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Advocacy Brief

Strong Foundations for Gender Equality in Early Childhood Care and Education

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Introduction

The term Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) refers to services for children from birth to eight years of age. These include educating parents in how to care for their children and help them learn, as well as providing community-run and formal preschool programmes for pre-primary-school-aged boys and girls. Given the varying needs of children from birth to eight years, educators have found it best to have different policies and strategies for children below and above three years of age.

This brief focuses on the gender issues in the services provided for children who are three years of age or older in the Asia-Pacific region. Its scope is informed by UNESCO's commitment to holistic pre-primary services for this age group. The goal is to provide early childhood education that helps girls and boys succeed in primary school and in learning throughout their lives.¹

The brief starts by looking into the growth of ECCE in the Asia-Pacific region and what is driving this growth. It explores why gender responsiveness is important in early childhood education, gives practical examples of what this looks like, and discusses the challenges of providing ECCE that equally values and benefits each girl and each boy. Flowing from this, the brief concludes with recommendations on how to make ECCE more gender responsive.

The Growth of ECCE in the Asia-Pacific Region

The Asia-Pacific region includes developing and developed economies. It is characterised by ethnic, cultural, linguistic and topographical diversity. This diversity is reflected in wide variations in pre-primary services, enrolment rates and quality of ECCE provided. In addition, the duration of ECCE programmes varies between countries, ranging from one to three years.

Despite this diversity, one trend in many of these countries is significant growth in ECCE enrolment. Enrolments are up even in most countries that previously had low coverage. In 2004, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in pre-primary education ranged from eight percent in Lao PDR to 92 percent in Thailand.²

Five of the nine most populous countries which are committed to Education for All are in this region. In 2000, Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia and Pakistan had 55 percent³ of the world's school-age children. Pre-primary education participation ranged from more than 1.1 million in Bangladesh to more than 24 million in India. GER varied from 12 percent in Bangladesh to 45 percent in Pakistan.

Several factors influence the growth of pre-primary education in the region within the last decade:

- The Asian region has a young population, despite declining growth rates. In 2005, China had 84 million and India had 120 million⁴ children from birth to four years. The target population for ECCE is growing faster than preschool spaces. Current access rates to pre-primary services are relatively low and millions of children are not served.
- More women are in paid employment and need more out-of-home care for their children. The presence of women in the workforce varies dramatically from country to country.

- More poor families realize that education is the way their children can break out of poverty. Demand for preschool increases as it becomes clear that attending preschool gives their child a better chance to do well in school.

The Importance of Early Childhood Care and Education

A global priority

Just as a high-rise building needs a strong foundation to support the structure above, the foundations for education and life-long learning are laid during the early childhood period.⁵

Learning begins at birth. Systematic development of basic learning tools and concepts therefore requires that due attention be paid to the care of young children and their initial education, which can be delivered via arrangements that involve parents, the community or institutions, depending on requirements.

World Declaration on Education for All, Article 5, Jomtien, 1990

The Jomtien Declaration⁶ recognized that basic education begins well before primary school. This was a watershed in the understanding of early childhood as it brought ECCE into mainstream education.

Following Jomtien, the value of ECCE was emphasized in the first goal of the Dakar Framework for Action.⁷ The goal calls for expanding and improving comprehensive ECCE, especially for disadvantaged and vulnerable children.

In 2002, world leaders at the UN General Assembly upheld the importance of care for every child. They agreed that,

Children must get the best possible start in life. Their survival, protection, growth and development in good health and with proper nutrition are the essential foundation of human development. We will make concerted efforts to fight infectious diseases, tackle major causes of malnutrition and nurture children in a safe environment that enables them to be physically healthy, mentally alert, emotionally secure, socially competent and able to learn.

The special theme for the 2007 Education for All Global Monitoring Report was Early Childhood Care and Education. This not only emphasized the importance of ECCE, but also the need to measure the impact on girls and boys.

These international developments evolved in partnership with countries committing to advance gender equality in education. Most Asia-Pacific nations have signed, and are acting on, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as well as the Beijing Platform for Action.

Each girl and each boy has the right to an equal quality education. This includes early childhood education.

The child's reality

Popular sayings such as “learning begins at birth” and “early years are learning years” highlight how important a child's early years are for learning and development. These popular axioms and

¹ The term is a trademark of the National Association for the Education of the Young Child, United States.

the international priority put on ECCE, as noted above, are based on solid research. Findings show the many benefits ECCE can bring to both girls and boys. They include emerging evidence that ECCE can help reduce gender and other social discrimination.

- Research on brain development shows that the brain develops more rapidly in the first three years of life. The brain can be stimulated to develop.⁸ Children who do not have a stimulating environment have smaller than normal brains for their age.
- Attending preschool helps girls and boys do better in primary school and have better cognitive skills. Children are more aware of what is going on and better able to figure out what to do.
- ECCE can help bring more equality and opportunity for girls. Research in developing countries shows girls who attend early childhood programmes are more ready for primary school, cope better, and stay longer than girls who do not.⁹
- Socially disadvantaged children who attend preschool are also more ready for primary school, perform better in school and are less likely to drop out than their peers who do not attend preschool. Early childhood programmes that give children snacks or meals increase the chance that children who live in poverty will survive.
- ECCE may free older sisters of child care responsibilities that pull them out of school. In many families, girls must look after their younger brothers and sisters so their parents can work. If their younger siblings are safe and supervised in early childhood services, the older sister may have a better chance of going to primary school.¹⁰
- There is less gap between what children from low-income and higher-income families achieve in primary school if they attend preschool.

The funding impact

Investing in early childhood development gives higher returns than investing in adults.^{11,12} Studies on the economic return of government investment show that investing in the early years outperforms other policy options: the money governments invest in early childhood results in these children growing up more self-reliant and less dependent on the government. The government saves more than its original investment by needing to pay for fewer health and social remedies.

Gender inequality and the commitment to reduce it is triggering government funding of ECCE. This funding commitment arises from girls being deprived of education and other rights, the need for more empowerment of women, and from country commitments to act on Education for All and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹³

Access Issues – Gender Equality and ECCE

Enrolment statistics

Each boy and each girl have the right to early childhood education. It is encouraging, but may also be misleading, that the gender gap in early childhood enrolment is small in most countries. Caution is needed when looking at figures on gender parity in ECCE. First, overall enrolment rates are lower for ECCE than for first grade. It is impossible to know if gender gaps would emerge if more children attended.

National figures can hide local gender disparities, including girls having less access to schools in rural and poor areas. The birth of female children is sometimes not officially registered in countries where there are either carrots or sticks used to limit family size. As enrolment data are collected at

the beginning of the school year and do not reflect regular attendance, they do not show whether more boys or girls have spotty attendance or drop out.

National statistics may not clearly show the children who are excluded from ECCE because of their sex or because they are poor, live in a rural or remote areas, are from an ethnic minority, are ill or have a disability. Faith-based and other socio-cultural constraints may also not surface. Policy and planning teams need to give special attention to providing early childhood education to girls and boys who are likely to be excluded because they belong to more than one disadvantaged group. For example, a poor, rural, disabled child is less likely to have access to high quality ECCE than an affluent, urban, able-bodied child. If a girl, her chances may well be less than a boy's.

Even when statistics may indicate that boys and girls have equal access to ECCE, when evidence from India and China shows that hidden discrimination can exist. Both countries have reasonable gender parity indices of 1.0 and .92, respectively. However, this masks the fact that boy preference results in more under-five deaths of girls due to poor care, aborting the female foetus and killing newborn girls. This has created a serious gender imbalance: there are fewer girls in early childhood.¹⁴

Socio-cultural constraints

When a child is born, families immediately start conditioning girls and boys to take on the different roles and behaviours that reflect local norms and values. These social norms can influence whether today's girls and boys get equal access to early childhood education. The most common example is where traditional beliefs favour sons over daughters. The song below reflects traditional Chinese thinking about boys and girls. The State has done much to promote gender equality, but parents want sons to perpetuate their family name and to look after them in their old age.

*When a son is born,
Let him sleep on the bed,
Clothe him with fine clothes,
And give him jade to play..
When a daughter is born,
Let her sleep on the ground,
Wrap her in common wrappings,
And give broken tiles to play.."*

China: Book of Songs (1000-700 B.C.)

In countries with strong son preference, parents are more likely to send sons than daughters to pre-primary institutions. This disadvantages girls in primary school. In response, parents are more likely to withdraw girls than boys from school. The cycle of discrimination continues.

In several cultures, parents have different socialisation goals and child-rearing practices for boys and girls. For example, girls must "learn to serve others", "listen to and respect adults", and "stay at home and play". On the other hand, "naughtiness" in boys is expected and condoned.¹⁵

Protection

Although parents are protective of their preschool sons and daughters, in some communities there is more concern about girls' in-class safety as well as their safety walking to and from preschool. Unless older siblings or other escorts are available, girls may be excluded.

Equity

All children should have access to high quality ECCE, but this is typically expensive. Children from advantaged backgrounds can attend high quality programmes because their parents can afford to pay the high fees. Children from lower income groups may be doubly disadvantaged – they may attend a poor quality programme and also have a less stimulating home environment. In families where sons are valued more than daughters and the family is unable or unwilling to fund all

children, daughters may be deprived of ECCE or be given the lower-cost, and often the lower-quality option.

Factors that enhance access for all

Pre-primary-school-aged children are not as useful as their older siblings in helping parents do farm and domestic chores or in working to earn money. This lower opportunity cost, compared to primary education, helps access.

In addition, parents welcome free holistic ECCE programmes which relieve them of child care as well as contribute to their child's health, nutrition and development. Governments or international development agencies provide food, learning materials and games, or other incentives. The Girl Child Protection Scheme in India, for example, provides monetary incentives to parents that are tied to girls' attendance in early childhood programmes. Sometimes agencies subsidize the wages of early childhood educators but reduce this support over time. The challenge in the developing world is to ensure these programmes are sustainable.

The demonstration factor helps access. Children learn good behaviours, games, songs and skills in well-run preschools. If food and health care are provided, they become healthier. When parents see this difference between children who have and have not received preschool education, they are usually happy to send children to ECCE.

Quality Issues – Gender Equality and ECCE

Boys and girls benefit most if ECCE is of high quality and holistic. ECCE has the potential to develop each child's social, language and communication skills as well as their fine and gross motor skills. This is best done in an environment that stirs their imagination and is both joyful and fun.

There are good reasons for defining what quality is and how to evaluate it. Although this is a challenging task, there is considerable agreement about the factors which define quality in ECCE, regardless of culture and context. These include the physical and psychological environment, curriculum, learning and teaching approaches, teacher-child interactions, programme management, and community integration. All aspects must meet the needs of both boys and girls. Gender analysis is needed to identify what their different needs are and how to respond.

Young children are very sensitive to their physical and psychological environments. Boys and girls should find ECCE:

- Safe. They will not be beaten or hurt physically or emotionally.
- Child-friendly. They play and are active in many ways that they enjoy.
- Supportive. Adults are there to support, protect and involve them in approaches and activities that help them develop their minds, their bodies, their social skills and behaviours.
- Nurturing of each child's self esteem. Children learn, gain communication skills and participate in a variety of ways. They feel good about who they are.
- Gender-sensitive. Girls and boys receive equal attention and respect. In this and other ways, they learn to value themselves and others equally.
- Well-managed. The local community cares and supports the programme.

What does gender sensitivity look like? Picture this early childhood education environment:

Educators. Educators have had gender training and know how to routinely do gender analysis. This equips them to see gender bias in the community and to actively keep it out of the classroom.

A gender-sensitive educator treats girls and boys with the same respect and supports each child to express ideas and participate fully. The educator develops skills to be sure he or she is treating girls and boys equally and not favouring one sex. Teacher trainers, in-service trainers and supervisors help educators develop this sensitivity and are trained to give feedback in a constructive, nurturing way.

Teachers can also improve these skills in less formal, and sometimes less threatening, ways by taking their own initiative. One simple way is to ask a trusted friend who gives honest, caring advice to observe what is going on in the class. The friend observes: how many questions the educator asks girls and boys, if the 'wait time' given to girls to think through an answer is the same as to boys, how much time the educator spends giving individual feedback to boys compared to girls, whether the tone of voice and comments to girls and to boys are equally supportive, and whether boys and girls equally share classroom tasks and leadership roles. Reflecting on the observer's feedback helps the educator internalise this kind of child-friendly gender analysis.

Equal treatment sends messages that each child is worthy and valued regardless of her or his sex or other differences. As the educator treats each child well, it may be easier to get children to listen to each other, to share and to play respectfully. A good educator demonstrates socially acceptable behaviour, then goes further to teach and reward it.

Good educators are able to make all children understand clearly what good behaviour is for their age and that there are logical consequences when a child behaves well or badly. For example, if a child does not listen to other children, then that child is not allowed to speak. This helps create space for girls and boys to listen and respect children of the same and the opposite sex.

Curriculum, guidelines and facilitation aids. All guide educators on how to make the teaching-learning process as participatory and child-centred as possible. Each child has the right to an education and to play. In ECCE, these rights merge: children learn best through doing and playing.

The aim here is to facilitate as much active learning as possible through play and other activities which are free of gender bias. Stories, songs, activities and facilitation aids should depict girls and boys in the same roles and men and women in all professions. Females and males should appear as leaders, heroes and problem solvers.

Girls and boys, or sub-groups of boys or girls, may learn best in different ways for a variety of reasons. These include different types of stimulation within their families due to gender roles. A variety of activities and approaches have the best chance of meeting diverse needs. The best educators are sensitive to who learns best how, then respond as best they can. They are aware of different rates of development that can exist for girls and boys, for example, in fine and gross motor skills. Children often opt to do activities which they can do best. For example, boys may rush to build with blocks and stones while girls may prefer to cut and paste or colour. It is up to the educator to ensure both sexes join all activities and improve all skills.

Gender roles shape how children spend their time, even as preschoolers. Girls do some things that boys don't do and some things less or more than boys. So, boys and girls have some different experiences and ideas. Role plays and puppet shows are good ways for girls and boys to show the different things they do and know. Likewise when girls pretend to be boys or fathers, they are learning to understand the other sex. The same applies for boys role-playing female roles. These structured exercises are both fun and educational for children. Educators can then explore what feelings the girls and boys have and build the comfort of both sexes in discussing their feelings. Giving equal time and value to girls' and boys' experience and feelings is one of the first steps on the path to gender equality.

Gender equality starts with each girl and each boy having a sense of dignity and self worth. This goes hand-in-hand with respecting the dignity and worth of other boys and girls. Here is the seed that educators have a responsibility to help nourish in all learners. The fruit of this care will be women and men who are full equal partners in their homes, communities and societies.

Preschoolers have ideas. They should have a voice and be encouraged to make choices, where possible, on activities, books and games within a framework of balanced learning. No toys or games should be reserved for one sex as this often reinforces stereotypes.

The ECCE space. Both girls and boys thrive where there is colour, happy, age-appropriate art, locally-appropriate and comfortable basic furnishings (mats, cushions, child-sized chairs and tables, etc.), adequate light, outdoor play space where they can run and play freely, healthy snacks, water and safe, easy-to-use toilets. Many children feel more at home if they have a special place in the centre, for example, a hanger for their coat or a special place to put their sandals. The art on the walls or on display includes work by each boy and girl or reflect the ratio of girls and boys in the class. Learner art and other creations are rotated so everyone's talent is featured.

The ECCE location. The location is safe and comfortable for mothers and sisters as well as fathers and brothers to bring learners to class. Both parents and children also feel that the children are safe during preschool hours.

Parent and community support. Parents' and community participation is encouraged in an organized way. The contributions of parents and community members (i.e., ideas, local stories, materials for crafts, etc.) are appreciated and acknowledged.

Management. Managers value input and ideas from staff, parents and children. They ensure there are fair rules and that everyone knows and obeys them.

Funding alone does not ensure quality. A recent study of ECCE programmes in Thailand, the Philippines and Viet Nam identified good practices which can help provide disadvantaged children an opportunity to have higher quality ECCE.¹⁶ These include:

- Nurturing a positive sense of self in the child.
- Providing a child-appropriate early childhood setting.
- Regarding the child as an active learner who can do things and make things happen.
- Implementing a curriculum so that each girl and each boy, regardless of their differences, feels they are regarded with dignity and worth.
- Creating an effective learning environment by developing and enacting effective curricula.
- Quality and age-appropriate instruction.

Approaches that are right for the children's age and relate to the child's home and community are at the heart of preschool learning and development. Many child-friendly approaches are being developed. However, programmes which centre on reading, writing and arithmetic are seen as too demanding and inappropriate for this age: this focus flows down from primary education and does not work for preschoolers.

Some pre-primary institutions in Asia emphasise a formal academic curriculum.¹⁷ Despite being less effective than more participatory age-appropriate methods, some advocate that implanting some basic academic skills in children at an early age may be useful in certain contexts. In particular, teaching these and other school-readiness skills and behaviours can be important in helping children from disadvantaged backgrounds to enhance their entry into, and success in, primary school.

Sex-disaggregated data and feedback from girl and boy learners, their parents and educators is essential to know if ECCE quality meets the needs of boys and girls. Comparative data is needed to know differences in the attendance, participation, performance and development of girls and of boys. The data signal quality and relevance issues that need attention.

Masuring Other Dimensions of Quality

Research in South Asia indicates that programmes that would be considered of low or mediocre quality by Western standards in terms of group size, teacher-child ratios and teacher qualifications have had positive outcomes for girls and boys. Children are better nourished, are learning and achieving, and are more developed socially and psychologically.

Results from longitudinal studies of children in preschool programmes in Bangladesh¹⁸, India¹⁹ and Nepal²⁰ show several benefits to participating children. The children are more ready for primary school, have better attendance and better cognitive development compared to those who did not attend preschool programmes. These findings underscore the necessity of looking at quality in context.²¹

Likewise, studies in India indicate preschools help children develop good behaviour. Children attending such preschools develop the emotional and self-regulation skills that are needed for learning in primary school.²²

Taken together, these findings suggest that in contexts where maternal literacy is very low and children are very socially disadvantaged, even the minimum input provided by preschool programmes which provide food to the children and some adult-centred stimulation, seem to make a positive difference to young children. These findings highlight the importance of looking at quality in context and in terms of benefits for children.

The importance of good quality, however, must be emphasized. Clearly, children will not benefit from ECCE if the quality of care and education they receive in early childhood programmes is poorer than what they would receive if they did not attend.

Badly-run preschools can leave children feeling humiliated, that they do not fit in or with a bad feeling about themselves and who they are. Harmful social or gender bias can destroy the joy of learning, especially for girls and disadvantaged children. These children may never get the education that is their right.

Challenges to Promoting Gender Equality

Key barriers to promoting gender equality in ECCE include:

Gender bias among educators and administrators

Educators may not provide equal opportunities for boys and girls. This reinforces the existing gender bias that most often disadvantages girls. Training standards and the quality of ECCE training in some countries do not adequately prepare ECCE educators to be gender sensitive. Administrators and supervisors do not see the importance of gender-sensitive education or have the knowledge and competency in promoting gender equality to support educators.

Lack of male role models

The majority of early childhood educators are women who can be inspiring role models for girls. However, the lack of male educators denies boys positive male role models. A mix of male and female educators also has the potential to bring more male creativity to the activities and approaches.

Devaluing of ECCE educators

Facilitating ECCE classes is often seen as women’s work and a natural extension of women’s unpaid family duty to care for children. In many countries this keeps wages for early childhood educators disrespectfully low. Low wages then become a barrier to recruiting and sustaining good educators.

Societal labelling of ECCE as women’s work also creates a stigma that pushes men who would be excellent early childhood educators away from the profession. Men in some socio-cultural environments also face societal and institutional barriers to becoming ECCE educators.

Absence of fathers' input

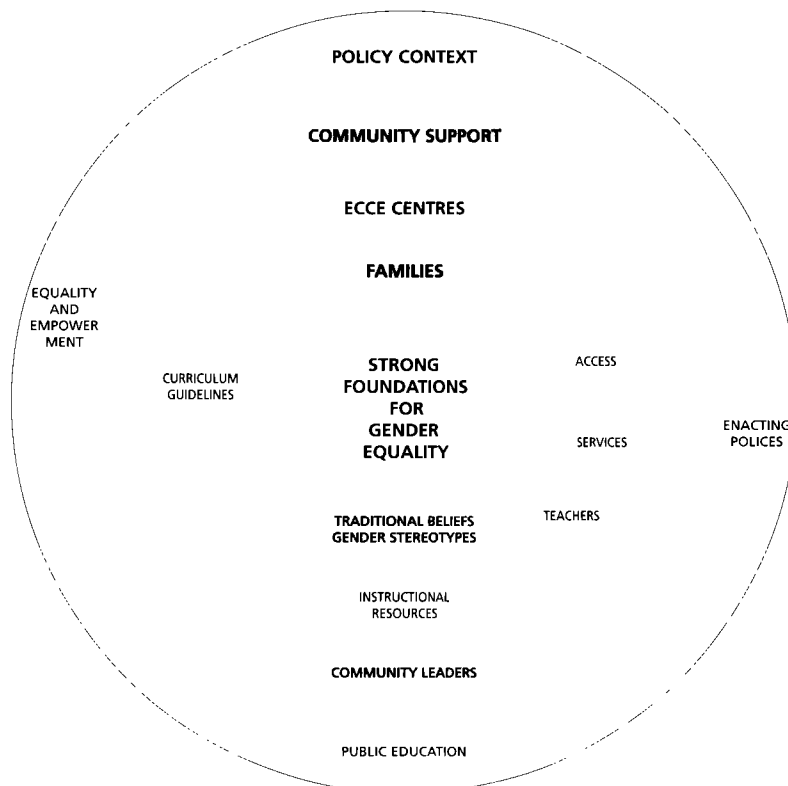
One of the results of ECCE being viewed as part of the women’s world is that in many countries most parental input comes from mothers. The ideas, interest and support of fathers is often minimal or lacking. Without this involvement, fathers are less able to encourage and support either their young sons or their daughters. If competing demands arise for family labour, time or funds, fathers are less able to justify their children continuing in ECCE.

Curriculum, activities and materials may not equally empower girls and boys

Teachers may encourage the use of different toys and resources by boys and girls. For example, boys may be discouraged from playing with dolls, and teachers may censure what is considered gender atypical play. Further, boys and girls may not get equal access to instructional materials.

B uilding Strong Foundations for Gender Equality in Early Childhood

Building strong foundations for gender equality in early childhood offers lifelong benefits for learners, their families and communities. The interventions needed at different levels are summarised using Bronfenbrenner’s conception of the child’s social environment.²³



Structure of the environment in Bronfenbrenner's theory.

Families

Work with parents and other family caregivers to help them understand and stop discrimination against boys or girls. Caregivers should not perpetuate gender stereotypes. Instead, they should be encouraged to have equal and appropriate expectations of boys and girls and promote equal opportunities for them.

Educate mothers. Educated mothers are more likely to support early childhood services for their children and give them more intellectual stimulation than are uneducated mothers.

Get fathers involved. Fathers are often involved in decisions about whether girls should go to primary school but often leave preschool matters to their wives. If fathers are more aware of how much their daughters learn and benefit from preschool, they are more likely to send them to pre-primary school.

ECCE centres

Provide pre-primary services close to where the child lives. In the Philippines, enrolment rates in rural villages are adversely affected by the long distance of the centres from children's homes and because families cannot afford the cost of public transport to and from the centres.

Provide services which are free, integrated, and have incentives for girls' participation. Poverty is a barrier to participation, and parents are likely to send their children to programmes which give meals, learner materials or other incentives.

Train early childhood educators to be gender sensitive. Include gender training in initial and in-service teacher training.

Encourage male early childhood educators. There are few male early childhood educators. Boy learners will benefit from male role models.

Curriculum and Instruction

Have gender-responsive curriculum guidelines. Ensure that the national curriculum, curriculum frameworks and guidelines address gender equality.

Have gender-sensitive instructional resources. Make sure gender stereotypes are not perpetuated in story books and other learning materials.

Community

Encourage community leaders to recognize the importance of ECCE. Influential community members should take the responsibility to ensure that all children have the right to high quality early childhood education.

Increase respect and appreciation for early childhood educators. Community recognition and appreciation is important to sustain the good work of early childhood educators and to raise the status of this segment of the education profession. Effort is also needed to build community acceptance of male early childhood educators.

Policy

Develop and enact policies to increase access to high quality ECCE for all children particularly disadvantaged girls and boys. These include children who are unlikely to benefit from ECCE because of their sex, poverty, disability, illness, socio-cultural constraints or ethnic minority status. Give special attention to children who are from more than one disadvantaged group.

Conduct public education campaigns to promote gender equality in the early years.

Focus on equality and empowerment. Implement social policy that goes beyond gender parity in education to focus on gender equality. Advancing gender equality includes helping the disadvantaged sex, which is often, but not always, girls.

C onclusions

The early childhood years are critical for cognitive, social and emotional development. Early childhood education that meets the distinct needs of girls and boys can positively affect their performance in primary school and their self esteem. It is a building block for life.

During the past decade, there has been a significant increase in access to ECCE in the Asia Pacific region. However, millions of girls and boys still do not have access and quality varies greatly. Gender-responsiveness is a critical component of quality. The everyday reality of girls differs from that of boys. This must be carefully assessed in order to create both the access and the quality that is each girl's and each boy's right. All education stakeholders have key roles to take social and gender discrimination out of early childhood education and replace it with empowerment.

It is time to act at the policy, community, centre and family levels.

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Useful websites

The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development
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The World Bank
 Early Child Development
<http://www.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTCY/EXTECD/0,,menuPK:344945~pagePK:149018~piPK:149093~theSitePK:344939,00.html> (accessed 4 September 2007)

UNESCO
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UNICEF
 Basic Education and Gender Equality: Early Childhood.
http://www.unicef.org/girlseducation/index_focus_earlychildhood.html (accessed 4 September 2007)

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Also available are the following advocacy/policy briefs:

- Education in Emergencies: The Gender Implications
- Getting Girls Out of Work and Into School
- *Impact of Woman Teachers on Girls' Education*
- Mother Tongue-based Teaching and Education for Girls
- Providing Education to Girls from Remote and Rural Areas
- Impact of Incentives to Increase Girls' Access to and Retention in Basic Education
- Role of Men and Boys in Promoting Gender Equality
- A Scorecard on Gender Equality and Girls' Education in Asia, 1990-2000

For more information, please visit UNESCO Bangkok's Gender in Education website at www.unescobkk.org/gender or write to gender@unescobkk.org