



Does gender matter?

14th SIG gender research conference – in hybrid mode

Funchal/Madeira & Online, Tuesday, 25th August 2026, 9.00 – 11.45 WEST

(Western European Summer Time)

In a world of escalating conflicts and struggles for basic resources, gender issues in ECEC might seem to be only academic or irrelevant. However, researchers continue to discuss gender gaps in education, gender disparities in the work force, and the underrepresentation of men in the early years. The EECERA Special Interest Group (SIG) *Gender* invited to its 14th research conference, connected to the 34th EECERA conference in Funchal/Madeira. 18 researchers and ECEC experts coming from 15 countries from all continents took part in the 14th EECERA SIG Gender research conference, which was conducted in hybrid mode in Funchal, Madeira. While half of the group met at the university of Funchal, Madeira, the other half joined the conference online.

Introduction and exchange round

Convenors Joanne McHale and Tim Rohrmann welcomed the group and introduced the SIG as a place for exchange and mutual support. The SIG brings together long-standing experts in the field, teachers and scientists interested in projects on gender issues, and early career researchers and PhD students doing their first steps in gender research in ECEC.

A first round revealed that the participants work on a wide range of issues in the field of gender in ECEC, including:

- Gender in ECEC practice: Children's gender development; Gendered relations among children and between children and adults; Doing and undoing gender in ECE practice; Gender reflexive pedagogy
- Gender in the ECEC workforce: Gender & professionalisation; Recruitment of men in the context of ECEC workforce shortage; Men in ECEC in and from different cultural backgrounds; Support structures for male workers in ECEC

As stated in past conferences, there is currently little focus on gender issues in ECEC and in the ECEC workforce in many countries worldwide. However, participants mentioned some projects on men in ECEC, some of them in the context of massive workforce shortage in the field of ECEC.

- As Kari Emilsen reported from Norway, the issue of recruiting men is part of an ongoing project on recruitment for ECEC. Moreover, an important private provider received funding for disseminating measures for attracting male workers for ECEC and conducting a national conference.
- Dietlinde Willockx informed about project applications for funding for recruiting men to the field of childcare in Belgium (Belgium has a split system).
- The until now unfunded MoMEC (Mentoring Men in ECEC) project brings together colleagues from Turkey, Ireland, Germany, Norway, and New York. First results are presented on the Annual conference.

- An international ERASMUS project application submitted by Konstantina Rentzou, Greece, with partners from Turkey, Germany, Portugal and the Netherlands, was unfortunately rejected.

After the exchange round, the group was split up in an on-site and an online group to discuss two topics:

1. Relevance of gender in pedagogical content and practice in ECEC (on-site, moderated by Ricardo Goncalves)
2. A gap between academic gender discourses and the reality of how people experience gender in everyday life in education and care (online, moderated by Konstantina Rentzou & Halah Elkarif).

Relevance of gender in pedagogical content and practice in ECEC

The group started with discussing how gender is embedded in National curricula, and how this is implemented in practice. While in some countries gender as a topic has been implemented and in others not, all colleagues agreed that thematizing gender is 'competing' with many other issues.

Moreover, debates on gender issues sometimes have become very polarized. Some countries see a conservative backlash in thematizing gender issues with children at all (e.g., UK, US, Brazil). Curricula are re-written with a focus on basic competences and knowledge-based learning.

On the other hand, the Nordic countries have implemented gender equality and gender sensitive education in their curricula; however, there is a backlash in student's interest: they take gender equality for granted and don't think it is relevant. Both developments may result in "gender blindness".

In some countries, like Germany, gender debates focus much on controversies on trans/non-binary issues, while apparent gender differences e.g. in the field of language development or other educational fields are rarely discussed.

Regarding the role of practitioners, the participants reported much variation in educators' awareness of gender issues. This is also relevant for the relevance of workers' gender, which is less thematized compared to gender differences among children. However, stereotypes regarding the involvement of men in ECEC persists. Finally, participants highlighted that parents' views have to be taken into regard, as practitioners are often cautious to confront gender stereotypes when they fear negative reactions from parents.

The group continued with discussing how we teach gender to students or practitioners. This depends much on *who* is teaching. Many participants teach gender modules, seminars or seminar units. Gender experts agree that gender is not just another topic, but needs to be reflected in all fields of pedagogical practice. However, educational subjects and fields (e.g. math, arts, psychology...) are often taught by colleagues who are specialized on their topic but do not focus gender aspects in their teaching.

It cannot be expected that the students or practitioners to connect basic knowledge on gender to their everyday practice without support. Thus, reflection of practice is an important part of studies where gender reflection has to be implemented and integrated.

The group finished with the question how we can make gender an attractive topic for our students and for practitioners in the field.

A gap between academic gender discourses and everyday life in ECEC

Participants acknowledged that there is indeed a gap between academic research and the gendered practices in ECEC institutions and families, and discussed what can be done about this gap.

The group highlighted a need for gender reflexivity, with a special focus on different cultural contexts. The group agreed that the cultural context plays a role but irrespective of the context, it was acknowledged that academics and researchers need to reach out both to practitioners and politicians and the wider community in order to sensitize them and increase awareness on gender issues. In this context, it was suggested to try to speak about gender in a simple language, addressed to practitioners and parents, including practical tips.

It was also mentioned that we grew up in societies where for many years it was forbidden for men to study in ECEC faculties and fathers were not involved in their children's upbringing. These traditional role stereotypes have formed our view of the role of men in education and care of young children. On the contrary, new generations who may see men in caring role do not view their presence in ECEC as something obscure.

Finally, it was mentioned that ECEC currently as a professional field has to face many different problems; therefore, the lack of male educators is not prioritised.

Ongoing and new projects: Men in ECEC and Teaching Gender

Regarding Men in ECEC, the MoMEC project will continue its exchange. As the EQUAL MEN-application was rejected, we will discuss possibilities to merge the two projects into a new application. People interested in participating in such a project, either as project partner or as associate partners, are welcome to contact Konstantina and Tim.

Based on the discussions in the meeting, participants brought up the idea of a joint project on *Teaching gender*. This idea was well received in the group. People could share publications and materials which have proven to work well with students and practitioners. The topic would also be good for an ERASMUS application. Ricardo and Melanie will set up a group to further discuss this idea, while Dietlinde offered her institution's support regarding EU applications (e.g. finding out which country would be good for taking the lead in a project application).

Next steps & final round

The participants gave overall positive feedback on the meeting. They agreed that the decision for a half day, hybrid SIG meeting was good. Participants are interested to continue the exchange, by meeting in-person as well as online. Planning for 2027 includes a SIG online conference in March 2027, and a conference connected to the Annual EECERA conference in August 2027 (the SIG conference could be on 24th August 2027).

The decision for having a half-day SIG meeting instead of a full-day conference as in the past years was welcomed. The shorter meeting was focused and productive. A shorter meeting allows to think about the new ideas and suggestions after the meeting. However, some participants would have liked some more time for networking, so maybe the SIG meeting could be a little longer with less time pressure (3-4 hrs).

The conduction of a hybrid meeting was also evaluated positively. It was a great chance for those who did not have the possibility to make it to the Annual conference. Both the online and the on-site group session were experienced as inspiring and fruitful.

Regarding possible topics of the next meetings and conferences, all SIG colleagues are asked to send in their suggestions to Joanne and Tim – either topics they want to present on, or topics they would like to hear about and discuss together.

It was suggested that a conference could be opened to include practitioners and/or students. The SIG team will take this into consideration when planning the next SIG Online conference. In the context of ERASMUS, a Blended Intensive Programme (BIP) might be a chance to further develop such a format.