



Special Interest Group convenors

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Fostering gender dialogues in ECEC

13th SIG gender balance research Conference

Bratislava, Slovakia, Monday, 25th August 2025, 9.00-16.00

Conference notes (Tim Rohrmann & Joanne McHale)

Attendees: Jean Plasir (NYC), David Brody (Israel), Cathy Kilburn (England), Kari Emilsen (Norway), Birgitte Ljunggren (Norway), Kozue Matsuda (Japan), Halah Elkarif (Germany/Egypt), Ikbal Şahin Sak (Turkiye), Ramazan Sak (Turkiye), Ricardo Goncalves (Brazil/Sweden), Shengnan Li (England/China), Tim Rohrmann (Germany), Joanne McHale (Ireland), Invited guest: Hasina Ebrahim (South Africa)

The SIG gender balance held its 13th research conference in the context of the EECERA Annual conference theme, *Early Education for All: Celebrating Diversity and Seeking Inclusion*. 14 participants from 12 countries and five continents took part, including Prof. Dr. Hasina Ebrahim, keynote speaker of this year's Annual conference, and exchanged experiences from practice, research and policy, and developed ideas for further cooperation.

Summary of exchange round

The research conference discussed developments related to gender equality in general, and issues of gender and men in the ECEC workforce. It built up on the last SIG online conference in March 2025, where we focused on recent developments and research from African countries (see documentation website www.siggender.eu).

Recent decisions of the US government against diversity programs received worldwide attention. In the US, gender issues are in peril, as the government intends to eliminate diversity, including research at universities and programs supporting diversity. However, on local level work is continued. A right-wing push back on gender discussions was also reported from other countries, including Sweden and Germany. In the UK, a new curriculum sets narrow limits to how teachers are allowed to talk to children about issues of gender and sexuality; pre-school children are not addressed at all.

There are few changes in proportion of men in the ECEC work force in the past years, ranging from 10% in Norway, 8% in Germany, 6% in Turkiye, 4% in Sweden and Brazil, to around 2% in Ireland and England, and nearly no men in Israel and MENA countries. As Hasina Ebrahim and others reported, the issue of men in education has reached policy makers on international level, including OECD and UN. However, strategies on national and regional level remain scarce, despite massive ECEC worker shortages in many countries, including Norway, Ireland, England, Sweden, and Germany.

In Norway, a recruitment crisis led to strategies for recruiting more widely. Universities also have problems to recruit students. Strategies for a more diverse workforce include men, but not comparable to the measures for more men developed 20 years ago. On the other hand, there is more interest in nursing professions. – The project “Beyond borders” brings together Norway and Sweden in approaching new target groups and developing the work force.

In Germany, recruitment campaigns mostly target the lowest qualification paths, leading to an overall loss of quality. Despite effectful campaigns for getting more men, this is not in the focus of current campaigns. In Germany, the existing network of men's working groups has connected to the National Forum for men (Bundesforum Männer) which has some chance to influence policy development on a national level. The network now has a national website: [Website](#). Halah Elkarif's PhD Thesis on men from Middle East and North African countries working in German ECEC showed interesting patterns of migrant men for whom working in ECEC can be an attractive and secure job, in contrast to the tradition in their home countries where men are not working in this field.

In Ireland, recent statistics and reports do not report on gender at all which is problematic in light of diversity in the workforce being a stated aim in the current Workforce Development Plan, published in 2021. In England, there have been several attempts to address men in recruitment campaigns over the years, but these are often limited and do not connect to previous projects. In Sweden, debates on gender in the ECEC work force only come up when there is a case of child abuse. As Ricardo Goncalves reported, his PhD on men in ECEC received rising interest only after such a case went through mass media.

The currents wars influence gender relations in families as well as in ECEC. For example in Israel, men are in military service which means stretches of leaving and returning, thus not available for children, neither as fathers nor as ECE practitioners.

In South Africa, as in many African countries, early childhood is on the margins. Early years programs focus not only on education, but also on basic needs of children and families, and there is a huge need for workforce development. In South Africa, debates have started on how boys are socialised, and traditional social norms about caregiving are challenged.

In Japan, attitudes regarding gender are in general conservative and progression is slow, but general equality policy initiatives are being rolled out, and there are some moves to incorporate equality in early childhood education. Similar developments are reported from China. Gender equality policies focus on equal opportunities for boys and girls, but there is little awareness of gender issues in practice, and many aspects of gender are not discussed. Persistence of stereotype gender traditions is also reported from Turkiye. A "Year of the Family" was announced, with initiatives and focus on supporting families. Several colleagues reported that in some countries, involvement of fathers is developing, with more fathers staying home with their kids and taking responsibility for their development. This is mostly not mirrored by a similar increase of males in ECEC.

Regarding academic research, there are some studies and publications from various countries where issues of gender in the work force have not been discussed before, including African countries (some of it was featured on the SIG online conference in March 2025), South America, and recently Slovenia. The updated SIG publication lists will be published later this year on the SIG's website.

However, as Tim Rohrmann reported, there is also a rise in AI generated papers which include fake references. Tim reported in detail from papers in international journals, shared by ResearchGate and Academia networks, which included AI generated fake references of SIG authors on men in ECEC. This was reported to the journals' editors, but until now without no consequences. This is perceived as a threat to our academic work in general, as it becomes increasingly difficult to establish and keep up scientific standards in debates on "fake news".

Ricardo Goncalves and Halah Elkarif, active SIG members, have successfully finished their PhD thesis – congratulations!

Fostering gender dialogues in ECEC against the pitfalls of polarization

moderated by Birgitte Ljunggren, Norway

Gender issues have come in the centre of political debate and polarized ideologies. In social sciences it has become sometimes difficult to talk about "men" and "women" at all, as this is interpreted as a support of traditional gender binaries, whereas at the same time anti-gender rhetoric from media, politicians and social influencers has begun to focus on academia. The conference addressed this issue by sharing experiences and discussing the role of researchers for supporting gender dialogues in policy and practice.

In two small groups, participants discussed recent developments in their countries. Examples included a controversy in Norway about supporting the "Pride" by hissing rainbow flags in kindergartens, and a campaign of the German extremist right-wing party "AFD" (Alternative for Germany) for "child protection" which connected gender pedagogy and sex education with pedophile criminals and child abuse, constructing debates on gender as a threat to children's identity development and safety. In both cases, the rainbow flag is not longer perceived as a symbol of individual freedom, but as a symbol of ideologic suppression. The whole range of gender issues is framed within this controversy. The notion of gender as socially constructed is under attack. Right-wing political activist, conservative Christians, and sometimes even conservative Muslim align in their attempt to stop strategies towards gender diversity and restore traditional gender roles.

Social media is perceived as both fueling polarization and challenging such developments. There is a danger of staying in "echo-chambers" on all sides, including gender research (as the SIG is also an echo chamber). Disenfranchisement and class struggles play an important role in debates on gender issues. As a result, the debate moves away from children's needs and the best interest of the child. Children's perspectives research shows, children are less concerned with gender as a concept, and more interested in what the adults 'do' with them.

It is important to acknowledge that context is important, as contextual variations exist. There is little debate on gender in countries like China and Turkiye, where traditional gender roles prevail. Even in Israel, where LGBT issues are visible and accepted by the majority, gender (diversity) issues are not discussed in ECEC contexts. Comparative research can be a way to approach these issues on an international level.

To summarize, two developments challenge the current ECEC system: in many countries, birth rates are low; and it is unclear who will be going to care for our children in future. In the conservative argumentation, women should stay home and care for children, but many women want to work and might be not willing to stay home and care for children instead.

Regarding the role of research, we finally discussed if polarizing discussions should be avoided (as many practitioners, and also many of us do), or if there is a need to speak up and challenge them. It was pointed out that right-wing stakeholders seek to influence legislation and funding, especially in the field of gender research. As a push-back against social-constructive understandings of gender is underpinning much of the discourse, it was concluded that perseverance in our efforts is absolutely important.

The role of gender in the context of teacher shortage across the globe

Group discussion

In OCED (2019) recommendations, men's participation is phrased as a measure to address teacher shortage in ECEC. A recent UNESCO (2024) states that “promoting gender equality in teaching (is) essential”:

Inclusive policies that foster gender equality in the teaching profession are vital. Diverse teaching workforces reflecting the communities they serve enhance the relevance of education and enrich the learning experience. Encouraging women's representation in leadership positions while engaging men in the teaching profession, especially at early years education, is critical. Understanding the significance of a gender-balanced teaching workforce and its impact on educational outcomes is crucial in crafting inclusive and effective education systems.

<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/global-report-teachers-what-you-need-know>

However, this universal assumption does not seem to apply to all countries, including e.g. China and South Africa where teacher shortage manifests in different ways in comparison to major OECD countries. In China, as reported by Yuwei Xu, there is sharp decrease in child birth rate (from 17.56 million in 2017 to 9.02 million in 2023), resulting in reduced needs in early childhood services. Therefore, the global call for more men to work in ECE to address the shortage of labour may not apply to China. In this context, do we still need more men (as one debate is that men come to 'steal' women's jobs and to occupy leadership roles in ECE)?

Against this backdrop, we explored the cultural contexts related to gender and staff shortage as a starting point for strategies for a more diverse ECEC work force. Participants gave examples of current issues in recruitment and retention, but also future issues with declining birth rates and aging populations.

In Ireland, aging population and full employment (in better paying sectors) creates a vacuum of employment. Research suggested that a crash of the construction industry was a catalyst for male recruitment in the mid-00s but currently with full employment, it's unlikely to generate the same pool unless other factors change. In the United Kingdom and in Norway, there is a huge shortage problem despite very low birthrates (UK 1.2%, Norway 1.4%). In a recent UK study, 70% of EC settings reported vacancies. The Norwegian government is aware of the situation; however, there is political debate about if ECEC should be free for parents, or if the government should invest in staff & ECEC quality. Similar debates are reported from Sweden and Germany. In Germany, worker shortages continue to be a huge problem in the West, where care for under 3s is still not sufficiently available, whereas in some Federal states in East Germany, the low birthrate has already resulted in reduced need for ECEC places.

Contrary to these countries, the birth rate in Israel is high. There is no shortage of staff for kindergarten (3-6 yrs), but as care for under 3s was made public and basic standards were established, the traditional workforce – orthodox women – moved to other fields, which lead to a huge crisis and lack of places. There is no debate of getting men into the field. In Turkiye, there is no shortage of preschool workers, but until now, there is only little provision for children under 3. Regarding men, it is perceived that many male ECEC teachers enter the field, but soon progress to administrative positions.

In South Africa, where birth rates are high and ECEC is still in development, there is a growing debate on men in care and changing masculinities. Some men enter the field, and they are especially attracted to continue family-owned settings, when mothers or other female relatives work in the field. However, some qualified men are not able to withstand the resisting high social pressure against men in care professions.

The debate revealed differences between the discourses on international level and in the represented countries. The debates on attracting a more diverse work force, including more men, to ensure a quality in ECEC has reached international level and was even mentioned in a workshop on education in the context of the G20 summit in South Africa. From a Norwegian perspective children have a right to meet men and women in ECEC. In the Swedish context, it is assumed that because all humans are equal, there is no need to discuss gender in binary terms. Moreover, there are issues of disjoint between high level policy and grass roots application and vice versa.

To conclude, the developments of birth rates, the growing demand for provision of care for very young children, changing qualification requirements for working in ECEC, and the persisting low status of the system (including low pay), create a complex image. It is difficult to predict if worker shortages will continue to be a problem, and if an increase in men's participation in the field might result in men occupying more leading position, thus reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies. Birgitte Ljunggren reported from a recent study that leadership styles can differ between men and women. Tim Rohrmann suggested a joined attempt to a detailed analysis of statistics from several countries to further research this topic.

It is surprising that gender issues are so little discussed in current debates on recruitment and retention of ECEC staff – in contrast to international recommendations, and despite effective campaigns in some countries during the last decade. Many strategies and programs for achieving a better gender balance in the ECEC work force, which have been a starting point for the collaboration within the SIG, have not been continued.

Mentoring men in ECEC

moderated by Tim Rohrmann & the MOMECE team

Together with colleagues, Tim presented the current stage of the MoMECE research involving (Germany), Ikbal and Ramazan (Turkey), Jean (NYC), Kari (Norway) and Joanne (Ireland). The aim of this international collaboration is to foster the development of a gender-mixed work force, to support the further qualification of male practitioners, and to retain male workers in the field of ECEC. To achieve this aim, we conduct research, develop strategies and apply measures during the whole progress of vocational biographies. In a non-funded research exchange, we want to exchange and bring together ideas that have already been applied successfully in the participating countries and regions. *Website:*

<https://gender-kindheitspaedagogik.hawik.de/en/male-professionals-ecec/mentoring-men-ecec>

After the overview on the project's aims and target groups, a short quantitative questionnaire was introduced. This questionnaire builds up on existing research and intends to include a bigger sample on international level. Results can be utilized for arguing for the implementation of specific measures in the participating countries (see details in attached presentation).

Then, a world café was arranged with three groups for the exchange of issues and ideas for three target groups:

- 1 on-site support for male students in vocational and academic training
- 2 online courses for ECEC students and/or novices
- 3 working groups for male practitioners working in ECEC centers

Participants assembled a wide array of ideas and suggestions. In the final round of the session, several critical issues were brought up:

- Mentoring implicates a top-down hierarchy, with qualified mentors setting the scene for students and practitioners – but who are we to define what men in ECEC need?
- Men-only groups could be echo chambers reproducing masculinities, or reinforcing complaints about what is wrong/bad about men's experiences.
- On the other hand, support among men can support feeling valued and included. It is necessary to bring in issues that initiate debate and promote critical thinking.
- What about the female students? They are unseen in this context and also have their issues. It is necessary to be sensitive approaching and delivering support to men and to take into account the needs of unseen and invisible students.
- If you look at community of practice on workforce issues, men and women have different experiences, but it is also relational and intersectional. Knowing when to bring them together is important – share issues and then specific issues. Look at an inclusive model, focusing on voice and empowerment.

The session was closed with an example from Germany. One working group of ECEC men in a town in North Germany decided to organise a congress and invite their female colleagues to this congress. Since then, the concept of combining men-only working groups with conferences/events for all genders has been taken up by several stakeholders in Germany.

Special issue

Tim explained the communication with the EECER Journal editors regarding a next SIG gender special issue and asked for suggestions. Tim will approach EECERA editors to further discuss the issue. He and Birgitte are willing to be co-editors of a special issue. As discussed earlier, a new special issue should include global discourses and develop a broader perspective on gender in contexts of diversity and intersectionality. Possible journals include

- *Gender in Education* has already published a special issue on gender in ECEC, but the journal is not focused on ECEC;
- An indexed (SSCI) journal as more impactful, e.g. *Early Childhood Education Journal* – however, this is a US based journal so may be more focused on quantitative studies;
- *Childhood, education and society*, an open access indexed on SCOPUS but not as high.
- The UK based *Journal of Early Years Education* which also has already published a special issue on gender / diversity in ECEC.

Next SIG conference, SIG team and final round

It was suggested to reduce the SIG conference to half day (“2 hours is too short, and indeed even a full day is not enough”), as many people have limited time and trying to connect with others (and possibly other SIGs) during the pre-conference day. A shorter meeting might also encourage new people to attend the session. On the other hand, for participants who only want to attend the SIG conference and not the EECERA conference, a half day is harder to justify. An idea is to combine a half day SIG meeting with a special topic /research group meeting. It was also suggested to cooperate with another SIG during the day.

Online conferences/meetings are very important for those who do not have the resources to attend in person conferences. We will continue to conduct a half day online conference in March and will discuss which topics may attract others, particularly a world-wide audience.

Between these two events, the SIG team will meet for exchange, planning and discussing the further development of the SIG. Everybody who wants to join the SIG team is welcome.

In the final round, participants highlighted shared values as well as different perspectives and challenging ideas, both contributing to the rich discourse within the SIG. The SIG has developed as a safe and productive space for discussing issues of gender equality and diversity in ECEC on a global level, giving room for progressing the participants’ individual development by mutual support.