



## **SIG gender balance think tank 2023**

**16<sup>th</sup> February 2023, Online – Meeting notes –**

14 researchers from nine countries met for an online meeting for discussing recent developments and new perspectives on gender and diversities in the ECEC work force.

Ricardo Goncalves (Sweden/Brazil) introduced the participants to the development of institutional ECEC and research on Men in the ECEC work force in Brazil. In Brazil, with 215 million inhabitants worldwide no. 7 by population, pre-school for children (4-5 yrs) is now obligatory, resulting in a huge ECEC/pre-school workforce with more than 20.000 men (3,7%). Parallel to the expansion of the ECEC system, research on gender and men in the workforce has developed strongly, and has adopted a wider range of theoretical and empirical approaches. Recently, conservative forces have started to criticize male involvement in ECEC. As a reaction to such debates, research becomes a part of activism for the acceptance of gender diversity.

Victoria Sullivan (Australia) shared first results of an interview case study with LGBT practitioners in Australia, England, China and Hongkong. Interviewees in Australia and England reported that gender diversity and diverse sexual orientations are more accepted nowadays. This is not true for China, where homosexuality is more and more banned from public discourse during the last years. In Hongkong, positive approaches towards diversity focus on race, not on gender. Although it might be easier to discuss gender diversity openly in Australia and England, interviewees from all countries reported tensions and a tendency to avoid the topic in their work life.

As the presented results show, traditional gender disparities and stereotypes prevail in the realms of ECEC practice, whereas welcoming multiple diversities has become a standard in the academic world. Currently, debates on queer theory and diversity seem to catch more attention, compared to issues of gender – at least among young academicians. What does this mean for the topic of men and a gender-mixed work force in ECEC? Are traditional understandings of gender not relevant any longer? We discussed these questions in small groups and plenary from multiple perspectives.

Finally, the participants agreed that gender is still a very relevant topic, especially when contextual and cultural differences are taken into account. It has to be acknowledged that a binary understanding of gender fits well for many people, even when gender stereotypes are criticized. “We still have some serious aspects in the binary division of gender”, as a participant put it. Arguments for or against more men in ECEC remain controversial and may even be more controversial than ever. While conservative forces in Brazil oppose men in ECEC because they might interfere with traditional understandings of gender roles, the opposite is true for China, where men in ECEC are welcomed because they shall prevent boys to become “sissy”, thus supporting traditional masculinity.

At the same time, diversities among men and among women need to be recognized, as well as a broader range of gendered identities. Including LGBT+ perspectives can open up new windows for understanding and debating gender in the field of ECEC. Finally, the participants agreed that “gender neutral” approaches to education do not offer a way out of the complexity of gendered relations and patterns in the field of ECEC: “You can’t erase gender to make ECEC gender neutral”.

To sum up, the participants reconnected and started new discourses on issues of gender in the ECE work force, and on the important role gender plays in adult-child-relations. Time was short, and we agreed that these debates shall be continued on the upcoming SIG conference in Lisbon, August 2023.

On the Annual EECERA Conference, the SIG will propose for four Self Organized Symposia on a broad range of topics. Proposals are under way and have to be submitted until the end of February.

For the SIG Research Conference, two ideas emerged:

- A pro/con debate on the topic “is gender still relevant?”. Participants could take up different roles in such a debate, focusing on positive and problematical aspects of making gender relevant.
- A discussion of case issues on the questions how gender, and attitudes on gender, impacts the practical work in ECEC.

#### **Next meetings**

##### ***SIG Team Meeting***

Friday, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2023, Online,

11.00 - 13.00 GMT (UK, Ireland), 12.00-14.00 (Germany, Norway), 14.00-16.00 (Israel)

Everybody is welcome who wants to help organizing the next SIG event.

##### ***Early Career Researchers Meeting***

Online meeting in March 2023. Please contact Victoria Sullivan [v.sullivan@uq.edu.au](mailto:v.sullivan@uq.edu.au) or Joanne McHale [joanne.mchale@tudublin.ie](mailto:joanne.mchale@tudublin.ie)

##### ***SIG Research Conference: Curiosity about Gender in the ECEC work force***

29<sup>th</sup> August 2023, 9-16, Lisbon, Portugal

(connected to the Annual EECERA conference)