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India's policy on early childhood education: Lessons for a gender-transformative early childhood in India

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ABBREVIATIONS

DWCD	Department of Women and Child Development
ECE	early childhood education
GRP	gender-responsive pedagogy
MWCD	Ministry of Women and Child Development

ABSTRACT

The Delhi government in India recently launched its preschool curriculum for the city's 10,897 community-based preschool centers. The draft National Education Policy of India, made public in June 2019, dedicates its first chapter to the importance of early childhood care and education and the need to extend the right to education to every child who is three to six years old.

It is in this context that this paper urges the government to ensure that gender sensitivity is embedded in every initiative of early childhood education (ECE) in India from here onward. Based on interviews with mothers of preschool children in underresourced communities and with teachers as well as observations of government-supported preschool centers, this paper builds the current narrative of the preschool child's ecosystem; notes the lack of gender-sensitive pedagogy in this space; and makes recommendations for what a gender-transformative approach in ECE in India should entail for men and boys, girls and women, so that India can strive for a more gender-equitable society in the years to come.

INTRODUCTION

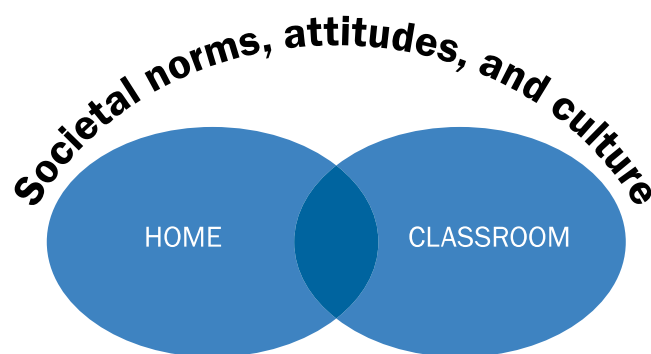
The world is grappling with a host of gender-related issues. In India, they manifest in ways ranging from sex-selective abortions to early child marriage and violence against girls and women. These issues feed into nationwide trends of a skewed sex ratio, poor retention of girls in high school, a paucity of skilled women in the labor market, gender discrimination, and gender-based violence, among others. Although the solutions to this complex problem will, of necessity, be multifaceted, the best place to begin this change would be to integrate a gender lens into India's government-supported early childhood interventions. If we do not begin gender sensitization in the early years for both boys and girls, the gender-based discrimination and gender-based violence that we confront today will not be resolved by the time the next generation comes of age.

The roots of the perceived inequality between women and men begin to form early in life.¹ These roots are nourished by life experiences, culture, and the media and are passed from generation to generation (Mlama et al. 2005). Research indicates that gender identities are formed by the time children are age two and a half years (Chi 2018); gender stereotypes about girls' and boys' intelligence are formed as early as age six (Bian, Leslie, and Cimpian 2017); and such stereotypes can have a lasting influence on girls' and boys' beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and learning outcomes (Mlama et al. 2005). Gender biases at home and in the classroom often reinforce stereotypes that in turn influence expectations and learning outcomes.

The mother is the first entrant in the life of a newborn, while the father and the rest of the child's family come together to form the most immediate circle in the child's ecosystem. Upon entering preschool, the child encounters the teacher and interacts with children of a similar age in the classroom. Through most of the early years, these two circles within the child's ecosystem—of the home and of the classroom—become the two spaces where language, creativity, emotions, understanding of the other, and many other experiences are shaped (Figure 1).

Notions of gender inequality are also carved out in the same two interconnected spaces. This paper presents an understanding of these two spaces in the ecosystem of the preschool child and the continuity between them to interpret how harmful gender norms at home may be reinforced in the classroom and vice versa. This understanding would inform where and how interventions can be implemented to catalyze a shift toward developing gender sensitivity early in life. Fortuitously, this is an opportune moment in India, which is in the midst of creating a new education policy that begins with the need to focus on early childhood education (ECE).

Figure 1. A preschool child's ecosystem: home and classroom



The draft National Education Policy of India (2019) recognizes the imperative to build the learning foundation of children in early years and seeks to extend the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 to ages three to six years across the country (Government of India 2009). Although government-supported, community-based preschools (called "Anganwadis") have existed in India for many decades now, the extension of the right to education means that preschools within government schools (hereafter referred to as "schools") are also likely to expand.

With the expansion of compulsory education to the early childhood years in India, a key policy opportunity has presented itself to reform the way harmful gender stereotypes are socialized in the country. The Draft National Education Policy 2019 devotes its first chapter to explaining why early childhood care and education are vital—calling it “the foundation of learning” (Government of India 2019).² It makes a strong case for why the early years need to be a priority, stating, “Supervised play-based education, in groups and individually, is considered particularly important during this [three to six years] age range to naturally build up the child’s innate abilities and all-important lifelong skills of cooperation, teamwork, social interaction, compassion, equity, inclusiveness, communication, cultural appreciation, playfulness, curiosity, creativity, as well as the ability to successfully and respectfully interact with teachers, fellow students, staff, and others.” However, the draft policy does not further address equity and inclusiveness in the early years with respect to gender either in this section or in a later chapter on equitable and inclusive education.

The policy’s lack of attention to gender in the early years risks missing a critical opportunity to sensitize India against the harmful gender stereotypes that fuel the gender-based violence and discrimination that currently plague the country. (For a list of key gender terms, see Annex A.) Addressing this oversight with only gender-sensitive policy language (MWCD 2013; NCERT 2018) may not be enough. There is scant research in the Indian context to systematically document the early childhood learning environment in homes and schools regarding gender. This policy paper attempts to shed light on the lived realities of young children through an understanding of the actors in their immediate lives by using in-depth qualitative data from preschool homes and classrooms.

In addition, in this critical moment of ECE expansion, it is important to analyze the long-established Anganwadi systems and their strengths and challenges in shaping gender norms. Such an analysis can inform what will be required of forthcoming systems of preschool education and what these systems might lose or gain during the shift from community-based to school-based ECE. To highlight these issues, this paper presents a gender-focused analysis of preschool classroom observations and conversations with mothers of preschool children before setting forth its recommendations. The next section describes the context for collecting this evidence.

SETTING

Government-supported preschool centers are free of cost for all children.³ They are divided into two categories: those in Anganwadis (community-based preschool centers) and those in government-supported schools, as follows:

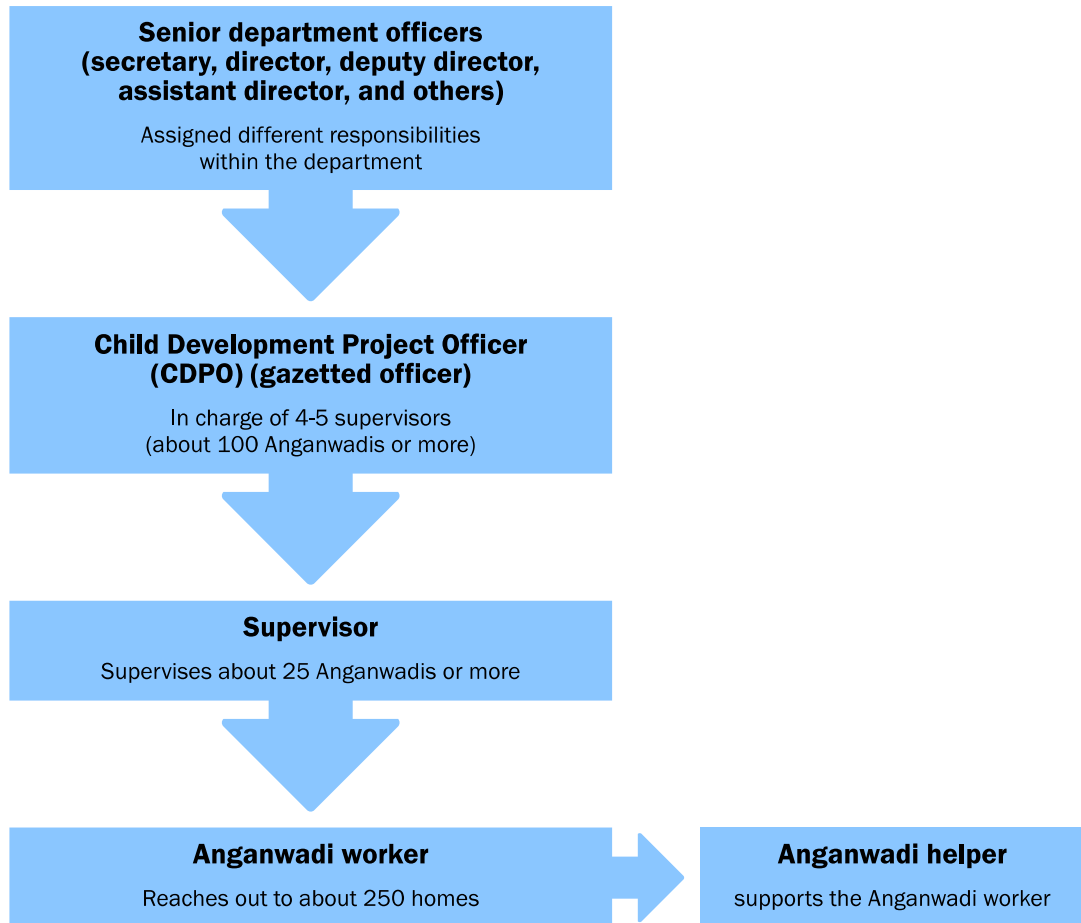
- *Anganwadis* are administered by the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD) of each state in India as part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS).⁴ Their nodal, or central, ministry is the Government of India’s Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD). Anganwadis occupy rented spaces in communities.
- *Preschools in schools* are administered by the Department of Education in each state of India. Their nodal, or central, ministry is the Government of India’s Department of School Education and Literacy within the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). These preschools are located within government schools.

The Anganwadi system is widespread in India and dates back to 1975 (MWCD 2018). “Anganwadis”—literally, “courtyard shelter”—have two frontline workers: the Anganwadi “worker” and the Anganwadi “helper” (who helps the worker in carrying out her responsibilities). The overall Anganwadi system has top-level officers: Child Development Project Officers (CDPOs) and supervisors in the middle who report to the CDPOs and are responsible for clusters of Anganwadis (usually about 30 per supervisor but possibly more if there is a shortage of supervisory staff). The Anganwadi workers report to the supervisors. Anganwadi workers must keep track of the number of children in the zero- to six-year age group in their communities. Each Anganwadi reaches out to a community of about 250 homes (Figure 2).

Anganwadis serve the children snacks and lunch at no cost. Anganwadi workers are responsible for tracking mortality and morbidity rates in the population, identifying and reducing the cases of malnourished and

underweight children, and ensuring that children’s immunizations are given on schedule. As a result, the entire weight of health, nutrition, and education of young children in the community is on the shoulders of Anganwadi workers. The workers go to the children’s homes regularly and play an important, multifaceted role in the community.

Figure 2. General structure of the Anganwadi system within the Department of Women and Child Development of a state in India



The schoolteacher, in contrast, is responsible for teaching in school but does not have to take care of the health and nutrition of children. In a city like Delhi, a government school typically has more space than an Anganwadi for a preschool. Schools also have uniforms, generally provide separate classrooms for each age group, and serve midday meals (lunch) to all children in school (Table 1).

Table 1. Differences in preschools within schools and Anganwadis in India

Parameter	School (preschools in schools)	Anganwadi (community-based preschool centers)
Geographical spread	These are gated, separate buildings in neighborhoods. Primary schools (up to grade 5) are required to be within a 1-kilometer radius of the villages or communities, except in tribal or hilly areas.	These are rented spaces, often homes, in the neighborhood. They are community-based, and each worker reaches out to about 250 homes.
Target group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children approximately ages 5-11 years in government primary schools • Now including children ages 3-5 years as preschools open within schools under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (2018)^a 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children ages 0-6 years • Lactating mothers • Adolescent girls
Services rendered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Midday meals (lunch), provided to all children free of charge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preschool nonformal education, supplementary nutrition, nutrition and health education, immunization, health checkup, and referral services • Snacks and lunch supplied to all children free of charge
Objective	To provide quality education that is developmentally appropriate	To provide quality education that is developmentally appropriate and to reduce malnutrition, morbidity, reduced learning capacity, and mortality
<p>a. Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan refers to an integrated scheme for school education, launched in 2018, to begin with preschools and end at grade 12, thus calling for government schools to open preschools.</p>		

Source: Government sources and field observations.

In the past, government primary schools began with grade 1. Hence, children could go to private preschools or Anganwadis or no preschool at all before entering grade 1 in school (Table 2).⁵ As a result, children have followed varied educational trajectories before reaching grade 1. Recently, with the launch in 2018 of a comprehensive program called the “Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan” (an integrated scheme for school education),⁶ government schools have been directed to open preschools within their schools. After the new National Education Policy is ratified, the number of preschools within schools can be expected to grow exponentially.

At present, India has about 0.8 million government primary schools (NUEPA 2016) and 1.36 million Anganwadis across the country (MWCD 2018). The latest data show that there are about 10,897 Anganwadis in Delhi alone (DWCD 2014).

Table 2. Percentage of children ages three to eight enrolled in preschools and schools, by type, in India, 2018

Age	Preschool			School			Not in preschool or school	Total
	Anganwadi	Govt. LKG/UKG	Private LKG/UKG	Govt.	Private	Other		
3	55.8	1.0	9.9	3.3	1.1	0.1	28.8	100
4	49.0	2.1	23.2	6.8	3.2	0.2	15.6	100
5	27.6	2.8	27.4	23.9	9.9	0.3	8.1	100
6	7.6	1.9	16.4	49.5	20.7	0.5	3.3	100
7	1.8	0.8	7.3	59.1	28.7	0.6	1.8	100
8	0.7	0.4	3.3	62.6	30.8	0.7	1.5	100
Total	21.1	1.5	14.1	37.1	17.2	0.4	8.7	100

Source: ASER 2019.

Note: LKG = lower kindergarten. UKG = upper kindergarten. Given education policies, three-year-olds can be in multigrade classrooms in school.

Although there is a national preschool curriculum for all government-supported preschool centers, each state creates its own preschool curriculum in line with the suggested national curriculum but customized as per the language and context of the state. Each state therefore has its own curriculum, which all government-supported preschools in the state generally follow.

The Delhi government's Anganwadi curriculum has been analyzed as part of this study. The curriculum is theme-based: nine themes spread out over 12 months. The stories, poems, games, and suggested activities feed into these themes as much as possible. Weekly planners for the whole year are laid out, and a daily timetable ensures that the activities around the key developmental domains each day are followed. Although I was part of the team that created the revised version of this curriculum, it was important to analyze it in light of the responses from mothers and observations of classroom transactions.

The next section describes the data collection process, followed by the observations analyzed based on the data collected. The data suggest six key findings that are relevant for ECE stakeholders under the new National Education Policy. These findings also make note of the gendered spaces that make up the ecosystem within which children are socialized to persistent, and harmful, gender norms.

FINDINGS

This study took place in government-supported preschools in underresourced communities of Delhi. To understand prevailing gender norms in the research conducted for this policy brief, 24 mothers of preschool children in Delhi participated in semistructured interviews. Their preschool children (12 boys and 12 girls) attend Anganwadis in the neighborhood. I observed three preschool classes (one school and two Anganwadis) from the same neighborhood for nine days (three days of observation for each class), focusing on classroom interactions between teachers and children. Children of the mothers who were interviewed studied in some of the Anganwadis that I observed. Two preschool teachers who taught the observed classes were also interviewed.

Together with over a decade of interaction with government-supported preschool stakeholders and centers across different states of India, the data collected through the interviews with mothers and observation of classroom interactions have yielded insights into classroom dynamics as well as the interactions among stakeholders in the child's preschool ecosystem.

Role models in home environments often reproduce traditional gender norms that are not opened for discussion in class

Observations confirm that children are exposed to figures at home who model gender norms and sensitize children to gender inequality between men and women. Through their own daily observations, children come to understand that mothers care for and serve others but are not cared for or served themselves, that they remain silent during conflict with fathers, that they are emotionally available to others, and that they are homemakers. Meanwhile, they learn that fathers are decisionmakers and discipliners. Interviews with mothers made it clear that, even though parenting by fathers was limited to activities like watching television with their children or playing games with them on mobile phones, fathers retained decisionmaking power regarding, for example, whether a daughter went to an Anganwadi and a son went to a private preschool.

Children pick up on these cues in their environment and then bring these understandings into the classroom. Yet my observations in Anganwadis suggest there is little questioning by teachers of these gender roles. For instance, when children were asked in class what their parents do, one child said, “My father is an electrician, and my mother cleans the house,” and the teachers did little to use it as a learning moment about gender stereotypes.

Exposure at this early age to role models who might not conform to but rather challenge gender norms seems to be lacking in the children’s ecosystem. Without exposure—whether in real life or as an idea brought up by a teacher—it is possible that children will simply assume that the world at large functions according to the gendered roles and norms they witness at home. These children are highly likely to behave in accordance with their experiences. For instance, when I asked a child what she does at home, the child told me about how she washes clothes and cooks each day. It was clear from the way this girl was narrating the story that she aspired to do this because she watches her mom do this all the time. This would be fine if the girl were aware of the different roles that women carry out. For example, women can read; become technicians, architects, pilots, teachers, and homemakers; and so on. If children are not exposed to alternate roles for women and men, or taught to question their own observations and assumptions, it is likely that they will perpetuate the stereotypes themselves.

Mothers have high aspirations for their children and perceive the genders as equal, but these aspirations are not always visible in practice

All of the mothers interviewed in this study stated that their children, regardless of their gender, should go to school and would probably study beyond grade 5. When asked about career aspirations for their children, independent of the gender of their child, mothers wanted them to be doctors, engineers, teachers, and advocates. Some said that the specific career choices should be the child’s decision. Most wanted their children—again, regardless of gender—to find employment opportunities after they completed their studies.

The mothers were quite vocal in their belief about the equality of girls and boys in today’s world. However, when asked why girls should study, some of them reverted to gender stereotypes, answering, “so that they make us proud in the house into which they get married.” Some mothers said girls should study “so that they could look after themselves when they get married.” In one case, when asked who should study if they had to choose between boys and girls, one participant replied, “Ultimately, the boy has to run the business and look after the house. If he studies, he can look after the sister as well.” Although this mother’s decision took into account the perceived long-term benefit of education and accordingly chose the son as the one who should study, interestingly, a recent study from Pakistan that took this same factor into account suggests that more schooling for girls improves the educational outcomes of the younger siblings they help raise (Qureshi 2018).



Mother at home with her preschool daughter

These idiosyncrasies between gender-equal aspirations for their children and gender-stereotypical beliefs and attitudes about their children extended to the way mothers encouraged their children’s play. For example, one mother said, “Girls have to do housework. They should not go out like boys. Boys jump around, like running, and play bat-ball. Girls should play games that don’t get in the way of those staying at home.” Although such beliefs about girls staying in the home could have arisen from safety concerns, statements like these make it clear that gender norms are so pervasive that, despite the mothers’ statements that boys and girls are equal, stereotypes are at play.

Notably, research suggests that play and toys are the space and tools of early learning (Daly 2017). According to Lauren Spinner, a developmental psychologist at the University of Kent in England, “Traditionally masculine toys like blocks and puzzles encourage visual and spatial skills, while traditionally feminine toys encourage communication and social skills” (Klass 2018). And we know that all children need both sets of skills. Playing only indoors and only with dolls or tea sets can heavily restrict the nature of play and exploration for girls, which, together with continued reinforcement of such messages at home and throughout their schooling life, can cause girls to differentially develop skills (like spatial skills), attitudes (like risk taking), expectations (like the type of play or subjects to pursue), and aspirations (like the type of work to pursue, if at all) that are highly gendered (Edwards, Knoche, and Kumru 2001). Because mothers spend the most time with children, their views have a direct impact on the gendered nature of their experiences and development. Clearly, there is a need to interact further with mothers and other adults in the household to explore their beliefs and how to translate gender-equal aspirations into gender-sensitive developmental opportunities for their children.

When opportunities for pushing gender boundaries arise in the classroom, teachers do not recognize them

Teachers serve as important actors in children’s lives—something that should be leveraged to change social norms, especially around gender. Once preschool children settle into their classroom environment, the rules and habits of the class, behavior of other children, and words and actions of teachers can set norms that are quite different from the norms that structure the home or their communities. Importantly, practices socialized in the classroom remain with children when they return home. For example, in interviews with mothers, they often talked about how their children sing songs, recite poems, and repeat stories from class in addition to trying out many of the rules and norms learned at school on younger siblings, toys, and themselves.

Like parents, however, preschool teachers seem to lack awareness of the impact of gendered roles and stereotypes in young children’s development. As mentioned earlier in the case where a child brought up the gendered occupations of his parents, teachers either do not notice an opportunity to teach about gender or do not know how to react and so let it pass. In fact, preschool teachers who were interviewed perpetuated gender stereotypes, declaring things like “boys are always naughtier than girls” when asked about gender differences in the classroom. In another case, when one child said his sister studies at home, the teacher responded, “Does she not do any work [chores or housework] at home?” At another school, the teacher made a comment in good faith but without awareness that she was perpetuating a female stereotype. The teacher told a little girl to put away a bottle of nail polish she kept taking from her bag. She said this twice. The third time, the teacher raised her voice and said, “Priya [name changed], why are you continuously taking out makeup from your bag? Is it your wedding today?”

These incidents could have provided opportunities to talk more about the roles that each person plays in society and how these roles may change over time. In a typical preschool class, children often engage in pretend play or cognitive or physical games, sing songs and recite poems, and listen to stories. In many of these activities, gender norms and gender stereotypes can come up. Until the teacher’s awareness of gender is raised, such learning opportunities will continue to go untapped.

School inputs do little to challenge early gender stereotyping

Ninety percent of brain development takes place by age six (Brown and Jernigan 2012), and children begin to form stereotypes about each other’s intelligence by the same age (Chi 2018). Therefore, given the developmental stage of young children, it becomes even more crucial to look at curriculum, teacher training, toys, and teaching learning material through the lens of gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP). This is the time

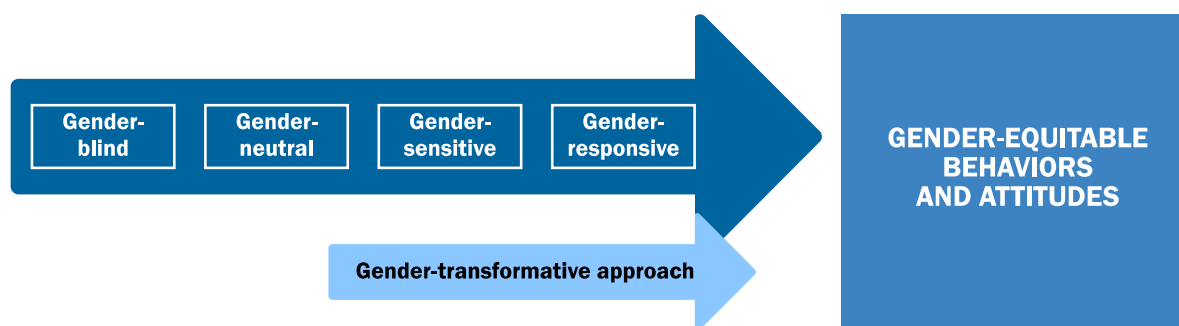
when children are—or should be—actively engaging with the world and should receive as enriching an environment and experience as possible.

The gender-neutral curriculum

Analysis of the Anganwadi curriculum of Delhi suggests that, although teachers may be perpetuating gender stereotypes, the curriculum is relatively gender-neutral.

The curriculum that guides teachers is well-planned and does not seem to reflect gender bias or stereotypes. On a continuum that moves from gender-blind to gender-responsive, this curriculum is likely to be classified as gender-neutral moving toward gender-sensitive pedagogy (Figure 3). However, it has the scope to move along this continuum further toward GRP.

Figure 3. Continuum of pedagogical approaches to gender



Note: For definitions of these terms, see Annex A.

Many stories were about animals and birds that did not specifically ascribe any gender. In stories with people, the characters who are portrayed avoid gender stereotypes as far as possible. For instance, Figure 4 (from the recently launched Anganwadi curriculum of Delhi) depicts a female doctor instead of a stereotypical male doctor treating a patient (Pratham and DWCD 2019).

Missing, however, were stories that challenge gender stereotypes and open themselves to discussion around traditional societal norms regarding gender. For example, in one story, a young boy called Rohan is peeling peas with his mother. This is a nice departure from popular stories where daughters are often the ones helping mothers at home. But to push this idea still further, one could have had the protagonist be the father peeling peas with the son instead of the stereotypical mother doing kitchen work. This would give the child an alternate framework for conceptualizing the story and the father's role within it.

Figure 4. Image from Anganwadi curriculum, Delhi, 2019



Source: Pratham and DWCD 2019.

Box 1. Story excerpt from the Anganwadi curriculum of Delhi

Suraj was sitting in the train with his grandfather. Slowly, the train puffed out of the station. After some time the train crossed a lake. As the train was crossing the lake, Suraj asked Grandpa, “Do we use water from the lake?” Grandpa said, “Yes, we use water from the lake.” As they were talking it started raining. Suraj asked his grandfather, “Do we use water from the rain?” Grandpa started smiling and said, “Yes, yes we do. The rain water fills up our lakes, rivers and wells.”

Soon it was time for Suraj and his grandfather to get off the train. There was a well on the way home. Pointing to the well, Suraj’s grandfather asked Suraj, “Do we use water from the well?” Suraj laughed and said, “ Yes, of course we do!”

Source: Pratham and DWCD 2019.

Another story advances the curriculum’s theme of the month, on “water” (Box 1). The story is a simple, short story on sources of water with no gender bias on the face of it. However, a deeper analysis finds that two people from the same gender step outside and discuss the world at large. It is quite common to see:

- People of the same gender together;
- Men and boys stepping out of the home; and
- Men and boys talking about issues of the world at large.

And so the story is based on what is commonly seen in Indian societies. Two simple changes could have made this story more challenging and gender-responsive: One could have been to make this a story about a grandmother and grandson (or granddaughter) stepping onto the train and discussing the same issue. The other could have been to add some questions at the end of the story for the teacher to probe in her class, such as “Who steps out with whom at your home?” “What do we do with water at home, and who uses the water at home for what?” In addition, the curriculum could give the teachers pointers on how to open up the stereotypical roles that children may describe in response to these questions and to share alternate examples. Thus, the curriculum would be creating an opening to share experiences about gender roles at home and questioning assumptions about such roles.

The challenge of uniforms in achieving gender neutrality



School children wearing uniforms

Although students attending Anganwadis do not wear uniforms, children attending schools almost always wear uniforms and black shoes. It was uniforms that created a striking point of comparison between how teachers interacted with children in Anganwadis and schools.

At three or four years of age, it is often difficult to distinguish between girls and boys because of the nature of their clothes and short hairstyles. In schools, however, boys wear pants and shirts; girls wear pinafores (frocks or dresses). So, when children take their food and sit in the open or in class, this becomes an issue because girls are constantly told by their teachers to “sit properly” so that their underclothes do not show.

This can be problematic. The practice of “shaming” girls begins at this age because of their clothing, which limits their movements and actions. In Anganwadis, in the absence of uniforms there was gender ambiguity and, as a result, zero instances of girls being reprimanded on account of the clothes they were wearing.

Anganwadi workers are the bridge between home and school

The level of detailed knowledge that Anganwadi workers have of their communities is unparalleled. For example, Anganwadi workers would most often know who was going to have a baby and where (at her mother's home or at the mother-in-law's place); who had just had a baby and what social functions they were planning for the new child; where there was a bereavement; whose older child had just been accepted into which school; why someone's mother was not available on a particular day; whether there were family feuds; and so on.

This familiarity with the home situations results largely from the multifaceted role of Anganwadi workers, which requires that they meet often with parents, especially mothers. Being situated close to mothers in the same neighborhood and having an important role vis-à-vis a mother's health and that of her child, Anganwadi workers are deeply connected to mothers and their children and are therefore potential catalysts for change in their communities.

In the past, these workers helped to change social norms about the importance of breastfeeding in early years and the need for timely immunization for polio. In fact, in the drive to eradicate polio from the country, the Anganwadi workers along with Accredited Social Health Workers (ASHAs) were the frontline workers who made this possible in a densely populated country like India.⁷ It is because of this very ability of Anganwadi workers to reach homes and mobilize community members that they are currently playing a vital role in the campaign to eradicate malnutrition among children younger than six years across India.⁸ This existing connection between Anganwadi workers and the community can be leveraged to change beliefs and attitudes around gender.

However, the same level of esteem and the degree of integration into the community does not hold true for the preschool teachers in schools. Both Anganwadi workers and parents, especially mothers, are viewed as "caretakers," as those who nurture. This term implies that it is the role of someone else to "educate." The point is that psycho-social development, caring and nurturing for all children, and education are intertwined, especially in this age range. Faced with the burden of having to complete the "curriculum," schoolteachers rarely have time to go into children's homes. Conversations with parents in school are restricted to classroom performance of their children.

Digital technology is the new entrant in the ecosystem of the child

Although mothers and teachers have been the two primary spheres within the child's ecosystem of care and learning, it was clear from the data in this study that digital technology was increasingly becoming a third. In addition to their interaction with teachers and mothers, children have regular exposure to and interaction with mobile phones. In all the interviews carried out with mothers, it was evident that all homes had television sets and at least one mobile phone, if not two, to which their preschool children had been regularly exposed. Mothers reported that their children enjoyed watching television with their fathers after they returned from work or playing games on their fathers' mobile phones, because the fathers' phones were most often the devices with internet access.

This aspect of increased access to digital technology in the community needs to be explored further (Cameron 2018). Knowing that a platform like this exists can increase the potential of broadcasting educational entertainment⁹ that can be used to increase the knowledge of the target audience and shift gender norms.¹⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS

With the new National Education Policy being finalized this year, the window of opportunity to shape gender sensitivity in children before gender stereotypes and norms are formed is in front of us. There is clearly a need for additional longitudinal research to build evidence on the positive outcomes of beginning gender sensitization in the early years. This is something that nongovernmental organizations in this sector and governments can do together by establishing a field laboratory that demonstrates how gender-responsive curriculum design and delivery, play, teaching and learning materials, classroom language and interactions, engagement with preschool children's parents, and assessment can help achieve gender-transformative ECE in the Indian context.

The following recommendations identify five concrete first steps toward achieving this goal. They are also intended to draw lessons from the Anganwadis, schools, and communities in their current form to inform the impending expansion of preschools within the government school network. My analysis reveals that there are lessons to be learned and opportunities to be leveraged between and from within each of these systems that can help build equitable gender norms in preschool classrooms and at home.

Gender-sensitize key change agents in a child's ecosystem

Given the central role that early childhood teachers, their immediate supervisors, and influential community members play in shaping young children's views of the world, it is important to equip them with tools to actualize a gender-transformative ECE agenda. The root causes of gender inequality in the country would be eradicated when we strengthen girls' and women's sense of agency, support boys and men in embracing positive masculinities,¹¹ appreciate the diversity among human beings, and provide the environment to move toward gender equality. The draft National Education Policy's lack of attention to gender in the early years means the country risks missing a critical opportunity to sensitize the country against the harmful gender stereotypes that fuel gender-based violence and discrimination in India.

Currently, the training of Anganwadi teachers in ECE is focused on understanding the five developmental domains for all-around development and school readiness.¹² GRP¹³ and gender sensitivity in the early years do not form part of these modules. Using such an approach would help teachers—both in Anganwadis and in schools—to address gender-blind spots in the classroom while equipping them with the tools to proactively engage with children and parents on issues of gender, gender roles, stereotypes, and biases. Drawing from observations like those that were made in homes and schools in this study can inform GRP by providing insights into children's worldviews and the ecosystems in which they are embedded. And working with key community members would help to echo the efforts of the preschool teachers, providing the level of consistency in messaging and communication that is key to changing social norms and gender stereotypes. Together, such approaches would allow for the creation of an indigenous framework of GRP that is best suited to the Indian context.

Ensure that inputs and outputs within the educational ecosystem are gender-responsive

All the internal and external factors that might affect the education dynamics within the preschool child's ecosystem need to be gender-responsive. These include inputs like the preschool curriculum as well as the expected outputs that orient the system. For instance, the data from this study indicate that play risks being gender-segregated into those activities considered appropriate for girls and those for boys. Providing play materials (indoors and outdoors) that are gender-neutral and ensuring that both girls and boys have equal opportunity to interact with materials (inside and outside) are all important measures to prevent children's worlds from becoming too limited or too divided (Klass 2018).

But the curriculum also needs to shift from being gender-neutral to becoming more gender-responsive. Missing, for instance, are inspirational stories about women and men and their bravery and kindness in adversity as well as stories that challenge existing gender norms. Moreover, the curriculum should adopt a gender-transformative approach. Integrating themes of gender equality more consistently across topic areas and incorporating these themes into the curriculum and in training of teachers (including pointers to teachers on how to guide discussions that expose the gendered realities in which children and their parents live) would go a long way toward changing the perceptions and behavior of men and women, and hence of preschool boys and girls, toward each other.

Stereotypes that are shaped and reinforced through play, stories, songs, and other preschool activities can be linked to educational and occupational goals as well as academic ability and social development (Klass 2018). Stating (in chapter 1 of the National Education Policy and in each state's preschool curriculum and policy documents) the development of gender sensitivity and a gender-transformational approach as an outcome of preschooling that is on par with achieving all-around development and school readiness would help ensure that efforts to make school inputs and processes more gender-responsive are taken seriously. It would also lead to a concerted effort in identifying ways to measure gender equality in early childhood care and education.

Reimagine the schoolteacher's role to become the bridge between home and school

The role of preschool teachers in communities is vital for children's holistic development. Parents form the core of the child's ecosystem but are often left out of the picture when it comes to their children's education. To ensure that children develop gender-equitable attitudes, preschool teachers must engage deeply with parents on gender-related issues, starting with improving the quality of interactions between fathers and children.

In the case of schools, such a task will be difficult. Although schools are not physically far from communities, the formality of exchanges between parents and teachers—typically confined to academic topics during meetings on a gated campus—will require that schoolteachers learn how to decrease their cognitive and socio-emotional distance from parents while engaging them on issues outside of academic performance, especially for preschoolers.

Anganwadi workers may be in a better position to do this because they have an existing and regular connection with the community. Because Anganwadi classes are set in communities, the interactions between parents and teachers are frequent and ongoing. Because the facilities are not gated, mothers and other family members can walk into these spaces at any time.

Although it would be unrealistic to expect schoolteachers to assume this role from the Anganwadi workers, schoolteachers may need to adopt some of their methods and to lean on them to help bridge the connection between school and home. Learning from the Anganwadi worker is especially the case given that the new National Education Policy will instigate an expansion of preschools in schools, and the Anganwadi worker's once-important connection to the home as a preschool teacher may be replaced by a teacher in the school in many areas. Hence, the vision and role of schoolteachers who teach preschool children must break away from that of the traditional teacher who is confined to the classroom and uses the talk-and-chalk method to teach. It needs to be reimagined as someone who is more approachable, accessible, and available to parents and children so that they reach their full potential and the teacher can fulfill his or her role as a positive change agent in the community.

Leverage digital platforms to change traditional gender norms among parents and children

Based on studies across the world and observations made in this study, we know that the availability of reading materials in homes is limited and that having a print-rich environment is a strong predictor of school readiness (Sarda et al. 2016). We also know that engaging fathers in the community and ensuring that they spend quality time with their children can be difficult. For both challenges, leveraging digital platforms can be a promising solution. This research indicates that every home has a mobile phone and television to which preschool children are regularly exposed. Children are fascinated by cartoon characters on television¹⁴ and when engaging with their fathers often do so vis-à-vis the television or games on mobile phones.

Apart from providing storybooks, posters, and other materials for the classroom, the government should also make available developmentally appropriate digital educational games and television programming that promotes gender equality through its content and messages.

According to researchers, educational entertainment can be used to shift attitudes on a variety of topics (Coffey 2019). Similar efforts have been carried out successfully by programs like Sesame Workshop India (ARNEC 2013; Sesame Workshop India, n.d.) and Broadclass in Pakistan¹⁵ using mobile phones and radio, respectively, to ensure continued educational inputs and learning opportunities for young children. Similar efforts should be made to measure shifting of gender norms as a result of using digital technology platforms.

Using the mobile phone as a tool for outreach, especially to fathers—providing information about parent-teacher meetings, short messages and films in the local language around gender-sensitive issues, and interactive content and suggestions on how to plan the time spent with children—would help bridge knowledge gaps that parents might face in being more involved in the development of gender sensitivity in their children.

Given that digital devices are a fast-developing third sphere in the child's ecosystem (next to home and school) and that such devices are already in the adults' hands,¹⁶ these tools must be leveraged at scale to help change mindsets and break gender stereotypes with parents and their preschool children.

Build longitudinal evidence to capture the benefits of beginning gender transformation early

Given the research on children's development of concepts of gender, we know intuitively the importance of addressing the development of harmful gender stereotypes in the early childhood years. But conducting the research for this paper made it clear that little is known about what works and why. To better understand the benefits of pursuing a gender-transformative ECE approach on the educational and life outcomes of both boys and girls and to identify the essential elements and change mechanisms that are effective in gender transformation, it is important to create learning laboratories that demonstrate the benefits of the recommendations suggested in this paper. Not-for-profit organizations like the Pratham Education Foundation (Pratham) in partnership with the government must together strive to build a partnership wherein GRP can be incorporated within government preschool settings.

For example, to address the rise of digital technology in a child's early-learning ecosystem, different organizations, including Pratham, could begin to pilot content that should go out to parents and that preschool children can engage with. This content could be tested in both Anganwadis and government schools. Preschool girls and boys could be tracked as they enter primary school to measure the impact of GRP on them in later years. Children's attitudes toward gender could be tracked until early adolescence to gauge the lasting impact of using gender-sensitive learning materials in ECE.

Furthermore, given Pratham's role in developing the existing Anganwadi preschool curriculum in partnership with the Delhi government, it could work with government stakeholders to gender-sensitize the curriculum, infusing more gender-transformative content, stories, and characters. Finally, and again drawing on Pratham's decades of work with Anganwadis, Pratham and the Delhi government can develop a preschool teacher training program that draws on the strengths of the Anganwadi worker to provide schoolteachers with insights into what a new, reimagined role for them might be. Similar steps could be taken in partnership with the government in other states so that this approach can be replicated across India.

Taking such forward-looking steps and guided by evidence, a learning laboratory for gender-responsive ECE would achieve the twin objectives of (a) drawing the road map for taking this concept to scale, and (b) evaluating the impact of this approach on children, parents, teachers, and the community in the near future as well as the long term.

CONCLUSION

If we want to prevent violence and harassment against women, ensure girls' retention in schools, and increase women's participation in the workforce, one of the first steps to be taken is to ensure that gender equality is developed in the early years. This study has attempted to illustrate in depth the world of the young child in Delhi and to highlight the important role that parents and early childhood teachers play in the development and perpetuation of harmful gender stereotypes. With the new National Education Policy at our doorstep in India, this is a prime opportunity to address this issue so that 10 years from today we can reap the benefits of having started early and not rue having missed the bus yet again.

ANNEX A: KEY GENDER TERMS, DEFINED

Term	Definition (as written in referenced documents)
Gender ^a	The socially constructed roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviors, values, relative power, and influence that society ascribes to the two sexes on a differential basis. Gender is relational and refers not simply to women or men but also to the relationship between them.
Gender roles ^a	A set of prescriptions for action and behavior assigned to men and women by society according to cultural norms and traditions.
Gender discrimination ^b	Denial of opportunities and rights or conferment of preferential treatment to individuals on the basis of their sex.
Gender blindness ^b	The failure to recognize the differences between males and females, thus leading to failure to provide for the differences.
Gender stereotype ^b	The constant portrayal (such as in the media, conversation, jokes or books) of women and men as occupying social roles according to a traditional gender role or division of labor. In children's textbooks, for example, women are seen as cleaners, caregivers, and nurses, and men are seen as drivers, doctors, and leaders. The images reinforce gender roles, which are socially constructed.
Gender relations ^b	Relationships between women and men acquired through the process of socialization in terms of power sharing, decision making, and division of labor within the household and in the society at large.
Gender equality ^c	The absence of discrimination on the basis of a person's sex. This can be related to authority, opportunities, allocation of resources or benefits, and access to services. It implies that society values men and women, and the varying roles that they play, equally.
Gender equity ^c	The process of being fair to women, men, boys, and girls. To ensure fairness, measures must often be used to compensate for historical and social disadvantages that prevent women and men from operating on a level playing field.
Gender stability ^d	The understanding that one's own—or other people's—maleness or femaleness does not change over time.
Gender bias ^c	An unfair difference in the way women or men, girls or boys, are treated.
Gender sensitivity ^e	Gender-sensitivity indicates gender awareness and means that a policy or program recognizes the important effects of gender norms, roles, and relations.
Gender responsiveness ^a	A gender-responsive policy or program fulfills two basic criteria: (a) gender norms, roles, and relations are considered; and (b) measures are taken to actively reduce the harmful effects of gender norms, roles, and relations—including gender inequality.
Gender transformation ^f	This approach tackles the root causes of gender inequality and reshapes unequal power relations. It requires working at all levels (as individuals; within families and relationships; and in communities, institutions, and societies) across a person's life course.
Gender empowerment ^g	The "expansion of freedom of choice and action," or recognizing systemic and structural sexist oppression and then acting to change existing power relations.

- a. GPE, UNGEI, and UNICEF 2017.
- b. Mlana et al. 2005.
- c. VVOB and FAWA 2019.
- d. Chi 2018.
- e. "Gender sensitivity" is often contrasted with being gender-blind, which ignores differences in opportunities and resource allocation for women and men and gender norms, roles, and relations and often reinforces gender-based discrimination (GPE, UNGEI, and UNICEF 2017).
- f. To facilitate and articulate a clear vision of what and how to implement a gender transformative approach, [Plan International has] identified six essential elements that are interconnected and mutually reinforcing (Plan International 2019):
 - 1. It is paramount to understand and address how gender norms influence children throughout their life course, from birth to adulthood.
 - 2. We need to strengthen girls' and young women's agency over the decisions that affect them, as well as to build their knowledge, confidence, skills, and access to and control over resources.
 - 3. For a truly gender-transformative approach, we need to work with and support boys, young men, and men to embrace positive masculinities and to promote gender equality, while also achieving meaningful results for them.
 - 4. A one-size-fits-all solution simply does not work. We need to consider girls, boys, young women, and young men in all their diversity when identifying and responding to their needs and interests.
 - 5. We need to both improve the conditions (daily needs) but most importantly focus our work in improving the social position (value or status) of girls and young women.
 - 6. To ensure a sustainable outcome, we need to foster an enabling environment (including with policies) where all stakeholders work together to support children and youth on their journey toward gender equality.
- g. Sahni 2017.

NOTES

¹ For more on this argument in other contexts, see Banda and Lambert 2018.

² Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is more than preparation for primary school. It aims at the holistic development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and well-being. ECCE offers the possibility to nurture caring, capable, and responsible future citizens. See "Early Childhood Care and Education," United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) website, September 29, 2015: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/early-childhood-care-and-education>.

³ Preschools in India can be private, government-supported, and/or run by not-for-profit organizations. Private preschools are those that do not rely on the government for funding, and they range from high cost to very low cost. In underresourced communities, many of these preschools charge about \$2 per month or less. Therefore, we can assume that the poorest of the poor access government-supported facilities. Not-for-profit organizations that run their own preschools generally do not charge a fee for the services provided. They are guided by their own curriculum or may follow the state curriculum.

⁴ The ICDS is the largest outreach program in the world (MWCD 2019).

⁵ For examples from three states in India of trends in children's preschool and school enrollment by age group, see Kaul et al. (2017).

⁶ Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan states that school should begin with preschools and end at grade 12.

⁷ An ASHA is from the Ministry of Health and works closely with the Anganwadi worker on health issues.

⁸ "Poshan Abhiyaan" refers to a national campaign to fight malnutrition launched by the MWCD.

⁹ "Educational entertainment" is the process of designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate (Singhal and Rogers 1999). "Essentially, educational entertainment is storytelling for change," said Amy Henderson Riley, assistant professor at Jefferson College of Population Health in Philadelphia. "It can be used to shift attitudes on a variety of topics, from sexual and reproductive health to domestic violence and even climate change" (Coffey 2019).

¹⁰ Messages for the entertainment-education intervention are designed on the basis of various theories of behavior change. For example, Bandura's (1977, 1997) social learning theory is often used: it states that learning can occur by observing media role models and that this vicarious learning usually is more effective than direct experiential learning (Singhal and Rogers 2001).

¹¹ A gender-transformative approach recognizes that gender-related beliefs can profoundly influence family life. Dominant notions of masculinity, for example, may lead men to assert control over women and discipline their children harshly (Duch et al. 2019).

¹² The five developmental domains are the physical and motor, cognitive, language, socio-emotional, and creative domains, as given in the Delhi government's Anganwadi curriculum.

¹³ In many African countries, GRP was developed in response to a similar need to create gender-sensitive classroom environments for children. GRP addresses gender-blind spots in the classroom while equipping teachers with the tools to proactively engage with children and parents on issues of gender, gender roles, stereotypes, and biases (Mlana et al. 2005)

¹⁴ Pokemon and Chota Bheem in the local language are two serials that are quite popular with little children.

¹⁵ "Broadclass Listen to Learn (Pakistan)," UNESCO Bangkok, May 18, 2017 (video): <https://bangkok.unesco.org/content/broadclass-listen-learn-pakistan>.

¹⁶ The number of illiterate adults is about 287 million in India, whereas the number of phone users is over 800 million, suggesting that even illiterate adults have access to and are using mobile phones (Oxfam India 2015; Statista 2019).

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