Gender equality and national education policies

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Policy is the government’s stated position in response to a particular problem or issue. It includes the collection of laws and rules that govern the operation of education systems. Policy sets out the principles, commitments and strategies to guide action by the government and its partners.

Policy is important as it gives a clear message to stakeholders as to what a government’s commitments are and how they will be achieved. Clear policy on gender equality provides a strong sign of the government’s commitment to achieving it.

Education policy is a key driver for education sector development and for the promotion of gender equality.

A national education policy establishes the main goals and priorities being pursued by a government at the sector or sub-sector level (e.g. primary education or TVET). A national education strategy sets out the ways in which the goals may be reached. These are usually referred to as National Education Sector Plans (NESPs). NESPs can be the single most important document of reference for education sector development. This is especially the case when national policy-making processes are slow and cumbersome. NESPs are

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often more action-oriented, although they tend to lack the full authority of approved policy.

The national policy may set out the chosen priorities without providing the precise elements of strategy. A national policy can be defined formally (i.e., in documentation) or informally (in ministerial speeches or declarations). A clearly formulated national policy can serve as a reference for action and thus play an important operational role. It often represents a declaration of intent. National education policies play an important symbolic role in obtaining support for action at a political level and among stakeholders in the education sector.

Countries across the Asia-Pacific region have different approaches to policy-making. There is considerable diversity in the way policies are formulated, documented, and enacted. This reflects different systems in governance. Some countries have put in place overarching education policy documents (e.g. India) that cover the entire sector; while others work with thematic policies such as curriculum policy or life skills education policy (e.g. Cambodia). While there is variation in how countries set policy and operationalize it, the fact remains that all countries need to take policy positions on key issues in education sector delivery.

The policy framework may contain a range of instruments including formal policy, circulars and directives, guidelines, national strategies and action plans. The majority of instruments for education are likely to emanate from the ministry of education, but other ministries may also issue policy that covers the sector. This is often the case regarding gender equality.

### Gender analysis and education policies

Policies may be considered as being framed by laws and are developed within the national framework of laws. They may provide implementation details that are not provided in laws, and as such can be regarded as complementary to laws.

How do policies embody and promote gender equality in education? Gender-responsive policy-making in education should integrate gender considerations across all education sector policies.

Education policies may directly address gender equality, or they may include actions which are relevant to gender equality but not explicitly stated as such. There may also be policies which do not include any consideration of gender, i.e., that are gender blind.
Applying a gender lens (perspective) to the analysis of education policy is important because all policies affect girls and boys. Sometimes these policies, whether gender-specific or not, impact girls and boys differently. A gender analysis of education policy highlights these differences so that appropriate actions can be taken. The starting point for any gender analysis of the education sector is to assess how gender is reflected in the overall sector vision and accompanying policies.

- Are gender considerations integrated across all policies or are gender considerations missing in some?
- Does the teacher recruitment and deployment policy, for example, consider the needs of both male and female teachers?
- Or is gender the exclusive domain of a separate policy?

Some countries have separate gender policies for the education sector, or a girls’ education strategy. It is important also to remember that some policies that do not explicitly refer to gender (such as a general policy regarding school fees) may impact girls and boys differently.

Important areas to examine in a gender analysis of education sector policy include:

- What are the broad vision, principles and values that guide planning and programme design in the education sector?
- To what extent do gender considerations feature in the education policy context?
- Do education policy documents show commitment or intent to address girls’ education or advance gender equality?

- Are there other policies (on school fees, school feeding, or construction, for example) that do not explicitly mention gender but that may impact girls and boys differently?

Gender disparities can take many different forms across countries. Thus, countries need a range of different policies to address the specific inequalities related to access, classroom practices, transition to higher levels of education and other issues. In many countries, policies to advance girls’ education relate to:

- female teachers (university entry, training, recruitment, pay, and transfer or promotion);
- distance from students’ homes to school (school construction, transportation, and payment schemes);
- teacher behaviour (codes of conduct, training, transfer, and reporting and response);
- school infrastructure (access to water, sanitation and hygiene);
- attendance (policies on pregnant girls’ attendance and re-entry policies for adolescent mothers).

Analysis of policy frameworks in education should be done in tandem with the analysis of gender issues. For example, analysis of current issues may highlight high levels of adolescent pregnancy and low levels of adolescent mothers in school. This information can help policymakers and planners consider the effectiveness of existing re-entry policies.


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2 Ibid.
Gender and education policy in practice

Gender equality is an issue that concerns all policy areas in education. This is why the concept of gender mainstreaming is so important (see Tool 10); it helps ensure that a gender perspective is not neglected within important areas of education policy.

National education policy frameworks and statements vary enormously in the Asia-Pacific region, reflecting different histories, political systems and education development issues. Some countries have a complex array of policies covering different levels of the system and specific thematic issues, while others operate with a much smaller set of policies. Two examples are given in Box 3.

Few countries in the Asia-Pacific region have put in place specific policies on gender equality in education. Cambodia drafted the Gender Education Policy in 2003 which was later followed by the Gender Mainstreaming Strategy for Education (2006–2010).

Box 3 Examples of education policy statements on gender


“Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of woman. In order to neutralize the accumulated distortions of the past, there will be a well-conceived edge in favour of women. The National Education System will play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women. It will foster the development of new values through redesigned curricula, textbooks, the training and orientation of teachers, decision-makers and administrators, and the active involvement of educational institutions. This will be an act of faith and social engineering. Women’s studies will be promoted as a part of various courses and educational institutions encouraged to take up active programmes to further women’s development.

The removal of women’s illiteracy and obstacles inhibiting their access to, and retention in, elementary education will receive overriding priority, through provision of special support services, setting of time targets, and effective monitoring. Major emphasis will be laid on women’s participation in vocational, technical and professional education at different levels.

The policy of non-discrimination will be pursued vigorously to eliminate sex stereotyping in vocational and professional courses and to promote women’s participation in non-traditional occupations, as well as in existing and emergent technologies.”


According to the policy, barriers exist in access to education and in students’ opportunities to benefit and participate from education. The policy demonstrates how, in order to dissolve such barriers, it is necessary to change educational processes and to adapt teaching and learning processes to the individual needs and background of students. Inclusion of the marginalized in education, in contrast to integration, calls for a change in the values, attitudes and practices of those who traditionally create the inner group of teachers and students already in education. Existing values in the education system must adapt to and acknowledge the values, experiences and needs that previously excluded groups, such as girls, bring with them once they are enrolled.
Box 4
Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming is supported by institutional mechanisms in a number of countries, for example:

- Cambodia has established a Steering Committee of Gender Mainstreaming in its Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.
- In Lao PDR, the Gender and Ethnic Minority Unit provides support for gender mainstreaming in the education sector.
- In Indonesia, a dedicated entity has been established within the Ministry of National Education, in cooperation with the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment, which has overarching responsibility for gender mainstreaming in all sectors.

Self-study and/or group activity
Analyse national education policy against CEDAW

- On your own, or working in small groups, choose a key education policy document for your country.
- Analyse your chosen education policy document against the expectations for gender equality in education set out in Article 10.
- Use the table in Handout 2 to write notes on how the policy document
  - a) complies with CEDAW
  - b) fails to comply with CEDAW.
- Pick one area where the document fails to comply with CEDAW.
- Think about one thing you could reasonably do to challenge this, or to change your own practice so you ‘lead by example’ (i.e. so you do better than the policy).
- If working in groups, share each group’s answers in plenary.
### Self-study and/or group activity

**Analyse the national situation regarding gender equality in education**

#### Self-study activity

- Below is a selection of key issues and questions. Work through these questions and answer as many as you can.
- For questions you cannot answer, do some research or make a note to do research on these in the future.

#### Group activity

- Split participants into pairs or small groups.
- Ask each pair/group to analyse one of the key issues below.
- Each group then presents their answers to the questions in plenary.

### The political agenda

- What are the principal issues facing the country regarding gender equality and education?
- What are the proposed solutions or strategies (name the policies concerning gender equality in education)?

### Identification and analysis of the problem

- How were the problems identified and analysed?
- Are the problems clearly stated?
- Was there an Education Sector Review or a more specific situation analysis?
- To what extent was a gender analysis of the education sector’s performance conducted?

### Formulation and adoption

- Is the policy clearly explained and presented in writing?
- In the case of NESPs, do the objectives address the key challenges and their underlying causes?
- Is formulation based on education sector analysis and dialogue with a range of stakeholders, or on the views of a narrow group of experts?
- Has the policy been:
  - formally approved by the competent authorities (e.g. The Prime Minister, Parliament etc.)
  - published in print form and electronic format?

### Costing the policy/NESP

- Is the financial framework adequate and realistic?

### Appraising the action plan

- Are activities sufficient to achieve the policy objectives?
- Are they clearly identified, costed and linked to results?
- Are there specific activities or strategies that address objectives that relate to gender equality?
- Are these prioritized in any way?
Self-study and/or group activity

**Analyse the national situation regarding gender equality in education**

**Capacity**
- Have the needs of implementing staff been sufficiently considered?
- Have roles and responsibilities for delivering the policy been clearly defined? Are steps being taken to strengthen institutional capacity in order to implement the policy effectively?

**Results framework**
- Is there a detailed monitoring and evaluation framework with specific indicators that measure the outcomes and impact of the policy on gender equality?
- Have the following been identified: targets, activities and outcomes?

**Communications**
- Has the policy been communicated to all relevant stakeholders?
- Is it accessible to all?
- Have simplified versions been prepared for dissemination at a community level?

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**Further reading**


Handout 1

Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

**Article 10 – Education**

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure to them equal rights with men in the field of education and in particular to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women:

a) The same conditions for career and vocational guidance, for access to studies and for the achievement of diplomas in educational establishments of all categories in rural as well as in urban areas; this equality shall be ensured in pre-school, general, technical, professional and higher technical education, as well as in all types of vocational training;

b) Access to the same curricula, the same examinations, teaching staff with qualifications of the same standard and school premises and equipment of the same quality;

c) The elimination of any stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education by encouraging coeducation and other types of education which will help to achieve this aim and, in particular, by the revision of textbooks and school programmes and the adaptation of teaching methods;

d) The same opportunities to benefit from scholarships and other study grants;

e) The same opportunities for access to programmes of continuing education, including adult and functional literacy programmes, particularly those aimed at reducing, at the earliest possible time, any gap in education existing between men and women;

f) The reduction of female student drop-out rates and the organization of programmes for girls and women who have left school prematurely;

g) The same opportunities to participate actively in sports and physical education;

h) Access to specific educational information to help to ensure the health and well-being of families, including information and advice on family planning.
Handout 2

Analyse national education policy against CEDAW

Pick a key education policy document for your country and analyse it against the expectations for gender equality in education set out in Article 10 of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Handout 1 provides the full text of Article 10 of CEDAW.

Use the table below to make notes on how the policy document

a) complies with CEDAW
b) fails to comply with CEDAW.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complies with Article 10, CEDAW</th>
<th>Fails to comply with Article 10, CEDAW</th>
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