



## Gender play - Play gender

### 10<sup>th</sup> SIG gender balance research Conference

Glasgow, Scotland, 23rd August 2022, 9.00-16.00

#### *Meeting Notes*

After two years online due to the Covid pandemic, the SIG gender balance met to its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference face-to-face in Glasgow. Twelve participants took part in Glasgow, with seven more participating online in the first session of the conference. We started with an exchange round about the situation regarding men and women in ECEC in practice and research in the represented countries. In a second part, two sessions connected to the main theme of the EECERA Annual conference “Cultures of Play: Actors, Affordances and Arenas”. Finally, the participants discussed further perspectives of the SIG.

#### **Overview on recent developments**

In general, participants agreed that the Covid pandemic has slowed down initiatives in the field of gender and participation of men in ECEC worldwide. In many countries, shortage of qualified teachers is a huge problem, and sometimes recruitment of men is mentioned in this context, but not followed by substantial actions. Regarding gender, in several Nordic and Western European countries there is a shift in interest to diversity, LGBTIQ+ issues and towards understandings of gender beyond gender binary. While this might lead to new and broader perspectives on inclusion, it becomes a problem when issues of men in ECEC are no longer acknowledged as relevant. As a participant put it: “Don’t flush the baby with the bath”. Finally, the group discussed the slow progress of measures towards a more gender-balanced work force despite several strategies and programs in some countries during the last two decades. With the words of another participant: “If you put so much money in something, how do you make it last?”

*United Kingdom.* Until 2019, several Annual conferences on men in ECEC were conducted. In 2021, the GenderEYE project published its final report and materials. However, the covid pandemic has slowed down activities on gender, men and women in the ECEC work force. Even established projects like Men in Childcare Scotland struggle for funding. Only in few places small-scale research projects are under way. – An online conference event on men in ECEC will be conducted on September 2022, sponsored by Stranmillis University College in Northern Ireland.

*Norway.* During the last two years, there have been few activities on gender balance issues. The general interest shifted towards issues of diversity and LGBTIQ+ issues. 2021, the government stopped to fund the national website “Menn i barnehage” (Men in ECEC). However, a workbook for men in ECEC is about to be published. Recently, a new National government was established. The minister of equality is interested in LGBTIQ+ issues as well as topics of boy’s and men’s situation in education

and society, and has established a working group on men's issues. There is some hope for new activities regarding recruitment of men. However, it is unclear if the field of ECEC will be included in these considerations at all.

*Denmark.* There have been no activities on men in ECEC on National level, and it seems that there has been no follow-up to the initiatives of the ministry for equality in 2016. Compared to gender, LGBTIQ+ and diversity issues are more in the foreground. However, since August 2022 parental leave for fathers and other partners was extended with the intention to promote participation of men.

*Sweden.* Shortage of male teachers is a huge problem in Swedish ECEC. The proportion of male teachers remains low despite some debates and reports in the last years. As far as we know, there are only very few individual research projects going on.

*Ireland.* Diversity in the workforce, especially in the caring professions, is an important topic regardless of gender. A new work force development plan published in January 2022 brings up gender/diversity as one relevant issue. On the other hand, the 2021 Annual sector report (statistics of ECEC work force) does not show the distribution of men and women anymore, so the lack of male professionals is no longer visible in the statistics. – Joanne McHale's recently finished PhD thesis gives an overview on developments regarding men in ECEC in Ireland.

*Germany.* There are no initiatives for men in ECEC on national level anymore. Nevertheless, numbers and proportion of men working in ECEC have continued to rise slowly up to more than 50.000 men – around 7.5% - in 2021. The last annual nationwide meeting of coordinators of working groups for men showed a decrease of local initiatives during covid. A few initiatives on local level continue their work; outstanding is a project of the city of Hanover in Northern Germany. Some researchers work on individual projects, e.g., a PhD project on men with and without Migrant background working in German ECE centers.

*Turkey.* The proportion of men in the Turkish work force is 6%. As in the years before, there are no specific policies or measures aiming at recruitment of men. ECE provision is still a growing field, and a recently started huge recruitment initiative of the Ministry of Education might attract more men. On the other hand, many qualified men soon become administrators, and interestingly, these men do not seem to prefer male teachers in their institutions; this can be interpreted as a reinforcement of the gender divide (men as leaders, women doing the practical work). – There is some research on different aspects of men, women and gender in the ECEC work force, focusing e.g. on the well-being of teachers, on children's perspectives, but without public funding.

*Israel.* Maybe due to changes in the general funding policies in the field of ECEC, there are nearly no men working in ECEC institutions in the public sector, whereas there are several men active in the private sector, with some of them founding their own centers. – As in other countries, there is a severe lack of qualified teachers in ECEC, especially since the government has raised the qualification requirements for centers working with children from 0-3 yrs. However, this shortage has not led to any political interest in recruiting men.

*South Africa.* In general, there is no specific interest in men in ECEC on National level, but special ECEC teacher qualification programs for students from disadvantaged backgrounds have attracted men. This made possible to conduct some research on the topic. A challenging topic in the South-African context is the problem of sexual abuse of girls by men, and the resulting negative attitudes towards men as carers for children in general. The connections between gender, power and sexuality remain a highly complex issue.

*Africa.* There is an emerging interest in issues of gender and men in ECEC in Africa, with a few surveys and small-scale research projects conducted in some African countries.

*Australia.* Due to the Covid pandemic, there is “a bit of stagnation” regarding issues of men in ECEC. However, there is growing recognition from providers that men should be part of the ECEC workforce in the context of a good qualified, diverse and inclusive workforce. Victoria Sullivan’s recently finished PhD study highlights relevant aspects of the inclusion of men in Australian ECEC from a workforce perspective.

*China.* Policy developments in China show a different pattern, compared to the developments in Europe and Australia discussed above. LGBT is a sensitive topic and often not accepted. Policies for recruiting more men for ECEC are supported in the context of advocating traditional masculinity, especially directed at boys. It seems that many men working in ECEC are willing to fulfil these expectations. On the other hand, there is serious and controversial debate that this leads to discrimination of girls and women. This means that a general affirmation of more men in ECEC developed in “Western” gender equality context cannot simply be transferred to e.g. Asian countries. However, the mentioned developments might bring positive changes in the long run, as gender and diversity issues are more debated now.

*An international project.* Building up on the results of the *Men’s career trajectories* project (MCT), the *Children’s perspectives on their teachers* project (CPT) is on its way. 22 researchers from nine countries and five continents work together in a qualitative study. Using the mosaic approach, the participating researchers develop methods to research gender issues with children. Preliminary results are expected for 2023.

### **Gender as a play**

Gender can be understood as a play we all participate in. It emerges out of mutual bodily positions in interaction rituals and thereby constructed metaphorical meanings of symbolic objects. In a performative group experiment, we tried to trace this performative entanglement on basis of interview excerpts from men in ECEC.

After a “warm up” with methods from dramatic play Di Wang introduced her PhD project on gender and dramatic play. Building up on a background of gender subjectivity and performativity, the power of dramatic play in education will be used as a means for supporting children’s agency. The method was explained by turning the participants to “magicians” in an inventive play. In a next step, small groups were formed to draw parts of a human body for a “ghost” (see image). In the research situation, this will be followed by presenting children dilemma situations to discuss.

In the research conference, this method was adapted to perform quotations from the *Men’s career trajectories* project in joint performances of interactive dramatic play. As a result, the quotes were perceived from different perspectives, giving a deeper understanding of the quotes and the stories connected to these. Thus, scientific knowledge from theory and empirical research was transferred into an affective experience.

The presentation of Di Wang and a short paper of Markus Andrä on performance ethnography are attached to these notes.

## **Gender, educare and the war**

Tim Rohrmann invited to an exchange on the consequence of the war in the Ukraine on our work as researchers and promoters of gender equality in ECEC. Our emotional involvement with the war in Ukraine has focused our attention on the role of gender in this debacle. The war has affected Ukrainian male practitioners and students in significant ways. Starting point for the debate was the example of an Ukrainian student who interrupted his studies at a Western European university for helping to support and protect his country. The participants shared thoughts and feelings about these impacts of the war in small groups and in a short round.

The exchange brought out diverse responses, including some very emotional. The topic is complex and “messy”, and different countries are more or less involved in direct consequences. Different cultural understandings of masculinity were discussed, including the concept of “protecting my country” as part of masculine identity. The war reproduces traditional, and maybe as well new, stereotyped masculinities. On the other hand, it was recognized that war has no “female face”, and the role and experiences of women often remain unseen. Furthermore it was criticized that the Ukraine war as resulted in harsh differences between groups of refugees, with Ukrainians as the “good” and people from African and Middle-East countries as “bad” refugees. Finally, consequences for politics in Western Europe were discussed. Participants reported that while huge amounts of money are currently spent for weapons and the military system, it is extremely difficult to put general and urgent issues of ECEC on the political agenda – not to speak of the issue of men in and gender in ECEC.

## **Dynamics of play in a gender perspective**

“Men do rough and tumble play because that’s what they want to do”? David Brody and Yuwei Xu wanted to challenge this assumption. Considering gender as a fluid concept, they let the group experience with gender and team dynamics in the context of children’s gross motor play.

The group was invited to participate in several rounds of two different children’s games from Israel and China.

*This experience is difficult to document – just imagine a group of serious researchers running wild to be the first on the other side of the room, and hopping around trying to fetch a feather ball... Fun!*

Based on this experience, the participants discussed gendered connotations of the games. We found out that gendered connotations depend on cultural factors on a more general level, but also on regional contexts or even local and individual differences, e.g. a gross motor game was played only by girls in one Chinese kindergarten, but by all children in another. In the debate, the question emerged how the polarity of individual and group play, and the role of competition, is connected to gender. Aspects of corporeality/embodiment were discussed. The role of men in play situations in ECEC remained an open question and needs further debate.

### Further development of the SIG gender balance

Based on the international exchange, the participants agreed that promoting the EECERA SIG is still a relevant task, especially in countries outside Europe. To refresh the topic, and the way we work now, the SIG intends to include more researchers in its work. The coordinating SIG team is an open group, and all researchers from the SIG context are invited to join and contribute.

The group agreed to have four annual meetings:

1. SIG team meeting in November 2022
2. Online conference in February 2023 (approx. 3 hrs.)
3. SIG team meeting in April/May 2023
4. Research Conference 29.8.2023 in Portugal, connected to Annual EECERA conference

The SIG can be a good support for the next generation of researchers in the field, and formats for establishing this kind of support will be developed. We will install a project "SIG Gender Balance" in ResearchGate as a source for relevant publications. Specific online meetings for PhD students might be a helpful approach.

The list of country contacts needs to be updated, Joanne McHale will take care of that.

The SIG website [www.siggender.eu](http://www.siggender.eu), which is until now hosted on a private website, will hopefully be moved to a university website this autumn.

There is some interest in collaboration on gender in Master programmes in ECEC. Please contact → Birgitte Ljunggren.

### Final round

The conference went very well although (or because?) the group was rather small. The participants agreed that the interactional quality on this day's research conference was different and more intense than on any other SIG conference until now, and this should be further developed. The atmosphere was good and very responsive. This enabled the group to explore gender issues in another way. Clearly, this was only possible in a face-to-face meeting. Being together, discussing and playing was wonderful and much appreciated.

**We will meet again in 2023!**

#### Next meetings

- **SIG team meeting Friday, 18th November 2022**  
9.00 - 11.00 GMT (UK), 10.00-12.00 (Germany, Norway), 12.00-14.00 (Israel)
- **SIG Online research conference Thursday, 16th February 2023**  
11.00 - 14.30 GMT (UK), 12.00-15.30 (Germany, Norway), 14.00-17.30 (Israel)
- **SIG team meeting Friday, 28th April 2023**  
11.00 - 13.00 GMT (UK), 12.00-14.00 (Germany, Norway), 14.00-16.00 (Israel)
- **SIG Research Conference 29. August 2023 in Portugal,**  
connected to Annual EECERA conference