



**Building Gender Equality
From the Start**

Recommendations for Adaptations of
Policies and Practices at ECEC Settings,
Municipality and State Levels to Foster
Gender Equality from Early Years



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Project Information

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

EC	European Commission
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care ¹
ECD	Early Childhood Development
EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
EU	European Union
EU FRA	European Union's' Fundamental Rights Agency
EQF	European Quality Framework
GENDERBEST	Building Gender Equality from the Start
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

¹According to the European Commission, it refers to any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to compulsory primary school age, which may vary across Europe. It includes centre and family-day care, privately and publicly funded provision, pre-school and pre-primary provision.

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Introduction

Gender equality became one of the basic values of modern democracies and it is explicitly anchored in human rights law on global and EU level. Implementation of policies to achieve gender equality across the sectors (education, employment, social policies, health care) belongs to the EU priorities. At the same time, the crucial role of ECEC for an individual's personal development including reproduction of gender stereotypes is generally accepted. However, initiatives for raising quality in ECEC don't put enough attention on gender based approach.

Project GENDERBEST aims to address two priorities - increased inclusive approach in ECEC and gender equality as one of the core values for ECEC quality assessment. The publication *Recommendations for Adaptation of Policies in ECEC Settings*, one of the project results, presents the findings of comparative analyses of how gender equality is promoted in project countries and recommendations for policy and practice in ECEC. Authors start in chapter 1 from comparing national regulations of ECEC to see the common approaches and differences and to be able to identify relevant stakeholders. The main findings are presented in chapter 2 including evaluation of access in relation to European Quality Framework, mainstreaming of gender equality in national quality standards and access to training programmes and resources.

Publication is not only for ECEC professionals but also for women (human) rights activists or educational professionals working in the field of inclusion or human rights education. Recommendations reflect on the gaps identified by mapping existing policies and are structured into four areas: 1. policy; 2. training and professional development; 3. educational resources; 4. community.

Publication thus aspires to serve as a guide for strategic planning for stakeholders promoting gender equality in education but also as an inspiration for small initiatives or individuals when thinking about how they could contribute to fostering gender equality. Last but not least, the authors of the publication and project team, hope that publication might be an inspiring resource for political representatives, public officers or educational professionals working in the public organizations with competences to bring about change from national to local level.

1. National Regulations and Standards of Early Childhood Education and Care in Partners' Countries

Before we look into the level of gender equality mainstreaming in ECEC including the area of digital competences, we need to understand how the ECEC is defined and regulated from national to municipal level in all three countries: Italy, Serbia and the Slovakia.

1.1 Governance of Early Childhood Education and Care on national and municipal level

Early Childhood Education and Care stands in two sectors which might be intertwined to a low or high degree - social services and education. The level of interconnection is anchored in the political trajectories of both of these areas and the role the states have traditionally played in providing social care and education. While in Italy and Serbia the whole range of ECEC is governed by the ministries responsible for the sector of education, the Slovak Republic recognizes two different forms or rather stages of ECEC. Care provided for children from 7 months to 3 years of age are regulated by the ministry responsible for social services (and employment and family policies as well). Facilities providing preparation for primary education from 3 to 6 years of age are governed by the ministry responsible for the sector of education and science regulated by the same legal act as primary and secondary education. These settings inform us about the general understanding of the meaning and expected roles for institutions and professionals providing the care.

In Italy, the Ministry for education and merit of Italy is responsible for the whole ECEC system which has been unified in 2017 into an integrated system of education and instruction starting from birth until 6 years of age. It includes three types of services: 1. crèches and microcrèches for children from 3 to 36 months; 2. spring sections which are supplementary services for children between 24 - 36 months; 3. pre-schools.

Crèches and microcrèches are considered to be education services managed by the local authorities, directly or through agreements, by other public bodies or by private individuals. They might have different opening hours, accommodation capacity, operating methods and fee costs from municipality to municipality (they usually provide meals and rest). The spring sections are attached to state-run or affiliated preschools or crèches as supplementary services, with a very flexible organization and diversified modes of operation. They are divided into 1) play areas for children from 12 to 36 months, without a canteen service, with flexible attendance up to a maximum of 5 hours a day; 2) child and family centres for children from the first months of life together with an accompanying adult, without a

canteen service, with flexible attendance, and 3) educational services in a home setting for a small number of children from 3 to 36 months of age. The last form are preschools, which may be state-run or publicly or privately run. Attendance at State preschools is free of charge; families are responsible for the cost of meals and any individual demand services (such as school buses, pre-school, extended hours)².

ECEC in Serbia falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, regulated by Law on Preschool Education and designed for children from 6 months to 6.5 years of age. It includes three levels of education or services for specific age groups of the children: 1. **nursery** is aimed for children aged 6 months to 3 years, 2. **kindergartens** accept children between 3 and 5 years of age, and 3. **preschool preparatory programme** classes are mandatory for children over 5.5 years of age. These classes may be delivered by kindergartens or by primary schools. Since ECEC in Serbia is a public service, many ECEC institutions are founded by the state or by local authorities. Private ECEC institutions are also available. ECEC institutions are responsible for providing meals, care, preventive healthcare and social protection services for children³.

Unlike Serbia, the Slovak Republic has divided competences over these two levels. Nurseries are considered to be social service institutions and together with other less institutionalized variants they are governed by the Ministry of employment, social affairs and family of the SR and regulated by the Act No. 448/2008 on social services⁴. Kindergartens are included in the system of formal education and although the enrolment is voluntary until 5 years of age, they are governed by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic and regulated by the Act No. 245/2008 on education and upbringing (also called a „school act“).

In all three countries nurseries and kindergartens might be founded by municipalities (public services) or by private bodies or (in case of Italy) by Regional authorities. Municipalities are therefore responsible for providing ECEC of sufficient quality and in sufficient capacities. The responsibility for the quality standards (including educational programmes), however, differs across countries.

In Italy, as described in the previous section, the educational services for children in the 0-6 age group may depend directly on the decisions from the Ministry or from local authorities, or being authorised by the latter (private or accredited). In this case, in order to obtain authorisation, socio-educational services must meet the usability, hygiene and safety requirements laid down by current legislation, as well as the organisational requirements set out in the Regional Regulations and - if relevant - described in the municipal standards.

² Information regarding the 0-6 system: <https://www.istruzione.it/sistema-integrato-06/>.

³ [Early childhood education and care \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu/early-childhood-education-and-care/)

⁴ [448/2008 Z. z. Zákon o sociálnych službách | Aktuálne znenie \(zakonypreludi.sk\)](https://www.zakony.sk/448/2008-Z-z-Zakon-o-socialnych-sluzbach/)

As an example, in the case of the Umbria Region staff must possess tertiary education and the diet has to be approved by the Local Health Agency⁵.

In Serbia there is a separate department in the Ministry of education for pre-primary and primary education and care. This department creates public policy, prepares and implements development strategies and action plans in regards to pre-primary and primary education. They also monitor the situation and implement measures and initiatives for different issues regarding pre-primary and primary education and care⁶. The criteria for accreditation of institution to provide pre-primary education are defined in the By-Law on detailed conditions for establishing, starting work and performing the activities of a pre-school institution⁷. The main procedure about verification of one institution to provide pre-primary education is defined in the general “Law on foundations of education and care” where the process of establishment and preconditions of all educational institutions in Serbia are prescribed.

In Slovakia, the accreditation of nurseries is managed directly by the Ministry of Employment, Social Affairs and Family of Slovakia and the accreditation of kindergartens is approved by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of Slovakia based on the expert evaluation of the organisational conditions and educational programme by the National Institute of Education and Youth of the country (NIVAM). NIVAM evaluates consonance of the proposed school educational programme (as part of the application) with the national curricula – national educational programme for pre-primary education.

1.2 Early Childhood Education and Care in national policies for education

One of the authoritative bodies in Italy which can influence the national policy in ECEC is The Commission for the Integrated System of Education and Instruction. The Commission, made up of experts in the field of education and **instruction** of children from zero to six years of age appointed by the Minister of Education, the Regions and the Local Authorities, has consultative and propositional tasks. In particular, one of its tasks is to draw up the Pedagogical Guidelines for the 0-6 System. The term of office of the Commission is three years. Members are not entitled to compensation or reimbursement of expenses of any kind⁸.

⁵ The list of all the requirements is ruled in the Regional Regulation available here:

https://leggi.umbria.it/mostra_atto_stampabile.php?file=reg2006-13.xml

⁶ More information about the department: [Pre-school education - Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development \(prosveta.gov.rs\)](http://prosveta.gov.rs)

⁷ The rule book is available at the following link <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/pravilnik-o-uslovima-za-osnivanje-rad-obavljanje-delatnosti-predskolske-ustanove.html>

⁸ [Integrated System Commission \(istruzione.it\)](http://istruzione.it)

Another document setting up standards in ECEC for children between 3 to 6 years of age is called *National indications and educational and teaching activities*. The National Indications set out the goals for the development of children's competences for each of the five 'fields of experience' on which the educational and teaching activities in the pre-school are based: 1. The self and the other; 2. The body and movement; 3. Images, sounds, colours, 4. Speech and words, 5. Knowledge of the world. Each field of experience offers objects, situations, images, languages referring to the symbolic systems of the culture capable of stimulating and accompanying children's learning, gradually making them more confident.

The National Indications of 2012 were updated in 2018 with the provision of "new scenarios" that place particular emphasis on education for citizenship and sustainability, with reference to the Recommendations of the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union and the goals set out by the UN in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The school promotes well-being and peaceful learning through the care of the environment, the provision of educational spaces and the careful management of the entire school day. The kindergarten curriculum is based on a balanced integration of care, relationships and learning. Learning takes place through action, exploration, contact with objects, nature, art, the territory, in a playful dimension, to be understood as a typical form of relationship and knowledge. The teaching methods refer above all to concrete experience, exploration, discovery, play, trial and error, conversation and confrontation among peers and with adults. Very important are the routines, moments of the day that recur in a constant and recurring manner linked to welcome, wellbeing and hygiene, interpersonal relations, which regulate the rhythms of the day and offer a secure basis for new experiences and new stimuli, help the children to orientate themselves with respect to the passage of time and strengthen their personal, cognitive, affective and communicative skills: roll call, assignment of tasks, body care, tidying up the environment, community meal, rest... Ample space is reserved for play, during which children express themselves, tell stories and creatively rework personal and social experiences. Observation by teachers, in its various modes, is a fundamental tool for getting to know and accompany the child in all its developmental dimensions; documentation serves to keep track, memory and reflection, in adults and children, of individual and group learning progress; evaluation recognises, accompanies, describes and documents each child's growth processes and has a formative value⁹.

In Serbia, directions and recommendations on the organisation of programmes and working methods with children from 6 months to 6.5 years of age are regulated by [*Fundamentals of the Preschool Education Programme*](#). This document specifies the objectives and outcomes of a preschool programme, makes general recommendations and includes all relevant guidelines for early childhood education and care (ECEC) staff who work with children in nurseries, kindergartens and preschool preparatory programme (PPP) classes. It is up to the

⁹ More information is available here: <https://www.miur.gov.it/web/guest/scuola-dell-infanzia>.

institution to develop programmes and up to the ECEC staff to choose the content and specific methods based on this document. The ECEC programme that each institution must draw up should contain general information about the institution, the types and duration of teaching and care activities, collaboration with families and local authorities, ways of achieving ECEC principles and goals, and methods of performance monitoring/evaluation¹⁰.

Strategic document covering education in general is *National Strategy for development of education and care in the Republic of Serbia (2021 – 2030)* where there are several goals relevant also for ECEC, such as increased quality of teaching and learning, fairness and accessibility of all educational stages (preuniversity) and strengthening the educational function of educational institutions and improved quality assurance system in education and care¹¹.

Within the “Rulebook on the quality standards of the institution's work” (educational institutions), there is a separate chapter dedicated to the “Quality standards in the pre-primary institutions” which covers different areas, such as: programme, annual plan and development plan; work on education and care; child development and growing; support to children and families; respecting of children’s rights and differences within pre-primary institutions; management of pre-primary institutions and necessary resources.

Development of ECEC in Slovakia is not guided by specific national strategic document. In the sector of education, there are several strategic or policy papers which might be relevant. The Strategy of Inclusive Approach in Education and Training was developed to implement goals defined in the Programme Declaration of the Government of the Slovak Republic for 2020 – 2024, specifically in the area Equal opportunities in education. It was approved by the Government of the Slovak Republic by Government Resolution No. 732 of 8 December 2021.

It is a framework strategy document that defines, through priority areas, the direction of public policies to achieve change in the field of education of children, pupils and students towards inclusive education. The document outlines the basic philosophy of an inclusive approach in education and training, which aims at a pro-inclusive education system, providing education to all children, pupils and students without distinction, respecting the uniqueness and diversity of each individual and enabling them to fulfil their potential to the highest possible extent. The strategy is linked to other already existing documents of the Ministry of Education, such as Zero Action Plan of the Strategy of Inclusive Approach in

¹⁰ [Educational guidelines \(europa.eu\)](http://europa.eu)

¹¹ Strategy for development of education and upbringing in the Republic of Serbia (2021 – 2030): <http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2021/63/1/reg>

Education and Training for 2021, National Programme for Development of Education and Training, component 6 of the Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Slovak Republic¹².

More specific educational goals and principles are defined in the National Educational Programme for Pre-primary education (NEP). Since 2021, the reform of NEP has been coordinated and since 2023 the pilot programme has started including several pre-primary and primary education facilities. As the novel NEP is not in application at the time of writing the publication, we are referring to the consolidated version of NEP approved in 2016¹³. NEP is setting standards for the following educational areas: 1. Language and Communication; 2. Mathematics and information literacy; 3. Human and Nature; 4. Human and society; 5. Human and employment; 6. Art and culture; 7. Health and mobility.

The general objectives of pre-primary education are: - improve the child's social activity and meet the need for social contact with peers and adults, - facilitate the child's smooth adaptation to the institutional, school environment, - promote the child's relationship with cognition and learning, - to support the development of individual competences of the child, - to convey the foundations of common values, implement and protect the rights of the child in cooperation with the family, - ensure accessibility and equity in education and training, - ensure the availability of counselling and other services for all children.

1.3 Gender equality in national educational policy for ECEC

There is no specific strategy or policy paper for gender equality in education in none of the project countries. All of the three countries have antidiscrimination legislation put in place covering also education as one of the protected areas against discrimination based on gender or sex. In Italy, the National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021-2026, includes the "Competences" as one of the 5 priority areas. However, in terms of indicators there are no specific expected targets for ECEC. Similarly, National strategy on gender equality (2021-2030) of the Republic of Serbia defines the issue of gender equality in general and as a cross-cutting topic in all spheres of social life, including education¹⁴.

In the National strategy for development of education and care in the Republic of Serbia (2021-2030)¹⁵ gender equality is prescribed as a general principal in all education stages.

There are two strategic documents which are directly related to gender equality in the Slovak Republic: National Strategy for Equality between Women and Men and Equal Opportunities in the Slovak Republic for 2021-2027 and Action Plan for Equality between Women and Men and Equal Opportunities for 2021-2027. Since 2020, the term "gender

¹² [Strategy for an inclusive approach in education and training | Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic \(minedu.sk\)](https://www.minedu.sk/)

¹³ [Štátny vzdelávací program pre predprimárne vzdelávanie v materských školách \(minedu.sk\)](https://www.minedu.sk/)

¹⁴ National strategy on gender equality (2021-2030) <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SIGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2021/103/1>

¹⁵ The strategy is available at: <https://prosveta.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/SROVRS-2030-1.pdf>

equality” has been systematically erased and the term “equality between women and men” is used instead. This has gradually impacted the change of narratives and political priorities originally framed by the concept of gender equality.

The national strategy (and the Action plan) covers 8 strategic areas and priorities: Dignity and bodily integrity; Reconciliation of family and professional life; Education, science and research; Equal opportunities and access to the labour market, women's economic dependency and poverty; Political and economic participation and participation in decision-making; Ensuring a participatory mechanism for promoting equality between women and men and institutional provision for equality between women and men; Inclusion of vulnerable groups and multiple discrimination against women and minor children/girls; International development cooperation and humanitarian aid. Although education is tackled in one of the above-mentioned areas, the actions and tools defined in the Action Plan doesn't include ECEC and are defined in rather general manner¹⁶.

2. European Quality Framework for early childhood education and care as a tool to promote gender equality in ECEC

Early childhood education and care has been identified as a priority area for cooperation under the European Education Area initiative for the period 2021-2030. European Quality Framework is one of the tools, which was developed by The Council to assist EU countries in their effort to increase the quality of their respective ECEC systems. EQF identified 5 key components of a qualitative system: 1. access to early childhood education and care; 2. training and working conditions of staff in charge of early childhood education and care; 3. definition of appropriate curricula; 4. monitoring and evaluation of systems and 5. governance and funding.

European Commission states that „*The Quality Framework has already supported reforms in many countries and helped improving the offer of early childhood education and care. For example, the EU-level target of 95% of children above 4 years old attending early childhood education and care has already been achieved*“¹⁷. In 2020, Working group on ECEC has been formed in the lines of EEA strategic framework which developed other tools to help member states in implementation of EQF – the toolbox and the guidelines.

2.1 Accessibility of EQF in national contexts

Although the EQF has been put in place since 2019, access to translated versions is not guaranteed, nor is its publication at the official website for education. From the three

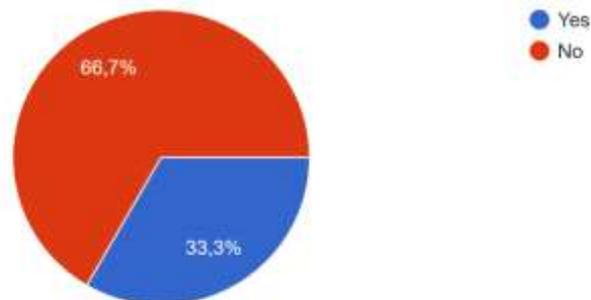
¹⁶ [ap-rovnosti-zien-muzov-rovnosti-prilezitosti-2021-27.pdf \(gov.sk\)](#)

¹⁷ [Early childhood education and care initiatives | European Education Area \(europa.eu\)](#)

monitored languages, EQF was translated only into Italian. Specific excerpts, summaries and related tools have been translated into Slovak language.

II.1 Is there translation of EQF into your national language available?

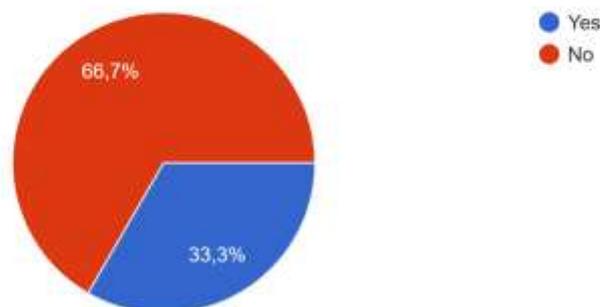
3 odpovede



Accessible at the ministerial or other official websites is EQF (although only partially translated) only in the Slovak Republic. It seems, that the implementation of EQF takes place on the level of policy formation or expert development of national standards but the conditions for participatory approach and wider discussion are not fulfilled.

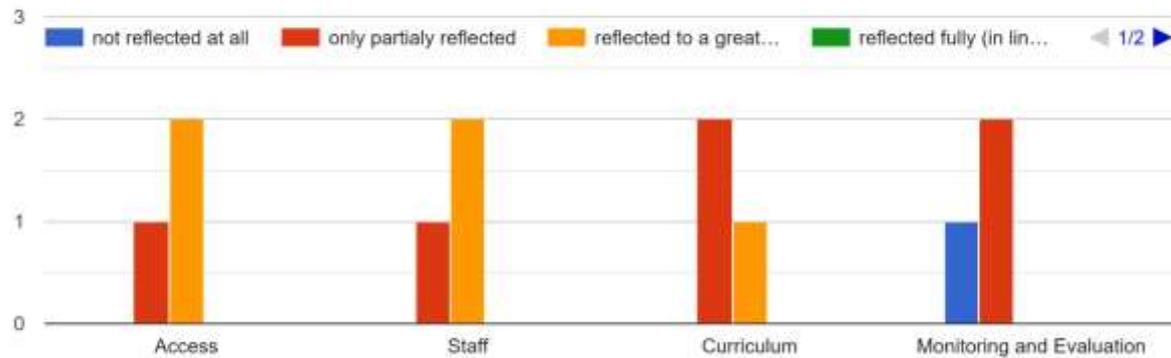
II.2 Is EQF published or referred to on the website of the ministry or on the website of other relevant public institution?

3 odpovede



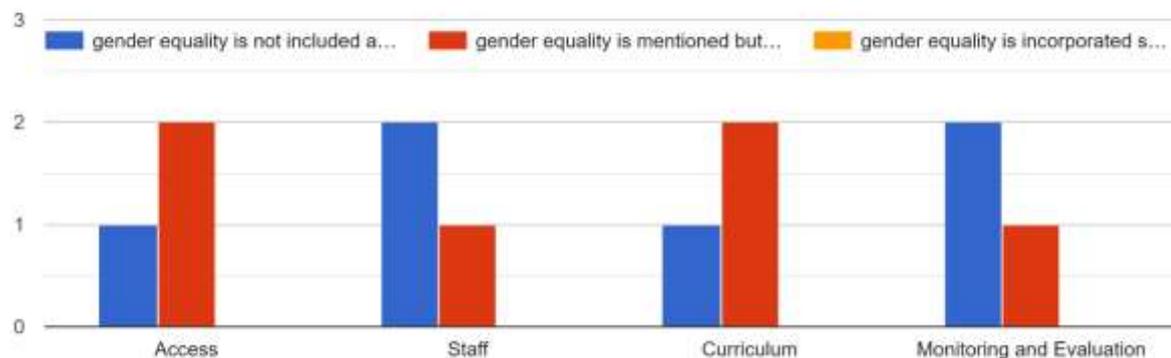
Closer evaluation of national quality standards (documents defining standards for ECEC) reveals, however, that there are gaps in the implementation of EQF. From the above-mentioned key areas of EQF, attention of strategic documents is given to recommendations related to inclusive access and development of staff competences. Lower influence of EQF has been identified in the area of curriculum (what is partially the result of decentralized approach towards educational programmes). The weak point of the implementation is monitoring and evaluation which is being highly neglected in national quality standards.

II.4 According to your professional opinion, are the following pillars of EQF reflected in national quality standards or recommendations on quality of ECEC?



Even less optimistic is articulation of gender equality as one of the elements in the key areas of EQF. As we can see in the graph below, gender equality is either mentioned but not elaborated or it is not included at all, especially in the area of staff and monitoring and evaluation.

II.5 According to your professional opinion, is gender equality mainstreamed through the following pillars of EQF in national quality standards or recommendations on quality of ECEC?



One of the reasons for such a poor representation of gender equality in quality standards might be, that prioritized focus of documents and outputs related to inclusive approach developed by the Working group on ECEC (and potentially implemented on national level) was given to vulnerable groups of children whose segregation is still being problematic. These groups are to certain extent being given attention also on national level, namely children with health disabilities, children from ethnic minorities or children from migrant background.

2.2 Gender equality in training of ECEC professionals and educational resources

To mainstream gender equality in the ECEC setting, we need gender sensitive and educated professionals who know how to implement gender equality into curricula and have enough resources to do so. Therefore, we have monitored access to educational materials and trainings for ECEC staff.

The access to trainings on gender equality mainstreaming varies across countries. From no trainings at all in Slovakia to trainings approved by public authority in Serbia.

III.5 Are there any trainings for ECEC professionals on the topic of gender equality available? (on national or local level)

3 odpovede



Similar situation is with professional preparation and resources for management to mainstream gender equality on organisational level.

III. Is there any methodology for ECEC management on mainstreaming gender equality on organisational level?

3 odpovede



The most practical and tangible tool to increase gender equality in practice are educational materials.

III.4 Are there any didactical materials for ECEC professionals on the topic of gender equality available? (in your national language)

3 odpovede



3. Recommendations

First, we should increase the advocacy on policy level. As we could clearly see, gender equality is not articulated enough in the context of ECEC development and vice-versa the role of ECEC in promoting gender equality is not reflected enough. Therefore, we recommend to:

- Include explicit goals to enhance gender equality through ECEC through specific targets and activities.
- Promote EQF and use its potential to mainstream gender equality. We have seen that although equality, diversity and inclusion are the key principles for EQF, the standards are used to promote inclusion of specific groups but not to promote gender equality.
- Equally important is to include gender equality and human rights education into national or regional curricula for ECEC. This would, probably, require extensive discussion among professionals but including gender equality as an educational goal into the binding document is a necessary precondition for improvement in other areas we will talk about – training and educational resources.

Secondly, human rights education is not sufficiently incorporated in the education of future teachers and other professionals working in ECEC. We need to increase awareness of future professionals about human rights and in that framework about history of feminist movements, gender (in)equality with all relevant inter-sectionalities for the contexts they will work in.

We need human rights education and gender equality methods not only at pedagogical universities but also as accredited trainings in the systems for further professional competences development. These programmes need to be directly supported by official training programmes to encourage participation of majority of staff. The educational programmes should cover not only the gender sensitive didactics but also gender sensitive management and communication.

Thirdly, to support the application of gender equality, teachers need more educational resources approved by authorities so they can be more confident to use them in their practice. Although there are some good practice examples in the three countries, only Serbia has the teaching materials approved by the authority. Approval could also help wider dissemination of materials and their adaptation to the needs of diverse groups of children – e.g. children with health disabilities, foreign language speakers or children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

Speaking about educational materials we also identified the need for gender-based analyses of ECEC materials to evaluate to what extent these support reproduction of gender stereotypes.

The last area we would like to mention is engagement with the community. The ECEC team needs to be assured that it is within their role as educational professionals to address gender equality in communication with parents and family members. Family provides the first formative context for understanding gender and gender roles. There might be situations where concept of gender equality might conflict with family understanding and ECEC teams need guidance how to work with divergent approaches to gender equality without creating conflict and with keeping the interest of the child in the centre.

Of course, we also need to increase awareness raising on the level of local communities and general public so the kindergartens are not isolated and can benefit from general acceptance of gender equality as an important value.

Areas	Recommendations
Educational policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include gender equality into national strategies for ECEC/formal education – SMART goals • Use the EQF to mainstream gender equality • Include gender equality and human rights into national/regional curricula
Professional development of ECEC staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include human rights education into professional preparation of future ECEC teachers and other professionals • Accredited and systemic trainings for further continual development of gender competences for ECEC teachers and staff <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to include gender equality (and human rights) into education • Competences to apply “gender lenses” on organisational level
Educational resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include human rights education into professional preparation of future ECEC teachers and other professionals • Accredited and systemic trainings for further continual development of gender competences for ECEC teachers and staff <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to include gender equality (and human rights) into education • Competences to apply “gender lenses” on organisational level
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FAMILY – support teachers and ECEC staff in engaging parents and family members to address gender equality • LOCAL COMMUNITY – programmes to strengthen participation in/with community reflecting gender equality • PUBLIC AWARENESS – thematization of gender equality in the framework of human rights and the role of pre-primary education