in occupations that are more powerful and provide a better income for the family.

Parents are not being encouraged to challenge or even to examine these gendered roles and norms when parenting groups are almost exclusively attended and facilitated by women. Nor are they encouraged to think differently about what to expect from their girls and boys, about what is natural, and what is learned and reinforced.

In some of the communities studied, while enrolment and attendance rates for girls and boys were roughly equivalent, their opportunities to learn – and to learn specific skills – were probably different. More restricted use of the outdoor play space and equipment meant that girls had fewer opportunities to learn gross motor skills. When teachers focused on areas in which they believed children were naturally able, such as in Nepal, boys may have been provided with less opportunity to learn literacy skills and girls with less opportunity to learn numeracy skills. When young girls are kept in the home – as was the case in many countries – they had less opportunity than boys to explore, observe and interact with other people and the world around them, and to learn from these interactions.

In the communities studied, girls are potentially learning from the earliest age that they are less valuable and important than boys – and boys are learning that they are more valuable and powerful than girls. They learn this from the way that girls and boys are depicted differently in story/picture books; when boys are told that they are the "inheritors of the next generation"; from the way boys are put first and allowed to play a dominant and active role in the classroom (while girls are praised for being quiet and obedient); and from the way they see the women around them occupied in lower value roles and tasks – domestic chores, childrearing, caring professions – while the men around them are the decision-makers, disciplinarians, providers and are supposed to work in professions, affording them more power and authority, and more time for leisure and rest.

In the communities studied, girls and boys are potentially being prepared from the earliest age to behave in ways that are expected and socially acceptable for their gender. They learn this from how children are depicted in play/learning materials; from the ways parents/caregivers relatively restrict girls' freedom of movement; from the ways parents/caregivers and teachers prohibit, reward or accept specific behaviours – for instance, praising girls for cleanliness, prettiness and obedience and boys for smartness, and implicitly condoning boys' naughtiness/stubbornness. They are learning that women are "good caregivers" and men are not, when all the educators and teachers in their pre-school are women.

In the communities studied, girls and boys are potentially being prepared, from the earliest age, for their future lives as adult men and women within narrow, culturally prescribed gendered roles. Girls being prepared to be a good wife/mother and boys to be a good economic provider and leader. They are learning about their future roles by observing the adults around them and how their behaviours model and reflect what is expected in their society to be a good man/father or a good woman/mother. They are being prepared when parents/caregivers keep young girls at home to help with domestic chores while boys are allowed to run around and play. They are being prepared when educators and teachers allow girls and boys to play in ways that imitate the roles of women and men (for instance, the girls in the home corner, the boys playing as train drivers) without prompting a reversal of roles – and when the printed reading/learning materials that they are exposed to depict girls and boys, men and women in gender-stereotypical roles and professions.

These findings are cause for concern. They are of concern because we know that when, in early childhood, children learn and internalise gendered attitudes and expectations about their behaviours, value and future role, these will be harder to “unlearn” in the future. They are of concern because, for all children, internalising these gendered beliefs and norms about the way they should be, the way they should behave, and what they should be and do, is potentially limiting: however, emerging evidence suggests that the impact on the agency and empowerment of girls and on their expectations for the future may be particularly profound. These findings are of concern because they suggest that in the communities studied, the existing gender discrimination, the low social position of women and the gendered distribution of labour are being taught from the earliest age, instilled in young children before they even reach primary school and in this way are being transmitted from one generation to the next.

CONCLUSIONS

Following these assessments, Plan and partner organisations in the study countries concluded that more needed to be done in ongoing Early Childhood Development programming to ensure that:

- Interventions that aim to ensure children’s access to inclusive, quality early childhood/pre-primary education should challenge, rather than reinforce biased and stereotypical gender socialisation processes – including through: review of the curriculum; review and replacement of printed reading/learning materials; review of teacher training curriculum; and ongoing training and support of educators for gender transformative pedagogy and classroom management.
- Strengths-based, culturally sensitive work with the parents and caregivers of young children should incorporate explicit and effective action to promote men’s engagement while taking care that their increased participation does not suppress women’s participation; incorporate opportunities for collective reflection and discussion about the implications of the existing gender socialisation processes and the gendered division of labour for children’s development and the wellbeing of the family; and support parents and caregivers to provide equal care and treatment to their sons and daughters.
- New ECD projects are better designed to identify the social and gender norms that underpin the different - and unfair - expectations that adults have about the behaviours, value, potential and future roles of girls and boys; and to support changes in the norms and expectations that underpin behaviours and practices that are not in the best interests of girls and boys.
- ECD project monitoring and evaluation frameworks and plans are adapted in order to allow assessment of any changes in gender norms, gaps, roles and relationships that occur and to which the project may have contributed.
- Organisational and staff capacities are sufficient to ensure that ECD projects are at a minimum gender aware and progressively gender transformative.

Finally, country teams agreed that the **Gender and ECCD self-assessment tool** addresses a gap in the sector, providing tools that can be used to assess the gender dimensions of early childhood development *and* ECCD interventions and that can be useful, therefore, for situational analyses as well as project monitoring and evaluation.

Work is currently underway to develop guidance for gender aware and transformative ECD programming and guidance for men’s engagement in their young children’s care and development. A revised version of the Gender and ECCD assessment tool has been developed, based on feedback and recommendations for strengthening the original tool from the study countries. More information about these resources can be obtained from <https://plan-international.org/publications> (under the Healthy Start area) or by contacting melanie.swan@plan-international.org

APPENDIX 1: COUNTRY PILOT INFORMATION

Country	Area and population	Institutions	Instruments/respondents
Bangladesh	Jaldhaka Upazila under Nilphamar, a northern sub-district of Bangladesh located around 300km away from Dhaka. This is a remote rural area, relying on agriculture for income generation and where the majority of the population is Muslim with smaller numbers of Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and some ethnic minorities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community-based ECCE centre (for children aged 3 to 5 years) Pre-school (children aged 5 to 6 years) Primary school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ECCE centre/pre-school/grade one primary: enrolment and attendance data ECCE centre/pre-school/grade one primary: gender assessment of printed learning materials ECCE centre/pre-school/grade one primary: observation of play session and class FGDs: parents/caregivers; educators and teachers of ECCE centre/pre-school/grade one primary Parenting group records
China	Jingyao township in Pucheng county, Shaanxi Province: an area where high percentages of fathers and mothers have migrated for work, often leaving children in the care of the grandmother.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community Child Development Network offering comprehensive child protection and development services Kindergarten 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ECCE centre/pre-school: enrolment and attendance data ECCE centre/pre-school: gender assessment of printed learning materials ECCE centre/pre-school: Observation of play and pre-school sessions FGDs: facilitators, parents/caregivers, teachers
India	Mangolpuri, Delhi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community-based ECCE centre Primary school Parenting group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ECCE centre: enrolment and attendance data ECCE centre/early grade primary: gender assessment of printed learning materials ECCE centre/early grade primary: observation of play session and class FGDs: parents/caregivers; educators and teachers of ECCE centre and early grade primary; parenting group facilitators
Indonesia	Hauteas Barat and Biloe villages, Timur Tengah Utara District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ECCE centre Primary school Parenting group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ECCE centre/early grade primary: enrolment and attendance data ECCE centre/early grade primary: gender assessment of printed learning materials ECCE centre/early grade primary: observation of play session and class FGDs: parents/caregivers; educators and teachers of ECCE centre and early grade primary; parenting group facilitators
Laos	Houay Pha and Pha Khoy villages, Paktha district. Houay Pha is inhabited by a Khmu ethnic group (total pop. 547). Pha Khoy is populated by a Hmong ethnic group (total pop. 699).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre-school Parenting group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre-school: enrolment and attendance data Pre-school: gender assessment of printed learning materials Pre-school: observation of class FGDs: parents/caregivers; pre-school teachers
Myanmar	Kan Pyin and Tae Mauk villages in Toungup Township of Rakhine state. Rakhine State is one of the least developed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community-based ECCE centre Parenting group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ECCE centre: enrolment and attendance data ECCE centre: Observation of play session Parenting education records FGDs: parenting group facilitators; parents/caregivers

	parts of Myanmar and is characterised by high population density, malnutrition, poverty and weak infrastructure compounded by storms and floods.		
Nepal	Paurahi Village in Rahutahat, a predominantly Hindu area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based ECCE centre • Pre-school (located in primary school) • First grade of the primary school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECCE centre: enrolment and attendance data • ECCE centre: gender assessment of printed learning materials • ECCE centre: observation of play session
Pakistan	Lahore and Chakwal districts in Punjab province, and Thatta and Karachi districts in Sindh province.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary schools with pre-school classes (40) 	<p>In each of the 40 schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation of class • Key informant interviews with educators/teachers • FGD with parents/caregivers • Dialogue with children • Key informant interviews with government representatives
Sri Lanka	Diganegama	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-school • Primary school • Parenting group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-school and early grade primary: enrolment and attendance data • Pre-school and early grade primary: gender assessment of printed learning materials • Pre-school and early grade primary: observation of play session and class • FGDs: mothers/female caregivers, father/male caregivers, parenting group facilitators, educators/teachers • Parenting group records
Thailand		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based ECCE centre • Parenting group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECCE centre: enrolment and attendance data • ECCE centre: gender assessment of printed learning materials • ECCE centre: observation of play session • FGDs: parents/caregivers; educators of ECCE centre
Timor-Leste	Aileu Fatisi and Maurusa villages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based ECCE centre • Primary school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECCE centre/early grade primary: enrolment and attendance data • ECCE centre/early grade primary: gender assessment of printed learning materials • ECCE centre/early grade primary: observation of play session and class • FGDs: parents/caregivers; educators and teachers of ECCE centre and early grade primary.