European Commission

Study on Gender Behaviour and its Impact on Education Outcomes (with a special focus on the performance of boys and young men in education)

Final Report: June 2021

Request for Services: EAC/07/2020

Education and Training

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Country abbreviations

Country abbreviations	Country
AT	Austria
BE	Belgium
BG	Bulgaria
CY	Cyprus
CZ	Czechia
DE	Germany
DK	Denmark
EE	Estonia
EL	Greece
ES	Spain
FI	Finland
FR	France
HR	Croatia
HU	Hungary
IE	Ireland
IT	Italy
LT	Lithuania
LU	Luxembourg
LV	Latvia
MT	Malta
NL	Netherlands
PL	Poland
PT	Portugal
RO	Romania
SE	Sweden
SI	Slovenia
SK	Slovakia

Other abbreviations used in the report

Abbreviations	Country
CPD	Continuing professional development
CSR	Country-specific recommendation
DG	Directorate-General
DG EAC	Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
EACEA	Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency
EC	European Commission
ECEC	Early childhood education and care
EEA	European Education Area
EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
ELET	Early leaving from education and training
ESF	European Structural Fund
ET 2020	Education and Training 2020 strategy
HEI	Higher education institution
ICILS	International Computer and Information Literacy Study
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
LGBTIQ	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, intersex and queer/questioning
NEET	Not in education, employment or training
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SEN	Special educational needs
SES	Socio-economic status
STEM	Science, technology, engineering and mathematics
TALIS	Teaching and Learning International Survey
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
VET	Vocational education and training

1.0 Introduction

Ecorys is pleased to present this Final Report for the *Study on Gender Behaviour and its Impact on Education Outcomes (with a special focus on the performance of boys and young men in education)*. This comparative study covering the 27 Member States of the European Union (EU) has been conducted during the period of negotiations between the EU and the Member States on the current EU long-term budget (also known as the Multiannual Financial Framework – MFF), running from 2021 to 2027, and on the strategic framework for cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021−2030). Addressing the issue of gender gaps in education and training is mentioned in the strategic framework as a key priority area for cooperation in the coming decade. This study, therefore, seeks to function as a discussion paper laying the foundations for future policy debate and work at EU and Member State level in this area, and encouraging policymakers and practitioners to also pay more specific attention to the challenges and wide-ranging set of societal implications related to the underperformance of boys and young men in education.

1.1   Structure of the report

The report is structured as follows:

- The current **Chapter 1** provides an **introduction** to the report, including an overview of the study aims, objectives and research questions (Section 1.2), our study methodology, which includes an overview of our overall method and the rationale for our case study country selection (Section 1.3), and key definitions, including the study scope and limitations (Section 1.4). The chapter concludes with an overview of the EU policy context on gender equality, and how our study fits within this wider policy framework at EU level (Section 1.5).

- **Chapter 2** on **measuring the gender gap** provides an overview of the main differences between boys and girls in terms of their participation in compulsory education (Section 2.1), their attainment rates in compulsory education (Section 2.2) – with a particular focus on reading, mathematics and science performance – and their educational choices (Section 2.3).

- **Chapter 3** on **explaining the gender gap** provides an overview of the factors which could explain some of the trends outlined in Chapter 2. After setting out our theoretical framework (Section 3.1), we discuss: the influence of individual attitudes and behaviour towards reading, learning and school on education outcomes (Section 3.2); the influence of family factors on school performance, which include family resources, parental support, expectations and interactions, and the role of early childhood education and care (Section 3.3); the influence of school factors, more specifically, the role played by a positive school climate, the teacher and school curricula/textbooks (Section 3.4); and the influence of

society more broadly on gender behaviour and education outcomes (Section 3.5).

- **Chapter 4** on **societal implications** discusses the various implications of the gender gap in education on society and, more specifically, the implications related to the underperformance of boys and young men in education. The chapter has been divided into two broad sections. The first section on direct implications (Section 4.1) presents evidence of direct implications of the gender gap and boys' underperformance on further education and the labour market. The second section on indirect implications (Section 4.2) presents evidence of wider societal implications, where a direct causal link with school performance is not always clearly visible. The areas covered in this section include implications on health and well-being, radicalisation and violent extremism, crime and custodial sentences, and demographic implications. The chapter concludes with a short appraisal of the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on boys' and girls' school performance (Section 4.3).

- **Chapter 5** presents the study **conclusions and recommendations**.

Each chapter presents **a variety of policy and project examples** from across all EU Member States, which seek to address some of the key issues underlying the gender gap in compulsory education and its societal implications. These are meant as inspiration and to illustrate different types of approaches.

The annexes include:

- **Annex I**: The tools informing our overall research design, including: our study research questions (Section 6.1.1) and intervention logic for tackling the underperformance of boys and young men in education (Section 6.1.2).

- **Annex II**: Statistics by gender for: the Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA, (2012−2018); the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, PIRLS, (2011 and 2016); and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, TIMSS, (2015 and 2019).

- **Annex III**: Case study reports for eight countries – Bulgaria (Section 6.3.1), Czechia (Section 6.3.2), Finland (Section 6.3.3), Germany (Section 6.3.4), Ireland (Section 6.3.5), Luxembourg (Section 6.3.6), Portugal (Section 6.3.7) and Sweden (Section 6.3.8) – and our approach for the selection of case study countries (Section 6.3.9).

1.2 Aims, objectives and research questions

The aim of this study was to provide insight into why boys and young men are increasingly falling behind in education and the consequences that this lack of educational success has on society. The study also sought to highlight initiatives that may have the potential to prevent this trend from escalating further. The specific requirements of the study, as set out in the tender specifications (p.2) were:

1. to conduct a **mapping of countries based on desk research covering all 27 EU Member States** to see the impact of gender on learning outcomes in primary and secondary education;

2. to carry out a more **in-depth analysis using primary research in Member States representing different geographical areas of the EU**;

3. to conduct an **analysis of the findings** (e.g. "*what are the current initiatives*?") in view of **offering policy recommendations** (e.g. "*which measures should Member States put into place to prevent further escalation of the challenge*?").

The study was carried out by a team from Ecorys, led by François Staring, Vicki Donlevy and Laurie Day. The team has worked closely throughout the study with three external expert advisors: Prof Andrew Martin (Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia), Dr Margriet van Hek (Assistant Professor of Sociology at Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands) and Klas Hyllander (Independent Consultant). It has also drawn on the expertise of 27 country experts who conducted the EU-wide desk research and case studies.

1.2.1 Specific objectives of the study

To meet the overarching study aims and specific requirements, the **specific objectives for this study** were further refined by Ecorys and DG EAC as follows:

- **Objective 1**: To carry out a mapping of countries, based on desk research (secondary data collection) covering 27 Member States in order to assess the impact of gender on learning outcomes in primary and secondary education.

- **Objective 2**: To carry out a literature review of existing analysis and good practices in selected Member States, examining measures to address gender stereotypes and change trends relating to boys' underperformance in education.

- **Objective 3**: To carry out primary research in selected Member States, based on interviews.

- **Objective 4:** To seek to provide insight into the societal implications of boys' underperformance in education, notably: educational implications, labour market implications, implications for health and well-being, as well as why more boys and men with little or no education support extremist movements (exploring the hypothesis that gender stereotypes, hampering the engagement of boys and young men in learning, contribute to this phenomenon).

- **Objective 5**: To summarise and assess the information gained in the objectives set out above in a report that can contribute to the research basis in this area (i.e., "*debunking the myths*" and highlighting the complexity of the issue) and serve as a starting point for guidance to education institutions.

1.2.2   Study research questions

Below we set out the four main research questions for the study, which are based on the specific objectives set out above. Our analytical framework, which expands on these four main research questions and has guided all our research activities, can be found in Annex I. Based on these research questions, we also developed an intervention logic model for tackling the underperformance of boys and young men in education, which can also be found in Annex I.

The four overarching research questions (RQ) for our study are:

- **RQ 1**: What is the impact of gender on **learning outcomes** in primary and secondary education in EU Member States?

  o   What is the impact of gender on educational participation rates?

  o   What is the impact of gender on educational attainment in reading, mathematics, science and other subjects?

  o   What is the impact of gender on educational choices?

- **RQ 2**: Which factors contribute to the **challenges** faced by boys and young men, which could explain why they are increasingly falling behind in education?

  o   Individual factors (e.g. reading enjoyment, extracurricular activities, etc.)

  o   Family-level factors (e.g. socio-economic and/or migrant background, etc.)

  o   School-level factors (e.g. school climate, bullying, peer pressure, etc.)

  o   System-level factors (e.g. gender stereotypes around masculinity, etc.)

- **RQ 3**: What are the **societal implications** of the underperformance of boys in education?

  o   What is the impact on men's education outcomes? (e.g. participation in lifelong learning and tertiary education, etc.)

  o   What is the impact on men's labour market participation? (e.g. careers, income, employment rates, etc.)

  o   What is the impact on men's health and well-being? (e.g. physical and mental well-being, depression rates, substance abuse, etc.)

  o   What are the wider societal implications of men's underperformance in education? (e.g. demographic implications, crime levels, membership of extremist political movements, misogyny and violence, etc.)

- **RQ 4**: Which **policy measures and initiatives** can prevent the trend of boys and young men underperforming in education from escalating further?

  o   Initiatives to better engage boys and young men in education

  o   Initiatives to prevent boys and young men from dropping out of education

1.3 Research methodology

This section provides a brief overview of the key components of our methodology, which has been designed to gather and analyse evidence in relation to the four main research questions outlined above, closely following the tender specifications.

Our research activities were based on a mixed methods design, structured around four main work packages (WPs). The activities carried out under each WP are described below:

- **WP 1 – Inception and scoping research (September–October 2020)**: This WP involved refining and further developing the methodology and overarching analytical framework for the study. This was done by conducting EU-level scoping interviews as well as an initial review of key literature and statistical datasets (mainly PISA) on the gender gap in education. All statistical datasets reviewed as part of our research are included in full in Annex II.

- **WP 2 – Desk research (November 2020–January 2021)**: This WP focused on desk research across all 27 EU Member States on the gender gap in compulsory education, the reasons which could potentially explain why boys are underperforming in education, and the societal implications of the underperformance of boys in education.

- **WP 3 – Case studies (February–March 2021)**: The case studies were conducted via primary research (i.e. interviews) in eight selected EU Member States (Bulgaria, Czechia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal and Sweden), representing a variety of education systems and challenges in relation to gender equality in education. The research focused on the key trends and issues underpinning boys' and girls' performance in compulsory education, the societal implications, as well as policy attention and actions around these issues. The eight case studies, including our case study selection approach, are included in full in Annex III of this report.

- **WP 4 – Final analysis and reporting (April–June 2021)**: The main objective of this task was to conduct a transversal analysis of the findings collected through the EU-27 desk research (WP 2) and case studies (WP 3) to develop evidence-based conclusions and policy recommendations. These are presented in Chapter 5 of this report and are also based on the findings from a validation workshop organised with our three high-level expert advisors for this study.

1.4 Key definitions, scope and study limitations

In this section, we set out the scope of the study, define key concepts used throughout this study, and present some of the study's key limitations.

1.4.1   Scope of the study

In terms of **geographical coverage**, this study covers all 27 EU Member States, but historically also EU-28 (especially in relation to the quantitative data presented in this report). For our presentation and analysis of international comparative datasets (e.g. PISA or Eurostat) we use the most recent available data until 2019. The scope of the analysis refers only to the current 27 Member States of the EU, as requested in the tender specifications. However, the study utilises an EU-28 average, where available (an average estimated from 28 countries of the EU including the UK), when comparing indicators across EU countries. The EU-28 average was deemed as the most appropriate comparative measure for the timeframe of this study, as this was the benchmark during the period 2013−2020 (i.e. countries were using this average to set national targets and measure their own progress in an international comparative perspective). One of the key data sources used in this analysis is the Eurostat database, which takes the same approach. Eurostat reports EU-28 averages between 2013 and 2020, and EU-27 averages either before 2013 (before Croatia joined the EU) or after 2020 (after the UK left the EU). Hence, the study utilises EU-28 averages, where available, but reports an estimated average across the EU-27 whenever this is not possible (for example, when analysing survey data which does not include an EU average).

In terms of **education levels**, the main focus of the study (as per the tender specifications) is primary and secondary education (i.e. International Standard Classification of Education − ISCED − levels 1−3). However, since compulsory education also covers ISCED level 0 in an increasing number of EU countries and, given the importance of tackling gender stereotyping in early childhood education and care (ECEC) to address the gender gap in subsequent levels of education, ECEC is also covered in several parts of our study. The gender gap in higher education (ISCED levels 5−8) is covered in Chapter 4, as part of our wider discussion of the implications of the underperformance of boys and young men on society.

1.4.2   Key definitions and limitations

We define below some of the key concepts used throughout the study to ensure full transparency regarding the intended meanings and how we have applied them.

- **Defining 'gender', 'sex' and 'gender behaviour'**: An important underlying concept for this study is the difference between 'gender' and 'sex'. In general terms, 'sex' is used to refer to biological differences between males and females (e.g. genetic differences and genitalia). 'Gender' is a more difficult concept to define and refers to an array of socially constructed roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, relative power and influence that society ascribes to the two sexes (male and female) on a differential basis.[1] 'Gender behaviour' is defined in the SAGE Encyclopaedia of Psychology as *"a fundamental expression of gender identity and gender*

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[1] See http://www.genderandhealth.ca/en/modules/introduction/introduction-genderasadeterminantofhealth-Shayna-03.jsp

socialisation that occurs developmentally for an individual throughout the life span". It encompasses *"ways in which an individual acts in accordance with their identified male or female gender"*.[2]

- **Defining 'performance'**: Chapter 2 of this study provides an overview of the gender gap in school education, examining performance from three main angles:

  o First, school performance is analysed from the angle of **participation rates** (Section 2.1): our examination of participation covers not only enrolment rates and school attendance, but also associated issues, such as absenteeism levels, participation, motivation or engagement with classroom activities, and levels of early leaving from education and training (ELET).

  o Next, school performance is analysed from the angle of **attainment rates in various school subjects** (Section 2.2): 'attainment rates' is used to refer to measurable grades or scores obtained by pupils in different school subjects (e.g. reading, mathematics, science and other subjects), as well as their level of achievement in other subjects or competence areas, such as arts, sport, digital skills, etc.

  o Finally, school performance is analysed from the angle of **educational choices** (Section 2.3): educational choices refer to the subjects most often chosen by boys and girls in primary and secondary education, as well as the types of activities in which boys and girls engage both at, and outside, school.

As with any research study, the report is subject to specific data limitations and caveats, which should be considered when interpreting the findings. These include:

- **Limitations related to focusing on 'boys' and 'girls' only**: The focus in this report is on performance differences between boys and girls in school education. However, as mentioned above, 'gender' is a very fluid concept which is very hard to define and in constant interaction with context and sex. The binary lens taken in this study, therefore, only takes into account the challenges facing non-binary sub-groups in a limited way. Wherever relevant, however, the study does refer to specific issues facing the LGBTIQ community,[3] but this is clearly a vital area for further research, as we go on to identify within the conclusions chapter.

- **Limitations around assessing the effectiveness of examples of policy and practice**: Throughout the report, several policies, practices, and projects

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[2] Srivastava, D. Gendered behaviour. In Nadal, K. L. *The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Psychology and Gender.* Available at: https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-psychology-and-gender/i8760.xml#:~:text=Gendered%20behavior%20are%20ways%20in,and%20develops%20views%20defining%20gender.
[3] For definitions of LGBTIQ, see ILGA's website: https://ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/ilgaeurope_glossary_final_170714_www.pdf

are presented which seek to address various aspects of boys' underperformance in school education or to tackle the gender gap in education more broadly. The scope of the study, as set out in the tender specifications, does not, however, comprise an assessment of the effectiveness of these measures. Given the limited availability of evaluative evidence on the impact of these measures and the lack of a common monitoring framework at EU level, the study cannot definitively state 'what works' to tackle the gender gap in education. It does, nonetheless, provide clear pointers for policy action by analysing the causes of boys' underperformance and indicating examples of promising practice.

- **Limitations around factors influencing boys' underperformance**: It should be noted that Chapter 3 of this report, which presents various factors which could potentially explain the gender gap in primary and secondary education, does not seek to be exhaustive. In fact, as is discussed in the conclusions and recommendations in Chapter 5, there are still several areas on which more research is needed, in particular: the effect of peer culture on school performance for boys and girls; the challenge of 'measuring' masculinity norms; or the complex interaction between biology and social factors (which were beyond the scope of this study).

- **Limitations around the societal implications of boys' underperformance**: Caution is needed in Chapter 4 around the potential societal implications of the underperformance of boys in primary and secondary education. Only in some very distinct cases (e.g. further education or labour market outcomes), a direct causal link with performance in school education can be established. In many other cases, evidence is insufficient as to whether factors such as poverty or disadvantage are factors *contributing* to underperformance, or *consequences* of underperformance. The complex relationship between school performance and various societal implications should be seen as cyclical rather than linear.

- **The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic**: It should be noted that this study was conducted in the middle of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, which made the collection of primary data as part of the case studies particularly challenging. For education ministries especially, the priority over the past year has been on finding solutions to ensuring access to education for all and tackling growing inequalities, which made it particularly challenging to engage this group of stakeholders in the interview programme. In addition to this, the findings presented in this report will undoubtedly be skewed by the differential emerging impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on boys and girls. Although this was beyond the scope of this study, a short appraisal of the impact of the pandemic on boys' and girls' education outcomes has been included in Section 4.3, but more research in this area will be needed.

1.5   EU policy context on gender equality

Our overall study is also rooted in a sound understanding of the broader context of Europe's education sector, the challenges it faces, and the broader developments with regards to gender equality at EU level. Gender equality is a core value of the EU. It is enshrined in the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU in Article 8, which states that *"in all its activities, the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality, between men and women".*[4] The EU has made significant progress in achieving this goal – from the first equal treatment directives in the seventies, to recent efforts to integrate the gender perspective into all policies (gender mainstreaming). Gender equality is also the second principle of The European Pillar of Social Rights.[5] Nevertheless, a gender-equal Europe is still not a reality. In 2020, the 27 Member States analysed as part of this study on average scored 64.5 out of 100 in the EU Gender Equality Index,[6] which remains far from a gender equal score of 100. In fact, **the EU is at least 60 years away from achieving gender equality if progress continues at the current pace**. This area, thus, continues to be a focus of EU policy.

1.5.1   Key recent developments

The European Commission now has – for the first time – a dedicated Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli, under whom the **Gender Equality Strategy 2020−2025** was adopted in March 2020.[7] The Strategy aims to combat gender-based violence, challenge gender stereotypes, boost women's economic empowerment and ensure equal opportunities in the labour market. The Commission has already launched actions to implement the Strategy, including a public consultation on pay transparency launched in March 2020.[8]

EU work on gender equality in education over the past decade has been guided by the **Education and Training 2020 strategic framework (ET 2020)** and by the concept of inclusive education.[9] Improving education outcomes and reducing early leaving from education and training have been two priorities of ET 2020. These are two areas where gender gaps are clearly present, with boys across the EU being more likely to leave school early and underperform at school (as will be discussed in Chapter 2). A series of EU initiatives over the past decade have been instrumental in helping the EU achieve its targets in these areas:

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[4] Article 8, Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12012E%2FTXT
[5] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en
[6] European Institute for Gender Equality (2020), Gender Equality Index. Available at: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020
[7] European Commission (2020), Communication on A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2020%3A152%3AFIN
[8] https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12098-Strengthening-the-principle-of-equal-pay-between-men-and-women-through-pay-transparency/public-consultation
[9] Inclusive education is understood as *"a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion from education and from within education".* See: http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Policy_Dialogue/48th_ICE/Press_Kit/Interview_Clementina_Eng13Nov.pdf

- the 2011 **Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving** calls on Member States to put in place national frameworks for comprehensive policies to reduce early school leaving (including prevention, intervention and compensation policies);[10]

- the 2015 **Council conclusions on reducing early school leaving and promoting success in school** recognise the importance of gender-related factors in early school leaving;[11]

- the 2017 **Commission Communication on school development and excellent teaching for a great start in life** highlights the gender gaps in educational attainments and the role that gender stereotypes play in these, setting out EU action to assist Member States in developing more inclusive schools and excellent teaching and learning;[12]

- most recently, the **Council Recommendation on high-quality early childhood education and care systems** of May 2019 has reaffirmed the importance of providing inclusive early childhood education and care at all levels, highlighting the positive societal impacts of ECEC being available to all children.[13]

1.5.2   Looking ahead

Beyond 2020, addressing gender inequalities in all aspects of education will remain a priority for the EU. This is even more important today, given the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on education and training systems in Europe, exposing existing inequalities and structural barriers to learning and skills development. The European Commission's 2020 **Communication on achieving the European Education Area (EEA) by 2025** articulates the EU's vision for education across six key dimensions, including inclusion and gender equality, as seen in Figure 1-1.

Under the priority dedicated to inclusion and gender, the Commission has set out the following areas of importance for European education and training systems:

- Developing a better **gender sensitivity**[14] in education processes and institutions to provide the basis for boys and girls to become adults respecting fully their own identity and that of their peers.

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[10] Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:32011H0701(01)
[11] Available at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52015XG1215(03)&from=EN
[12] Available at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2017%3A248%3AFIN[13] Available at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CONSIL%3AST_9014_2019_INIT&from=EN
[13] Available at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CONSIL%3AST_9014_2019_INIT&from=EN
[14] According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, gender sensitive policies and programmes are those that take into account the particularities pertaining to the lives of both women and men, while aiming to eliminate inequalities and promote gender equality, including an equal distribution of resources, therefore addressing and taking into account the gender dimension.

- Challenging and dissolving **gender stereotypes**, especially those that constrain the choices of boys and girls for their field of study, but also all those that can be conveyed in education and training practices and learning materials. Traditionally male- or female-dominated professions are to be further opened-up to persons of the under-represented sex.

- Working towards a **gender balance in leadership** positions, including in higher education institutions.

Figure 1-1   Six constituent dimensions of the EEA vision
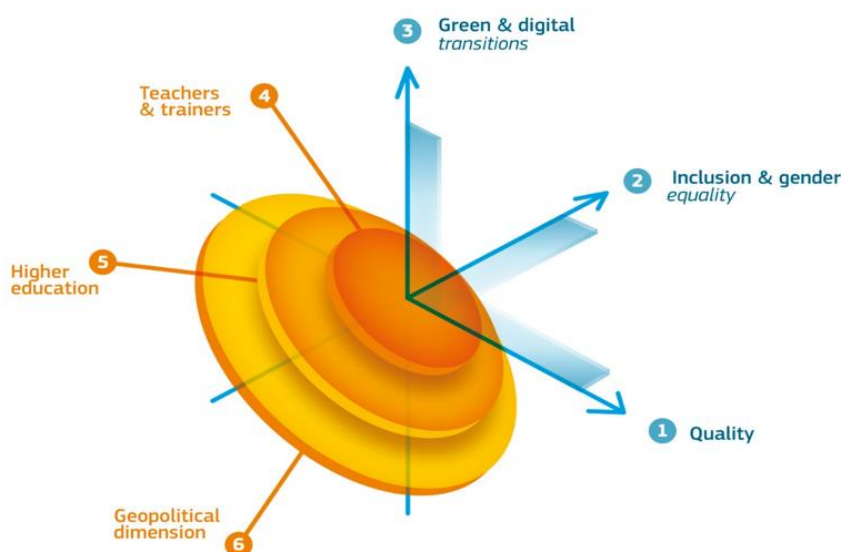
Source: Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025, COM(2020) 625 final

Building on the priorities included in the EEA Communication, on 26 February 2021 the EU presented a **Council Resolution on a strategic framework for cooperation in education and training towards the European Education area and beyond (2021−2030),**[15] replacing the ET 2020 Strategic Framework. The framework includes five strategic priorities which will guide EU cooperation in the field of education and training for the next decade.[16] Under the first strategic priority 'Improving quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training', the EU underlines the importance of *"addressing the issue of gender gaps in education and training"*. More specifically, it says it will support EU-level cooperation on addressing: *"unequal opportunities for girls and boys, women and men, by promoting more gender-*

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[15] Council of the EU (2021/C 66/01). *Council Resolution on a strategic framework for cooperation on in education and training towards the European Education area and beyond (2021-2030)*. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2021.066.01.0001.01.ENG

[16] The five strategic priorities are: Strategic priority 1: Improving quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training; Strategic priority 2: Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality for all; Strategic priority 3: Enhancing competences and motivation in the education profession; Strategic priority 4: Reinforcing European higher education; and Strategic priority 5: Supporting the green and digital transitions in and through education and training.

balanced educational choices, challenging and dissolving gender stereotypes in education and educational careers, especially in STEAM fields of study, addressing issues such as boys' underachievement, bullying and sexual harassment, and developing a better gender sensitivity in education and training processes and institutions".[17]

The Council Resolution also states that the EU will support data collection and innovation around inclusion and gender equality in education, and that it will seek to reduce gender imbalance at all levels and types of education and training-related professions.

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[17] Council of the EU (2021/C 66/01). *Council Resolution on a strategic framework for cooperation on in education and training towards the European Education area and beyond (2021-2030)*. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_.2021.066.01.0001.01.ENG

2.0 Measuring the gender gap

This chapter outlines the differences between the performance of boys and girls in compulsory education. It firstly looks at participation rates in early childhood education and care and compulsory education. It then explores attainment in mathematics, reading, science and other subjects across ISCED levels 1−3, as well as differences between boys and girls in terms of their educational choices. The raw statistical data from PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS underpinning the quantitative analysis in this section is included in Annex II (Section 6.2).

2.1   Participation rates in compulsory education

Overview of key findings

This section explores participation rates of boys and girls in early childhood education and care and compulsory education. Some key findings are outlined below.

- **No differences were identified regarding the participation rate of boys and girls in ECEC across the EU**, which was at 96% for both in 2019. This reflects that younger children are more dependent on decisions taken by parents and carers about their enrolment and participation in education. Important differences were found in terms of lower participation rates among children from a low socio-economic status (SES), migrant and Roma background as well as those living in rural areas.

- **By compulsory education stage, gender differences are established, with boys' participation falling behind that of girls**. Overall, 11.8% of males aged 18 to 24 were early leavers from education and training in 2019 in the EU, compared to 8.4% of girls.[18] Boys, on average, are also more likely to be truant from school and repeat a grade compared to girls.[19] This is supported by recent statistics from across different Member States which continue to show boys to be more likely to be excluded or absent from school or vocational training. While not comparable, reports from several Member States (Belgium, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) show that boys continue to be more likely than girls to repeat a year of education.

- While making ECEC more accessible, reducing ELET, and tackling truancy and exclusion are a priority for Member States, **there is a lack of focus on boys within these initiatives or policies.** Where specific target groups are mentioned, these predominantly focus on marginalised groups rather than

[18] Eurostat (2020). *Early leavers from education and training by sex and labour status*. Available at: http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat_lfse_14&lang=en
[19] OECD (2015). *The ABC of Gender Equality in Education. Aptitude, Behaviour, Confidence*. PISA, OECD publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9789264229945-en.pdf?expires=1610634769&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=66B1763A84CB2A7C21B3829FBC7B8E3B

tackling gender differences.

2.1.1 Participation rates for boys in early childhood education and care

The desk research shows that **ECEC participation rates are consistently high across the EU** with no obvious gender differences. According to Eurostat data, for example, the average ECEC participation rate across the EU stood at 96% in 2019.[20] There are no consistent trends regarding girls or boys being more or less likely to attend ECEC.[21] In some Member States, such as Germany, Greece, Latvia, the Netherlands and Spain, girls were slightly more likely to attend than boys. In others, such as Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, Hungary, Italy and Poland, marginally more boys attended pre-school than girls. A possible explanation for this could be that boys are more prone to disruptive behaviour – as shown in Section 3.2 – making it more difficult for parents to manage them, and parents wanting to send boys to ECEC sooner than girls. As an exception to these trends, in **Bulgaria** only 82% of 4-7-year-old boys attended ECEC compared to 91.4% of girls. Also of interest is data from the **Netherlands**, where ECEC participation fell from 99% in 2009 to 96.9% in 2018, mainly caused by a decrease in the participation of boys.

The high participation rate generally masks **underlying issues of access to quality ECEC provision for rural families**. National data and reports demonstrate this well. Belgium,[22] France,[23] Lithuania,[24] Poland,[25] Romania[26] and Slovakia[27] report significant regional differences in participation rates. For instance, **Slovakia** reported that the participation rate of 5-year-olds was 70% in the eastern Košice Region, compared to over 90% in western regions.[28] Similarly, in **Poland**, participation in ECEC in the less wealthy areas of the country was lower than participation in the wealthier areas.[29]

Children from low SES background also struggle to access ECEC where access is not funded by the state. In **Ireland**, where *"childcare costs are the highest in the EU"*, 2017 data demonstrates that *"the net cost for a lone mother with two children*

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[20] Eurostat 2020, indicator: Pupils from age 4 to the starting age of compulsory education at primary level, by sex - as % of the population of the corresponding age group.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Bay, S. (2010). La fréquentation de l'école maternelle francophone en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, *Centre d'expertise et de ressource pour l'enfance*, p.58. Available at : http://www.cere-asbl.be/IMG/pdf/frequentation_ecmatfr_rbc_sb_dec2010.pdf
[23] For more information, please visit: https://www.gouvernement.fr/les-actions-du-gouvernement/education-nationale-et-jeunesse/pourquoi-rendre-l-ecole-obligatoire-des
[24] For more information, please visit: https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize#/
[25] Statistics Poland & Statistical Office in Gdańsk (2019). *Education in the 2018/2019 school year*. Available at: https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/edukacja/edukacja/oswiata-i-wychowanie-w-roku-szkolnym-20182019,1,14.html
[26] World Bank (2014). *Diagnostics and Policy Advice for Supporting Roma Inclusion in Romania*. English online version, Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/eca/romania/OutputEN.pdf
[27] Varsik (2020). *Držím ti miesto*. Available at: https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/15248.pdf
[28] Varsik, *op. cit.*
[29] Statistics Poland & Statistical Office in Gdańsk (2019). *Education in the 2018/2019 school year*, Available at: https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/edukacja/edukacja/oswiata-i-wychowanie-w-roku-szkolnym-20182019,1,14.html

and low earnings amounts to 42% of her disposable income".[30] In **Spain**, while 62.5% of affluent families can afford day-care centres, this is only the case for 26.3% of those from a low SES background.[31] A gap of 15.7% between those from high and low SES backgrounds also exists in **Lithuania** in terms of access to ECEC.[32] Research points to a similar picture in **Cyprus**,[33] with expensive private day care and informal care impacting children from lower-income families to access quality provision.

Children from migrant or Roma families are also less likely to attend ECEC in many Member States. In **Bulgaria**, only 45% of Roma children aged 3−6 attended kindergarten (with Roma girls being 8% less likely than Roma boys to attend ECEC). Similarly, a 2011 study in **Romania** revealed that 32% of Roma children participate in ECEC compared to 77% of their non-Roma peers.[34] In **Sweden**, where only 6% of 3-5-year-olds do not attend ECEC, 20% of these children are foreign born.

Initiatives aimed at increasing ECEC participation rates for boys

Given the small differences between boys and girls in terms of ECEC participation, **there are very few ECEC initiatives targeted at boys**. Exceptions exist in some Member States, although these initiatives do not directly aim to increase participation rates, but rather aim to tackle gender disparities in the ECEC profession. In **Luxembourg**, for instance, the MADAK[35] project aims to increase the number of men teaching in ECEC settings, while the RockMEGA[36] initiative aims to reduce gender stereotyping across the ECEC curriculum. Our case study for **Czechia** shows that the Strategy for Equality of Men and Women also focuses on the teaching profession, with its second strategic goal aiming to address the unbalanced representation of teachers at all levels of the education system (see Annex III, Section 6.3.2).

Most ECEC initiatives are targeted at increasing the participation of groups at risk of social exclusion. This includes Member States focusing on addressing the Council Recommendation on high-quality early childhood education and care systems[37] and offering *"high-quality, accessible, affordable and inclusive"* ECEC, in particular to *"achieve educational equity for children in a disadvantaged situation"*.[38] This consists

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[30] European Commission SWD (2019). *Country Report Ireland 2019 Including an In-Depth Review on the prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances*. Available at: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/bc38f6d5-3b6b-11e9-8d04-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

[31] Save the Children (2019). *Where it all Begins: Early childhood education for equal opportunities*. Available at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/where-it-all-begins-early-childhood-education-equal-opportunities

[32] Education and Training Monitor (2019). *Lithuania*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/et-monitor-report-2019-lithuania_en.pdf

[33] Rentzou, Konstantina (2018). Family support and early childhood education and care in Cyprus: existing policies and challenges. *Early Child Development and Care, 188(5),* 571-583. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1433172

[34] World Bank (2014). *Diagnostics And Policy Advice For Supporting Roma Inclusion In Romania.* English online version, Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/eca/romania/OutputEN.pdf

[35] See https://madak.lu/

[36] See https://www.rockmega.lu/lu/rockmega-lu-2/

[37] European Commission (2019). *Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems*, Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/council-recommendation-on-high-quality-early-childhood-education-and-care-systems_en

[38] European Commission (2019). *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems*, Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-

of introducing or extending provision for compulsory childcare and offering support to families from low SES backgrounds (including targeted or universal free provision or vouchers).[39] There is, nonetheless, a complex link between boys' underachievement and participation rates for marginalised families in ECEC which requires further exploration. **Germany** has acknowledged this link in its *Gender Equality Policy for Boys and Men*[40] which infers that boys benefit slightly more than girls by attending day-care centres; subsequent issues of access for boys from migrant, low-skilled and low SES households make boys' underachievement and participation barriers for marginalised groups an interconnected issue. Research is, however, lacking at this level.

2.1.2   Participation rates for boys in compulsory education

Beyond ECEC, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Eurostat data show that **boys are more likely than girls to be early leavers from education and training (ELET)**. According to 2008 and 2012 PISA data, compared to girls, boys across OECD countries were more likely to leave education/training early, were more likely to arrive late or miss school, and were more likely to repeat a grade.[41] Eurostat data shows that 11.8% of males aged 18 to 24 left education/training early in 2019 compared to 8.4% of girls (a gap of 3.4 percentage points).[42] Boys are more likely than girls to leave education/training early in nearly all Member States (with the exception of Croatia, Czechia and Romania). Spain has the largest gap, with boys being 8.4 percentage points (pp) more likely to be early leavers from education/training than girls. The Netherlands (4 pp), Belgium (4.3 pp), Denmark (4.5 pp), Estonia (5.8 pp) and Portugal (6.3 pp) also reported gaps wider than 4 pp. These trends are also supported by national statistics. In **Belgium (Flanders)**, for example, the *2020 Flemish School Leavers Overview Report* (*schoolverlatersrapport*) shows boys to be twice as likely as girls to leave education early (in 2018/2019, 64% of early leavers from education/training were male).[43]

Views from national experts interviewed as part of the case studies suggest **several interconnected reasons for the higher ELET rates of boys**. The **German** case study, for example, suggests that gender stereotypes play a part (see Annex III,

content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.C_.2019.189.01.0004.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AC%3A2019%3A189%3ATO
C

[39] European Commission (2020). *Country Report Greece 2020. 2020 European Semester: Assessment of progress on structural reforms, prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances, and results of in-depth reviews under Regulation (EU) No 1176/2011.* Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1584543810241&uri=CELEX%3A52020SC0507;
Diario da Republica (2015), Lei no 65/2015 de 3 de Julho, Avaliable at:
https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/Legislacao/lei_65_2015_3_julho.pdf

[40] MBFSFJ. *Gleichstellungspolitik für Jungen und Männer in Deutschland*. Available at:
https://www.bmfsfj.de/blob/160754/f4f3a6b03c6e7451f56ab68ddea28ff8/gleichstellungspolitik-fuer-jungen-und-maenner-in-deutschland-langfassung-data.pdf

[41] OECD (2015). The ABC of Gender Equality in Education. *Aptitude, Behaviour, Confidence*. PISA, OECD publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9789264229945-en.pdf?expires=1610634769&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=66B1763A84CB2A7C21B3829FBC7B8E3B

[42] Eurostat (2020). *Early leavers from education and training by sex and labour status*. Available at:
http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat_lfse_14&lang=en

[43] VBAD (2020). *Schoolverlatersrapport*. Available at:
https://www.vdab.be/sites/web/files/doc/schoolverlaters/schoolverlatersrapport2020.pdf

Section 6.3.4). Boys feel a stronger wish to be independent and to earn their own money than girls, due to the traditional role model of 'the man as the breadwinner of the family'. This is exacerbated by the absence of positive male role models for boys, or more specifically, of more diverse images of masculinity, at school, in leisure activities and in the media. According to Eccles' expectation value theory, this has an impact on school engagement, as gender stereotypes held by parents and peers influence children's own beliefs about their abilities and behaviours, which, in turn, are linked to children's school success.[44] In the **Luxembourgish** case study, interviewed experts point out that school alienation – which is felt more strongly by boys than girls – may be a factor for higher male ELET rates in the country (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6). The **Finnish** case study suggests that the school environment, school culture and, moreover, the pedagogy, teaching methods and learning materials used are more targeted at girls, with experts holding the view that "*boys need more activity-oriented approaches to learning*", which are less commonly used by teachers (see Annex III, Section 6.3.3).

Nevertheless, trends over time demonstrate that **the gender gap in ELET between boys and girls is narrowing** in the majority of Member States.[45] As an average across the EU, the ELET rate for boys has dropped by 4 percentage points (pp) since 2010. When comparing 2010 and 2019 data, 21 Member States reported a drop in ELET rates among boys, with Greece, Ireland, Malta, Portugal and Spain reporting the most significant drops. On the other hand, Luxembourg (0.9 pp difference), Austria (1.1 pp difference), Hungary (1.2 pp difference), Czechia (1.7 pp difference), Bulgaria (2.1 pp difference) and Slovakia (4.2 pp difference) reported higher ELET rates for boys in 2019 compared to 2010.

Data from several countries shows **boys to have higher exclusion and absenteeism rates than girls**. In the **Netherlands**, boys are three times more likely than girls to be excluded from school and have high levels of absenteeism compared to girls.[46] Similarly, in **Malta**, boys recorded higher absentee rates than girls in 2017/2018.[47] In **Latvia**, absenteeism is particularly common among older boys and those in their first year of vocational education and training (VET).[48] In contrast, **Denmark** reported no difference between genders in terms of absenteeism (both boys and girls at 5.7%) in 2019/2020.[49]

Boys are also more likely than girls to repeat a year of education. As will be discussed in Section 2.2, boys are behind girls by several months in different subjects (e.g. they are behind girls on average by 6 months in reading), and grade repetition only contributes to increasing this gender gap. During the academic year 2019/2020,

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[44] Eccles, J. S., & Wigfield, A. (2002). Motivational beliefs, values, and goals. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *53*, 109–132.

[45] Eurostat (2020). *Early leavers from education and training by sex and labour status*. Available at: http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=edat_lfse_14&lang=en

[46] Maltese statistics available at: https://nso.gov.mt/en/nso/Media/Salient-Points-of-Publications/Pages/2020/Regional-Statistics-MALTA-2020-Edition.aspx

[47] Maltese statistics available at: https://nso.gov.mt/en/nso/Media/Salient-Points-of-Publications/Pages/2020/Regional-Statistics-MALTA-2020-Edition.aspx

[48] IKVD (2020). Gada publiskie pārskati. *2019 gada publiskais pārskats*. Avialable at: https://ikvd.gov.lv/publikacijas/gada-publiskie-parskati/

[49] Børne.og undervisningsministeriet (2020). Uddannelsesstatistik. *Elevfravær – Skole, Skoletrin.* Available at: https://uddannelsesstatistik.dk/Pages/Reports/1604.aspx

1,372 boys repeated a year in **Lithuania** compared to only 746 girls.[50] Similarly, in **Romania**, 3.5% of boys repeated a grade compared to 2.3% of girls.[51] In **Slovenia**, 62% of those that repeated a grade in the school year 2019/2020 were boys.[52] The same trend is also apparent in **Slovakia**, with 57% of grade repetitions undertaken by boys,[53] and in **Belgium** where 6.6% of boys (14.8% in Wallonia) repeated upper secondary education compared to only 3.6% of girls (10.4% in Wallonia).[54] National data from **Luxembourg** also shows that 52.3% of boys in their first 'cycle' of primary education (age 6−7) repeated a grade, rising to 61.5% in the third 'cycle' (age 10−11), a greater number compared to girls.[55]

Regional characteristics, ethnicity, migrant status, and socio-economic factors are linked to an increased likelihood of ELET and absenteeism. Eurostat data from 2019 demonstrates that 24.3% of foreign-born males and 19.9% of females aged between 18 and 24 were ELETs.[56] In **Belgium (Flanders)**, being a boy and coming from a migrant background are recognised as the two main indicators of absenteeism.[57] Examples from different Member States also demonstrate significant regional variations in ELET rates. In **Estonia**, for instance, there is a higher proportion of ELET from rural than urban areas.[58] Similarly, young people living in the rural south of **Portugal** are more likely to repeat a year than children living in the north and centre of the country.[59]

Pupils from low SES backgrounds are significantly more at risk of ELET. OECD data shows that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds face a much greater ELET risk, with ELET rates linked to educational attainment of parents: 37% of young people whose parents do not have upper secondary education also left school without achieving this qualification, compared to only 6% of those with a parent who had obtained tertiary education.[60]

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[50] Statistikos departamentas. Bendrojo ugdymo mokyklų mokiniai palikti kartoti programos kursą. Available at: https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize#/

[51] Romanian National Institute of Statistics. Available at: https://insse.ro/cms/ro/tags/sistemul-educational-romania

[52] Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia. Available at https://pxweb.stat.si/SiStatData/pxweb/sl/Data/-/0972113S.px/table/tableViewLayout2/

[53] CVTI (2019). *Štatistická ročenka - základné školy 2019/2020*. Available at: https://www.cvtisr.sk/cvti-sr-vedecka-kniznica/informacie-o-skolstve/statistiky/statisticka-rocenka-publikacia/statisticka-rocenka-zakladne-skoly.html?page_id=9601

[54] For more information please see: https://statistiques.cfwb.be/enseignement/fondamental-et-secondaire/redoublants/

[55] Ministere de l'Education nationale (2016). *Le Décrochage Scolaire*. Available at: https://men.public.lu/content/dam/men/catalogue-publications/statistiques-etudes/statistiques-globales/decrochage-15-16-fr.pdf

[56] See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Early_leavers_from_education_and_training

[57] Vlaanderen (2020). *Truancy and absenteeism from school.* Available at: https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/nl/samen-tegen-schooluitval/leerplicht-en-spijbelen/spijbelen-en-schoolverzuim

[58] Juurak, R. (2019). *Kas muudame keskhariduse kohustuslikuks? (Shall upper secondary education be mandatory?)* In: Õpetajate Leht (Education Portal). Available at: https://opleht.ee/2019/11/kas-muudame-keskhariduse-kohustuslikuks/

[59] Observatorio das Desigauldades. Available at: https://www.observatorio-das-desigualdades.com/2019/11/15/taxa-de-retencao-e-desistencia/

[60] OECD. (2012). *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools*. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/education/school/50293148.pdf

Initiatives aimed at increasing the participation rates of boys

Many Member States see tackling ELET as a priority and have strategies and initiatives aimed at preventing, intervening and compensating early school leaving. Despite a few notable exceptions (see Box 2-1 below), the desk research suggests that **initiatives to prevent ELET targeted specifically at boys are uncommon** among Member States. Instead, tackling low participation and underachievement among underperforming students in general, and ensuring inclusive education for all, is the main driving force for initiatives to prevent ELET. Experts interviewed for the **Luxembourgish** case study, highlighted that supporting students with a migrant or disadvantaged socio-economic background was a much more pressing challenge to address than gender disparities in ELET (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6). In **Germany**, a similar view emerged, with experts holding the view that combating social disadvantages in education for all, and focusing on inclusive teaching and a student-centred pedagogy are more important policy initiatives than gender-focused approaches, as these benefit both boys and girls, as well as the wider society as a whole (see Annex III, Section 6.3.4).

Box 2-1   Training Sports Students as Mentors to Improve the Educational Attainment of Boys and Young Men – Erasmus+

This project, which received EUR 171,123.9 of Erasmus+ funding, involved training sports mentors to improve the educational attainment of boys and young men. The rationale behind this was that many sports coaches are already providing mentoring to boys around health and social issues but lack training to do so effectively. The project aimed to assist in reducing male early school leaving by developing a higher education course to enhance the knowledge and skills of undergraduate sports students. These students would then apply their learning in vocational settings to provide effective mentoring support to young males who are underachieving at school and at risk of ELET. This approach aims to motivate young men to stay at school and improve their educational attainment/outcomes.

More information: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplus-project-details/#project/2017-1-UK01-KA203-036698

Despite not targeting boys specifically, **many of the initiatives do focus on wider issues facing boys**. Such policies, therefore, have the potential of being more closely tailored and monitored from a gender perspective to monitor how they disproportionately affect boys and girls. For example, **Malta**'s *Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving* offers vocational and alternative learning pathways suited more to the educational choices of boys.[61] Many of the approaches taken by Member States are also highly individualised and look to respond to local and contextualised needs. This includes **Sweden**'s 'ESL: Plug In'[62] and **Estonia**'s 'Saved

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[61] Ministry for Education and Employment (2014). *Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early School Leaving*. Available at: https://education.gov.mt/ESL/Documents/School%20Leaving%20in%20Malta.pdf.
[62] For more information on the project, please see: https://skr.se/skolakulturfritid/forskolagrundochgymnasieskola/uppdragfullfoljdutbildning/pluginminskarstudieavbrottenpagymnasiet.2132.html; https://skr.se/skolakulturfritid/forskolagrundochgymnasieskola/uppdragfullfoljdutbildning/utvecklingsprogramforfullfoljdutbildning.29661.html

by the Bell: Early Warning System for Dropouts'.[63] These initiatives focus on identifying the individual risk factors associated with early leaving from education and training, which may include a gender dimension. Other Member States focus on compensation for lost education, with **Italy**'s 'INVALSI' aiming to improve support to get ELET students back into education.[64]

A common approach among Member States is to adopt **regional approaches to ELET**, with the **Netherlands**,[65] **Portugal**,[66] and **Sweden**[67] all targeting funding at municipalities, cities and regions and devolving responsibility for addressing ELET issues to a local level. Some Member States also **target provision at specific vulnerable groups**. This includes **Cyprus**' 'DRASE' programme aimed at vulnerable groups.[68] **Romania** also has provision targeted at minority groups (including Roma children), those from single-parent families, children from rural areas, and those with disabilities.[69] Other approaches that address issues commonly affecting boys include programmes which focus on improving access to education, those aimed at reducing absenteeism (e.g. the **Bulgarian** 'At School Without Absence'),[70] and those related to improving the integration of migrants into education (e.g. **Ireland**'s 'Better Outcomes Brighter Futures' programme).[71] Again, however, there is a lack of focus on gender disparities across these policies and approaches.

2.2   Attainment rates in compulsory education

Overview of key findings

This section explores attainment rates of boys and girls, with a particular focus on mathematics, reading and science. Some key findings are outlined below.

- **In every Member State, without exception, various data sources (PISA, PIRLS and national data) demonstrate a large and persistent gender gap in favour of girls in reading**. In 2018, the average PISA gap between

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[63]For more information on the project, please see: http://www.praxis.ee/en/works/saved-by-the-bell-early-warning-system-for-dropouts/

[64] For more information on the project, please see :https://www.invalsiopen.it/poverta-educativa-aree-interne/

[65] Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen (2016). *Thuiszitterspact.* Den Haag: Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen. Avaialbe at: https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/publicaties/2016/06/13/thuiszitterspact/thuiszitterspact-13-6-2016.pdf

[66] PNPSE. Studies Collection. Availabe at: https://pnpse.min-educ.pt/

[67] For more information on the project, please see: https://skr.se/skolakulturfritid/forskolagrundochgymnasieskola/uppdragfullfoljdutbildning/pluginminskarstudieavbrottenpagymnasiet.2132.html; https://skr.se/skolakulturfritid/forskolagrundochgymnasieskola/uppdragfullfoljdutbildning/utvecklingsprogramforfullfoljdutbildning.29661.html

[68] For more information on the programme, please see: https://www.structuralfunds.org.cy/Drase

[69] Romanian government (2013). *Strategy for reducing early school leaving in Romania*. Available at: https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/_fi%C8%99iere/Invatamant-Preuniversitar/2015/Strategie-PTS/Anexe-Strategie-PTS.pdf

[70] For more information on the programme, please see: https://www.mon.bg/upload/11929/NP6_uchilishte_bez_otsystvia_2015.pdf

[71] Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2014). *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures - The national policy framework for children & young people 2014 – 2020*. Available at: https://sets.gov.ie/23796/961bbf5d975f4c88adc01a6fc5b4a7c4.pdf

girls and boys across the EU in reading was thirty points – which is equivalent to one year of schooling. While the gender gap has closed between 2012 and 2018, this is often due to girls' performance declining at a faster rate than that of boys, and not due to boys' improvement.

- **PISA 2018 data shows that boys perform marginally better than girls in maths across the EU.** However, since 2012, this gap has narrowed in favour of girls by more than 3 points in 11 Member States. 2018 TIMSS data also shows that boys' performance in mathematics declines as they progress through compulsory education. At grade 4, boys outperformed girls in nearly every Member State included in the study; by grade 8, boys statistically outperformed girls in only four reporting countries (France, Hungary, Italy and Portugal).

- **While there is a mixed picture in terms of boys' and girls' performance, girls generally outperformed boys in PISA 2018 for science**. TIMSS data also shows that, while boys and girls perform similarly in science early in compulsory education, girls outperform boys in the later years.

- **Demographic factors are also associated with gender differences in reading, mathematics and science performance**. While these trends need further exploration, boys from low SES backgrounds, rural communities and migrant families are generally at a 'double disadvantage' due to their gender and marginalised group status. For example, PISA 2018 data shows that first-generation immigrant boys performed 27.5 points worse than their female counterparts.

- Addressing pedagogical issues and raising the attainment of target groups in reading, mathematics and science are key priorities in many Member States. However, **there is a lack of focus on boys within initiatives or policies despite the gender differences identified through the data**.

2.2.1   Reading performance

In every Member State, without exception, various data sources (PISA, PIRLS and national data) demonstrate **a large and persistent gender gap in favour of girls in reading**. This is demonstrated in Figure 2-1, which shows the point score of boys and girls in reading across the OECD's 2018 PISA data. PISA scores are collected from students aged between 15 and 16 years old and describe student performance in terms of levels of proficiency across different subjects. Higher proficiency scores represent the knowledge, skills, and capabilities needed to perform tasks of increasing complexity. As a rule of thumb, the OECD indicates that 25−30 points is equivalent to one year's worth of schooling.[72]

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[72] OECD (2018). *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 Results: What Pupils Know and Can Do*. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/35665b60-en.pdf?expires=1610022523&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=B6ED8635FD5E7D65934BF526B99E6EC0

This is particularly significant given that the average PISA gap between girls and boys across the EU stood at 30 points in 2018, and 34 points when taken as an average across PISA 2012, 2015 and 2018.[73] According to the OECD, the highest gap in 2018 was 51 points in Finland, while the smallest gap was 22 points in Belgium. This means that **boys are behind girls in reading by over six months in every Member State**. In 17 countries boys are behind girls by the equivalent of over one year.

Figure 2-1   PISA 2018 reading score of males and females (age 15/16) across the EU

Source: PISA 2018. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/
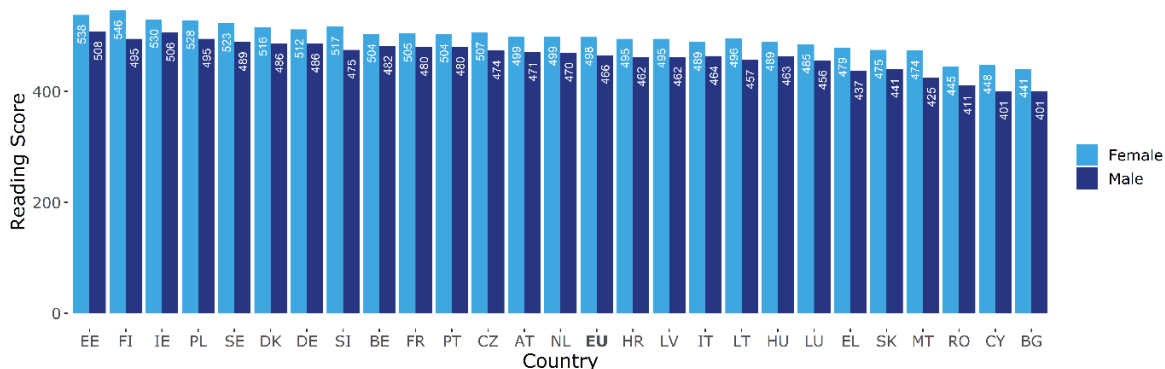
PIRLS 2016 data provides further evidence that girls greatly outperform boys in reading.[74] This data is taken at an earlier age than PISA, with PIRLS measuring reading achievement in the fourth year of schooling (the average age is 9.5 years). Here, girls attained higher scaled scores on average than boys in every EU Member State included in the study.[75] On average, boys were 12.3 points behind girls across the Member States covered. PIRLS benchmarking comparison data is split into low (96th percentile), intermediate (82nd percentile), high (47th percentile) and advanced (10th percentile) scores in reading.[76] Boys in Finland, Ireland and Poland were the only ones to reach the high threshold on average, compared to girls in 11 EU countries.

Snapshot data taken from national statistics also shows that boys underperform in reading at various points in compulsory education. In the **Netherlands**, 86% of girls compared with 82% of boys meet the 'end terms' (*eindtermen*) in reading at the end of ISCED level 1.[77] In **Malta**, 44.9% of Maltese boys were considered to be 'low achievers' compared to only 26% of girls in 2019.[78] In **Romania**, 21.9% of the boys who took the national exam at ISCED level 3 in reading obtained a grade below 5 (on

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[73] OECD (2018). *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 Results*. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/pisa-2018-resultshtm.htm
[74] TIMSS and PIRLS data is available here: https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/
[75] EU countries included are: Ireland, Poland, Finland, Latvia, Hungary, Sweden, Italy, Bulgaria, Denmark, Netherlands, Austria, Czechia, Slovenia, Germany, Slovakia, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, France, Malta.
[76] TIMSS and PIRLS data is available here: https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/
[77] Vlaanderen (2018). *Peiling Nederlands*. Available at: https://peilingsonderzoek.be/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Brochure_Nederlands_BaO_2018_DEF.pdf
[78] Maltese statistics available at: https://nso.gov.mt/en/nso/Media/Salient-Points-of-Publications/Pages/2020/Regional-Statistics-MALTA-2020-Edition.aspx

a scale from 1 to 10), while this was the case for only 10.3% of girls.[79] In **Sweden**, data shows that, in the subject of Swedish, boys achieve 80% of what girls do in terms of grades at the national examinations at ISCED level 3.[80]

Looking at longitudinal data, trends over time show that the gap between girls and boys is narrowing across nearly all Member States (see Figure 6-1 in Annex I, Section 6.2.1). While seemingly positive, **only a few Member States have managed to improve boys' reading performance** (yet a policy focus on this is still lacking, as explored in Section 2.2.6). Figure 2-2 shows how PISA reading scores have changed (in percentage terms) from 2012 to 2018.[81] These changes in scores can be interpreted as the drivers for changes in the gender gap.

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[79] Ministerul Educatiei Si Cercetarii (2020). *Results of the National Assessment 2020: The differences between Rural and Urban in Romanian*. Available at: https://stiriedu.ro/2020/06/22/rezultate-evaluare-nationala-2020-diferentele-dintre-rural-si-urban-la-limba-romana/

[80] Government Commission Report SOU 2010:99 (2010). *Flickor, pojkar, individer – om betydelsen av jämställdhet för kunskap och utveckling i skolan*. Available at: https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2010/01/sou-201099/; SNS Analys nummer 42 (2017). *Könsskillnader i skolresultat*. Available at: https://snsse.cdn.triggerfish.cloud/uploads/2020/02/sns-analys-nr-42.pdf

[81] PISA data available here: http://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/. Raw data for 2012, 2015 and 2018 are also presented in Annex II of this report.

Figure 2-2   Change in PISA reading scores across the EU for boys and girls between 2012 and 2018

Source: PISA 2012 & 2018. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/
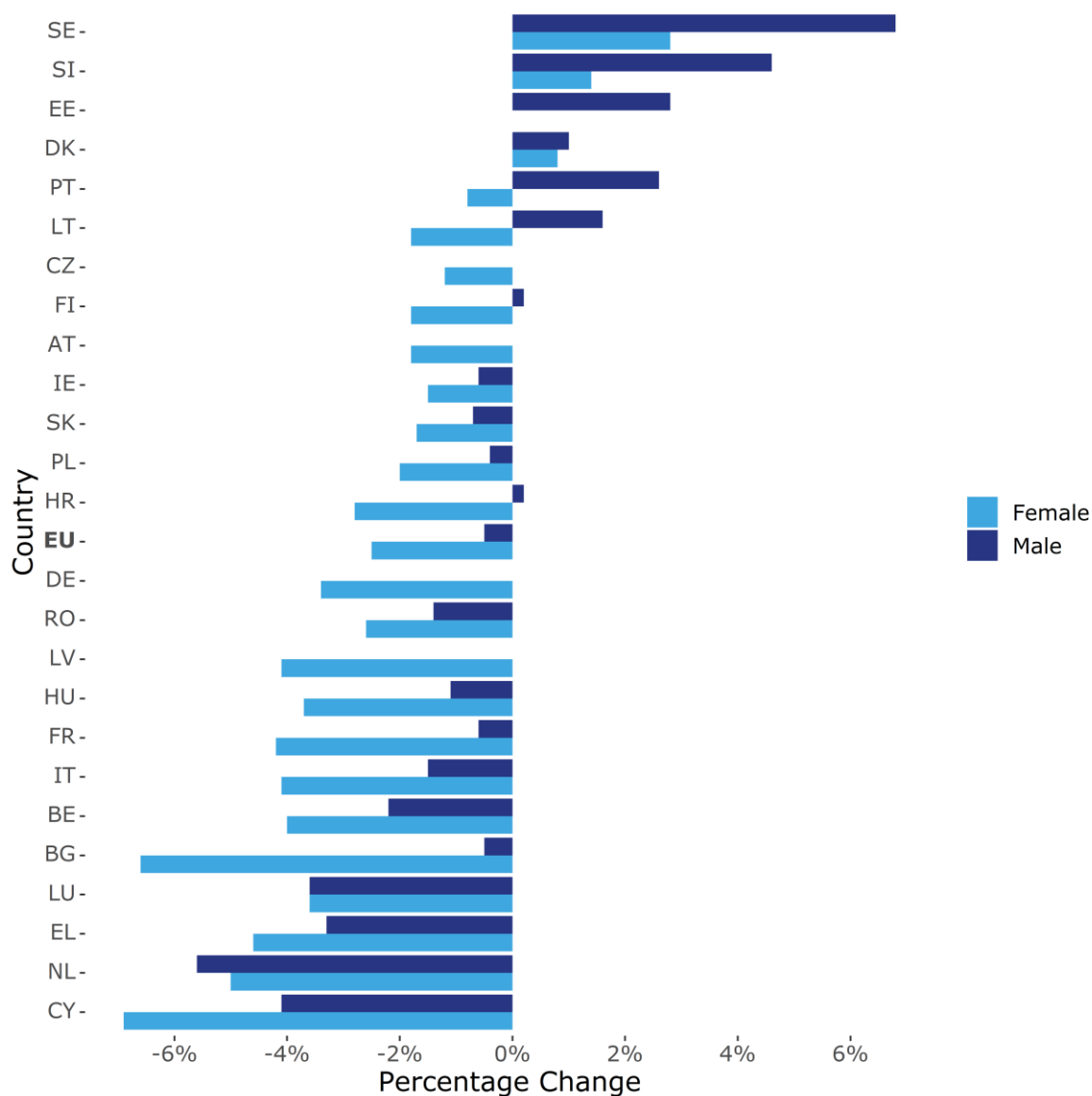
Analysing this data in more detail, **three main trends can be observed in PISA data from 2012 to 2018 across the EU**. These scenarios are as follows, listed in order of prevalence among Member States:

- First, **the gap between boys and girls has narrowed because girls have been performing worse over time**. This trend was identified in several Member States and reflects EU data where there has been a general decline in girls' reading score by 13 points (i.e. around 3%) between 2012 and 2018 compared to 3 points for boys (i.e. less than 1%). In countries where this occurred, this was either due to boys' performance remaining relatively stable while girls' performance declined over time (e.g. Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Finland, France, Germany, Latvia and Poland), or due to a declining

performance of both genders, with girls' scores declining at a faster rate (e.g. Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Romania and Slovakia). In **Italy**, for example, boys' performance declined from 471 in 2012 to 464 in 2018, while girls' performance declined at a sharper rate, from 510 in 2012 to 489 in 2018. This means that while the gap between boys and girls decreased from 49 to 25 PISA points between 2012 and 2018, this is not due to boys improving their performance.

- Next, **the gap between boys and girls has narrowed because boys have been improving faster than girls over time**. This was the case in **Slovenia**, where the gap shrunk from 56 points (2012) to 42 points (2018) due to boys improving at a faster rate than girls. In **Sweden**, both boys and girls have improved their reading score in PISA since 2012, with boys (31-point improvement) doing so at a faster rate than girls (14-point improvement). In **Estonia**, whereas girls' performance remained stable, boys improved their reading score by 14 points.

- Finally, **there have been no significant changes in the trend over time**. Denmark, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands had a change of approximately 3 points. In **Luxembourg** this was due to the performance of boys and girls deteriorating at a similar rate (-17 points and -18 points respectively) between 2012 and 2018. In contrast, **Denmark** reported boys (5-point improvement) and girls (4-point improvement) improving at the same rate during this period.

2.2.2 Mathematics performance

Data from PISA and TIMSS shows **a more mixed picture for mathematics than reading.** PISA and TIMSS data show that boys marginally outperform girls in mathematics. However, TIMSS data suggests that the gap between boys and girls narrows in the older years of compulsory education. PISA 2018 data shows that boys scored more than 3 points more than girls in mathematics in 17 Member States.[82] Only in Cyprus, Finland and Malta did girls perform better than boys (by more than 3 points), with the largest difference being in Malta where girls outperformed boys by 12 points. In Bulgaria, Czechia, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia and Sweden, boys' and girls' performances were relatively similar in maths (+/- up to 3 points). This is shown in Figure 2-3.

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[82] PISA data available here: http://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/.

Figure 2-3 **PISA 2018 mathematics score of males and females (age 15/16) across the EU**

Source: PISA 2018. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/
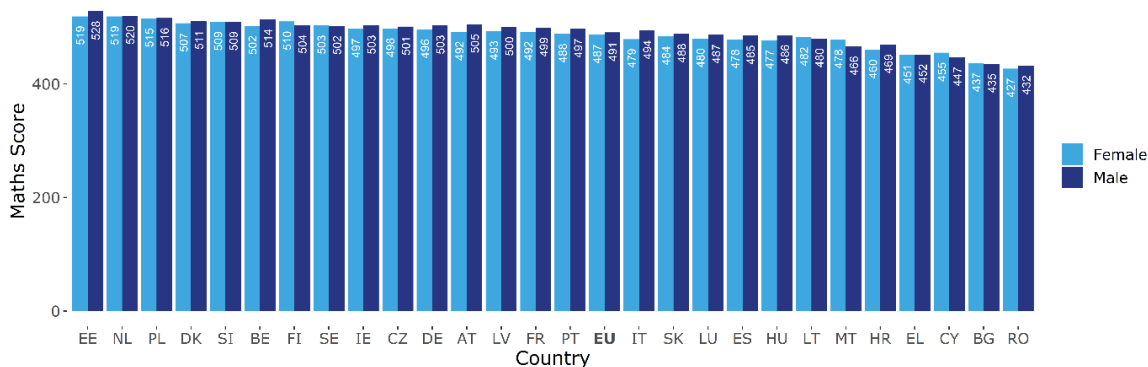
Looking at longitudinal trends, PISA 2012−2018 data also shows that boys' mathematics performance saw a relative decline compared to improvements for girls (see Figure 2-4).[83]

Figure 2-4 **PISA mathematics score trends over time (male and female) between 2012 and 2018**
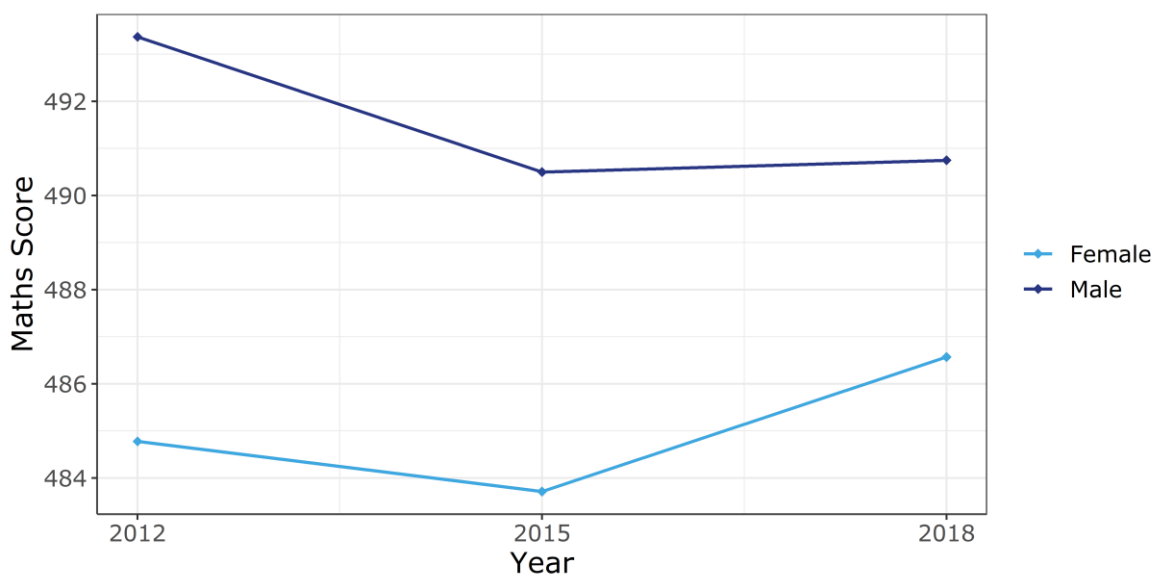
Source: PISA 2012, 2015 & 2018. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/

Analysis of PISA data at the country level (see Figure 6-3 in Annex II, Section 6.2.2 shows that **between 2012 and 2018, the gap between boys and girls narrowed in favour of girls** by more than 3 points in 11 Member States.[84] Only in **Estonia** (4 points) and **Latvia** (11 points) did the gender gap increase between 2012 and 2018

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[83] PISA data available here: http://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/. Raw data for 2012, 2015 and 2018 also presented in annexes.
[84] PISA data available here: http://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/. Raw data for 2012, 2015 and 2018 also presented in annexes.

by more than 3 points in favour of boys. This was due to the relative stability in girls' performance and improved performance of boys.

Figure 2-5 provides insights on the drivers for the widening of the gap in performance between boys and girls between 2012 and 2018, namely:

- **Boys' scores decreased over that time whereas girls' scores increased** (Czechia, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands and Spain);

- Both boys' and girls' scores decreased, but **boys' scores decreased at a faster rate** (Austria and Germany); and

- Both boys' and girls' scores increased, but **girls' scores increased at a faster rate than boys** (Cyprus, Denmark and Slovakia).

Figure 2-5   Change in PISA mathematics scores across the EU for boys and girls between 2012 and 2018
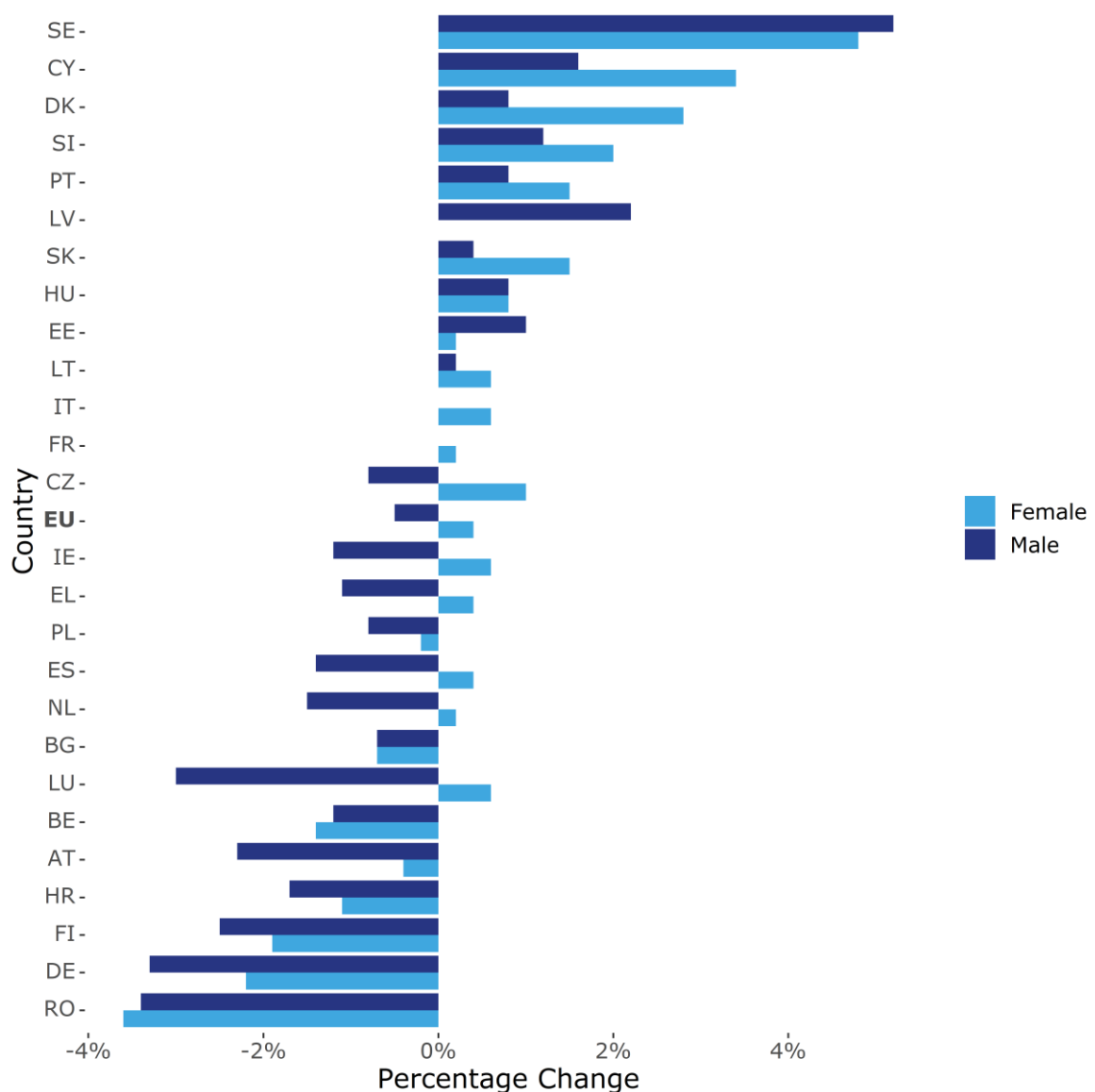
Source: PISA 2012 and 2018. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/

In those **countries where the gender gap remained the same** in mathematics (within +/- 3 points), this is due to a comparative decline (Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland and Poland), comparative improvements (Hungary, Portugal and Sweden) or relative stability (France and Italy), equally distributed between boys and girls. In most countries that reported a stable gender gap, there was very little change in PISA performance for either boys or girls between 2012 and 2018. Of particular exception is the gender gap in **Sweden**, which is currently 2 points in favour of boys. In this case, both genders reported significant improvements in PISA scores of 23 points (girls) and 25 points (boys).

Overall, across the EU, the general trend in PISA data between 2012 and 2018 is **a marginal improvement for girls in mathematics (2 points) and a marginal decline in boys' performance (-3 points)**. Sweden (25 points), Latvia (11 points), Cyprus (7 points), Slovenia (6 points), Estonia (5 points), Denmark (4 points), Hungary (4 points) and Portugal (4 points) were the only countries to report improvements for boys between 2012 and 2018 greater than 3 points (see Figure 2-5 above).

Similar to reading, PISA provides a snapshot of student performance for 15- to 16-year-olds. TIMSS, on the other hand, is collected at two timepoints, the fourth (average age 9.5) and eighth year (average age 13.5) of schooling. **Longitudinal TIMSS data shows that, between 2015 and 2019, the gap widened in favour of boys by 4.1 points at the earlier timepoint (fourth year of schooling)**.[85] This is largely due to a decline in girls' scores (average change of -3.7 points) between 2015 and 2019 across the Member States included in the study,[86] with only marginal improvements for boys (of 1.1 points on average between 2015 and 2019). No trends between 2015 and 2018 were observed in those Member States[87] with comparative data for the eighth year of schooling (point change of -0.8).

TIMSS data further demonstrates that **boys' performance in mathematics declines as they progress through compulsory education** relative to girls.[88] At grade 4, 2018 TIMSS data shows that boys outperform girls in nearly every EU Member State included in the study. The differences in scores in favour of boys were statistically significant in 17 Member States, namely Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden. In these countries, the average gap between boys and girls was 9.9 points in favour of boys in grade 4. However, out of 10 Member States providing data for students in the eighth year of schooling, the average gap fell to 1.8 points in favour of boys. Furthermore, in half of the reporting countries, girls outperformed boys at grade 8, with girls in **Romania** outperforming boys by 16 points. Only in **France**, **Hungary**, **Italy** and **Portugal** did boys continue to statistically outperform girls in mathematics in grade 8. In countries

[85] TIMSS and PIRLS data is available here: https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/
[86] Countries included are: Bulgaria, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Malta, Austria, Poland, Netherlands, Germany, Belgium (Flemish), Czechia, Hungary, Croatia, Italy, Slovakia, France, Spain, Portugal, and Cyprus.
[87] Sweden, Ireland, Lithuania, Italy, and Hungary.
[88] TIMSS and PIRLS data is available here: https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/

reporting for both grades 4 and 8 in TIMSS 2019, the gap in mathematics performance significantly narrows between boys and girls through the years. This is particularly stark in **Cyprus**, for instance, where boys at grade 4 are 11 points ahead of girls but, by grade 8, boys are 4 points behind.

While less extreme, reversals in the gap (where boys previously outperformed girls) can also be seen in **Finland**, **Ireland** and **Sweden**. For the other Member States reporting for both grades (France, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania and Portugal), boys maintain their advantage over girls between grade 4 and 8, albeit with a shrinking gap across all, except for Italy and Hungary.

Mullis *et al.*[89] report similar findings in 2007 TIMSS data, demonstrating that this is a consistent trend. In 2007 data, boys scored higher in most EU Member States in the fourth year of schooling (Austria, Czechia, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden), while in the eighth year, there was either no gender difference in scores (Czechia, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Slovenia and Sweden) or girls had higher scores than boys (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Lithuania and Romania). These results further demonstrate that **boys' performance declines from the fourth to the eighth years of schooling relative to girls,** and that this has been occurring for some time.

A mixed picture in terms of mathematics performance and gender is further reflected in **examination outcomes and research at national level**. In **Latvia**, girls achieved an average grade which was 2 percentage points higher than that of boys in the 2019/2020 mathematics national examination.[90] Results from the Eighth Grade National Examination in **Romania** also favoured girls, with 33.5% of boys obtaining a grade below 5 in mathematics, compared to only 26.2% of girls.[91] In **Estonia**, girls outperformed boys in the state exam of mathematics at the end of secondary school.[92] Nevertheless, in **Finland**, while girls marginally outperformed boys in mathematics, research suggests that boys were better in performing mathematics-related tasks than girls.[93] Similar evidence that boys perform better than girls in mathematics emerges from longitudinal data tracking 3,000 pupils in **Belgium**.[94]

2.2.3   Science performance

While there is a mixed picture in terms of boys' and girls' performance**, girls generally outperformed boys in PISA 2018 for science**.[95] Looking at Figure 6-5

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[89] Mullis et al (2007). TIMSS 2007 International Mathematics Report. Available at: https://timss.bc.edu/timss2007/PDF/TIMSS2007_InternationalMathematicsReport.pdf

[90] Valsts izglitibas satura centrs. Available at: https://www.visc.gov.lv/sites/visc/files/content/vispizglitiba/eksameni/statistika/2020/mat_visi_sal_dzim.pn

[91] Ministerul Educatiei Si Cercetarii (2020). *Results of the National Assessment 2020: The differences between Rural and Urban in Romanian*. Available at: https://stiriedu.ro/2020/06/22/rezultate-evaluare-nationala-2020-diferentele-dintre-rural-si-urban-la-limba-romana/

[92] Taal, D. (2019). *Matemaatika riigieksamid 2019. (State examinations in mathematics 2019).* Foundation Innove.

[93] Karvi (2020). *Alkumittaus – Koulutulokkaiden matematiikan ja äidinkielen ja kirjallisuuden taidot ja osaamisen taustatekijät – Tiivistelmä [Assessment in the beginning of compulsory school - Mathematics and mother tongue and literature skills and background factors for pupils at first grade - Executive summary].* Tiivistelmät 13:2020

[94] Study reports available here: https://peilingsonderzoek.be/kennisdeling/peilingen/secundair-onderwijs/?peiling=wiskunde

[95] PISA data available here: http://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/. Raw data for 2012, 2015 and 2018 also presented in annexes.

in Annex II (Section 6.2.3), we can see that, on average, girls in 2018 scored 5 points higher than boys. Boys performed marginally better than girls (more than 3 points) in only four countries (Belgium, Hungary, Italy and Portugal), with the highest point gap in favour of boys only reaching 6 points. Girls and boys achieved relative parity (within +/- 3 points) in Austria, Czechia, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Romania and Spain. In the remaining countries, where girls outperformed boys, large gaps in favour of girls were apparent, especially in **Finland** (24-point gap), **Cyprus** (21-point gap), **Malta** (21-point gap) and **Bulgaria** (15-point gap).

TIMSS 2015 and 2019 data for science shows that **boys perform at a similar rate to girls in the fourth year of schooling, but that girls overtake boys by the eighth year**.[96] The minimal 1.2-point gap in favour of boys at grade 4 is reversed by year 8, with girls performing better than boys by an average of 2.6 points across participating EU Member States. In EU countries where comparable data is available, the gap between boys and girls widened from 5 points to 19 points in favour of girls in **Finland**, from 2 points to 11 points in favour of girls in **Sweden**, and from 4 points in favour of boys to 5 points in favour of girls in **Ireland**. Relative stability was reported in **Lithuania** and **Italy**, whereas the gap in favour of boys in **Hungary** rose from 7 points to 20 points from year 4 to year 8.

Longitudinal trends between 2012 and 2018 (see Figure 2-6) show a downward trend for both boys and girls in PISA science performance, but a slightly faster decline for boys (-15 points) than girls (-12 points).

Figure 2-6   PISA science score trends over time (male and female) between 2012 and 2018
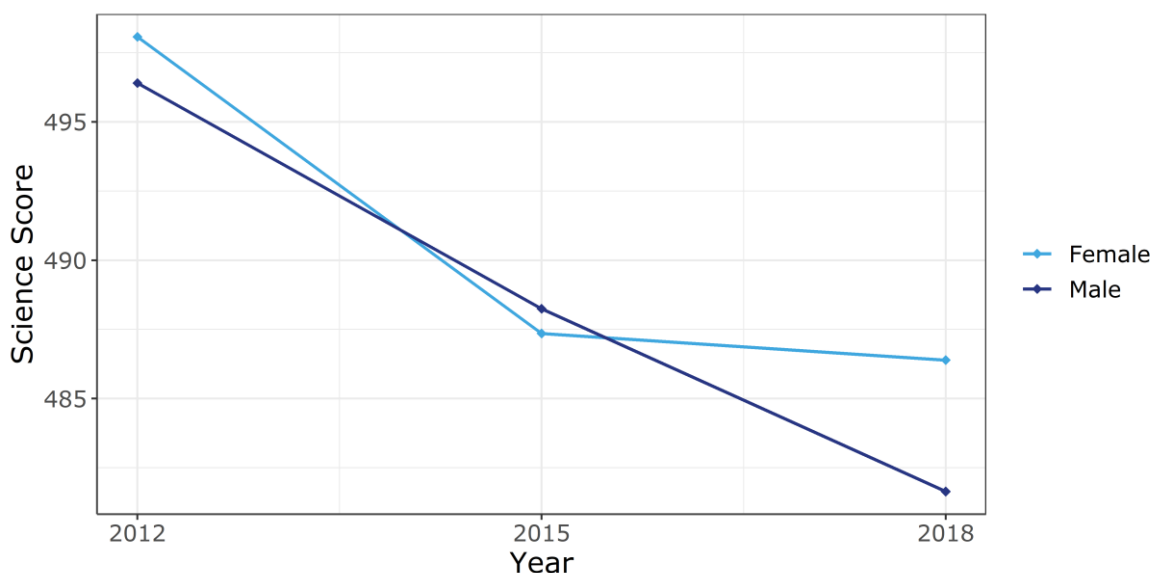
Source: PISA 2012, 2015 and 2018. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/

This trend is largely due to **a decline in performance for both boys and girls, but a faster decline for boys** (by 3 points or more) in Austria, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Spain. In other Member States, girls improved

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[96] TIMSS and PIRLS data is available here: https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/

while boys declined (Cyprus), or girls' performance remained stable while boys' performance declined (Denmark and Slovakia). In contrast, the performance gap widened in favour of boys in Belgium, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania due to girls' performance declining at a faster rate than boys', and in Portugal due to boys improving while the performance of girls remained relatively stable.

No trends are apparent when comparing changes to the gender gap between 2015 and 2019 in TIMSS science data.[97] The gap remained stable at the fourth (-0.25-point change) and eighth (-1.8-point change) year of schooling over this period.[98]

2.2.4 Performance in other subjects

Beyond reading, mathematics and science, gender gaps are also visible in other subjects – and these differences persist into adulthood. Some examples are listed below.

- **Digital skills**: In the EU, in 2019, a marginally higher proportion of males had basic or above basic overall digital skills than females (58% vs 54%).[99]

- **Sports and physical education**: In **Austria**, boys are much more likely to be engaged in sport activities in their younger years.[100] Boys also make up 70% of sports club members in **Belgium (French Community)**.[101]

- **Performing and creative arts**: Evidence from **Belgium (French Community)** shows that twice as many females as males are involved in creative activities, such as drama or arts.[102]

- **Problem solving**: According to PISA 2015, girls perform significantly better than boys in collaborative problem solving in every country and economy that participated in the assessment. The largest gaps between boys and girls (over 40 points) were recorded in Finland, Latvia and Sweden. This contrasts with the PISA 2012 assessment of individual problem solving, where boys generally performed better than girls.[103]

- **Foreign languages**: In 2016, a slightly higher share of men did not know any foreign languages or knew only one foreign language (both 36.1%) compared with the corresponding share for women (34.8% and 34.3% respectively). However, the share of women who knew two foreign languages (22.1%) was 2.2 percentage points higher than that for men, and the share of women who

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[97] TIMSS and PIRLS data is available here: https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/
[98] Countries with comparable data in the fourth year of schooling include: Bulgaria, Finland, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, France, Netherlands, Croatia, Spain, Ireland, Germany, Slovakia, Portugal, Hungary, Italy and Czechia. Countries with comparable data in the eight year of schooling include: Sweden, Ireland, Lithuania, Italy, and Hungary.
[99] Eurostat (2019): https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=isoc_sk_dskl_i&lang=en
[100] Sport Austria (2015). *Gender Equality Strategy 2015*. Available at: https://www.sportaustria.at/de/schwerpunkte/soziales-und-gesellschaftspolitik/gender-equality/aktivitaeten-gender-equality/strategie-gender-equality-2015/
[101] For more data on gender, sports and leisure in FWB, please visit: http://www.egalitefillesgarcons.cfwb.be/genre-par-theme/sports-et-loisirs/donnees-quantitatives-et-qualitatives/
[102] Ibid.
[103] OECD (2017). *PISA in Focus 2017/78 (November)*: *Collaborative problem solving.* https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/cdae6d2e-en.pdf?expires=1619620774&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=3E7F5588CB290CEB4A573281293F513C

knew three or more foreign languages (8.9%) was also higher than that recorded for men (7.9%).[104]

- **Performance in end-of-school exams**: The way in which end-of-school examinations are conducted and graded in EU Member States varies greatly,[105] and EU comparative data is not available. However, some findings from the case studies show gender differences in performance. In **Ireland**, girls have long performed better than boys in most subjects in the Leaving Certificate exam which marks the completion of secondary level education. They are more likely to sit the exam at 'Higher' level (the 'Foundation' and 'Ordinary' levels are at a lower level of difficulty) than boys, and in 2019, in 23 of 37 Leaving Certificate subjects taken at Higher level, girls were more likely to achieve higher grades than boys. Results from the Eighth Grade National Examination in **Romania** also favoured girls, with 33.5% of boys obtaining a grade below 5 in Mathematics, compared to only 26.2% of girls.[106] And in **Estonia**, girls outperformed boys in the state mathematics exam at the end of secondary school.[107]

2.2.5   Demographic influences on school performance

Evidence shows however that **boys are not a homogenous group, and their performance is moderated by a number of socio-demographic factors**. While boys perform worse than girls overall, the situation is worse for both boys and girls from immigrant, low socio-economic status, or rural backgrounds. This is demonstrated below by looking at how different demographic factors influence boys' reading scores. Data across EU countries shows that, after accounting for gender and students' socio-economic status, the score point difference in reading performance associated with immigrant background is extremely significant. This is highlighted in Figure 2-7 below.[108]

The data shows that first-generation immigrants perform substantially worse than their native peers, and that this disadvantage persists between the generations, despite a narrowing of the gap. With regard to gender, it is apparent that **first- and second-generation immigrant boys perform worse on average than their female counterparts**. In 2018, first-generation immigrant girls performed 27.5 points better than boys, and second-generation immigrant girls performed 23.3 better than boys.

The data does not suggest, however, that male first- and second-generation immigrants are at more of a disadvantage than female first- and second-generation immigrants, as both genders have a similar gap between their native counterparts.

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[104] Eurostat (2019). https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Foreign_language_skills_statistics#Number_of_foreign_languages_known
[105] West, A., Edge, A., Stokes, E. (1999) *Secondary education across Europe: Curricula and school examination systems*. Available at: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00001195.htm#Chapter%203
[106] See https://stiriedu.ro/2020/06/22/rezultate-evaluare-nationala-2020-diferentele-dintre-rural-si-urban-la-limba-romana/
[107] Taal, D. (2019). Matemaatika riigieksamid 2019. (State examinations in mathematics 2019). Foundation Innove.
[108] OECD (2018). *PISA Average reading score by Index Immigration status (IMMIG).* PISA data available at: http://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/.

Indeed, the statistics indicate that **second-generation immigrant boys have closed the gap on their native counterparts at a faster rate than girls between 2012 and 2018**, narrowing by eight points. In contrast, the gap widened by two points between second-generation immigrant girls and their native counterparts over the same period.

Figure 2-7   Average PISA points score difference in reading between first- and second-generation immigrant and native students (boys and girls) of EU countries in 2012, 2015 and 2018

Immigrant status	2012		2015		2018	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Native PISA point score	516.8	474.7	506.2	478.4	504.2264	472.0
Second generation (point score difference from native students)	-28 pts (488.9)	-29 pts (445.4)	-19 pts (487.0)	-16 pts (462.9)	-30 pts (474.2)	-21 pts (450.9)
First generation (point score difference from native students)	-52 pts (464.4)	-52 pts (423.0)	-45 pts (460.9)	-47 pts (431.1)	-54 pts (449.9)	-50 pts (422.4)

Source: PISA 2018. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/

Other socio-economic and geographical factors appear as salient indicators of boys' performance in reading. For example, in the EU, 41% of boys living in households in the first income percentile were underachieving in reading compared to 31% of girls. These gaps also persist at the other end of the spectrum, with 7.7% fewer girls in the fourth income percentile being underachievers in reading compared to boys. However, boys from wealthier household are far less likely to underachieve in reading – with the percentage of male underachievers diminishing as household income increases (41.3% fourth percentile; 29.0% third percentile; 21.7% third percentile; and 13.2% fourth percentile).[109] These trends are demonstrated in Figure 2-8 (below).

Some countries also reported **urban and rural divides** (although data per gender is scarce) as well as geographical divides based on cultural and socio-economic differences. For instance, in **Romania**, boys residing in rural areas faced higher risk of obtaining grades below 5 in national tests in reading (26% of students from rural areas obtained grades below 5 compared to only 9.9% students living in urban areas).[110] In **Germany**, though, the risk for rural students appears to have decreased, with one expert interviewed stating that in the 1960s, a person with the greatest risk

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[109] OECD (2018). *Percentage of underachieving students in reading by Economic and Social Background - ESCS (PISA Index of economic, social and cultural status).* PISA data available at: http://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/.
[110] Ibid.

of low educational achievement was characterised by the features 'girl, catholic, rural area', while today, the main risk characteristics are 'boy, migration background, urban background' (see Annex III, Section 6.3.4).

Figure 2-8   Percentage of underachieving students in reading across the EU, broken down by ESCS quartile (PISA 2018)

Source: PISA 2018. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/
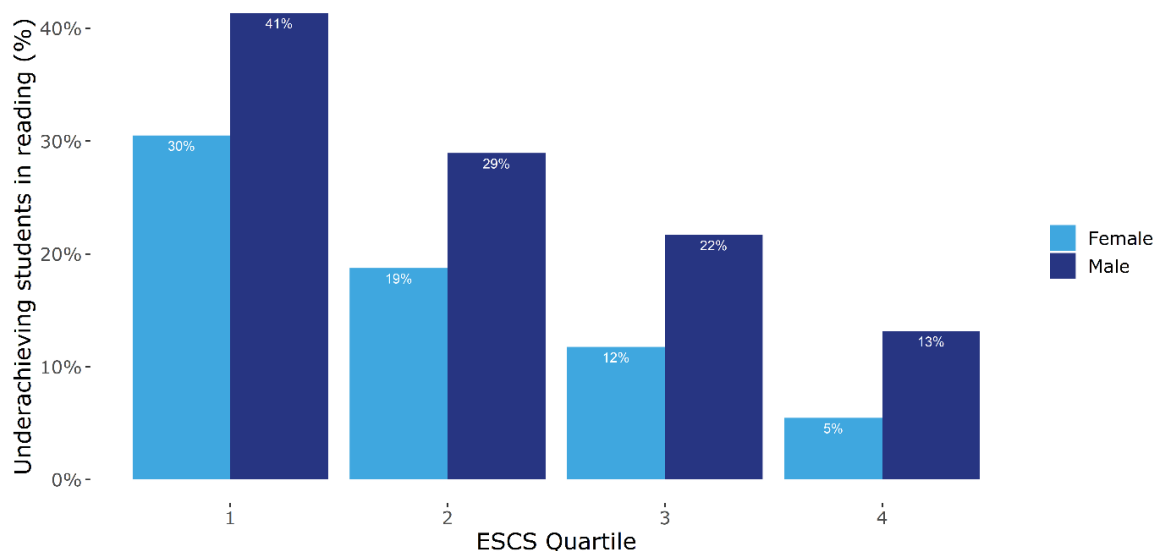
Beyond reading, **low socio-economic status accounts for 13% of variance in science and 14% in mathematics performance** across all OECD-PISA participating countries.[111] Immigrant status is also a strong predictor of overall performance in mathematics and science, with extensive research showing persistent gaps between first- and second-generation immigrants and native students across these subjects.[112]

2.2.6   Initiatives aimed at increasing educational attainment among boys

Many Member States have policies and initiatives aimed at improving reading, science and mathematics performance. However, **very few initiatives are targeted at boys specifically** to reverse the gender trends outlined above. Several possible reasons for this emerged from the case study research. Several stakeholders are of the view that there are larger problems within education systems – such as tackling low participation and educational attainment rates of children with migrant and low socio-economic backgrounds – that need to be addressed more urgently. This view is clearly held by interviewed experts in **Luxembourg**, for example. In other instances, the lack of boy-specific initiatives may be driven by the view that addressing challenges by targeting both boys and girls is more consistent with the ultimate aim of creating

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[111] OECD (2015*). PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education.* Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9789264266490-10-en.pdf?expires=1608652399&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=BB7376322E43F6E71DA8220157B8D5B3
[112] Joint Research Council (2016). *Educational outcomes and immigrant background*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/index.cfm?action=media.download&uuid=8C78FCC5-0DE1-34DA-61D815D357411F2D

inclusive, student-centred education systems that work for all – regardless of gender, socio-economic background, migrant background or other characteristics. This view was clearly expressed in the **Czech** and **German** case study interviews, for example. In some countries, ideological views clearly influence the lack of policy focus on gender: research conducted in **Poland**, for instance, highlights that policy-making is often based on the premise of gender neutrality, which treats the sex variable as insignificant – strengthening discrimination, particularly in its indirect forms.[113] In the key documents shaping education policy in the country there is no reference to the principle of equal treatment and equality based on sex, and, thus, no specific focus on boys (or girls) in measures addressing educational attainment.

Exceptions include the policies highlighted below, as well as efforts in some Member States to prevent gender stereotyping in schools. This includes **Malta**'s *Vision for Science* which includes reference to gender inclusive pedagogies which are attractive and motivating for both boys and girls.[114]

1. Increasing boys' performance in reading

Improving literacy is a policy priority for many countries. In **Ireland**, the National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011−2020[115] outlined a strategy to overcome significant gaps in reading and maths following poor PISA results in 2009. Literacy is one of the three main performance indicators in **Latvia**'s Educational Development Guidelines for 2014−2020*.*[116] Other countries with a focus on reading include **Bulgaria**[117] (National Strategy for Promoting and Improving Literacy, 2014−2020), **Slovenia**[118] (The National Strategy for the Development of Reading Literacy 2019–2030), **Italy**[119] (National Reading Plan), and **Belgium** (Strategic Literacy Plan, 2017-2024 and Plan for Reading).[120]

These plans vary in terms of their emphasis and target groups, ranging from improving reading among disadvantaged groups and those that speak a non-native language, to encouraging more reading at home among parents and families. However**,** a common theme across all of these strategies is that none of them identify or focus on boys as a target group. One exception is the strategy developed by **Malta**, described in Box 2-2.

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[113] For more information, please see: https://bezpiecznaszkola.men.gov.pl/programy/program-bezpieczna/
[114] Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family (2011). *A Vision for Science Education in Malta*. Available at: https://curriculum.gov.mt/en/Resources/The-NCF/Documents/Consult_Docs/1_Book%205%20Eng.pdf
[115] Department of Education and Skills (2017*). National Strategy: Literacy And Numeracy For Learning And Life 2011-2020*. Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/publications/education-reports/pub_ed_interim_review_literacy_numeracy_2011_2020.pdf
[116] Latvian Government (2014). *On approval of the Guidelines for the Development of Education for 2014-2020*. Available at: http://m.likumi.lv/doc.php?id=266406
[117] Ministry of Education and Science (2014). *National Strategy For Lifelong Learning For The Period 2014 – 2020*. Available at: https://www.mon.bg/upload/6561/strategy_LLL_2014_2020.pdf
[118] Republika Slovenija (2020). *The National Strategy for the Development of Reading Literacy 2019–2030*. Available at: https://www.gov.si/novice/2020-01-15-nacionalna-strategija-za-razvoj-bralne-pismenosti-za-obdobje-2019-2030/
[119] Centro per il libro e la lettura (2014). *Piano nazionale di promozione della lettura*. Available at: https://www.cepell.it/it/documenti/documenti-istituzionali/3-piano-nazionale-di-promozione-della-lettura.html
[120] Vlaanderen (2019). *Strategic Literacy Plan 2017-2024*. Available at: https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/strategisch-plan-geletterdheid-2017-2024

Box 2-2   National Literacy Strategy (2014–2019) – Malta

In Malta, boys underperform at all levels of education. The Maltese National Literacy Strategy 2014–2019 makes specific reference to the existing gender differences that were identified among boys and girls in Malta in international tests. The strategy states: *"This strategy is not gender neutral. The gender mainstreaming of such a strategy is important to ensure equity and increased effectiveness. Gender desegregated data should allow us to identify the different issues boys and girls contend with, in the field of literacy. Interventions are to be targeted accordingly."*

Particular reference to boys can be found in two policy actions, including: (1) more research around English and Maltese skills, and effective teaching and learning, with a focus on gender; and (2) for data to be broken down by gender so that trends and problem areas can be identified for targeted initiatives.

More information: Ministry for Education and Employment (2014). A national literacy strategy for all in Malta and Gozo, Available at: https://education.gov.mt/en/Documents/Literacy/ENGLISH.pdf

The **lack of emphasis on gender differences in reading** is reflected in the type and focus of initiatives funded by Member States. For example, in **Italy**, one of the main policy initiatives to improve literacy is 'Born to Read' (*Nati per Leggere*).[121] Linked to Italy's National Reading Plan, this focuses on the parent-child relationship as a means to address issues with reading. Other initiatives focus on developing the curriculum and/ or collating sources of good practice. This includes the **Dutch** 'Reading Plan' (*Leesplan*)[122] and the **Finnish** 'National Literacy Forum',[123] which both provide tools and guidance to encourage children to read more. Some Member States, such as **Spain**, also focus on reinforcement and compensation for those students who are struggling with reading (see the '#PROA+' programme for example).[124] Similarly, the 'Reading Heroes' project in **Germany** aims to increase reading, speaking and social competences among 4-10-year-olds.[125] It is particularly targeted at children from families where there is no tradition of learning and children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, in which access to education is difficult. While many of these initiatives no doubt indirectly benefit boys (in some cases more than girls), there is, nonetheless, a lack of focus on gender issues. Two exceptions are outlined in Boxes 2-3 and 2-4 below, including an initiative in **Sweden** aimed at encouraging reading among boys through a family lens, and another funded by the EU aimed specifically at boys aged 11−15 and reading.

Box 2-3   Endure (*Stå ut-ett läsprojekt*) – Sweden

This small-scale project in Pitea, Sweden, was aimed at increasing interest and motivation to read among children with a special focus on boys. The rationale

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[121] For more information on the programme, please see: http://www.natiperleggere.it/
[122] For more information on the programme, please see: https://www.leesplan.nl/nl
[123] For more information on the programme, please see: https://minedu.fi/en/-/lukuliike-innostaa-lukemiseen-ja-vastaa-taitojen-heikentymiseen
[124] For more information on the programme, please see: http://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/mc/sgctie/comunicacion/noticias/septiembre2020/objetivos-proa.html
[125] For more information on the programme, please see: https://www.borromaeusverein.de/lesehelden/

behind the project is to encourage boys to read more through the use of male role models. The initiative is aimed at fathers or other male figures in young people's lives, with joint reading assignments being given to both young people and their fathers who themselves may not be avid readers.

More information: https://www.pitea.se/Invanare/Skola/Grundskola-och-grundsarskola/Hitta-grundskolor/Hortlaxomradet/Hortlax-skola/Amnen/Svenska/sta-ut---ett-lasprojekt/

Box 2-4   Boys Reading – Erasmus+

This project received EUR 231,336.5 of funding and included participation from Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Poland, Portugal and Romania. The aim of the project is to "*make reading an integral part in the life of boys aged 11−15, who are currently unenthusiastic about books*". The project focuses on four priority areas: (1) motivation among boys to read and write; (2) better teaching resources and materials that are appealing to boys; (3) drawing upon male role-models to support reading; and (4) increasing enjoyment from reading among boys.

The project involved research on how to effectively promote reading among boys, which informed the development of a 'Boys Reading Toolkit', training modules for practitioners, and an online portal with resources and best practice material.

The outcomes of the project include a research report[126] which identified successful practices in promoting reading to teenage boys. These include:

- the use of book trailers and book talks to promote reading;
- graphic novels as a reading tool for secondary school students;
- using newspapers to support boys' reading.

More information: https://www.boysreading.org/index.php/en/

2. Increasing boys' performance in mathematics and science

There is also a **lack of focus on boys within policies and initiatives related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)**. However, unlike reading, where gender is often left off the agenda completely, several Member States focus on improving access and outcomes for girls in STEM subjects, given boys' over-representation in STEM subjects.[127] In **Belgium**, Flanders' STEM Action Plan (2012−2020),[128] for instance, focuses on increasing STEM participation overall, particularly for girls. Similarly, in **Estonia**, the 'HK Unicorn Squad'[129] is a privately funded project aimed at offering technology education to 7-14-year-old girls.

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[126] For more information, please see: https://www.boysreading.org/project-outputs/IO1/O1-A1_Reserch_%20State-of-the-%20Art.pdf
[127] OECD (2015). The ABC of Gender Equality in Education. *Aptitude, Behaviour, Confidence*. PISA, OECD publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9789264229945-en.pdf?expires=1610634769&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=66B1763A84CB2A7C21B3829FBC7B8E3B
[128] For more information on the programme, please see: https://onderwijs.vlaanFlanderrderen.be/sites/default/files/atoms/files/STEM-actieplan.pdf
[129] For more information on the programme, please see: https://unicornsquad.ee/unicornide-liikumine/

Several countries do, nonetheless, have **gender-neutral policies and initiatives focused on improving teaching and learning in mathematics and science** to benefit both boys and girls. In **Bulgaria**, for instance, the national programme 'Developing STEM environment in education' (2020−2021) focuses on the creation of new school centres aimed at delivering and helping students gain new skills in STEM.[130] Initiatives in **Sweden** (*Styrning och ledning matermatik*) aim to promote a novel model of mathematics education focused on ISCED level 1 (primary education).[131] Similarly, **Finland** has established the LUMA centre for the professional development of teachers and the provision of focused mathematics and technology-based initiatives for students.[132] The National Educational Institute (*NA-MA POT*) in **Slovenia** is looking to design strategies aimed at improving mathematics literacy, critical thinking and ICT skills.[133] The Ministry of Education and Culture in **Cyprus** is proposing to improve assessment by focusing on pedagogical improvements in mathematics and science.[134] Policy initiatives open to both genders include science summer camps in **Spain** aimed at fostering science among girls and boys of 16 and 17 years of age.[135] **Lithuanian** schools have also taken part in various Erasmus+ projects with a focus on improving STEM skills among both boys and girls.[136]

Another common trend is **initiatives focused on groups at risk of marginalisation**. For example, *Diritti a Scuola* in **Italy**, funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), aimed to prevent school dropout and raise attainment among disadvantaged pupils, with part of the initiative focusing on raising maths standards in secondary school.[137] Other examples include the 'School After School' and 'Second Chance' programmes in **Romania**, which allow all young people (boys and girls) who have dropped out of school to access education.[138]

3. Other policies and initiatives

It is also worth noting that several EU Member States fund targeted initiatives aimed at raising **attainment and/or access to different subjects for girls**. This includes work in **Malta** done by the eSkills Malta Foundation to increase and retain women in ICT professions.[139] The **Austrian** government has also launched an initiative to

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[130] Ministry of Education and Science (2020). *Developing STEM environment in education*. Available at: https://www.mon.bg/bg/100835
[131] For more information, please see: https://skr.se/skolakulturfritid/forskolagrundochgymnasieskola/skrssatsningarutvecklaskolan/styrningochledningmatematik.14787.html
[132] Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner. *Governance and management mathematics - education on a scientific basis and proven experience*. Available at: https://www.luma.fi/en/
[133] For more information on the programme, please see: https://www.zrss.si/objava/projekt-na-ma-poti
[134] European Commission (2020). *Eurydice Report Cyprus*. Available at: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/cyprus/national-reforms-school-education_en
[135] Ministerio deo educación y formación profesional (2019). *Isabel Celaá and Pedro Duque inaugurate the 2019 Summer Scientific Campuses*. Available at: https://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/prensa/actualidad/2019/07/20190701-campusvalencia.html
[136] For more information, please see: https://erasmus-plius.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/KA101_finansuojam%C5%B3_s%C4%85ra%C5%A1as.pdf
[137] For more information on the programme, please see: https://por.regione.puglia.it/-/diritti-a-scuola-2017
[138] For more information on the programme, please see: https://eeagrants.org/archive/2009-2014/projects/RO09-0122
[139] For more information on the programme, please see: https://eskills.org.mt/en/Pages/Home.aspx

encourage girls and women to participate in sporting activities and to choose sport as a career.[140]

2.3   Educational choices

Overview of key findings

This section explores the educational choices made by boys and girls in compulsory education. Some key findings are outlined below.

- Comparable EU data is not available, but in general evidence from the national level suggests that **educational choices are affected by gender stereotypes, with girls and boys making educational choices that fall within traditional gender roles**. Boys across a range of EU Member States choose to study more traditionally 'male' subjects, such as sciences, industry and ICT, and girls choose to study more traditionally 'female' subjects, such as care, teaching, arts and humanities.

- **This trend is present in most Member States and starts in compulsory education** as soon as pupils can choose educational subjects. For example, in Czechia, 34.4% of boys in upper secondary education chose to take mathematics compared to 18.6% of girls. In France, in 2018, 56.5% of male learners chose sciences compared to 39% of female learners. In Ireland, 92% of boys' schools have physics, chemistry and biology on the Leaving Certificate timetable, compared to 77% of girls' schools.

- **Boys are also more likely to choose vocational educational and training pathways than girls in most Member States**, with this gender difference becoming more pronounced at upper secondary level. In the EU, in 2018, 54.6% of male students were in VET programmes at upper secondary level, compared to 41.8% of female students.

- **The influence of gender stereotypes on educational choices is also seen in the career expectations of boys and girls**. According to PISA 2018 data, among top performers in mathematics and science in OECD countries, boys are more likely than girls to expect a career in science and engineering, and girls are more likely than boys to state that they expect a career in health-related occupations.

- **Many Member States have national strategies in place** that recognise there is a challenge of gender segregation in educational choices and that aim

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[140] For more information on the programme, please see:
https://www.sportaustria.at/de/schwerpunkte/soziales-und-gesellschaftspolitik/gender-equality/aktivitaeten-gender-equality/strategie-gender-equality-2015/

> to address this. **Most of these initiatives, though, are targeted at girls**, with the aim of encouraging them to enter fields in which they are under-represented, particularly STEM. This may be due to the increasingly critical role of STEM skills for innovation and competitiveness in knowledge-intensive economies. **There are a few initiatives that are gender-neutral** and aim to deal with gender segregation in educational choices in general, with Boys and Girls Days in several countries, such as Austria, Belgium and Germany. There are only a few initiatives that exclusively target boys in this area.

2.3.1   Choosing STEM

STEM subjects are predominantly chosen by boys. In **Czechia**, for example, in 2017, 34.4% of boys in upper secondary education chose to take mathematics compared to 18.6% of girls.[141] In **France**, in 2018, 56.5% of male learners chose sciences compared to 39% of female learners.[142] This is the case even after a reform to the education system which aimed to give more flexibility to the learner to build an individual learning pathway according to their interests and tertiary education goals. In **Ireland**, which has a high number of single-sex schools, 92% of boys' schools have physics, chemistry and biology on the Leaving Certificate timetable, compared to 77% of girls' schools.[143] Furthermore, in 2019, girls only made up 28% of students sitting the Physics Leaving Certificate examination and only 7% of students sitting the engineering examination.[144]

Even **within STEM subjects, boys and girls tend to make choices that reflect gender stereotypes**. Evidence from **Belgium (Flanders)**, for example, shows that boys more often choose courses, such as industrial electricity, electronical installation techniques, applied informatics or industrial sciences – electromechanics, while girls more often choose courses such as decoration and restauration, pharmacy assistant, biomedical laboratory technology or architecture.[145] Similarly, in **Belgium (French Community)**, boys make up 98% of industry students, 97% of construction students, and 67% of agronomy students.[146] Finally, even in countries which have relatively higher enrolment in STEM fields of study, the gender disparity is still present. In **Germany**, more than one-third of students choose to study in STEM fields, which is much higher than the OECD average of 16% of students in engineering and construction and 6% in sciences, mathematics and statistics. Even so, men are over-

[141] CERMAT (2018). *The final examination results and its development since 2011*. Available at https://data.cermat.cz/files/files/MZ2017_ZZ.pdf

[142] Le ministre de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports (2020) *Filles et garçons sur le chemin de l'égalité, de l'école à l'enseignement supérieur, édition*. Available at https://www.education.gouv.fr/filles-et-garcons-sur-le-chemin-de-l-egalite-de-l-ecole-l-enseignement-superieur-edition-2020-289508

[143] Donnelly, K. (2019). *Gender gap in science, maths and tech subjects on offer in girls' and boys' schools*. Available at https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/education/gender-gap-in-science-maths-and-tech-subjects-on-offer-in-girls-and-boys-schools-38657808.html

[144] Examinations. *2019 Leaving Certificate Statistics*. available at: https://www.examinations.ie/statistics/

[145] Flemish Ministry of Education and Training. *Flemish education in figures, 2018-2019*. Available at https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/flemish-education-in-figures

[146] Federation Wallonie-Bruxelles. *Indicateurs statistiques: enseignement secondaire ordinaire et en alternance*. Available at https://www.iweps.be/indicateur-statistique/enseignement-secondaire-ordinaire-alternance/

represented – only 28% of young people who enrol in the STEM fields in Germany are female.[147]

Correspondingly, **boys are under-represented in fields of study that are more traditionally deemed to be 'female'**. In **Czechia**, girls make up over 75% of programmes focused on humanities, education, arts, medical care, hospitality and non-technical study programmes in specialised upper secondary education tracks.[148] In **Malta**, female-dominated subjects include health and social care (4.5% males), textiles and design (5.8% males), home economics (25% males), music (26.1% males) and art (29.1% males).[149] In **Slovakia**, at ISCED level 3 in 2019, female students were over-represented in three study fields: health (85%), culture and art (74%) and social sciences (70%), which includes study fields such as cosmetics or waitressing.[150] In **Slovenia**, the field of education and teacher education is predominantly female, with women making up 93.3% of students in this area of study.[151] In **Germany**, of those choosing to study art and art history, 62.7% are girls and 37.3% are boys.[152]

2.3.2   Choosing VET

Clear differences between boys and girls can also be seen in the choice of educational pathway. **Boys are more likely to choose vocational education and training pathways**. At EU level, gender differences can already be observed at lower secondary level, but these become far more pronounced at upper secondary stage. In 2018, at lower secondary level, 2.9% of EU male students were enrolled in VET programmes, compared to 2.2% of female students. At upper secondary level, this difference increases, with 54.6% of male students enrolled in VET programmes, compared to 41.8% of female students.[153]

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[147] OECD Education at a Glance 2017 https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2017_eag-2017-en

[148] CERMAT (2018). *The final examination results and its development since 2011*. Available at https://data.cermat.cz/files/files/MZ2017_ZZ.pdf

[149] MaltaToday. 2019a. Record number of 16-year-olds sat for SEC exams in 2019. 15 July 2019. https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/96295/record_number_of_16yearolds_sat_for_sec_examinations_in_2019#.X7_Msc1Kjic

[150] Own calculations based on: CVTI, 2019, *Štatistická ročenka - stredné odborné školy 2019/2020*. Available at: https://www.cvtisr.sk/cvti-sr-vedecka-kniznica/informacie-o-skolstve/statistiky/statisticka-rocenka-publikacia/statisticka-rocenka-stredne-odborne-skoly.html?page_id=9597

[151] Resolution on the National Program for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men 2015-2020. Available at: http://www.pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=RESO108

[152] Statistisches Bundesamt (2019). *Statistisches Jahrbuch 2019*, Band 3 Bildung, pp. 101 and 105. Available at: https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Querschnitt/Jahrbuch/statistisches-jahrbuch-2019-dl.pdf?__blob=publicationFile

[153] Eurostat, 2020, *Vocational education and training statistics*. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Vocational_education_and_training_statistics

Figure 2-9   Share of female and male graduates from upper secondary vocational programmes, 2018
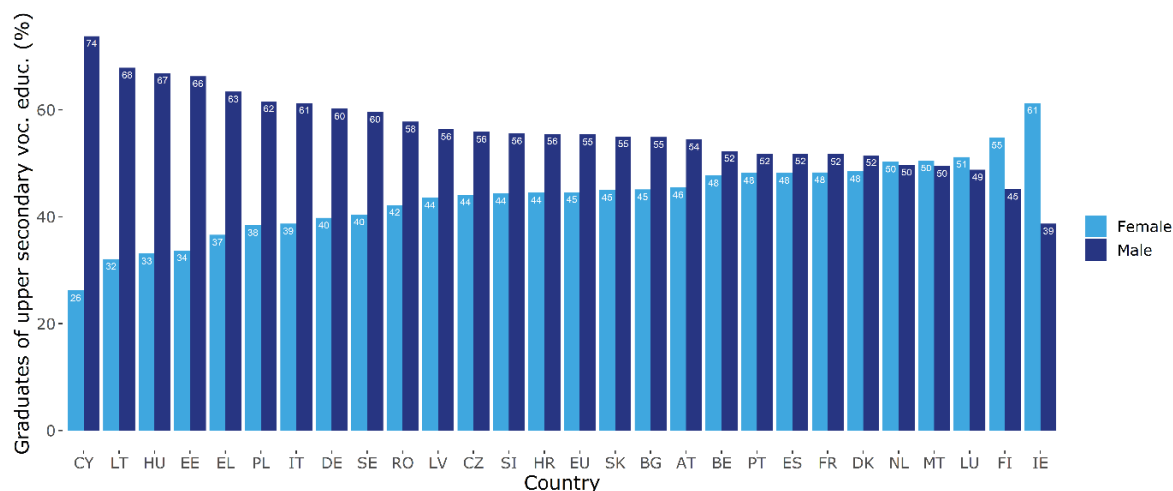
Source: Eurostat, 2020, Vocational education and training statistics. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Vocational_education_and_training_statistics

Figure 2-9 shows that, in 2018, women represented a smaller share of all graduates from upper secondary vocational programmes in the EU – 44.6%.[154] The difference is greatest in Cyprus, Hungary and Lithuania where at least twice as many boys graduate from VET programmes than girls. There are only five Member States – Ireland, Finland, Luxembourg, Malta and the Netherlands – which have higher proportions of female graduates of upper secondary VET programmes than males. This is evidenced in the country reports too, where **boys typically make up around two-thirds of upper secondary VET programmes**. In **Czechia**, in the school year 2018/2019, 65% of students in upper secondary schools without the final examination (vocational track) were boys. The trend of boys outnumbering girls in this education track has been strong and consistent since 1993 in the country.[155] In the **French Community of Belgium**, boys were over-represented in dual learning courses, making up 64.7% of students on this educational track in 2019.[156] In **Estonia**, boys more often choose a vocational education path – 36% of boys continue in upper secondary vocational education compared with only 19.2% of girls. In total, boys make up 67% of the student body in vocational upper secondary education in the country.[157] Boys in **Spain** make up 70% of participants in ISCED level 2 VET, and

[154] Eurostat (2020). *Vocational education and training statistics*. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Vocational_education_and_training_statistics

[155] Czech National Statistical Office. *Children, pupils, and students of various types of schools by sex*. Available at https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/3-vzdelavani

[156] Federation Wallonie-Bruxelles. *Indicateurs statistiques: enseignement secondaire ordinaire et en alternance*. Available at https://www.iweps.be/indicateur-statistique/enseignement-secondaire-ordinaire-alternance/

[157] Haaristo, H.-S., Räis, M. L., Kasemets, L., Kallaste, E., Aland, L., Anniste, K., Anspal, S., Haugas, S., Jaanits, J., Järve, J., Koppel, K., Lang, A., Lauri, T., Michelson, A., Murasov, M., Mägi, E., Piirimäe, K., Põder, K., Rajaveer, K., Sandre, S.-L., Sõmer, M. (2019). Elukestva õppe strateegia vahehindamine. (Lifelong Learning strategy: Interim Evaluation) Tallinn: Praxis, CentAR. Avaiable at: http://www.praxis.ee/en/works/interim-evaluation-of-the-lifelong-learning-strategy/

57.7% of VET students at ISCED level 3.[158] Evidence from **Malta** from 2019 further shows that girls (3,016 entries) were far more likely than boys (2,459 entries) to sit the final Secondary Education Certificate exams.[159] National data from **Romania**[160] and **Finland**[161] also show that boys favour non-academic pathways compared to girls.

It appears from expert views that this **disparity in VET choices is due in large part to traditional attitudes and expectations of gender roles in society**, which are still dominant in European society. The **Irish** case study, for example, shows how single-sex boys' schools (which are 17% of primary schools and 30% of secondary schools in the country) are more likely to have woodwork, metalwork or engineering facilities than girls' schools. This may be a reason for the overwhelming dominance of boys in VET programmes in the country, where males make up almost 100% of the enrolments on apprenticeships in engineering, manufacturing and construction[162] (see Annex III, Section 6.3.5). A similar view of the influence of gender stereotypes was held by experts interviewed for the **German** case study. They highlighted that in Germany, qualifications for typically 'female' professions, such as health and care, are not taught in dual VET courses, while qualifications for typically 'male' professions, such as manufacturing, are – which may explain the dominance of men in VET courses in the country (see Annex III, Section 6.3.4).

Within VET, the choice of subjects appears to be strongly influenced by traditional gender roles. In **Estonia**, for example, boys dominate in the largest field of vocational training – engineering, manufacturing and construction (79%), as well as in ICT (90%) and agriculture (73%). By contrast, girls make up 96% of business, administration and law students, 61% of students in services, and 58% of students of arts and humanities.[163] In **Spain**, in subjects such as personal image, sociocultural services, and tailoring, girls are the majority (90%), whereas in fishing, wood, maintenance, ICT or agriculture, for example, boys are the majority (above 93%).[164] In **Sweden**, boys in VET are the clear majority in construction- and technology-related programmes (80−97%), while girls are the majority in service- and care-related programmes (65−75%). In **Denmark**, 87% of the young people in the study area 'care, health and pedagogy' in vocational education are girls.[165]

[158] Ministry of Education (2020). *Indicators of the Spanish Education System*. Available at http://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/dam/jcr:7bd02364-3fd2-405f-b0d6-4fe05debbd38/seie-2020.pdf

[159] Matsec Examinations Board (2020). *Statistical Report 2019, Secondary Education Certificate Examinations*. Malta: Matsec, University of Malta.

[160] INSSE. *Statistical research in the field of education, School / Academic year 2018-2019*

[161] City of Helsinki (2020). *Indikaattorit*. Available at: https://www.nuortenhyvinvointikertomus.fi/indikaattorit/tulevaisuuden-hallinta/16-18-vuotiaat-toisen-asteen-koulutuksessa

[162] Dulee-Kinsolving, A., Guerin, S. (2021*). A study into Further education and training in Ireland – Women in FET*. SOLAS

[163] Serbak, K. (2018). *Mis mõjutab keskhariduseni jõudmist Eestis? Analüüs EHISe andmetel. (What affects the attainment of secondary education in Estonia? Analysis of EHIS data)*. Tartu: Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium. Available at https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/uuringud/keskhariduseni_joudmine_kadi_serbak.pdf

[164] Ministry of Education (2020). *Indicators of the Spanish Education System*. Available at : http://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/dam/jcr:7bd02364-3fd2-405f-b0d6-4fe05debbd38/seie-2020.pdf

[165] EVA (2019). *Køn og uddannelsesvalg i 9. klasse. Unges veje mod ungdomsuddannelse*. Avaliable at: https://www.eva.dk/ungdomsuddannelse/koen-uddannelsesvalg-9-klasse

Correspondingly, **more girls than boys choose upper secondary education that leads to university education**. In **Slovakia**, the academically more challenging general education track (gymnasium) is dominated by women (60%), and this trend has been consistent since 1995.[166] In **Spain**, 53.9% of girls compared to 46.1% of boys take the academic route.[167] In **Denmark**, more females (47%) than males (30%) chose general upper secondary education. Disparities are also observed in **Romania**, where only 56% of boys attend secondary school compared to 65% of girls.[168]

Boys are also more likely to be over-represented in alternative pathways to education in some Member States, such as second chance schools. In **Portugal**, for example, young men are much more likely to be enrolled in alternative paths to education, such as *Cursos CEF* (flexible pathway to finish compulsory education after school dropout) or 'Alternative Curricular Paths' (*CPA* in Portuguese).[169] In **Sweden**, boys are the majority (61%) in preparatory programmes for students that do not qualify to enter ordinary educational pathways.[170] In **Belgium (Flanders)**, in the school year 2018/2019, 67% of students in special secondary education were boys.[171] Our case study in **Luxembourg** shows that boys have a greater tendency of choosing 'low performance' education tracks (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6).

2.3.3 Non-formal learning outside school

Although there is no comparative EU-wide data, some national evidence shows that **girls participate more in non-formal learning outside formal education than boys**. Non-formal learning takes place outside formal learning environments but within an organisational framework. It arises from the learner's conscious decision to master a particular activity, skill or area of knowledge, but it does not follow a formal syllabus and is not governed by external accreditation and assessment. Non-formal learning typically takes place in community settings.[172] In **Croatia**, for example, girls have been found to be more active during non-formal learning activities.[173] One study conducted in four schools in the country (two rural and two urban) of pupils aged between 7 and 11 found that 66.4% of girls participated in non-formal learning outside school, compared to 33.3% boys.[174] In **Estonia**, girls participate slightly more often in non-formal learning than boys. The non-formal learning choices are also

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[166] Own calculations based on: CVTI (2019), *Štatistická ročenka - stredné odborné školy 2019/2020*. Available at: https://www.cvtisr.sk/cvti-sr-vedecka-kniznica/informacie-o-skolstve/statistiky/statisticka-rocenka-publikacia/statisticka-rocenka-stredne-odborne-skoly.html?page_id=9597
[167] Ministry of Education (2020). *Indicators of the Spanish Education System*. Available at : http://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/dam/jcr:7bd02364-3fd2-405f-b0d6-4fe05debbd38/seie-2020.pdf
[168] INSSE. *Statistical research in the field of education, School / Academic year 2018-2019*
[169] For more information, please visit: https://www.dge.mec.pt/percursos-curriculares-alternativos
[170] Statistics Sweden (2019), https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/temaomraden/jamstalldhet/jamstalld-utbildning/gymnasieskolan/#129810
[171] Flemish Ministry of Education and Training. *Flemish education in figures, 2018-2019*. Available at https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/flemish-education-in-figures
[172] More information available at: https://www.coe.int/en/web/lang-migrants/formal-non-formal-and-informal-learning
[173] Martinčević, J. (2010). *Provođenje slobodnog vremena i uključenost učenika u izvannastavne aktivnosti unutar škole. Život i škola: časopis za teoriju i praksu odgoja I obrazovanja*, 56(24), 19-34.; Terzić, V. (2015). *Izvannastavne glazbene aktivnosti u školama novogradiškog kraja*. Pribavljeno 18.6.2018.
[174] Markovic Josipa (2018). *Attitudes of lower elementary school pupils towards extracurricular activities*. Available at https://repozitorij.foozos.hr/islandora/object/foozos%3A664/datastream/PDF/view

influenced by gender, with a higher share of boys in technology (78%) and sports (58%) activities, and a lower share of boys in music and arts (27%) and other general cultural activities (36%).[175] In **Belgium (Flanders)**, almost twice as many girls take part in extracurricular arts education.[176]

2.3.4   Career expectations

The impact of traditional gender roles is also evident in what pupils expect of their career. According to PISA 2018 data, among top performers in mathematics and science in OECD countries, **boys are more likely than girls to expect a career in science and engineering**, and girls are more likely than boys to state that they expect a career in health-related occupations.[177] This is the case in almost every EU Member State for which data was available, as shown in Figure 2-10. Career expectations have an impact on the career choices made by children later on in life, and this is discussed in detail in Section 4.1.2 of this report.

Figure 2-10 Gender differences in career expectations in science and engineering (PISA 2018)

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[175] Haaristo, H.-S., Räis, M. L., Kasemets, L., Kallaste, E., Aland, L., Anniste, K., Anspal, S., Haugas, S., Jaanits, J., Järve, J., Koppel, K., Lang, A., Lauri, T., Michelson, A., Murasov, M., Mägi, E., Piirimäe, K., Põder, K., Rajaveer, K., Sandre, S.-L., Sõmer, M. (2019). Elukestva õppe strateegia vahehindamine. (Lifelong Learning strategy: Interim Evaluation) Tallinn: Praxis, CentAR. Avaiable at: http://www.praxis.ee/en/works/interim-evaluation-of-the-lifelong-learning-strategy/
[176] Flemish Ministry of Education and Training. *Flemish education in figures, 2018-2019*. Available at https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/flemish-education-in-figures
[177] OECD (2020). Gender gap in career expectations amongst top performers in mathematics and/or science. *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*. PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/e99e49c0-en.

Source: OECD (2020), 'Gender gap in career expectations amongst top performers in mathematics and/or science', in PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/e99e49c0-en. Note: The dark blue diamond and square indicate statistically significant difference.

The **gap between girls and boys in expectations for a career in health-related professions** are greatest in Denmark, Portugal and Sweden and lowest in Greece (no gap), Romania and Slovakia. Correspondingly, more girls than boys expect to have a career in health-related occupations. This is the case for every Member State for which data is available. The gender gap is highest in Finland, Portugal and Slovakia and lowest in Estonia, Italy and Sweden, as seen in Figure 2-11 below.

Figure 2-11 Gender differences in career expectations in health-related occupations (PISA 2018)
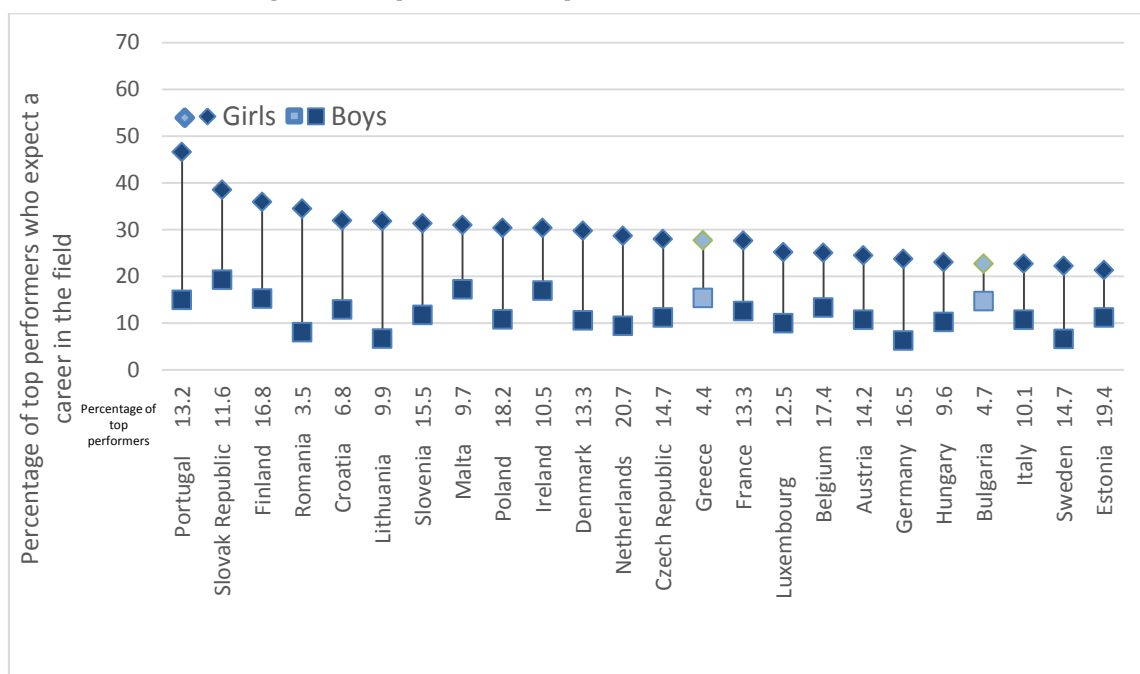
Source: OECD (2020), 'Gender gap in career expectations amongst top performers in mathematics and/or science', in PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/e99e49c0-en. Note: The dark blue diamond and square indicate statistically significant difference.

Initiatives aimed at changing gender stereotypes in educational choices

High-quality career advice, guidance and counselling play an important role in ensuring that young people make informed and appropriate subject choices, and in challenging gender stereotypes.[178] The purpose of this support is not to directly point

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[178] European Commission (2017). *Continuity and transitions in learner development. Guiding principles for policy development on learner pathways and transitions in school education*. Available at: https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/Governance/2018-wgs3-learner-development_en.pdf

young people to career pathways that are atypical of traditional gender roles, but rather to support them in choosing a career that is based on their abilities as opposed to on what is traditionally expected of their gender. In **Czechia**, for example, a publication aiming to support career counsellors and education providers in changing gender stereotypes in educational choices[179] focused on getting children to think about their career choices on the basis of a realistic assessment of their own abilities and skills, regardless of whether they fit into the traditional social roles of men and women. However, such career advice tends to only come into play at a stage where young people have already chosen certain subjects in school, having possibly been influenced by traditional gender roles already (the influence of gender stereotypes on boys' and girls' career and study choices is further discussed in Section 3).

It is well documented that the transition from lower to upper secondary VET poses a high risk of dropout, due to learners having unrealistic expectations of their course. One survey from **the Netherlands** found that most learners dropping out of VET schools without obtaining an upper secondary qualification attributed their decision to a poor educational choice.[180] This, in turn, has a gender dimension, due to the greater proportion of boys taking vocational routes.

National strategies that aim for gender equality in educational choices are largely in place across EU Member States. In **Lithuania**, for example, the action plan to implement the National Programme on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men 2015−2021 aims to encourage girls and boys to choose 'non-traditional female and male' study fields and professions.[181] In **Romania**, the National Strategy for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities and Treatment of Women and Men and the Prevention and Combating of Domestic Violence for 2018−2021 aims to combat gender stereotypes in the labour market and in masculinised occupations.[182] However, the strategy focuses on the gaps present to the detriment of women in the labour market, and does not bring into question the gaps in terms of school attendance and skills development of boys. In **Slovenia**, the Resolution on the National Programme for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men 2015−2020 (and its corresponding implementation) aims to increase the share of girls and boys in educational programmes and orientations where they are under-represented.[183]

Most of these strategies, however, focus on changing the educational choices of women, and in particular on increasing the number of girls enrolled in

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[179] Gender Studies, o.p.s., Ministry of Education (2019). *Dvanáct ověřených metod pro rozvoj kolegiální spolupráce.* Available at : https://cizinci.npi.cz/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/volba-pov.pdf

[180] GHK (2010). *Guiding at-risk youth through learning to work: Lessons from across Europe*. Luxembourg Publications Office of the European Union

[181] Action Plan For The Implementation Of The National Program For Equal Opportunities For Women And Men For 2018–2021. Available at https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/571f9fe079d711e8ae2bfd1913d66d57

[182] Strategia naţională privind promovarea egalităţii de şanse şi de tratament între femei şi bărbaţi şi prevenirea şi combaterea violenţei domestice pentru perioada 2018-2021 (The National Strategy for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities and Treatment for Women and Men and the Prevention and Combating of Domestic Violence for the period 2018-2021). Available at https://anes.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Strategia-Nationala-ES-si-VD.pdf

[183] Resolution on the National Program for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men 2015-2020. Available at http://www.pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=RESO108#

STEM and other traditionally male-dominated subjects and sectors. Few focus on attracting more men to social sciences or arts/humanities courses. If such initiatives exist, they seem to be more targeted towards the working population, such as the 'Care? I Go for IT!' programme in **Belgium (Flanders)**.[184] In **Cyprus**, the third national action plan on gender equality 2019−2023 aims to tackle the gender disparity in STEM professions by focusing on the education and training of women in ICT.[185] In **Ireland**, the Irish government and several stage agencies support the 'I WISH' programme which aims to encourage girls to study STEM subjects and to pursue a career in STEM.[186] In **Greece**, the National Coalition for Digital Skills, launched in June 2018, has set up several initiatives to upgrade digital skills among the public, small and medium-sized enterprises, and civil servants. The gender focus is on women and girls: Priority 11 is to 'empower women and girls to go digital' and priority 12 is for 'better employment conditions for female talent with digital skills'.[187]

An explanation for the dominance of female-focused STEM initiatives could be **the critical role of STEM skills to the innovation and competitiveness of knowledge-intensive economies**. The demand for STEM skills has been increasing over the past two decades because of structural changes, such as rapid digitalisation.[188] There is clear evidence to show that the supply of higher-level STEM skills is reliant on the development of competences, interest and passion in STEM subjects through the early years of education,[189] which may thus explain the focus on increasing young girls' interest in STEM and women's take-up of STEM professions.

Another possible explanation offered by experts for the focus of initiatives on girls in STEM (as opposed to boys in female-dominant sectors) is the fact that **women are still under-represented in positions of leadership** across a range of professions, which needs to be addressed more pressingly. As one interviewee in **Germany** stated, girls achieve better grades, perform better at school and in higher education, so *"the key question is: why don't they get to the top?"* This view must, however, be balanced with findings from recent literature that point to a shift in this trajectory: *"Although a significant minority of males continues to reach the highest echelons of achievement in education and labour markets, the median male is moving in the opposite direction"* in terms of skills acquisition, employment rates, occupational stature, and real wage levels.[190] (See Section 4 for a deeper exploration of this.)

[184] Please see https://www.ikgaervoor.be/

[185] National Action Plan for Equality between Men and Women. Available at http://www.mjpo.gov.cy/mjpo/mjpo.nsf/sectorgend02_el/sectorgend02_el?OpenDocument&ExpandSection=3#_Section3

[186] For more information please see: www.iwish.ie

[187] Digital Skills Greece (2017). *Enhancing digital skills in Greece – National Action plan for Digital Skills and Jobs in Greece*. Available at http://elke.eap.gr/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/dsgr_action_plan_eng_subm4_no-memo.pdf

[188] For more information, please see : https://oecdskillsandwork.wordpress.com/2016/05/06/the-growing-need-for-developing-the-right-stem-skills/

[189] For more information, please see: https://skillspanorama.cedefop.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUSP_AH_STEM_0.pdf

[190] D Autor and M Wasserman (2013). *Wayward Sons: The emerging gender gap in labor markets and education*. Available at: https://economics.mit.edu/files/8754

Some Member States have gender-neutral policy initiatives to reduce gender disparities in educational choices, promoting non-traditional educational choices. In **Denmark**, 'The Future is Yours' is a website that has been launched by the Ministry of Children, Gender Equality, Integration and Social Affairs (later the Ministry of Food, Fisheries and Gender Equality), aimed at school students in 8th to 10th grade (finalising lower secondary education) who are making their first choices about education and their futures. The aim of the webpage is to inform students of educational opportunities in subjects that are not typical for their gender.[191] In **Lithuania**, the National Programme on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (2018–2021) aims to improve gender equality in the education and science sector, including by promoting non-traditional study and career choices.[192]

Box 2-5   Reform of the upper secondary education qualification (*Baccalauréat*) – France

This reform to the upper secondary education qualification (*Baccalauréat*) was introduced in France to give learners more flexibility in choosing their majors (three subject matters) as of the penultimate grade of upper secondary education. The reform aims in this way to fight gender stereotypes in educational choices and increase the number of boys and girls in learning pathways where their genders are under-represented.[193] Learners can choose three subject matters from 12, in addition to compulsory subjects. They are encouraged to choose the subjects in which they are successful and that correspond to their interests and to their career aspirations. The reform is very recent, and the first cohort impacted by the reform have just taken their upper secondary education qualification (July 2020). Nevertheless, initial feedback suggests that learners' choice of subject matter remains consistent with the trend that prevailed before the reform. For example, 26% of learners took the three subject matters that were at the core of the now discontinued scientific upper secondary education qualification (*Baccalauréat*), which was the most popular.[194]

More information: https://www.education.gouv.fr/egalite-des-filles-et-des-garcons-9047

There are few examples of initiatives that target boys and their educational choices. Policymakers may prefer gender-neutral approaches as they are more consistent with the ultimate aim of making education inclusive for all. In **Sweden**, on the local level, there are municipalities that actively support non-traditional study and career choices for both boys and girls. One example is the municipality of Katrineholm,

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[191] The Ministry for Food, Fisheries and Gender Equality (2020). *Om "Fremtiden er din".* Available at https://fremtidenerdin.dk/om-fremtiden-er-din

[192] For more information, please visit: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/countries/lithuania

[193] Le ministre de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports. *L'egalite les filles et les garçons*. Available at: https://www.education.gouv.fr/egalite-des-filles-et-des-garcons-9047

[194] Le ministre de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports*. Enseignements de spécialité au lycée : des parcours plus divers et plus adaptés aux profils et aux projets des lycéen*s. Available at https://www.education.gouv.fr/enseignements-de-specialite-au-lycee-des-parcours-plus-divers-et-plus-adaptes-aux-profils-et-aux-5321

which actively aims to support boys in choosing care programmes in upper secondary school, resulting in more boys choosing care programmes in Sweden.[195] In **Denmark** too, the focus is on boys in the social services sectors in which they are under-represented: the Danish Nurses Organisation is working on a recruitment campaign aimed at males, as well as providing recommendations on the retention of male nurse students.[196] Boys' and Girls' Days in several countries, such as **Austria**, **Belgium** and **Germany**, aim to introduce boys and girls to sectors that are non-traditional for their gender, as seen in Box 2-6 below. In **Luxembourg**, Action 3.5 of the National Action Plan on Gender Equality (2018−2023) encourages boys to take up more socio-educational classes at school (and thereby professions later).[197]

Box 2-6   Boys' Day – Austria

This is an initiative led by the Austrian Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection that invites boys and young men to learn about working in the social care sector, an occupation classed as 'non-traditional' for men. Social organisations open their doors for a day and show boys and young men what it is like to work in the sector, giving them a chance to get involved in some tasks. The types of organisations that take part are kindergartens, primary schools, care homes, hospitals, and education and training organisations that offer training in the care sector. Related workshops take place during the course of the year, dealing with issues, such as masculinity, equality and discussion of careers that are not typical for men.

More information:
https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20191114_OTS0129/grosses-interesse-am-boys-day-2019

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[195] See https://skr.se/skolakulturfritid/forskolagrundochgymnasieskola/studieochyrkesvagledning/genusmedvetensy v.14689.html

[196] Danish Nurses Organization (2020). *Mænd I sygeplejen*. Available at: https://dsr.dk/politik-og-nyheder/det-mener-dsr/maend-i-sygeplejen

[197] See https://gouvernement.lu/dam-assets/documents/actualites/2020/07-juillet/Plan-d-action-national-Egalite.pdf

3.0 Explaining the gender gap

To help us better understand the gender gap in compulsory education, as well as why it differs across EU Member States, this chapter reviews some of the existing evidence on the factors which contribute to school success - or failure - and how Member States are working to reduce the influence of some of these factors. As we will see, one of the most commonly cited reasons for boys' underperformance is their disruptive behaviour at school and engagement in activities which are 'unproductive to learning' outside school. Gender behaviour, however, can only tell part of the story. It is what is visible on the surface, and the manifestation of a complex array of underlying factors.

3.1   Towards a theoretical framework

There is an established body of literature on gender behaviour and identities, and it is important to explore this in relation to educational choices and outcomes. It is possible to make a general distinction between those theories that place a greater emphasis on biological factors on the one hand, and more overtly 'social' models of gender behaviour on the other. We will first explore the main arguments of both theories, before going on to present a multi-dimensional approach, which draws on elements of both.

3.1.1   The influence of biological differences

A first group of scholars believe that the main reason why boys and girls behave and perform differently at school is because of **innate biological differences between men and women**. The three principal arguments are that, first, girls have stronger cognitive abilities than boys, as evidence shows that boys are over-represented in populations with mental or reading disabilities, dyslexia, stuttering and other types of speech disorders. This would give them an advantage over boys at school.[198] Second, girls also have stronger non-cognitive abilities than boys, as evidence shows that, as early as in kindergarten, *"boys display more developmental disabilities, more disruptive conduct in class and less positive orientations to learning activities"*.[199] It is argued that boys cannot sit still in class and have a greater inherent desire for physical activity than girls, which is not favourable to learning in a classroom setting.[200] Third, the onset of puberty happens later with boys than girls. This leads many to believe that 'it is normal' for boys to be 'slower' or to 'underperform' at school compared with girls, because their neurological development is slower due to a later onset of puberty.[201] One interviewee from **Finland** described the issue as follows:

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[198] Spelke E. S. (2005). Sex differences in intrinsic aptitude for mathematics and science? A critical review. *Am. Psychol.* 60 (9):950–58.

[199] Zill N. & J. West (2001). *Entering Kindergarten: A Portrait of American Children When They Begin School: Findings from the Condition of Education 2000*. Washington, DC: Natl.

[200] OECD (2017). *Girls better than boys at working together to solve problems, finds new OECD PISA global education survey*. Paris: OECD. Available at: http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/girls-better-than-boys-at-working-together-to-solve-problems-finds-new-oecd-pisa-global-education-survey.htm

[201] *Ibid.*

"puberty of boys starts later than puberty of girls. This influences boys' concentration and learning" (see Annex III, Section 6.3.3).

Boys' and girls' neurological strengths are also slightly different. If boys are better at deductive reasoning, visualising, and need a lot of physical space to perform cognitive tasks, girls would be better at inductive reasoning and have stronger bi-cerebral access to language.[202] Their enhanced neurological capacity for languages would be one of the main reasons why girls perform better at school than boys. As will be discussed in more detail in Section 3.2.1 below, language proficiency (and reading literacy in particular) is a foundational skill for learning, because school-based learning is very 'verbal' in its nature. School would therefore be more suited to girls' neurological strengths than boys', putting them at a disadvantage.[203]

Several scholars believe that, if there are any neurological differences between boys and girls, this is due to the influence of hormonal differences. As mentioned by Dr Annelies Kleinherenbrink in her PhD thesis on 'The Politics of Plasticity: Sex and Gender in the 21st Century Brain', *"the central premise of brain organisation theory is that sex differences are 'programmed' in the womb under the influence of hormones – especially testosterone – similar to the way hormones influence the sexual differentiation of the external genitalia"*.[204] There is, however, ample neuropsychological evidence which indicates that, **although some cognitive differences may exist, these are small, and boys and girls are born with similar (average) mental abilities**.[205] A study from 2014,[206] for example, shows that no significant differences can be observed between men and women on most personality traits.[207] The only personality dimensions on which differences could be observed were agreeableness/tender-mindedness (girls are more tender-minded than boys in general), sensation-seeking (boys are more sensation-seeking than girls), interest in 'things' versus 'people' (girls are more interested in people, boys are more interested in things), and physical aggression (boys display more physically aggressive behaviour than girls).

Moreover, in her thesis, Dr Kleinherenbrink continues by saying that any neurological differences or 'predispositions' of boys and girls can be strengthened (or weakened) by certain processes of socialisation (e.g. due to upbringing, schooling, or society more generally). This is confirmed by the case study research conducted in **Sweden**, which

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[202] Michael Gurian & Kathy Stevens. (2010*). Boys and Girls Learn Differently! A Guide for Teachers and Parents. John Wiley & Sons Inc.*

[203] Clinciu, Aurel Ion. (2014). Personality, gender and high school profile correlates of underachievement. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 127 (2014) 149-153.

[204] Kleinherenbrink, A.V. (2016). *The Politics of Plasticity: Sex and Gender in the 21st Century Brain. PhD Thesis. University of Amsterdam.* Available at: https://dare.uva.nl/search?identifier=3ee41101-960c-4b55-ad71-44ad75554241

[205] For an overview, see Halpern, D. F. (2013). *Sex differences in cognitive abilities.* New York: Psychology press.

[206] Hyde, J. S. (2014). Gender similarities and differences. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *65*, 373-398. Available at: https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115057

[207] No significant differences were observed between men and women for the following personality traits: gregariousness and conscientiousness, reward sensitivity, the temperament dimension of negative affectivity, relational aggression, tentative speech, some aspects of sexuality (e.g. oral sex experience, attitudes about extramarital sex, attitudes about masturbation), leadership effectiveness, self-esteem and academic self-concept.

shows that **social factors can either amplify or weaken certain biological differences which *do* exist between males and females**. For example, boys' later average maturity is in part caused by biological differences, which could lead to boys developing key cognitive skills, such as concentration and self-discipline, at a later age than girls (and these skills are crucial for educational success). The family, school, and wider societal environment can either contribute to strengthening or weakening the development of such key skills for learning (see Annex III, Section 6.3.8).

3.1.2   The influence of contextual factors

A second group of scholars believes in the 'gender similarity theory', or the hypothesis that men and women are born equal on almost all psychological variables. They believe in ***"the importance of context in creating or erasing gender differences"***.[208] Scientific evidence from **Luxembourg**,[209] the **Netherlands**[210], and **Sweden**[211] states that the gender gap in education cannot be explained due to biological differences, but are rather the result of different processes of socialisation in society. In fact, in the last ten years academics have *"moved away from examining biological [and psychological] differences as the basis for the underperformance in school"*,[212] focusing increasingly on the various contextual factors which influence gender behaviour and school performance. The link between gender behaviour and context is confirmed in the SAGE Encyclopaedia of Psychology and Gender, which defines gender behaviour as *"a fundamental expression of gender identity and gender socialisation that occurs developmentally for an individual throughout the life span"*. It encompasses *"ways in which an individual acts in accordance with their identified male or female gender"*.[213] In other words, contextual factors at various levels (individual, family, school, society) either weaken or strengthen gender stereotypical behaviour, and – as will be discussed in the following pages – this has an impact on school performance.

Throughout this chapter, we will see that **masculinity norms and their relations to power are particularly important social constructs** which penetrate the family and school environment, and wider society. They have an important impact on boys' and girls' individual behaviour, attitudes, and education outcomes, but are not understood well enough yet, as this is a fairly recent field of study. Another reason for this, as will be discussed, is linked to the historical power positions of men and masculinity relative to women and femininity. Boys/men and their challenges and vulnerabilities have, until recently, not been problematised, and the focus has always

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[208] Hyde, J. S. (2014). Gender similarities and differences. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *65*, 373-398. Available at: https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115057

[209] LUCET & SCRIPT (2018). *Rapport National sur l'Éducation au Luxebourg* 2018, p. 62. Available at: https://www.bildungsbericht.lu/media/ul_natbericht_fr_web.pdf

[210] Onderwijsraad (2020). *Een verkenning van sekseverschillen in het onderwijs.* Den Haag: Onderwijsraad.

[211] Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (2019). *Se, förstå och förändra ATT MOTVERKA KÖNSSKILLNADER I SKOLRESULTAT*. Available at: www.skr.se

[212] Jha, J., N. Menon and D. Chatterjee (2017). *Boys' Underperformance in Education. Revisiting the Issue in the Commonwealth. Commonwealth of Learning:* p. 29. Available at: http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/2810

[213] Srivastava, D. Gendered behaviour. In Nadal, K. L. *The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Psychology and Gender.* Available at: https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-psychology-and-gender/i8760.xml#:~:text=Gendered%20behavior%20are%20ways%20in,and%20develops%20views%20defining%20gender.

been on the issues facing girls/women. This 'invisibility' of boys/men's problems means that they are not properly addressed, and can contribute to further exacerbating some of the key challenges facing women in society (such as gender-based violence or women being 'left' with most of the caring responsibilities in the family sphere).

3.1.3 Theoretical framework on the factors impacting boys' school success or failure

As we have shown, biological, environmental, and social factors are all implicated within these debates, and there is no simple causality. Instead of focusing on factors in isolation, we base our discussion of the potential factors underlying boys' underperformance on Dr Margriet van Hek's **theoretical model of the influence of contextual factors on education outcomes**.[214] In her study, van Hek analysed the influence of family, school, and societal context on reading performance and educational attainment. Building on this model, and recognising the multi-dimensional nature of gender behaviours, we have structured our analysis around four inter-locking 'domains,' embedded in an overarching context of influencing masculinity and femininity norms (see Figure 3-1). As the conceptual diagram illustrates, we have considered the roles of individual attitudes and behaviour, family, school, and societal factors and appraised their impact on boys' underachievement, drawing on EU and country level data, and a review of wider academic literature.

Figure 3-1   Factors impacting school success or failure for boys
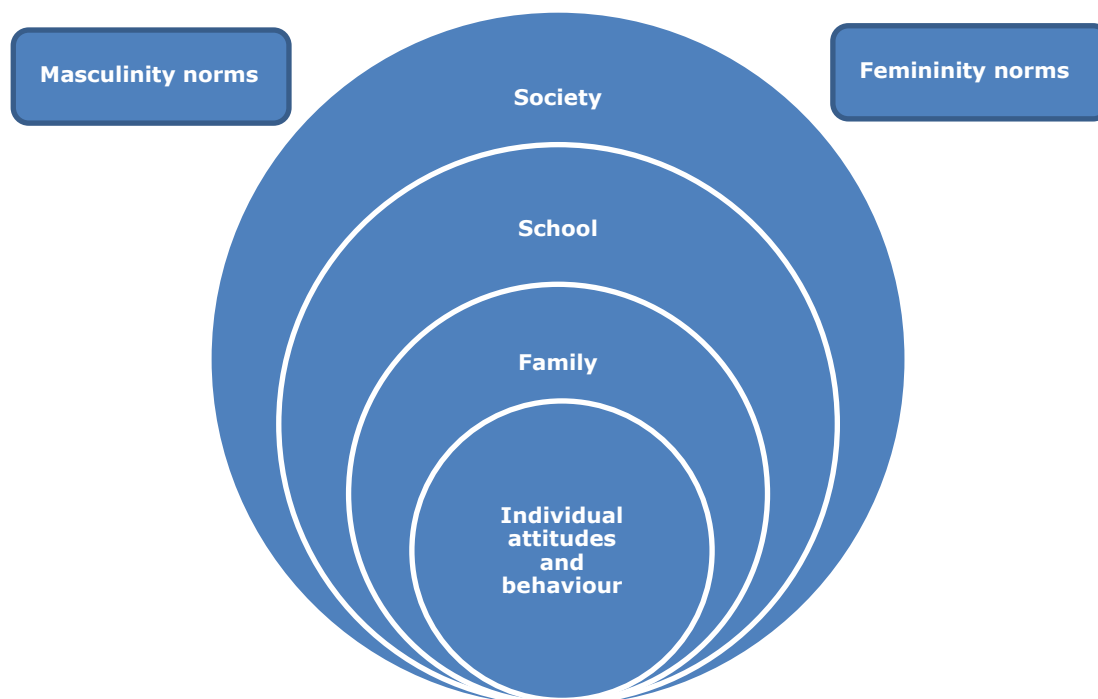
Source: Ecorys

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[214] Van Hek, M. (2017). *Gender equality in educational attainment and reading performance*. BOXPress.

The following sections explore each of these sets of factors in turn. Section 3.2 covers individual attitudes and behaviours, followed by family factors in Section 3.3 and school factors in section 3.4. In Section 3.5, we look at societal factors.

3.2 Individual attitudes and behaviour

<u>**Overview of key findings**</u>

This section explores differences between boys and girls in terms of their individual attitudes and behaviours, while being mindful of the fact that boys and girls are not homogenous groups and that individual attitudes and behaviours are mediated by factors such as socio-economic status, family characteristics, cultures, and traditions. Some key findings are outlined below.

- **Boys spend less time reading on average, and also enjoy reading less than girls**. The reasons underlying boys' limited engagement (and interest) in reading are complex, ranging from reading being seen as a 'feminine' activity which boys should not engage in, to boys being less encouraged by their parents (and fathers especially) to read, due to gender stereotypes. Reading, however, is an important activity to develop functional literacy as a basic skill for learning, and therefore has wider implications for boys' performance across other subjects.

- **Boys are more likely to outwardly display negative attitudes towards learning than girls, but do find it important to perform well at school**. These attitudes have a direct impact on education outcomes and are influenced by what boys and girls 'feel' or 'think' they are (supposed to be) good at in school, and puts boys in a conflicting situation of having to perform well, without displaying any signs of effort.

- **Boys have a higher tendency to externalise problems in the form of challenging behaviour or violence**. This has a direct impact on school performance and is influenced by the fact that boys have poorer socio-emotional skills than girls and, from a very young age, are pressured to conform to traditional values and norms of masculinity (such as 'acting tough' or 'being self-sufficient').

- **Boys are more likely to engage in unproductive activities outside school (e.g. substance abuse), whereas girls spend more time on average doing homework and reading outside school**. Boys also spend more time playing video games than girls, but there is no conclusive evidence of a positive correlation between playing video games and bad school results. Looking at children's general health and well-being, boys report being 'more satisfied with life' than girls overall.

- **Few policy initiatives include a specific focus on changing unproductive attitudes and behaviour among boys**. Many initiatives, though, such as support for teachers to deal with different forms of challenging behaviour, or policies aimed at improving young people's health and well-being, aim to tackle unproductive attitudes and behaviour among children *in general*.

A number of differences can be observed between boys and girls in terms of their individual behaviours and attitudes, which have an impact on their performance at school. In the following sections, we will review evidence on the differences between boys and girls in terms of their attitudes and behaviour towards reading (Section 3.2.1), school and learning (Section 3.2.2), their attitudes and behaviour *at* school (Section 3.2.3) and their attitudes and behaviour *outside* school (Section 3.2.4).

3.2.1   Attitudes and behaviour towards reading

A first big difference between boys and girls is in the amount of time spent on, and their enjoyment of, reading. PISA data for 2018 tells us that across the EU, **more than half of boys (54%) at lower secondary school level do not read for enjoyment**. This is confirmed by their responses to the statement 'for me, reading is a waste of time' (see Figure 3-2). Two-fifths of boys (40%) compared with 21% of girls agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Relatedly, boys have been consistently scoring lower on the PISA reading test (as discussed in Section 2.2.1 above). Poor reading skills are also linked with bad results at school, since reading is one of the main tools to strengthen language proficiency, which, in turn, is the basis of all learning.

In a recent interview with VRT, the Flemish public broadcasting agency, commenting on the latest PISA results for Flanders, Dirk Van Damme (former head of the OECD's Centre for Research and Innovation) said that underachievement in mathematics is linked with underperformance in literacy/reading skills.[215] In 1922, the Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein already said that *"the limits of our language define the limits of our world"*.[216] Indeed, it is through language that we perceive the world, and it is through language that pupils have access to the curriculum. It could therefore be hypothesised that, due to more limited reading skills, **boys have challenges developing so-called 'cognitive academic language proficiency' (CALP)**[217] **or functional literacy**,[218] a basic skill crucial for cognitive progress across the curriculum.

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[215] Please see https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/12/08/wiskunde-wetenschappen/

[216] Wittgenstein, L. (1922), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Available at: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5740/5740-pdf.pdf

[217] In 1979, the terms BICS and CALP were coined to distinguish 'basic interpersonal communicative skills' (BICS) from 'cognitive academic language proficiency' (CALP). See: Cummins, J. (2008). 'BICS and CALP: Empirical and theoretical status of the distinction'. In: Street, B. V., and Hornberger, N. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Language and Education, Volume 2: Literacy*. New York: Springer, p. 71-83.

[218] See also Staring, F. and A. Broughton (2020). *Education begins with language*. Thematic report from a programme of seminars with peer learning to support the implementation of the Council Recommendation on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages (2019-2020). Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6b7e2851-b5fb-11ea-bb7a-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

Figure 3-2   Share of underachieving pupils rating their agreement with the statement 'For me, reading is a waste of time' (PISA 2018)

Source: PISA 2018. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/
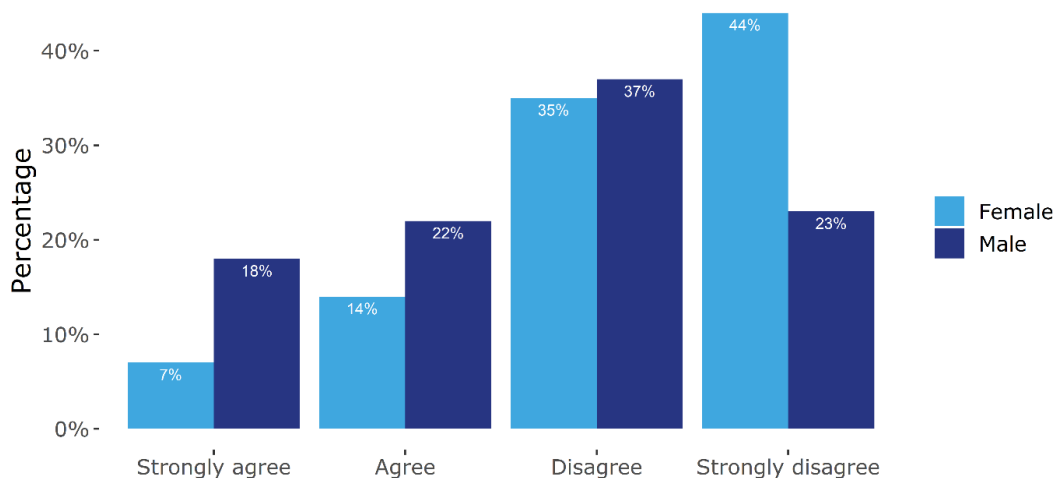
Why then are boys less engaged in reading than girls? A recent report published by the Dutch Education Council in October 2020[219] suggests that **reading has a feminine image among boys and girls** – but slightly more so with boys. Several interviews conducted as part of the case studies in **Sweden**, **Germany**, and **Finland** confirm that while more 'feminine' behaviour – such as reading or trying hard at school – contributes to educational success, this is often seen by boys as something which they should try to avoid, because it does not conform with traditional gender norms. Stakeholders interviewed in Germany, for instance, noted that the gender norm persists that a 'real man' is successful without having to put in any effort (see Annex III, Section 6.3.4).

Another reason could be that **boys and girls seem to be motivated by different types of texts**. One study exploring boys' and girls' (aged 10–11) attitudes towards reading and writing[220] suggests that boys typically do not enjoy reading schoolbooks. They tend to be more interested in reading comic books and humorous stories, whereas adventure books are girls' favourite type of books. Another study, commissioned by the Dutch Reading Foundation (*Stichting Lezen*),[221] suggests that girls are ahead of boys in terms of their socio-emotional development, and that this is why they can more easily engage with texts at a higher relational and abstract level, whereas boys tend to be more inclined to relate stories to their own experiences.[222] 'Unwanted' reading tasks, such as the reading of abstract and technical texts (much of

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[219] Onderwijsraad (2020). *Een verkenning van sekseverschillen in het onderwijs.* Den Haag: Onderwijsraad.
[220] Tuula Merisuo-Storm (2006) Girls and Boys Like to Read and Write Different Texts. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, *50(2),* 111-125, DOI: 10.1080/00313830600576039
[221] See https://www.lezen.nl/nl
[222] Schlundt Bodien & Nelck-da Silva Rosa (2004). *Als Jongeren lezen. Longitudinaal onderzoek naar verband tussen ego-ontwikkeling en bij adolescenten tussen 13 en 19 jaar en didactisch model voor reflectief lezen.* Stichting lezen. Available at:
https://www.lezen.nl/sites/default/files/Als%20jongeren%20lezen.pdf

which happens at school), would therefore be more difficult for boys than girls and could possibly explain why boys perform worse than girls at school overall.[223]

Finally, evidence shows that **fathers have an important role to play in boys' literacy development**. For example, some studies indicate that since men on average read less than women, they could potentially have a greater impact on their sons if they read out loud to them, or if their sons see them reading.[224] Home literacy strategies are also moderated by a range of factors, with evidence showing that **mothers and fathers use different strategies**. According to some studies, for instance, fathers would be more inclined to ask questions, clarify statements, invent stories, and make references to events outside the text when reading to their children, providing a very rich language offer.[225] Mothers, on the other hand, would use more 'interpretative' (and less 'literal') reading strategies with their children than fathers. For example, they are more inclined to ask children about the meaning of a story rather than simply 'checking facts' (which is more common among fathers).[226] Finally, there is evidence that **gender stereotypes are present in the ways parents adapt their reading strategies** to boys and girls. Fathers, for example, are more likely to use complex reading strategies (such as asking questions or making references outside the text, as described above) with their daughters than their sons.[227] This suggests that boys receive less language stimulation at home than girls, due to gender stereotyping, and that fathers are important role models for boys.

Initiatives aimed at encouraging boys to read more

In Section 2.2.1, we showed that national literacy strategies to improve overall reading literacy have been adopted by several Member States, but that few have a specific focus on tackling underperformance in reading among boys. In some countries, however, **specific initiatives *have* been developed to encourage boys to read more**. In **Bulgaria**, for example, the 'Read Every Day' campaign promotes the importance of parents reading aloud to their children.[228] The **Erasmus+** 'Boys Reading' project, involving partners from Austria, Cyprus, Croatia, Greece, Poland and Romania, aims to make reading an integral part of the everyday life of boys aged 11–15 years old.[229] In 2014 and 2015, the **Dutch 'Reading Coalition'** (*Leescoalitie*)[230] ran a national campaign entitled 'Dads Reading' (*Vaders lezen voor*),[231] aimed at

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[223] Oakhill, K. V. & A. Petrides (2007). Sex differences in the effects of interest on boys' and girls' reading comprehension. *Br. J. Psychol.* May 98 (Pt 2): 223-235. DOI: 10.1348/000712606X117649
[224] See for example https://www.lezen.nl/publicatie/van-woordjes-tot-wereldliteratuur/
[225] Vernon-Feagans, L and The Family Life Project Investigators (2010). Fathers' Early Contributions to Children's Language Development in Families from Low-income Rural Communities. *Early Child Res 5* (4): 450–463.https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2967789/
[226] This study, for example, says that the language quality offered by mothers would be of higher quality than that of fathers: Duursma, E. (2011). Vaders en voorlezen. Een onderzoek naar voorlezen door vaders in lage-inkomensgezinnen in de Verenigde Staten. *Pedagogiek 31* (1): p. 29 – 52. Available at: https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/259304
[227] See Vandermaas-Peeler, M., Sassine, B., Price, C., and Brilhart, C. (2012). Mothers' and fathers' guidance behaviours during storybook reading. *SAGE Journals*. Available at: http://ecl.sagepub.com/content/12/4/415.abstract
[228] See https://www.euread.com/contact-us/
[229] See https://cardet.org/get-updated/contact-us
[230] See http://leescoalitie.nl/
[231] See http://vadersvoorlezen.nl/

encouraging fathers to read more to their children. In **Germany**, as part of the nationally-funded 'Reading Makes You Strong' project (*Lesen macht Stark*), primary and secondary schools are provided with various types of reading material in order to make reading more fun for children.[232]

3.2.2   Attitudes and behaviour towards learning

Boys and girls also have different attitudes and behaviours towards school and learning more broadly. PISA data for 2015 shows that, while 88% of all pupils agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'trying hard at school is important', **boys were 6% less likely than girls to (strongly) agree**, and 3% less likely to report that they enjoy receiving good grades.[233]

Boys' negative attitudes towards learning could be another explanation for the gender gap in education, and this is confirmed in research from **Sweden**[234] and **Finland**,[235] which states that these attitudes stem from the fact that, just like reading, **schoolwork is seen as 'feminine' and 'uncool'**. A longitudinal survey from Ghent University among 6,380 Flemish students in seventh grade and 1,247 teachers[236] shows that boys have less positive attitudes towards school than girls, and that school success does not add to boys' popularity. PISA data from 2018 also shows that boys agree less strongly than girls that trying hard at school is important for pursuing further studies. Almost half (46%) of all boys strongly agreed with the statement 'trying hard at school will help me get into a good college'. This compares to 54% of girls (see Figure 3-3). As shown in Section 3.2.1 above, stakeholders from several countries interviewed as part of the case studies (e.g. **Germany**, **Sweden**, and **Luxembourg**) confirm that boys see schoolwork, just like reading, as a 'feminine' activity which they should avoid.

Another reason why boys may have negative attitudes towards learning, as confirmed by stakeholder interviews conducted in Germany, Finland, and Sweden, is that **boys are often more aware of the favourable position of men in the labour market compared with girls**. **German** interviewees said that, since they think they will be 'preferred' over girls on the labour market anyway, boys may be less inclined to perform well at school. In contrast, since they are aware that they will be facing difficulties on the labour market, girls may be more inclined to work hard at school (see Annex III, Section 6.3.4). This was confirmed by several stakeholders consulted as part of the **Swedish** case study, which furthermore states that the favourable position of boys on the labour market compared with girls could be one of the reasons why the underperformance of boys is not seen as a priority at political level (this will

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[232] See https://www.schleswig-holstein.de/DE/Landesregierung/IQSH/iqsh_node.html

[233] OECD (2015). The ABC of Gender Equality in Education. *Aptitude, Behaviour, Confidence*. Paris. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264229945-en

[234] Laine, K., Ahonen, A, & Nissinen, K. (2020) Pisa 2018 talousosaaminen. *Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriön julkaisuja* 2020(18). Helsinki: Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö

[235] De Blende, A. (2017). *Peer pressure in het secundair onderwijs. Een kwalitatieve studie aan de hand van focusgroepen.* Master's dissertation. Ghent University. Available at: https://lib.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/002/377/341/RUG01-002377341_2017_0001_AC.pdf

[236] Van Maele, D., E. Huyge, E. Consuegra, M. Van Houtte & N. Engels (2013). *Teaching in the bed of procrustes: a focus on the role of macho culture and gendered teacher-student interactions in secondary education.* Conference Paper. Available at: https://lib.ugent.be/nl/catalog/pug01:4094597

be discussed in more detail in Section 3.5.3). In Sweden, however, this situation is changing, as women are starting to catch up with men in terms of higher education attainment and leadership positions in the labour market, and with the demand for low-skilled jobs decreasing (see Annex III, Section 6.3.8). The **Finnish** case study mentioned that boys may be less motivated by education because they find *"the road to working life too long"*, as one interviewee described it (see Annex III, Section 6.3.3). This suggests that boys' motivation for school and learning could be increased if the labour market relevance were to be increased, and methods such as work-based learning strengthened. It may also be one of the reasons why boys are over-represented in more professionally oriented programmes, such as VET (as described in Section 2.3.2).

Figure 3-3   Share of pupils rating their agreement with the statement 'Trying hard at school will help me get into a good college' (PISA 2018)

Source: PISA data 2018. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/
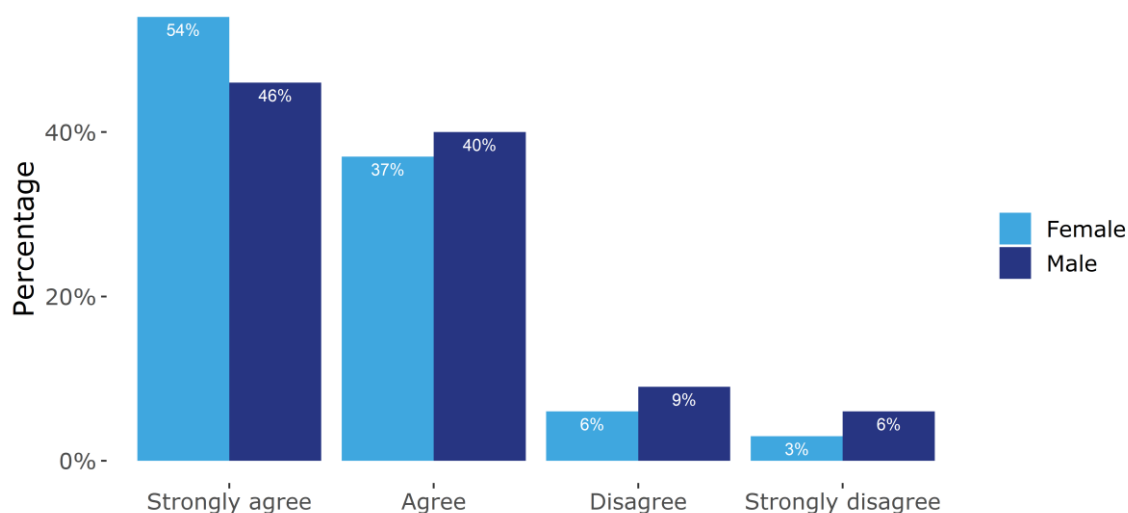
Despite these negative attitudes towards school effort and learning, this does not mean that performing well at school is not important for boys. On the contrary, **boys *do* find it important to perform well**, and this is confirmed by PISA 2018 data. 64% of boys (compared with 55% of girls) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'it is important for me to perform better than others on a task' (Figure 3-4). This means that boys may find themselves stuck in a somewhat conflicted situation wherein, on the one hand, it is important for them to obtain good results, but on the other hand it is not 'cool' to be putting in too much effort to perform well at school. Obtaining good results should be perceived by peers as the result of 'effortless achievement' or some sort of 'natural talent', rather than the result of hard work. The title of a 2009 study – 'I sat back on my computer … with a bottle of whisky next to me'[237] – captures what is at stake quite well. Drawing upon theories about the construction of masculinities and UK data from school and higher education, the study

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[237] See https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09589230903260019

finds that current educational climates highly valorise so-called 'effortless achievement', and that there is a strong link with masculinity. The influence of masculinity and 'macho' peer culture on gender behaviour will be discussed at greater length in Section 3.4.1.

Figure 3-4   Share of pupils rating their agreement with the statement 'It is important for me to perform better than other people on a task' (PISA 2018)

Source: PISA data 2018. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/
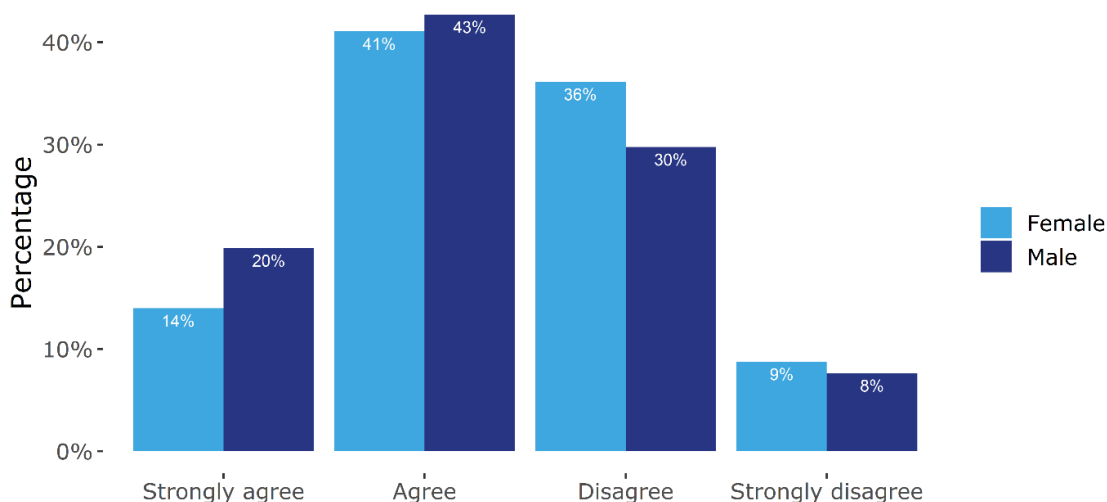
Despite the conflicting school performance situation boys may find themselves in, and the pressure associated with this, **fear of failure is still more common among girls**, and this is the indicator where the gender gap was largest among all indices analysed in PISA 2018.[238] These results are confirmed in a study from **Poland**, which shows that girls are more likely to feel stressed and nervous at school.[239] According to PISA, fear of failure is also a better predictor of academic performance among girls than boys. In almost all school systems, greater fear of failure among girls meant higher scores in reading, mathematics, and science. Fear of failure would encourage girls to reduce risk-taking behaviour and put in extra effort to ensure good performance. By contrast, boys who expressed greater fear of failure only scored marginally better on PISA, which suggests that school pressure for boys (potentially coupled with greater fear of failure) does not encourage them to put in extra effort to obtain good results. A study from **Sweden** explains that the reason for this may stem from the fact that traditional norms of masculinity require boys to publicly display control, knowledge, and assertiveness. This may lead some boys to, instead of trying their best in the face of pressure, avoid trying to obtain good results on purpose, as

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[238]See https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/acd78851-en.pdf?expires=1608137149&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=A2AAB3F0724F64D4E6985700CEF9A075 p. 193-196
[239] Malczewski, A. (2017). *Polska młodzież A.D. 2016 a uzależnienia, SIU nr 2/20, Centrum Informacji o Narkotykach i Narkomanii, Krajowe Biuro ds. Przeciwdziałania Narkomanii.* Available at: https://siu.praesterno.pl/artykul/561

this is better than 'losing face' as a result of failing while having tried to obtain good results.[240]

Finally, research also shows that **both boys and girls have specific views on what they *think* or *feel* they should be 'good at' or 'able to do' at school**. On the one hand, there is evidence that boys have lower levels of ambition and self-esteem than girls. According to a 2014 survey in **Portugal** on health behaviour in school-aged children,[241] boys are more likely than girls to say that the subject matter does not matter for their future. And the **Swedish** Association of Local Authorities and Regions found that boys have lower levels of ambition than girls, and lower levels of self-esteem in relation to schoolwork, especially boys with parents that have low levels of education.[242] This could be one of the reasons why boys are over-represented in vocational programmes and special needs education. On the other hand, there is research – such as a **Spanish** study from 2012[243] – which says that it is girls, rather than boys, who have lower levels of self-esteem, and that this is why they are likely to choose studies in which they have to 'memorise' rather than 'understand', because this is a skill which girls are 'naturally better at'. In many education systems, though, there is a move away from knowledge-based approaches towards more learning outcomes-based teaching and learning. These attitudes on perceived strengths and weaknesses at school are heavily influenced by gender stereotypes existing at family, school, and societal level (this will be discussed in more detail in Sections 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5). The latest PISA results also show that the gender gap in educational choices seems to have widened.[244]

3.2.3   Attitudes and behaviour *at* school

If boys and girls have different attitudes towards school and learning, they may also behave differently in terms of expressing these attitudes, especially when it comes to expressing problems or frustrations. Evidence shows that **boys tend to display their problems 'externally', and girls tend to deal with their problems 'internally'**.[245]

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[240] Asp-Onsjö, L, (2014). *Parallella positioneringar bland pojkar. Om sociala hierarkier och skolprestationer.* And Zimmerman, Fredrik (2018). *Det tillåtande och det begränsande – En studie om pojkars syn på studier och ungdomars normer kring maskulinitet, Om könsspecifika förväntningar och konsekvenser*. Diss., Göteborgs Universitet.

[241] HBSC (2014). *A saude dos Adolescentes Portugueses em Tempos de Recessao*, Avaliable at: http://aventurasocial.com/arquivo/1428847597_BROCHURA_HBSC%202014.pdf

[242] Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (2019). *Se, förstå och förändra ATT MOTVERKA KÖNSSKILLNADER I SKOLRESULTAT*. Available at: www.skr.se

[243] Santana Vega, L.; Feliciano García, L.; and Jiménez Llanos, A. (2012). Toma de decisiones y género en el Bachillerato. *Revista de Educació*n, Ministerio de Educación. Available here: https://sede.educacion.gob.es/publiventa/descarga.action?f_codigo_agc=15353 In similar sense see: FUENTES DE FRUTOS, S.; y RENOBEL SANTAREM, V. (2019) "La influencia del género en el aprendizaje matemático en España. Evidencias desde PISA", *Revista de Sociología de la Educación-RASE*, 13 (1) 63-80, available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.7203/RASE.13.1.16042

[244]See:https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/b5fd1b8f-en.pdf?expires=1608139826&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=9779B62C90F704EAC21121BF167D87D4 p.168

[245] Baat, M. De & N. Foolen (2012). *Oorzaken van schoolverzuim en voortijdig schoolverlaten.* Nederlands Jeugdinstituut. Available at: https://www.nji.nl/nl/Download-NParental suppoJi/Oorzaken_schoolverzuimenvsv.pdf

The external display of problems by boys manifests itself mostly in the form of disruptive or violent behaviour. A longitudinal survey of **Irish** schoolchildren in 2016, for example, shows that boys are much more likely than girls to report all types of anti-social behaviour, with 10% of 13 year-old boys reporting theft (compared to 5% of girls), 6% reporting vandalism (compared to 2% of girls), and 8% reporting violent behaviour (compared to 3% of girls).[246] This does not mean, however, that it is *only* boys who indulge in disruptive or violent behaviour. Violence is a complex concept which needs to be further broken down. First, it is important to note that physical violence is only one of many different forms of violence (i.e. physical, psychological, sexual, relational, etc.). Second, violence is gendered (i.e. boys vs. boys, boys vs. girls, girls vs. girls). Gender stereotypes about violence say that boys have a 'greater desire or need for physical activity'. For girls, on the other hand, the stereotype of 'mean girls' implies that girls engage more in verbal and relational aggression. 'Relational aggression' refers to *"behaviour that is intended to hurt others by damaging their peer relationships"*.[247]

Evidence, however, shows that the **difference between boys and girls in terms of relational aggression or indirect aggression is not large**. On the other hand, there are moderate gender differences for physical aggression.[248] Finally, it is important to note that, no matter how 'meaningless' it may seem, there is always a 'root cause' of violence, and violence is always directed towards a certain purpose. For example, as discussed in Section 3.4.1 on the influence of peer culture on gender behaviour, boys can 'negotiate' social status in peer groups through displaying violent or disruptive behaviour towards their peers or teachers.

There is a large body of evidence which suggests **there are important differences between boys and girls in terms of their time spent in physical activity**.[249] The exact reason for this is unclear, but one study points to a link between gender stereotypes, physical activity, and aggression.[250] According to this study, physically active girls are often seen by both girls and boys as 'tomboys' or 'too aggressive'. Girls report boys' attitudes and beliefs about their levels of engagement in physical activity as being an important barrier to engaging in physical activity, which suggests the importance of breaking gender stereotypes in this sphere.

The fact that boys are more likely than girls to engage in physical activity and violence means that **the expressions of boys' disruptive behaviour at school is more visible than that of girls**. On the one hand, this means that whereas girls' problems may go unnoticed, boys may be more easily targeted and punished by teachers, which will have an impact on their school results – in the worst cases, boys' disruptive

[246] Williams, J., Nixon, E., Smyth, E., Watson, D., (2016*), CHERISHING ALL THE CHILDREN EQUALLY? Ireland 100 years on from the Easter Rising*. Available at: https://www.esri.ie/publications/cherishing-all-the-children-equally-ireland-100-years-on-from-the-easter-rising

[247] Hyde, J. S. (2014). Gender similarities and differences. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *65*, 373-398. https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115057

[248] *Ibid.*

[249] For example, see Patnode, C.D., Lytle, L.A., Erickson, D.J. et al. *The relative influence of demographic, individual, social, and environmental factors on physical activity among boys and girls*. Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act 7, 79 (2010). https://doi.org/10.1186/1479-5868-7-79

[250] Complete reference https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1090198105282443

behaviour may lead to suspension or even exclusion from school, which has detrimental consequences for their future school career.

But why are boys more likely than girls to display disruptive behaviour at school? A first explanation could be found in the fact that they tend to have poorer **socio-emotional and relational skills**, which can be the result of less attention to language and soft skills development for boys in early childhood (as discussed elsewhere in this report). Research from **Sweden** shows that such skills are developed as early as ECEC, and include the ability to deal with one's own emotions, understanding others and their expectations (relationship skills), self-discipline, and independence.[251] Relational skills, for example, are crucial to have a good relationship with teachers and peers, and self-discipline and independence are important skills for doing homework, which may not bring immediate rewards, but are crucial for success at school. Another qualitative study from 2019 in **Slovenia** also establishes a link between social skills, absence of behavioural problems, and absence of developmental deficits, and shows that this is one of the strongest predictors of academic achievements in primary school in all subjects, except mathematics.[252]

A second explanation could be found in relation to **boys' over-representation among students with special needs (SEN)**, some of whom may be more prone to displaying behaviour typically seen as disruptive in a classroom setting (e.g. children with ADD or ADHD[253]). This is a trend which can be observed in almost all EU Member States. In **Belgium**, for example, government data for the 2018/2019 school year shows that in Wallonia,[254] on average more than 60% of all children in SEN classes are boys; in **Ireland**, boys are over-represented among students with autism, ADD, and ADHD;[255] in **Finland**, 66% of all pupils enrolled in SEN classes in 2019 were boys; [256].and in **Luxembourg** 64.5% of all boys enrolled in 'differentiated education centres' were boys.[257] Looking at the types of SEN boys are most likely to have, data from **Denmark** shows that more males are found to have autism and ADHD.[258] More research on the precise reasons for the over-representation of boys in SEN groups is needed. Some stakeholders interviewed in the case studies stated that boys display special needs earlier and more clearly than girls, and are therefore more easily diagnosed (**Ireland**). Research in this respect refers to so-called **'lost girls'** or **'girls**

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[251] See Eidevald, C., (2009). *Det finns inga tjejbestämmare – Att förstå kön som position i förskolans vardagsrutiner och lek. Diss., Högskolan för lärande och kommunikation i Jönköping*; and Zimmerman, Fredrik (2018). *Det tillåtande och det begränsande – En studie om pojkars syn på studier och ungdomars normer kring maskulinitet, Om könsspecifika förväntningar och konsekvenser*. Diss., Göteborgs Universitet.
[252] Zurc, J. (2019). Is children's gender a factor in academic achievement in primary school?. *Journal of Elementary Education, 12 (1)*, pp. 59–88
[253] ADD (attention deficit disorder) and ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder).
[254] Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (2019). *Les indicateurs de l'enseignement 2019*, p.23. For more information, please visit: http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=28273&navi=2264
[255] Banks, J., McCoy, S. (2011). *A Study on the Prevalence of Special Educational Needs' National Council for Special Education Research Report No.9*, ESRI https://www.esri.ie/system/files?file=media/file-uploads/2015-07/BKMNEXT198.pdf. Central Statistics Office (CSO) data shows that in 2016, 156,968 people identified themselves as having 'Difficulty in learning, remembering and concentrating', 85,861 (55%) of whom were male.
[256] Tilastokeskus (2020). *Joka viides peruskoululainen sai tehostettua tai erityistä tukea*. Tilastokeksus. http://tilastokeskus.fi/til/erop/2019/erop_2019_2020-06-05_tie_001_fi.html
[257] https://www.bildungsbericht.lu/media/ul_natbericht_fr_web.pdf
[258] Egelund, N., Nordahl, T., & Andersen, PG (2018), Piger og drenge i skolen in: *Aalborg Universitetsforlag*, p. 45. Available at: https://vbn.aau.dk/ws/files/292029360/Piger_og_drenge_i_skolen_TIL_UPLOAD.pdf

hiding in plain sight', i.e. girls who remain undiagnosed (or are diagnosed as having SEN at a later age) because *"they [girls] don't fit the stereotypes or their symptoms are misinterpreted as something else".*[259]

Another important factor which could reinforce disruptive behaviour among boys it the fact that **boys feel more pressure to conform to gender norms**. 'Gender nonconformity', or *"having a gender expression that is perceived to be inconsistent with gender norms expected for an individuated sex"*[260]*,* is something which is found to be more common among females than males. A study of gender-atypical behaviour among primary school children in the US found that approximately 22.8% of boys and 38.6% of girls displayed multiple gender-atypical behaviours.[261] This seems to indicate that boys, as early as primary school, feel the need to conform to certain received notions of 'what it means to be a man' in society. A recent study on 'Being a Young Man in the US, UK, and Mexico' (2017)[262] shows that most young men feel pushed to live in the 'Man Box'; a rigid construct of cultural identifiers about male identity, consisting of seven pillars (see Box 3-1 below).

Box 3-1   The Man Box – what it means to be 'a real man' in the US, UK, and Mexico

Based on 17 key messages collected through qualitative and quantitative stakeholder consultations (which asked respondents what they think a 'real man' should believe and/or how a 'real man' should behave), researchers from the UK, US and Mexico identified seven pillars which constitute what they termed the 'Man Box'. Seven pillars of 'what it means to be a real man' for young men in these three societies:

- Pillar 1 – Self-sufficiency: A 'real man' does not talk about his worries, fears or problems if he wishes to be respected. Men should figure out their own problems and never ask others for help.
- Pillar 2 – Acting tough: A 'real man' fights back, even if he feels scared or nervous.
- Pillar 3 – Physical attractiveness: A 'real man' needs to look good, or else girls will not like him. At the same time, though, a man cannot spend too much time on their looks either, because this is too feminine.
- Pillar 4 – Rigid masculine gender roles: A 'real man' should not be doing any household chores and does not know how to cook, clean the house, or take care of younger children. Their role is to bring money home to provide for their wife and family.

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[259] See https://childmind.org/article/autistic-girls-overlooked-undiagnosed-autism/#:~:text=Many%20more%20boys%20than%20girls,Researchers%20point%20to%20genetic%20differences.

[260] Green E and L. Maurer (2015). *The Teaching Transgender Toolkit: A Facilitator's Guide to Increasing Knowledge, Decreasing Prejudice and Building Skills*. Ithaca, NY: Planned Parenthood of the Southern Finger Lakes.

[261] Sandberg DE, Meyer-Bahlburg HF, Ehrhardt AA, Yager TJ (1993). The Prevalence of Gender-Atypical Behaviour in Elementary School Children. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 32* (2), 306-14. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/8444758

[262] Heilman, B., G. Barker and A. Harrison (2017). *The Man Box: A Study on Being a Young Man in the US, UK, and Mexico*, *Washington, DC and London*. Promundo-US and Unilever. Available at: https://promundoglobal.org/resources/man-box-study-young-man-us-uk-mexico/#

- <u>Pillar 5 – Heterosexuality and homophobia</u>: A 'real man' cannot be gay, although it is perfectly fine to be friends with gay guys.
- <u>Pillar 6 – Hypersexuality</u>: A 'real man' should have as many sex partners as possible and never says no to sex.
- <u>Pillar 7 – Aggression and control</u>: A 'real man' should use violence, if necessary, to get respect. He should also always have the final say about any decision in his marriage, and he deserves to know where his wife is at any time of the day.

<u>More information</u>: Heilman, B., G. Barker and A. Harrison (2017). *The Man Box: A Study on Being a Young Man in the US, UK, and Mexico*, p. Washington, DC and London: Promundo-US and Unilever. Available at:
https://promundoglobal.org/resources/man-box-study-young-man-us-uk-mexico/#

The seven pillars of the 'Man Box' apply to EU Member States to varying degrees, and this depends greatly on the extent to which societies are gender equal *as a whole* (Section 3.5.1 provides a comparative overview of gender equality in the EU, based on the Gender Equality Index of the European Institute for Gender Equality, or EIGE). The case study in **Portugal**, for instance, shows that machoism is still very dominant in the country. According to this view, men should be physically strong, attractive to women, sexually active (and promiscuous), impose their will over others, hide their emotions, and be an active decision-maker. Such stereotypical notions of masculinity are replicated through male peer groups, schools, and the media. While some interviewees mentioned that, due to the success of video game streamers, shows, and Silicon Valley millionaires, the image of the male 'studious nerd genius' is slowly being accepted as a 'type of masculinity', the 'macho' model continues to be preponderant in school, leading many boys to see school as boring, useless, and not leading to fame or fortune. Role models such as footballers, sportsmen, and streamers also promote the idea that school is not needed for boys to be successful in society, but that hard work is (see Annex III, Section 6.3.7). By contrast, in Nordic countries, machoism is much less present, although it can still be 'triggered' in certain contexts and situations. **Sweden**, for instance, is the highest performer in the EU in terms of gender equality at societal level (as we will see in Section 3.5.1), with men being much more likely to take up roles such as parenting and domestic tasks.[263]

Only a limited number of studies exist which delve deeper into **men and masculinities in Europe**,[264] with the European Research Network on Men in Europe project being one of the few projects funded in this area by the European Commission (see Box 3-2 below).

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[263] Gustafsson Sendén, M., Klysing, A., Lindqvist, A., & Renström, E. A. (2019). The (Not So) Changing Man: Dynamic Gender Stereotypes in Sweden. *Frontiers in psychology*, 10 (37).
https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00037
[264] E.g.: Pringle, Keith, Jeff Hearn, Harry Ferguson, Dimitar Kambourov, Voldemar Kolga, Emmi Lattu, Ursula Müller, Marie Nordberg, Irina Novikova, Elżbieta Oleksy, Joanna Rydzewska, Iva Šmídová, Teemu Tallberg, and Hertta Niemi, *Men and Masculinities in Europe, Revised and Updated 2nd edition*, Whiting & Birch, London, Critical Studies in Socio-Cultural Diversity, 2013. 278 pp.; or J. Hearn and K. Pringle and members of Critical Research on Men in Europe, *European Perspectives on Men and Masculinities: National and Transnational Approaches*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2006; paperback 2009, pp.240 https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9781403918130

Box 3-2   European Research Network on Men in Europe – EUROPE

Funded by the European Commission, the European Research Network on Men in Europe consisted of a group of male and female researchers, which carried out research in ten European countries between 2000 and 2003 on 'The Social Problem and Societal Problematization of Men and Masculinities'. The countries studied were: Estonia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Norway, Poland, the Russian Federation, and the UK.

As part of the first phase of its work, the Network focused on analysing men's relations to four thematic areas: home and work, social exclusion, violence, and health. It provided the following recommendations to tackle gender stereotyping and some of the challenges facing men in these areas:

- Home and work: *"To encourage men to devote more time and priority to caring, housework, childcare, and the reconciliation of home and paid work; to remove men's advantages in paid work and work organisations, as with the persistence of the gender wage, non-equal opportunities practices in appointment and promotion, and domination of top level jobs; policies on men in transnational organisations and their development of equality policies; to encourage men's positive contribution to gender equality; to remove discriminations against men, such as compulsory conscription of men into the armed forces, and discriminations against gay men."*
- Social exclusion: *"To reduce the social exclusion of men, especially young marginalised men, men suffering racism, and men suffering multiple social exclusions; reducing the effects of the social exclusion of men upon women and children; ameliorating the effects of rapid socio-economic change that increase the social exclusion of men; specifically addressing the transnational aspects of social exclusion of men, in, for example, transnational migration, and homosexual sexual relations; to change men's actions in creating and reproducing social exclusions."*
- Violence: *"To stop men's violence to women, children, and other men, assisting victims and survivors; enforcing the criminal law on clear physical violence, that has historically often not been enforced in relation to men's violence to known women and children; making non-violence and anti-violence central public policy of all relevant institutions – including a focus on schools within extensive public education campaigns; assisting men who have been violent to stop their violence, such as men's programmes, should be subject to accountability, high professional standards, close evaluation, and not be funded from women's services; and recognising the part played by men in forms of other violence, including racist violence."*
- Health: *"To improve men's health; to facilitate men's improved health practices, including use of health services; to connect men's health to forms of masculinity, such as risk-taking behaviour; to focus on the negative effects of men's health problems upon women and children; to ensure that focusing on men's health does not reduce resources for women's and children's health."*

The **link between boys conforming to masculinity norms, disruptive behaviour, and poor education outcomes** is confirmed in the longitudinal survey conducted by Ghent University (**Belgium**) on how teachers deal with disruptive behaviour in the classroom.[266] The study shows that if boys conform with traditional gender roles, they are more likely to display 'macho' and 'anti-school' like (i.e. anti-feminine) behaviour, including disruptive behaviour in class, which has a direct impact on their education outcomes (see Figure 3-5).

Figure 3-5   Link between gender conformity, disruptive behaviour, and low education outcomes
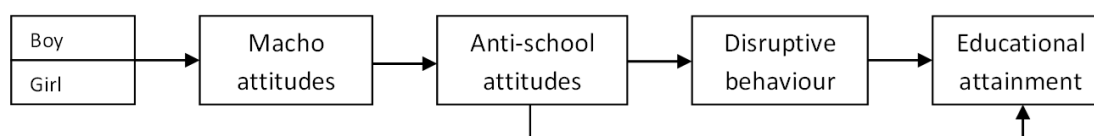
Source: Van Maele, D., E. Huyge, E. Consuegra, M. Van Houtte & N. Engels (2013). Teaching in the bed of procrustes: a focus on the role of macho culture and gendered teacher-student interactions in secondary education. Conference Paper. Available at:
https://lib.ugent.be/nl/catalog/pug01:4094597

Initiatives aimed at tackling disruptive behaviour and male stereotypes

In most EU Member States, tackling disruptive behaviour is part of **wider pedagogical and psychological prevention and intervention measures**, often conducted by NGOs and lacking a specific focus on violence and disruptive behaviour among boys. Research from **Poland**, for example, shows that boys are more prone to disruptive behaviour than girls, but this is not taken into account for the design of prevention measures.[267] In **Belgium (Flanders)**, the Ministry of Education developed a specific website to define and point teachers to different NGOs that can help them to deal with different types of 'transgressive behaviour' at school (e.g. sexually transgressive behaviour, sexting, (cyber-)bullying and violent behaviour).[268] In **Cyprus**, the CARDET and INNOVADE organisations were involved in an Erasmus+ project focused on improving school discipline issues that affect student performance.

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[265] Hearn, J., Müller, U., Oleksy, E., Pringle, K., Chernova, J., Ferguson, H., Holter, O.G., Kolga, V., Novikova, I., Pitch, T., Ventimiglia, C., Lattu, E., Olsvik, E., Tallberg, T., Millett, J., Raynor, A., & Jacobsen, A. (2003). *The European Research Network on Men in Europe: The Social Problem and Societal Problematisation of Men and Masculinities. The social problem of men: deliverable 14: Final Network Report.* Available at: https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-European-Research-Network-on-Men-in-Europe%3AThe-Hearn-M%C3%BCller/42418e38c079008460e8e934abe34c10d36dd8e3

[266] Van Maele, D., E. Huyge, E. Consuegra, M. Van Houtte & N. Engels (2013). *Teaching in the bed of procrustes: a focus on the role of macho culture and gendered teacher-student interactions in secondary education.* Conference Paper. Available at: https://lib.ugent.be/nl/catalog/pug01:4094597

[267] Chmura-Rutkowska, I. (2012), *Przemoc rówieśnicza w gimnazjum a płeć: kontekst społeczno-kulturowy, „Forum Oświatowe"* 2012, nr 1 (46).

[268] See https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/wat-is-grensoverschrijdend-gedrag

Through the project, numerous resources were developed to help primary schools implement Schoolwide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS), a preventive three-tiered approach to school violence and discipline.[269] In the **Netherlands**, the Amsterdam Kiem Montessori school allows students to exercise for an hour before classes start. Children also have to do less homework, and throughout the day, teachers tick off completed tasks for each child. Any uncompleted tasks will need to be completed after class, at school, before children can go home.[270]

Initiatives *specifically* aimed at helping boys to improve their behaviour at school are limited. In **Sweden**, Killar.se is a platform targeting boys between 10 and 20 years old and encouraging them to talk about any issues they may be facing.[271] Another initiative is the 'Macho Factory', an initiative run by the NGOs MÄN and Unizon, which develops and disseminates educational material to schools about gender and masculinity norms (see Box 3-3 below).[272] In **Portugal**, there are national programmes which actively reach out to schools to deconstruct the persisting machoism in society (see Box 3-4 below).

Box 3-3   The Macho Factory – Sweden

In Sweden, several schools have managed to reduce the gender gap in education. As part of their approach, they have employed a 'gender transformative approach', which includes a specific focus on reforming masculinity norms.

To implement this approach, some of these schools have been making use of educational material by The Macho Factory, which is developed and disseminated by civil society organisations MÄN and Unizon. The material is based on short films and exercises that make visible and problematise masculinity norms and inequalities, and is used to increase awareness of masculinity norms among staff and students, and to prevent abusive and violent behaviour.

More information: https://machofabriken.se/

Box 3-4   Deconstructing machoism in schools – Portugal

In Portugal, governmental bodies (such as the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG)), NGOs (such as *rede ex aequo*) and several organisations involved in EU projects (such as EQUI-X) are all working to fight harmful perceptions of masculinity which are still very dominant in Portuguese society. As part of the EQUI-X project, national campaigns involving (on average) 50 young people were carried out in two waves in Portuguese schools. Activities were held in two schools (Infanta D. Maria Secondary School and Pombal Secondary School) and were carried out entirely by students. The EQUI-X actions consisted of promotion and engagement of students with the concept of gender equality through, for example, the creation of posters and videos on gender equality. Posters were hung

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[269] For more information on the project, see: https://tasdi-pbs.eu/en/
[270] See https://www.kiemmontessori.nl/
[271] See https://killar.se/
[272] See https://mfj.se/

up throughout one school bearing the message: 'Do you want to get out of the box? Open me!'

More information: http://equixproject.eu/ and case study Portugal (see Annex III, Section 6.3.7).

3.2.4   Attitudes and behaviour *outside* school

Boys and girls also differ in terms of their attitudes and behaviours *outside* of school, some of which have a negative impact on education outcomes. Stakeholders interviewed as part of the **Finnish** case study (see Annex III, Section 6.3.3) highlighted the importance of peer culture on boys' and girls' activities outside school (discussed in more detail in Section 3.4.1). As seen in Section 2.2.1 of this report, boys read less than girls, and one explanation for this is that reading is perceived to be 'uncool' for boys. Linked to this, PISA 2018 data shows that **girls tend to spend more time than boys doing homework**. In 2018, 64% of boys and 73% of girls reported that they had studied at home for more than one hour per day prior to taking the PISA test; and 24% of boys compared with 18% of girls reported that they had not studied for school at all that day. The largest differences were observed in Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, and Lithuania.[273] A study published by **Belgium**'s Institute on Equality between Women and Men (2020) found that, on average, teenage boys have around one hour per day of additional free time than teenage girls. Girls spend more time doing their homework, doing chores around the house, and maintaining social contacts (including volunteering and community work).[274]

Another difference is the amount of time boys and girls spend using digital devices and gaming in their free time. PISA 2018 data shows that **boys more frequently use ICT and digital devices outside school than girls**. There are also differences between boys and girls in terms of what they use digital devices for. On average, across OECD countries, the proportion of girls using digital devices (almost) every day for social media purposes was almost 10 percentage points higher than that of boys, and 4% more girls than boys use digital devices for chatting online. This is confirmed in a recent WHO survey, which says that *"problematic social media use affects 7% of adolescents overall, but is highest among older girls"*.[275] Boys, however, may begin interacting on social media earlier; research by the Hellenic Centre for Safe Internet shows that 35% of **Greek** boys say that they created a social media profile between 6-10 years old, compared to only 21% of girls.[276]

The gender gap is bigger when it comes to gaming, which the PISA study refers to as **the 'gaming divide' between boys and girls**. On average, across all OECD countries, 53% of boys, compared with 10% of girls, reported that they play

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[273] OECD (2018). PISA 2018 Results (Volume II) *Where All Students Can Succeed*. p. 162 https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2018-results-volume-ii_b5fd1b8f-en
[274] See https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/sites/default/files/vm2020-h7.pdf
[275] Inchley, J. et. Al., (2020*). Spotlight on adolescent health and well-being.* WHO, https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/332091/9789289055000-eng.pdf
[276] Daskalaki, D. et al. (2020). *Understanding the online behavior and risks of children: results of a large-scale national survey on 10-18 year olds*. Available at https://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/2008/2008.10274.pdf

collaborative games almost every day; the figures are 28% and 14% for boys and girls respectively for online games via social media networks.[277] A recent large meta-analysis on the impact of video gaming on mental health and academic performance,[278] however, suggests that **the negative impact of video gaming may be weak**. Moreover, increased use of ICT devices cannot fully explain the gender gap in attitudes towards reading.[279] Evidence from **Belgium (Flanders)** even suggests that gaming among girls has actually been increasing in recent years.[280]

Evidence also shows that **boys are more prone to substance abuse**, as is confirmed in the latest findings for Europe from the WHO's latest health behaviour in school-aged children (HBCS) survey in 2017/2018[281], and the European Commission's Staff Working Document accompanying the renewed EU Youth Strategy.[282] These results are confirmed in national studies across EU Member States; in **Belgium (Flanders)** for example, a study shows that, in 2014/2015, boys were 2.5% more likely than girls to smoke and almost 9% more likely to regularly consume alcohol and smoke cannabis.[283] Similar findings are mentioned in **Luxembourg**'s latest Ministerial Action Plan on Gender Equality (2019–2023), which includes specific actions to tackle the drinking and smoking behaviour of young people.[284] The WHO warns that abuse at early age – in particular alcohol abuse – has detrimental effects on brain development and mental health. It can lead to learning difficulties, as well as harmful behavioural and social functioning throughout adolescence, and into adulthood. This includes violent and delinquent behaviour, risky sexual behaviour, increased (attempts at) committing suicide, as well as social and emotional problems.[285]

Nonetheless, other data sources, such as the WHO data for Europe, show that girls are also more susceptible to harmful behaviour outside of school. Specifically, girls tend to more often skip breakfast, eat fewer meals with their family, be less engaged in physical activity, and have poorer mental well-being than boys.[286] For instance, a study from **Portugal** says that boys are less likely than girls to self-harm when they feel tired or sad (16.3% of boys compared with 23.7% of girls).[287] A 2020 study from

[277] *Ibid.*
[278] Ferguson, C. (2015). Do Angry Birds Make for Angry Children? A Meta-Analysis of Video Game Influences on Children's and Adolescents' Aggression, Mental Health, Prosocial Behavior, and Academic Performance. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 10(5)*, pp. 646-666, http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1745691615592234 .
[279] Parent, J., W. Sanders and R. Forehand (2016). Youth Screen Time and Behavioral Health Problems. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics, 37(4),* pp. 277-284, http://dx.doi.org/10.1097/dbp.0000000000000272.
[280] See https://girlgamergalaxy.com/
[281] See https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/332091/9789289055000-eng.pdf
[282] See https://ec.europa.eu/youth/sites/default/files/youth_swd_169_part_4_2_en_autre_document_travail_service_part4_v4.pdf
[283] https://www.statistiekvlaanderen.be/sites/default/files/docs/vrind2016-3-welzijn.pdf
[284] Government of Luxembourg, National Plan on Gender Equality Between Men and Women (2018), https://gouvernement.lu/dam-assets/documents/actualites/2020/07-juillet/Plan-d-action-national-Egalite.pdf
[285] https://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/382840/WH15-alcohol-report-eng.pdf
[286] See https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/332091/9789289055000-eng.pdf
[287] Pereira, B (2004). *Bullying in Portuguese Schools*. Available at http://repositorium.sdum.uminho.pt/bitstream/1822/6094/1/school%20psychology%20internacional.pdf

Luxembourg shows that girls are twice as likely as boys to engage in suicidal behaviour.[288]

The **gender dimensions of well-being** are also rather complex. Looking at the general health, well-being, and life satisfaction of boys and girls, a recent study of 35 OECD countries concluded that cognitive well-being is positively associated with students' academic performance, raising possible concerns about the impact of boys' underperformance on certain dimensions of their well-being.[289] Gender differences can also be observed with regard to leisure activities. As mentioned above (see Section 2.3.3), girls are more likely to be enrolled in part-time music or arts education or other creative activities outside school. Nonetheless, perhaps surprisingly, results from the latest PISA 2018 assessment show that, on average across OECD countries, boys (around 72%) are more likely than girls (61%) to report being 'satisfied' with their lives.[290] This suggests that there is no simple causal association with academic performance.

Initiatives aimed at improving health and well-being

Several Member States have developed initiatives to improve the health and well-being of young people. One example is **Luxembourg**, where Action 3.6 of the National Action Plan on Equality between Women and Men of July 2020[291] is focused specifically on **improving the health and well-being of boys and girls**. The Ministry intends to develop several targeted prevention and awareness-raising activities to tackle specific health and well-being issues among boys (e.g. alcohol abuse, smoking, and cannabis use) and girls (e.g. skipping breakfast, not doing enough exercise). At EU level, NGOs and charities also play an active role. The **Schools for Health in Europe** network foundation[292] (SHE), for example, runs a European platform to support health promotion activities within participating EU countries, with a focus on reducing health inequalities. The SHE model is based on a **whole school approach**, aiming to empower students, parents, and teachers to lead on running activities, with access to a bank of resources.

To conclude, although our review is far from complete, this first section shows that there are a **large number of behavioural differences between boys and girls**, and that these have an impact on school performance. The underlying reasons for these differences in gender behaviour are extremely complex, though, and influenced by a variety of family, school, and societal factors, as we have briefly tried to show for some of the boy-girl differences in gender behaviour described above. This means that **gender behaviour is context dependent**, and context is something which can be

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[288]See : https://men.public.lu/fr/publications/sante-bien-etre/informations-generales/20704-hbsc-suicidal-behavoiur.html
[289] Govorova, E., Benítez, I., & Muñiz, J. (2020). How Schools Affect Student Well-Being: A Cross-Cultural Approach in 35 OECD Countries. *Frontiers in psychology*, *11*, pp. 431.
https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00431
[290]OECD (2019), PISA 2018 Results (Volume III*) What School Life Means for Students' Lives*. pp.155
https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/acd78851-en.pdf?expires=1610010158&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=912BEFB1ACA04102F3C056822378D668
[291] See: https://gouvernement.lu/dam-assets/documents/actualites/2020/07-juillet/Plan-d-action-national-Egalite.pdf
[292] See: https://www.schoolsforhealth.org/

modified. This is why it is important to better understand how factors related to the family, school, and societal context influence gender behaviour, as well as if (and how) policymakers and practitioners across the EU can work to tackle gender stereotypes in these three areas to help tackle the gender gap in education.

3.3   Family factors

Overview of key findings

This section explores the gendered effects of family factors on individual attitudes, behaviours, and education outcomes. Some key findings are outlined below.

- **Boys seem to be more affected by lack of parental support than girls.** The evidence reviewed shows that involvement of a father figure is particularly important for boys, as they act as important role models. The educational and professional background of the mother is also important, as evidence shows that the expectations of mothers, in terms of school and learning, have a bigger impact on boys than girls.

- **Many parents also still hold gender stereotypical notions of what boys and girls 'should' or 'are able to' do at school, and in life.** While parents are more likely to expect boys to work in STEM, they expect girls to work in caring or teaching professions. Such gender stereotypical notions also seem to be stronger among parents from low socio-economic backgrounds.

- **Several countries actively try to change gender stereotyping at home through specific policy interventions or initiatives**. Examples include Belgium (Flanders), France, and Luxembourg, where the government is running large-scale awareness-raising campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes at societal level, including in the family environment.

- **Gender stereotyping in ECEC institutions is very common.** More research in this area is needed, especially since ECEC has a key role to play in supporting parents in getting their children 'school ready' by developing key skills such as self-regulation, socio-emotional skills, and critical thinking. Already at this level, it seems many practitioners give more attention to girls than boys.

The family context – in particular, parental background and the perpetuation (or weakening) of gender stereotypes at home – has a major influence on individual attitudes, behaviour, and education outcomes. Gender stereotyping at home was mentioned by almost all stakeholders interviewed as part of the case studies as the single most important factor influencing the behaviour and education outcomes of children. One interviewee from **Luxembourg** described the issue as follows: **the most challenging is *"changing what they [children] get for Christmas"*** (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6). Gender stereotyping at home covers a range of different areas, from the way parents interact with their children and their expectations, to the toys that children are given to play with.

In the following sections, we will first review the impact of family resources on education outcomes (Section 3.3.1). Next, we will look at the impact of parental support, expectations and attitudes (Section 3.3.2). Finally, in addition to combating gender stereotyping at home, ECEC plays a crucial role in the early socio-emotional and cognitive development of children, and has a crucial role to play in mitigating the potential negative impacts of challenging family situations on educational success (Section 3.3.3).

3.3.1   Family resources

As confirmed by the majority of our interviewees, the family factor which most impacts school performance is family resources, particularly parents' educational background. There are three types of resources which parents (either consciously or subconsciously) deploy to influence their children's education outcomes: socio-economic resources, cultural resources, and social resources. Socio-economic resources refer to parents' financial, occupational, and educational resources or background. Cultural resources refer to parents' cultural capital (measured through various constructs, but often by parental cultural participation). Social resources refer to parents' social networks.[293]

Earlier in the report (see Section 2.2.5), we saw that **education outcomes are worse for children coming from migrant, low socio-economic, or rural backgrounds**. One key reason for this, as confirmed by interviewees in **Bulgaria**, is that parents of children from more privileged backgrounds have more financial resources to provide access to extra-curricular activities (such as sports or music classes) as well as toys or school materials which support learning and general well-being (see Annex III, Section 6.3.1).

Other national level studies and case studies underline the importance of family resources. In **Ireland**, for example, interviewees said that parents from higher income families are more likely to have participated in higher education, have a better understanding of its value, and are more likely to support their own children's education (see Annex III, Section 6.3.5). In **Portugal**, parents' professional background and whether children live in urban/rural areas still also has an important impact on children's success at school.[294] Under the Portuguese dictatorship (until 1974), most of the population did not finish school, and university was only available to the upper classes. Thus, for many parents, in particular those working in low-skilled occupations, school success is still not seen as essential for success in life, in particular for boys[295] (see Annex III, Section 6.3.7).

A recent study in **Finland**, combining PISA results between 2000 and 2018, shows that the socio-economic background of parents has started having a greater impact on

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[293] See Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In Richardson, J. G. (Eds). *The Handbook for Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education (*pp. 241-258). Greenwood Publishing Group.; and Breen, R., & Jonsson, J. O. (2005). Inequality of opportunity in comparative perspective: Recent research on educational attainment and social mobility. *Annual Review of Sociology, 31,* 223-243.

[294] Costa, A.S.F. (2018), *Desempenho dos pais versus sucesso dos filhos: uma leitura também geográfica.* Avaliable at: https://repositorio-aberto.up.pt/bitstream/10216/117617/2/303325.pdf

[295] Costa, *op. cit.,*

young people's school success in recent years, and that inequalities in Finland are bigger on average compared with other Western European countries.[296] A stakeholder interviewed as part of the case study in Finland said that "*parents who are not well educated are negative role models for their children: education is inherited*" (see Annex III, Section 6.3.3). In **Cyprus**, a study underlines the importance of 'family social capital' in determining a pupil's risk of ELET and shows that most parents of children at risk of dropping out in Cyprus have a lower educational background.[297] Case study interviewees in **Germany** said that there has also been an important evolution over time. If in the 1960s the groups at highest risk of underachievement in education could be characterised as female, catholic, and rural, today the main risk factors are being male and having a migrant or urban background (see Annex III, Section 6.3.4).

Research from **Sweden** suggests that **boys are potentially more vulnerable to, or influenced by, family resources** than girls, particularly the educational background and socio-economic status of parents.[298] A study in the **Netherlands** looking at the factors impacting the gender gap in reading shows that mothers' occupational resources are a strong predictor for students' educational performance. Economically active mothers act as important role models for their daughters, and this helps them to perform better at school.[299] Statistical data from **Flanders (Belgium)** also shows that mothers' educational backgrounds have an influence on whether boys participate in higher education. Girls are always more likely to pursue higher education regardless of the educational background of their mother, but for boys, if their mother is averagely or highly educated, then the gender gap tends to decrease.[300]

Some stakeholders also pointed out the importance of better understanding **the influence of different family background characteristics**. A stakeholder from **Luxembourg** gave the example of Portuguese and Balkan families, two big immigrant groups. For many Portuguese children, whose parents and grandparents mainly came to Luxembourg during the 1970s for work, there is less pressure to perform well at school. In contrast, the educational background of parents from the Balkans is higher on average and, having had high-skilled jobs in their country of origin, they often place high expectations on their children's education (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6).

3.3.2   Parental support, expectations and interaction

Several experts interviewed as part of the case studies highlighted the importance of parental involvement and support for educational success and reducing ELET.[301] One

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[296] Salmela-Aro, K., & Chmielewski, A. (2019). Socioeconomic Inequality and Student Outcomes in Finnish Schools. *Socioeconomic Inequality and Student Outcomes Education Policy & Social Inequality*, 153-168.
[297] See https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02673843.2012.717899
[298] Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (2019*). Se, förstå och förändra ATT MOTVERKA KÖNSSKILLNADER I SKOLRESULTAT.* www.skr.se
[299] Van Hek, M. (2017). *Gender equality in educational attainment and reading performance*. BOXPress.
[300] See https://www.statistiekvlaanderen.be/nl/starters-hoger-onderwijs-naar-opleidingsniveau-moeder#meisjes_stromen_vaker_door_naar_hoger_onderwijs_dan_jongens,_ongeacht_opleidingsniveau_moeder
[301] European Commission (2015). *A whole school approach to tackling early school leaving – Policy messages.* Brussels: European Commission. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/early-leaving-policy_en.pdf

stakeholder from **Finland**, for example, said that: "*One consequence of this partnership are various role models offered by parents in different partnership activities, such as study visits and celebrations*" (see Annex III, Section 6.3.3). Data from PISA 2018 shows that, across the EU, boys and girls receive similar levels of support from their parents when facing difficulties at school: 86% of girls compared with 84% of boys.[302] PISA data shows that **the average reading score for all children was higher in those countries and economies where more parents discussed their child's progress** on the initiative of teachers, and that this positive association remains even after accounting for per capita GDP and other forms of parental involvement in school-related activities. For every 10 percentage point increase in the share of parents who discussed their child's progress on the teachers' initiative, the average reading score increased by 10 points.[303] These figures are confirmed in national research, such as a 2012 study from **Malta**,[304] or a large-scale quantitative study from 2019 in **Slovenia**.[305] In **Lithuania**, research carried out as part of the implementation of the National Education Strategy (2003–2012) shows that parental involvement in their child's education is not only important for better school results, but also for their mental health and social skills more broadly.[306]

Some studies indicate that **girls may receive more help from their parents**. A 2019 study from **Slovenia**[307] found that girls received more support than boys from their parents, and that this helped them get better results at school.[308] In her PhD thesis, published in 2017, Dr Margriet van Hek explains that one reason for parents' more limited involvement in the education of their sons could be linked to the increase over time in parents' focus on investing in girls' educational career.[309]

One of the main reasons why some boys receive less parental support than girls is that many parents **hold gender stereotypical notions on their children's school education**. The OECD reports that, across all countries and economies reviewed as part of PISA 2012, parents were more likely to expect their sons to work in STEM (science, technology, engineering, or maths), and that such gender stereotypes are stronger among socio-economically disadvantaged households.[310] These findings are confirmed in several national studies, e.g. in **Slovakia**[311] or **Portugal**. A **Czech**

[302] PISA data 2018. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/

[303] *Ibid.*

[304] Lam S, Jimerson S, Kikas E, Cefai C, Veiga F, Nelson B, Hatzichristou C, Polychroni F, Basnett J, Duck R, Farrell P, Liu Y, Negovan V, Shin H, Stanculescu E, Wong B, Yang H, Zollneritsch J. (2012). Do girls and boys perceive themselves as equally engaged in school? The results of an international study from 12 countries. *Journal of School Psychology 50,* 77–94.

[305] For more information, please visit: https://www.emokykla.lt/bendrasis/skaityk/elektroniniai-leidiniai/tevu-i-si-traukimas-i-mokiniu-ugdyma/182

[306] For more information, please visit: https://www.emokykla.lt/bendrasis/skaityk/elektroniniai-leidiniai/tevu-i-si-traukimas-i-mokiniu-ugdyma/182

[307] For more information, please visit: https://www.emokykla.lt/bendrasis/skaityk/elektroniniai-leidiniai/tevu-i-si-traukimas-i-mokiniu-ugdyma/182

[308] Zurc, J., Is children's gender a factor in academic achievement in primary school*? Journal of* <u>*Lithuania: Elementary Education, 12(1),*</u> 59–88

[309] Van Hek, M. (2017). *Gender equality in educational attainment and reading performance*. BOXPress.

[310] OECD (2015). The ABC of Gender Equality in Education. *Aptitude, Behaviour, Confidence*. PISA, OECD publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9789264229945-en.pdf?expires=1610634769&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=66B1763A84CB2A7C21B3829FBC7B8E3B

[311] Sedová, T. (2010), *Understanding and Providing a Developmental Approach to Technology Education*. Available at: http://www.klemens.sav.sk/fiusav/cecwys/cecwys_update.php

research study[312] found that parents tend to perceive boys as 'the provider' for their future family, and are therefore more likely to encourage them to follow studies leading to well-paying jobs. In **Portugal** too, parents seem to have higher expectations of boys than girls to get good grades at school. According to the 2014 OMS (*Organização Mundial de Saúde*) survey on health behaviour in school-aged children, boys seem to be under more pressure from their parents than girls to achieve high grades.[313] Boys should obtain good results at school, but without seeking help or 'acting like a girl' – confirming Pillar 1 of 'the Man Box' model (i.e. the social pressure for men to be 'self-sufficient').

In certain cultures, parental expectations of their children getting good results at school are however low, especially for boys. This is the case in some Roma households. A study conducted by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) in 2014[314] found that some of the main reasons for ELET among Roma children (particularly boys) is that their parents think education is too expensive, and that their children should start working from the age of puberty. For these groups, poverty plays a key role in whether students continue with education. For girls, the reason for leaving school early is linked to early marriage or pregnancy.[315]

Many parents also hold **gender stereotypical notions on how their children should behave**. As observed above (see Section 3.2), boys are more prone to displaying disruptive behaviour, as well as socio-emotional and cognitive disorders, than girls. Evidence from **Poland** suggests that this could be due to the relatively greater freedom of behaviour which parents give to boys compared with girls (i.e. parents do not expect boys to 'behave well' or conform to rules as much as girls). At the same time, boys face serious limitations related to expressing fear, sadness, anger, or 'girl-like' behaviour at home.[316]

Finally, there is also a wide body of evidence comparing the impact of fathers and mothers on children's behaviour and education outcomes. Looking at the **influence of mothers as role models**, evidence shows that women still play the biggest role in the household. Research from **Ireland**, for example, shows that mothers are typically the ones who check their children's homework, attend parent-teacher meetings, help their children to complete their Central Applications Office (CAO) forms, etc.[317] The extent to which mothers are engaged in the education of their children can therefore be decisive for children's success or failure at school. Some interviewees suggested that this may particularly be the case for boys, as they are especially sensitive to

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[312] Jarkovská, L. (2010). *Educational choices and anticipation of chances at the labour market from a gender perspective. S genderem na trh*.

[313] HBSC (2014), *A saude dos Adolescentes Portugueses em Tempos de Recessao*, avaliable at: http://aventurasocial.com/arquivo/1428847597_BROCHURA_HBSC%202014.pdf

[314] FRA, Education: the situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States Roma survey – Data in focus P.40. Available online at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2014-roma-survey-dif-education-1_en.pdf

[315] *Ibid.*, p. 41.

[316] Gawlicz, K., Rudnicki, P., Starnawski, M. (2015). *Discrimination at school - presence unjustified. About building anti-discrimination education in the formal education system in Poland*. Research report. Warszawa: Towarzystwo Edukacji Antydyskryminacyjnej.

[317] The Central Applications Office (CAO) processes applications for undergraduate courses in Irish higher education institutions (HEIs). Entry into HEIs is determined by the grades (translated into a points scoring system) achieved in the Leaving Certificate exam.

individual support. A stakeholder interviewed as part of the case study in **Finland** said that *"the influence of the family, especially mothers, is important for boys' learning"* (see Annex III, Section 6.3.3).

Findings from research on the **influence of fathers as role models** also show interesting results. One study by Prof Andrew J. Martin (2013), for example, finds that, while fathers and male teachers can have positive impacts on children's academic and non-academic lives, many fathers are not taking an active caring role in the family, and are therefore modelling unhealthy gender norms. This suggests that the quality of paternal involvement at home is important for good education outcomes.[318] A recent study from **Germany**[319] found evidence that the gender gap in upper secondary education reflects the rising share of single parent households in Germany, which impacts boys' attainment more than that of girls. This may be because boys' educational attainment suffers more than that of girls from the absence of a father, which is confirmed by a study which concludes that boys are more influenced than girls by their parents.[320] Furthermore, girls may respond more strongly to single parent households headed by a mother who supports the household financially than boys, and intensify their investments in educational attainment. As seen above (see Section 3.2.1), fathers have an important role to play in supporting boys to develop literacy and language proficiency more broadly.

A final group of children that merit particular attention are **children in institutional care**, who are separated from their biological parents and face different challenges for home learning altogether. Education outcomes for children in care are notoriously poor, yet they do not feature widely in national policy frameworks within the EU. The ESN includes a set of resources on supporting care leavers.[321]

Initiatives focused on changing gender stereotypes at home

As discussed above, challenging gender stereotyping in the home environment can be an important element of improving boys' (and girls') performance and choices at school. This was mentioned by several stakeholders interviewed as part of the case studies as one of the most crucial factors underpinning the gender gap in education. Stakeholders interviewed in **Bulgaria**, for instance, said that initiatives to encourage parents to become more closely involved in the education of their children were key to overcoming some of the challenges boys face in education (see Annex III, Section 6.3.1). In **Luxembourg**, interviewees said that it was particularly important to increase the involvement of fathers in the education of their children (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6).

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[318] For more information, see the following meta-analysis of 66 studies on the relationship between father involvement and the education outcomes of urban school children: Jeynes, W.H., A Meta-Analysis: The Relationship Between Father Involvement and Student Academic Achievement, *Urban* Education (2014)complete reference https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0042085914525789

[319] Riphahn, R, and Schwientek, C. (2015) *What drives the reversal of the gender education gap? Evidence from Germany*. BGPE Discussion Paper No. 159

[320] Bertrand, M., Pan, J. (2013). The Trouble with Boys: Social Influences and the Gender Gap in Disruptive Behavior. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, 5 (1):* 32-64.
DOI: 10.1257/app.5.1.32

[321] ESN (2016). *Lessons from Europe: how projects supporting care leavers are transforming lives,* https://www.esn-eu.org/news/lessons-europe-how-projects-supporting-care-leavers-are-transforming-lives

Several Member States have therefore developed specific initiatives to **increase fathers' engagement in education at home**. In **Czechia**, the NGO *Ligy otevřených mužů* developed a set of tips and tricks for fathers on how they can become more involved in the education of their children at home, and why this is important.[322] To increase the involvement of fathers in the education of their children, the Ministry of Equality between Women and Men (MEGA) in **Luxembourg** developed a video called 'Men Who Care'.[323] In **Belgium (Flanders)**, the Flemish Ministry of Equal Opportunities presented a Concept Note on Equal Opportunities to the Flemish Parliament in October 2014.[324] The government proposed investment in the development of a dedicated platform and awareness-raising activities to change gender stereotypical thinking in society, including in the family context. This led to the establishment of the website 'genderklik.be' (see Box 3-5 below).

Box 3-5   Achieving a 'gender click' at home – Belgium (Flanders)

The Flemish Ministry of Interior Affairs in Flanders funded the development of the website 'genderklik.be', which aims to change gender stereotypes at societal level in Flanders. The website provides answers to all sorts of questions around gender and the gender mechanisms which exist in daily life. It aims to raise awareness across a range of sectors to recognise male and female stereotypes by providing concrete examples, as well as practical tips and tools.

Through the concept of 'lifecycle' (*levensloop*), the website provides a breakdown of gender stereotypes existing in all stages of life, and provides links to reading material, videos, and other resources to break with gender stereotypes, including at home:

- Growing up/raising children: Resources related to raising children (e.g. one section is called 'boys mow the lawn, girls do the dishes').
- School: Resources to support teachers, schools, and parents in ECEC, primary education and secondary education.
- Free time/extracurricular activities: Resources in relation to sports, arts, pirates/princesses, gaming, and movies.
- Higher education: Material around educational choices, e.g. 'STEMGirls',[325] '#STEM Heroes'[326], and on female STEM role models.
- Working life: Resources related to men in care professions, politics as a 'man's world', breaking the glass ceiling for women and the ambitions of men/women.
- Family: Resources on breaking stereotypes such as 'women being better caregivers' or 'men needing to go for a successful career'.
- Retirement: Addressing the pension/pay gap between men and women.

More information: https://genderklik.be/

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[322] EDU (2014). *Muži do škol?* https://www.eduzin.cz/nezarazene/muzi-do-skol/
[323] https://mega.public.lu/fr/actualites/2019/11/Weltmaennerdag.html
[324] See : https://docs.vlaamsparlement.be/docs/stukken/2014-2015/g136-1.pdf
[325] See https://www.stem-girls.org/ and
[326] See https://www.stemcoalition.eu/programmes/stemhelden-stem-heroes

3.3.3   The importance of early childhood education and care

On 22 May 2019, the EU adopted a Council Recommendation on high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems. In this recommendation, the EU stresses the importance of the family for children's individual growth and development, and **the role of ECEC in supporting parents to prepare children for a smooth transition to primary education**. The recommendation describes this partnership as follows: *"Family is the first and most important place for children to grow and develop, and parents and guardians are responsible for each child's well-being, health, and development. Early childhood education and care services are an ideal opportunity to create an integrated approach because they lead to a first personal contact with the parents"*.[327]

ECEC therefore has an important role to play in helping to tackle gender stereotyping in the family environment. Although there is limited research in this area, the available research shows that **gender stereotyping in early childhood education is common**. A 2019 literature review of international academic evidence on gender stereotyping from 0–7 years old, for instance, states that pre-schools and primary schools are *"spaces where gender is learned and where gender inequalities are reproduced […] suggest[ing] that gender stereotypes are reproduced in early education through a number of means including teachers' attitudes and expectations of children, gendered materials, peer interaction, and gender imbalance in staff"*.[328] The report also states that, as early as the age of two, children are aware of gender and, from the age of six, start associating *"intelligence"* with being male and *"niceness"* with being female.

Other research indicates that, due to gendered expectations and patterns of differential treatment relative to many younger girls, **younger boys tend to have poorer socio-emotional and cognitive skill sets that support success later on in education**. These skill sets are developed (to different degrees) during early childhood and in ECEC and include the following:[329] independence in self-care and of taking responsibility for oneself; language proficiency, which, in turn, affects logical thinking and reasoning; understanding of others, and understanding of expectations from others (relationships skills), which later on are useful for interactions with teachers; and self-discipline, which is useful in developing grit and doing schoolwork.[330]

Initiatives focused on changing gender stereotypes in ECEC settings

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[327] Council of the European Union (9014/2019). *Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care systems*. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CONSIL:ST_9014_2019_INIT&from=EN

[328] Culhane, L. and A. Bazeley (2019). *Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood. A Literature Review. The Fawcett Society*. Available at: https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=e8096848-cbdb-4e16-8713-ee0dadb3dcc5

[329] Eidevald, Christian, (2009). *Det finns inga tjejbestämmare – Att förstå kön som position i förskolans vardagsrutiner och lek. Diss., Högskolan för lärande och kommunikation i Jönköping*

[330] Zimmerman, Fredrik (2018). *Det tillåtande och det begränsande – En studie om pojkars syn på studier och ungdomars normer kring maskulinitet, Om könsspecifika förväntningar och konsekvenser.* Diss., Göteborgs Universitet

More research is needed on **approaches to tackle gender stereotyping in ECEC settings**. One study in Australia, for instance, found that exposing children to 'gender-atypical' scenarios at a young age can influence their behaviour. As part of the study, eight 'highly gender-stereotyped' boys and girls were exposed to storybooks displaying 'gender-atypical' toy play, which yielded significant changes in play behaviour among some children, increasing their likelihood to play with 'gender-atypical' toys (although this was more likely among girls).[331]

Action 3.9 of **Luxembourg**'s National Action Plan on Gender Equality between Women and Men is centred on raising awareness on gender stereotyping in toys (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6), part of Luxembourg's wider 'RockMEGA' campaign on tackling gender stereotypes in the family environment (see Box 3-6 below).

Box 3-6   RockMEGA: Changing gender stereotypes at home − Luxembourg

As part of a wider awareness-raising campaign, the organisation RockMEGA (funded by MEGA, the Ministry for Equality between Women and Men) has also developed a wide range of flyers, videos, and brochures, and runs a number of other promotional activities to tackle gender stereotyping for children aged 3−6 years old. The PIXI booklets,[332] for example, cover a wide range of topics such as: 'I Can Also Do This' (focused on making children aware that their study and career choices are limitless, regardless of their gender), 'Mummy the Mayor' (to make children see that women can also take up leadership positions), or 'The Unicorn and Robot are Moving' (on tackling gender stereotyping in toys). Three promotional videos on toys, day care, and clothes shopping were also developed, aimed at tackling gender stereotypes in these domains.[333]

More information: https://www.rockmega.lu/lu/rockmega-lu-2/ and case study Luxembourg (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6)

A similarly interesting case is in **Belgium**, where the NGO *Vie féminine* has developed a training package designed to raise awareness of gender stereotypes among early childhood education stakeholders.[334] Their training package '*Pour une éducation non sexiste dès la petite enfance*' (For non-sexist education from early childhood onwards)[335] is intended to raise awareness among early childhood practitioners.[336] Another interesting example is the **Finnish** National Agency for Education (FNAE), who actively seek to emphasise gender equality in their ECEC core curriculum (2017).[337] They have published a guidebook to promote gender equality in ECEC,

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[331] Green, Bigler, and Catherwood (2004). The Variability and Flexibility of Gender-Typed Toy Play: A close look at children's behavioural responses to counterstereotypic models. *Sex Roles* 51:7-8, pp 371-386.
[332] https://www.rockmega.lu/materiel-sensibilisation/livrets-pour-enfants-pixi-2/
[333] https://www.rockmega.lu/materiel-sensibilisation/videos/
[334] For more information, please visit: http://www.viefeminine.be/
[335] Our translation.
[336] For more information, please visit: http://www.viefeminine.be/pour-une-education-non-sexiste-des-37#:~:text=%22Pour%20une%20%C3%A9ducation%20non%20sexiste,et%20les%20attitudes%20des%20adultes
[337] FNAE (2017). *National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education*. Helsinki: FNAE

which includes support for ECEC staff to guide boys in their learning.[338] A 2017 study in the **Netherlands** by VHTO published a report with findings on approaches to tackling early gender stereotyping (see Box 3-7 below).

Box 3-7   Pilot project on early gender stereotyping – the Netherlands

One of the main conclusions from this inventory of research on early gender stereotyping was that offering counter-stereotypical examples, particularly at a young age, can be effective in preventing and breaking stereotypes. Based on this insight, two interventions were devised, the first involving visits by counter-stereotyped female role model professionals (in science and technology), and the second an exercise where children were asked to draw pictures in relation to professions, and indicate whether they saw these as suitable for a specific gender and why.

The results of the research show that, although small children often do not yet have a fixed idea of professions, both boys and girls already have gender stereotyped associations. Additionally, the findings revealed that pre-schoolers are starting to become aware of differences between boys and girls, and what 'suits' the respective genders. They concluded that pre-schoolers are therefore particularly susceptible to both stereotyping, as well as counter-stereotyping, examples. As a result, both teachers and teacher training students involved indicated that it is important to start breaking stereotypes early on.[339]

More information:
https://www.vhto.nl/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/publicaties/Vroege_Stereotypering_verslag_van_een_iventarisatie-_en_interventiepilot_VHTO_2017.pdf

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[338] FNAE (2015). *Tasa-arvotyö on taitolaji: opas sukupuolten tasa-arvon edistämiseen perusopetuksessa [Equality work is a challenging: a guide for promoting gender equality in primary education].* Opetushallitus [Finnish National Agency for Education]
[339] *Ibid.*

3.4   School factors

Overview of key findings

This section explores the gendered effects of school factors on individual attitudes, behaviour, and education outcomes. Some key findings are outlined below.

- **Creating a positive and inclusive school climate is particularly important for boys**. The evidence reviewed shows that: (1) Boys are more likely to be bullied (or be bullies) than girls, and there is a positive correlation between bad results at school and bullying. This suggests that anti-bullying policies and initiatives are particularly important for boys, but no specific policies or initiatives were identified focusing on the challenges facing boys. (2) Boys are particularly sensitive to 'non effort' and 'anti-school' peer cultures at school, which encourage disruptive behaviour and, in turn, poor education outcomes. (3) Boys also perform better in classrooms with at least 60% girls, as this contributes to a more positive climate.

- **Several Member States have policies in place to attract and retain more males in the teaching profession**, as there is some evidence that male teachers can act as role models for boys. The majority of research, however, shows that the gender of the teacher does not have a significant impact on boys' educational performance. Instead, it is more important for policies to focus on ensuring teachers present alternative and diverse images of masculinity and femininity to children, in order to change gender stereotypes.

- **Gender stereotypes are common among many teachers in the EU**. Evidence shows that boys receive more attention from teachers than girls (both positive and negative) and are more severely punished for disruptive behaviour than girls. At the same time, boys receive less support from teachers when facing difficulties at school, which is correlated with poor education outcomes. 'Traditional' teaching methods (e.g. blackboard instruction, requiring students to sit still) are also still the dominant form of teaching in many Member States, and evidence shows that this is less engaging for boys than girls. The systematic inclusion of gender issues in initial teacher education and continuing professional development is also lacking, although some NGOs are developing and disseminating tools for teachers and school leaders.

- **Certain features of education systems can contribute to deepening the gender gap in education**. Evidence shows that boys' education outcomes can be negatively affected by more standardised curricula and learning materials. Higher levels of differentiation (streaming or tracking) also contribute to the persistence – and sometimes deepening – of gender gaps.

- **Gender stereotypes in teaching material are dominant across the EU** and have an important influence on perpetuating gender stereotypes at school and in wider society. A limited number of Member States (e.g. Lithuania) have specific regulations in place to ensure gender issues are taken into account during the

A second set of factors which impact gender behaviour and education outcomes are related to the school environment. According to van Hek (2017), boys are influenced more strongly than girls by their school and teaching environment.[340] This may be because, as suggested by several stakeholders interviewed as part of the case studies, the school environment in general is too 'female-oriented', and better suited to female students' behaviours, thereby putting boys at a disadvantage. As one stakeholder from Finland described it, "*masculine traits are not accepted at school*", underlining that there is a predominance of women in the teaching profession (see Annex III, Section 6.3.3). However, as the research presented in this section shows, the gender of the teacher is not the most determining school factor. Instead, what is most important is the masculinity and femininity norms and stereotypes which these teachers reflect in their own behaviour, interactions, and treatment of students, as well as their overall teaching quality and prior expectations for boys' (under)achievement.

3.4.1   The role of a positive school climate

In this section, we look at the influence of school factors on gender behaviour and education outcomes by looking at, first, the role played by a positive school climate (Section 3.4.1), and discussing the influence of bullying, peer culture, and the composition of the student body. Next, we look at the role played by the teacher (Section 3.4.2), including consideration of the composition of the teaching body and teacher quality, support, and interaction. In the subsequent section, we explore how school autonomy and the degree of standardisation and differentiation in school curricula impact school performance (Section 3.4.3). Finally, we look at the influence of gender stereotypes in textbooks (Section 3.4.4).

1. The influence of bullying

In its discussion of the latest PISA results, the OECD states that "*school climate can be safe or unsafe, cohesive or divisive, collaborative or competitive. Above all, it is typically perceived as either positive or negative*".[341] A first key element which contributes to a negative school climate and poor education outcomes for both boys and girls is bullying. Bullying is correlated with lower scores on all PISA subjects. PISA 2018 shows that, across the EU, **boys are more likely to be bullied or be bullies**. In 2018, 5% of girls reported being bullied at least a few times per month, compared with 10% of boys (see Figure 3-6 for a breakdown by country). This is linked to the fact that boys feel pressured (in line with the 'Man Box' model outlined above, see Box 3-1) to express control in the form of aggression, and are also more likely than girls to externalise negative feelings in the form of disruptive behaviour. Evidence from a longitudinal survey of pupils aged 11–13 years old in **Flanders (Belgium)**, published

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[340] Legewie, J., & DiPrete, T. A. (2012). School context and the gender gap in educational achievement. *American Sociological Review*, *77*(3), 463-485.
[341] OECD (2018) *PISA - What School Life Means for Students' Lives.* p.13 Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/acd78851-en.pdf?expires=1608137149&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=A2AAB3F0724F64D4E6985700CEF9A075

in 2012,[342] also suggests that cyberbullying is more prominent among boys than girls: 14.1% of boys surveyed, compared with 8.1% of girls, indicated that they had been cyberbullied over the past six months.

Figure 3-6   Proportion of males and females reporting being bullied at least a few times per month (PISA 2018)

Source: PISA data 2018. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/
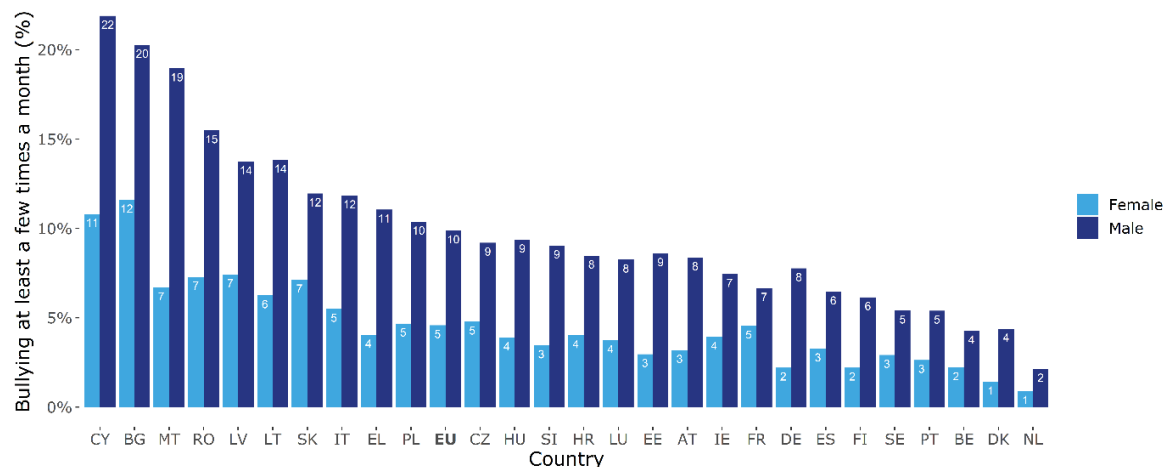
However, the reason why data shows a higher incidence of bullying among boys than girls may be because **bullying is more visible among boys than girls**. As we have seen above (see Section 3.2.3), there are different forms of violence, with girls being more prone to relational violence and boys being more prone to physical aggression. This was confirmed by our case study research, with stakeholders from **Bulgaria**, for example, pointing out that emotional bullying – which is less visible - may be more common among girls than boys (see Annex III, Section 6.3.1). Our **Swedish** case study also shows that, although the overall incidence of bullying in Swedish schools is relatively low, bullying follows gendered patterns. Girls are more likely to use psychological violence against other girls, while boys are more likely to use physical and sexual violence against fellow students (see Annex III, Section 6.3.8).

As illustrated by Figure 3-6, there are a few **EU Member States where the incidence of bullying is particularly problematic**, which could partially explain why the gender gap in education outcomes in these countries (as described in Chapter 2) is larger. In **Cyprus**, 31% of all pupils reported being bullied at least a few times per month, which is a 16-percentage-point increase compared with 2015, and the highest increase in the EU (EU average: 4.6 percentage point increase in bullying between 2015 and 2018). Similarly, in **Greec**e, the incidence of bullying increased by more than 10 percentage points between 2015 and 2018. The reasons for this are varied, with experts pointing to the increase of images of violence on social media, and the uncontrolled use of technology by children and young people as contributing

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[342] Vandebosch, H., Poels, K., Van Cleemput, K., Deboutte, G., Bastiaensens, S., De Bourdeaudhuij, I., & DeSmet, A. (2012). *Zes jaar onderzoek naar cyberpesten in Vlaanderen, België en daarbuiten: een overzicht van de bevindingen. Antwerpen: Universiteit Antwerpen*. Friendly ATTAC IWT/SBO project.

factors to this increase.[343] In **Lithuania**, according to a 2016 survey, 30% of all pupils feel lonely or out of place, and this figure rises to 42% for overweight pupils, and to over 50% for LGBTIQ pupils, with 90% of LGBTIQ pupils saying they intend to leave Lithuania after graduating because they feel unsafe.[344] According to a survey conducted by Spinter Research in 2017,[345] 85% of all Lithuanians see bullying as a very big problem. **Bulgaria** is another Member State where bullying rates are particularly high. Research conducted by the 'Single Step' and 'Bilitis' foundations in Bulgaria,[346] which received a lot of media attention in 2020, found that LGBTIQ students were more likely to be bullied than their heterosexual peers. Even more disturbing is that the study showed that the increase in hate speech and verbal bullying did not only happen among students, but also teachers. Issues related to bullying among LGBTIQ youth are discussed in further detail below, in relation to peer culture among boys. Even countries where bullying rates overall are lower, the trend of boys being twice as likely to be bullied than girls remains. Data from **Portugal**, for example, shows that boys are two to three times more likely than girls to have been involved in a fight or been provoked to fight in school in the last two months.[347]

There is, however, some international evidence which suggests that **bullies themselves may be less likely to be underperformers at school**. A study carried out in the United States and published in 2017,[348] which received a lot of media attention,[349] suggests that bullies may have higher levels of self-esteem and social status, and lower levels of depression. More research on this area is needed.

Initiatives focused on tackling bullying among boys

In terms of policy responses, the 2016 NESET II report on how to prevent and tackle bullying and school violence states that *"a large number of EU Member States do not have any national school bullying and violence prevention strategy"*.[350] The report goes on to say that the few countries which *do* have specific bullying policies lack a specific focus on particularly problematic areas of bullying (e.g. cyberbullying) or the needs of particular sub-groups who are more prone to bullying (e.g. LGBTIQ youth). More specifically, the report shows that national bullying prevention strategies in schools exist in only half of all EU Member States (AT,

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[343] Evangelia Daskalaki et al. (2020). *Understanding the online behavior and risks of children: results of a large-scale national survey on 10-18 year olds*. Available at
https://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/2008/2008.10274.pdf
[344] For more information, please visit: https://www.bepatyciu.lt/kampanija-be-patyciu/tyrimai-apie-patycias-1/
[345] See https://rm.coe.int/168070a746
[346] See *https://singlestep.bg/wp-content/uploads/LGBTI_students_survey.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2P_SeVXsmzGPiRFKSHY9kqgR6Gmt_rIOIrgjRz-JJ6vYhtS9RNaDy6lvE*.
[347] Pereira, B. (2004). *Bullying in Portuguese Schools* , available at
http://repositorium.sdum.uminho.pt/bitstream/1822/6094/1/school%20psychology%20internacional.pdf
[348] Koh, J.-B., & Wong, J. S. (2017). Survival of the Fittest and the Sexiest: Evolutionary Origins of Adolescent Bullying. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *32*(17), 2668-2690
. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260515593546
[349] See for instance https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/bullies-have-higher-self-esteem-social-success-study-finds-1.3173387 or https://www.today.com/parents/study-bullies-have-higher-self-esteem-social-status-lower-levels-t36271
[350] European Commission, (2016). *How to prevent and tackle bullying and school violence*, p.30
https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/3fb78afb-c03d-11e6-a6db-01aa75ed71a1

Bulgaria, Czechia, France, Greece, Italy, Liechtenstein, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden).[351] Since the publication of the report, however, an increasing number of Member States have adopted specific bullying strategies. One example is **Cyprus**, which had a National Strategy for the Management and Prevention of Violence at School (2018–2020).[352] Indeed, a recent pan-EU study found that well over half of European countries had introduced measures to promote inclusive school environments, anti-bullying, and well-being. Despite these developments, however, the policies in question had not always been fully implemented (Czechia, Croatia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and the UK).[353]

Although not all countries have a dedicated anti-bullying strategy in place, most do have initiatives in place to tackle bullying, in one way or another. There is, however, **no specific focus on tackling violence or bullying among boys** in any of these initiatives; this was mentioned by some stakeholders interviewed (in **Bulgaria,** for example) as a potential problem, since bullying disproportionately affects boys (see Annex III, Section 6.3.1). In **Poland**, the Safe+ programme aims to improve the safety of students at school by encouraging the safe use of cyberspace, and creating an open and positive school climate. The programme targets pupils, parents, teachers, and other school staff.[354] In **Latvia,**[355] **Lithuania,**[356] and **Flanders (Belgium),**[357] annual awareness-raising campaigns have been in place since 2004/2005 to raise awareness across society of the importance of bullying prevention. In **Lithuania**, as a result of the 'Safe School for All' programme, which is part of the national education system reform 2019–2022, 824 general education schools (i.e. 71% of all schools) and 342 pre-schools (57% of all pre-schools) have developed adopted anti-bullying strategies.[358] Another Erasmus+ funded project, EUROPE, is described below (see Box 3-8).

Box 3-8   EUROPE – Ensuring Unity and Respect as Outcomes for People in Europe

Carried out in 12 schools in three European countries (Portugal, Sweden, and the Netherlands), the EUROPE project aimed to prevent violence and promote inclusive education. The project targeted schools with a high proportion of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, newly arrived migrants, or students who had dropped out of schools. One of the key outcomes of the projects was the creation of five regional teacher training centres, which offer short courses on how to deal with disruptive behaviour and promote better social inclusion at school in

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[351] *Ibid.* p. 31.
 Ibid. p. 31.
tegy here: http://www.moec.gov.cy/paratiritirio_via/ethniki_stratigiki.html
[353] European Commission (2020) *Assessment of the Implementation of the 2011 Council Recommendation on Policies to Reduce Early School Leaving* (p.52). Available at :https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/72f0303e-cf8e-11e9-b4bf-01aa75ed71a1
[354] See : https://bezpiecznaszkola.men.gov.pl/programy/program-bezpieczna/
[355] For more information, please visit: https://www.bepatyciu.lt/kampanija-be-patyciu/apie-kampanija-be-patyci/
[356] For more information, please visit:https://www.bepatyciu.lt/kampanija-be-patyciu/apie-kampanija-be-patyci/
[357] See : https://overheid.vlaanderen.be/agenda/week-tegen-pesten
[358] For more information, please visit:
https://lrv.lt/uploads/main/documents/files/Atnaujintas%20reform%C5%B3%20leidinys%20(Angl_).pdf

general.

2. The influence of peer culture

The overall school climate and gender behaviour towards school and learning is also influenced by dominating peer cultures. Peer culture is defined in the academic literature as *"a stable set of activities or routines, artefacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers"*.[359] In other words, peer culture refers to a set of values, norms, attitudes, and behaviours that are produced and shared by peer groups (i.e. a group of people of roughly the same age, status, and interests). Different peer cultures co-exist at school, and each of these is influenced to varying degrees by norms of masculinity and femininity, which influence the likelihood, expectation, and pressure for boys and girls to conform to different types of peer culture at school.[360] **Conforming to 'the right peer culture' is extremely important**, especially for teenagers, as this can mean the difference between being popular or not, being bullied or not, and in short for general well-being at school. Research from **Poland**, for instance, shows that the children who are most vulnerable to bullying or violence are those who are considered as inferior or different. For boys and girls, this means that children who do not respect the traditional and stereotypical gender regime are more likely to be victims of bullying.[361] This links to research around hegemonic masculinity, which has had an important influence on gender studies in recent years.[362]

The influence of peer culture on boys' and girls' behaviour is extremely complex, and not a lot of research has been conducted in this area yet in the EU. Based on the literature, and supported by examples of research from **Sweden**[363] and **Belgium (Flanders)**,[364] three main types of peer culture can nonetheless be identified:

- **Anti-school or non-study culture**. In this peer culture, it is considered 'uncool' to be doing well at school and get good results. Instead, it is important to display attitudes and behaviours to actively distance oneself from school and

[359] Corsaro W.A. (2009). Peer Culture. In: Qvortrup J., Corsaro W.A., Honig MS. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 301. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-27468-6_21

[360] Asp-Onsjö, L, (2014). *Parallella positioneringar bland pojkar. Om sociala hierarkier och skolprestationer.*

[361] Chmura-Rutkowska, I. (2012), *Przemoc rówieśnicza w gimnazjum a płeć: kontekst społeczno-kulturowy, „Forum Oświatowe"* , nr 1 (46).

[362] Connell, W. et al, (2005) Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept. *Gender and Society,* Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0891243205278639

[363] Asp-Onsjö, Lisa, (2014). *Parallella positioneringar bland pojkar. Om sociala hierarkier och skolprestationer.*

[364] Houtte, M.V., (2017). *Peer Pressure In Het Secundair Onderwijs*, Available at: https://lib.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/002/377/341/RUG01-002377341_2017_0001_AC.pdf

learning. At school, this means making jokes in class, disrespecting teachers, not completing or submitting school assignments, and being able to show that you do not obtain good results. Outside school, common attitudes and behaviours would be smoking, drinking, hanging out in the street, etc. In this culture, studying and schoolwork are regarded as feminine, and norms of masculinity are dominant. If this peer culture exists at school, there is a high likelihood that boys will conform with these attitudes and behaviours.

- **School- or study-oriented culture**. In this peer culture, obtaining good grades at school as a result of hard work or effort is seen as a good thing. It is okay for both boys and girls to be open about effort and to perform well. Girls are more likely than boys to conform with this type of culture. Research also shows that this type of culture is more common among children whose parents have higher levels of education.[365]

- **Mixed or non-effort culture**. In this peer culture, it is acceptable to obtain good results at school, but this should appear to be achieved without having put in any effort. The underlying idea is that school performance should be based on talent and not hard work. Traditional norms of masculinity are again very dominant in this peer culture, meaning that boys are more likely than girls to conform to it. Those who conform to it often display behaviours which are found in the anti-school or non-study culture, such as making jokes or not paying attention in class. A possible long-term effect of this type of culture can be that children (often boys) do not develop effective enough learning techniques, which can lead to failure to complete higher education. There is also, however, a lot of evidence that some 'jocks' (i.e. children who joke in class, belonging to his peer mixed or non-effort culture) do very well at school.[366]

Boys who feel more pressure to conform to dominant peer cultures and gender norms are more likely to display disruptive behaviour.[367] Evidence from **Belgium (Flanders)**[368] suggests that **boys feel more pressure than girls to conform to dominant peer cultures**. For example, the Flemish study suggests that while students coming from a migrant background are more likely than their native peers to be school-oriented, boys with a migrant background are more likely to conform to the mixed or non-effort culture and behave in a 'laddish' way in order to camouflage their schoolish behaviour at home. Girls with a migrant background are more likely to conform to the school or study culture. It should be noted, however, that both boys and girls can be found in all three types of peer culture described above, and this is

[365] Zimmerman, Fredrik (2018). *Så kan fler pojkar lyckas i skolan*, https://skolvarlden.se/artiklar/sa-kan-fler-pojkar-lyckas-i-skolan

[366] Barber, B., Eccles, J., (2001). Whatever Happened to the Jock, the Brain, and the Princess?: Young Adult Pathways Linked to Adolescent Activity Involvement and Social Identity, *Journal of Adolescent Research,* https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0743558401165002

[367] Heyder, A., van Hek, M. & Van Houtte, M. When Gender Stereotypes Get Male Adolescents into Trouble: A Longitudinal Study on Gender Conformity Pressure as a Predictor of School Misconduct. *Sex Roles 84,* 61–75 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-020-01147-9

[368] Blende, A., (2017) *PEER PRESSURE IN HET SECUNDAIR ONDERWIJS*. Available at: https://lib.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/002/377/341/RUG01-002377341_2017_0001_AC.pdf

often heavily dependent on the wider school context. There are also so-called 'ladettes' who conform to the anti-school or non-study culture; vice-versa, there are a lot of boys who do put in a lot of effort at school and conform to the school or study culture.[369] Peer culture among boys is also strongly dominated by extremely hierarchical power relations (see Box 3-9 below).

Box 3-9   Understanding peer dynamics among boys – Sweden

The Swedish case study shows that boys tend to organise themselves in hierarchies, especially in anti-school/non-study and mixed/non-effort cultures. Boys can negotiate their status in this hierarchy through displaying certain types of behaviour and school performance. They can 'climb the ladder' though offensive behaviour such as teasing, bullying, or violence, including sexism and homophobic behaviour among each other and towards girls. This serves as a mechanism to uphold power relations based on traditional gender norms within peer groups of boys, and towards girls as peers from the opposite sex. They can also climb the ladder by 'self-sabotaging' their own learning process, for example by being disrespectful towards teachers and seeking punishment, or by showing off bad school results. Changing this type of behaviour among boys is crucial to improve their performance at school.

More information: Case study Sweden (see Annex III, Section 6.3.8)

There also appears to be a strong **link between homophobia and masculine or anti-school culture**. Research from **Portugal**, for example, shows that homophobic language and behaviour is still very common in Portuguese schools, particularly towards boys who express their sexuality with perceived 'feminine' traits.[370] There is also intense social pressure around what it means to be 'a good homosexual' as a boy. A 'good homosexual' is discreet, still 'behaves like a man' and does not display their 'different' sexuality too visibly; a 'bad homosexual' behaves like a girl, acts queer, and is therefore seen as disruptive.[371] More information on the challenges facing LGBTIQ youth in Portugal can be found in the case study (see Annex III, Section 6.3.7).

This means that it is potentially **more challenging for boys than girls to come out during schooling age** if they are gay or bisexual. Evidence shows that, while parents generally welcome nonconformity among their daughters, they have mixed reactions to some degrees of non-conformity of their sons (e.g. if they show interest in cooking, see Pillar 4 of the 'Man Box' described above (Box 3-1)) and outright negative reactions to higher levels of non-conformity (e.g. wearing dresses, thus not

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[369] University of Lancaster, (2016) *Lads and Ladettes* https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/news-archive/504EB6F1412A648A802571C700518E4A.php
[370] Santos, H (2017). *Para uma visão completa do bullying homofobico: desocultando o quotidiano da homofobia nas escolas*. Avaliable at https://exaequo.apem-estudos.org/files/2017-12/07-hugo-m.-santos-sofia-marques-da-silva-isabel-menezes.pdf
[371] Poeschl, Venancio and Costa (2012). *Consequences of (non) disclosure of homosexuality and sexual prejudice: The point of view of homosexuals*. Avaliable at: http://www.scielo.mec.pt/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0874-20492012000100003; Pereira (2009) *Fazendo género na escola: uma análise performativa da negociação do género entre jovens*. Avaliable at: http://www.scielo.mec.pt/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0874-55602009000200010; Da Silva and Araujo (2007). *Interrogando masculinidades em contexto escolar: mudança anunciada?*. Avaliable at: https://exaequo.apem-estudos.org/artigo/interrogando-masculinidades-em-contexto-escolar

conforming to Pillar 5 of the 'Man Box').[372] Worldwide and in the EU, LGBTIQ people on average attain lower levels of education, have higher unemployment rates or are underemployed, face barriers to getting married (which denies them tax and other financial benefits), and are often vulnerable to social stigma, discrimination, exclusion, and oppression, including violent attacks.[373] The School Climate survey shows that, across Europe, most LGBTIQ students feel unsafe at school, and as many as 90% are victims of verbal abuse.[374] If both being a boy and gay are indicators of lower school performance, then boys with an LGBTIQ identity could be at even higher risk of low performance at school.

Initiatives focused on improving peer culture

UNICEF's 'Rights Respecting Schools' website promotes **whole school approaches aimed at tackling negative school cultures**.[375] In **Sweden**, a government commission on Men and Gender Equality (appointed from 2012–2014) suggested a strategy based on counteracting non-study cultures, applying norm-critical work in schools, zero tolerance against sexism and all forms of violence and harassment, as well as measures to support non-traditional study choices.[376] According to the Council of Europe[377] and UNESCO,[378] the **prevention of homophobic and transphobic violence and bullying** in the education sector is a crucial dimension of intervention to ensuring a positive school climate. Citing research conducted by IGLYI, apparently less than half (21) of all Council of Europe Member States have national or regional action plans to explicitly prevent and address school-based bullying based on gender orientation and gender identity and expression,[379] and there do not seem to be any policies or initiatives focusing specifically on the challenges faced by LGBTIQ boys.

3. The composition of the student body

Eurydice data on the existence of single-sex schools in the EU shows that in the school year 2008/2009 only **Ireland**, **Malta**, and **Greece** had public single-sex schools (see Figure 3-7). Since the early 2000s, however, the explicit policy in Ireland has been to

[372] Kane, E.W. (2006). No Way My Boys Are Going to Be Like That!. Parents' Responses to Children's Gender Nonconformity. *Gender Sociology 20* (2):149–176. doi: 10.1177/0891243205284276.

[373] Bosia, M.J., McEvoy, S.M. and Rahman, M. eds., 2020. *The Oxford Handbook of Global LGBT and Sexual Diversity Politics*. Oxford University Press.

[374] GLSEN, (2017). *The 2017 National School Climate Survey*, Available at : https://www.glsen.org/research/2017-national-school-climate-survey-0

[375] See https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/

[376] Sverige, A.B., (2014). Män och jämställdhet, https://www.regeringen.se/49b70d/contentassets/6e2024c9c99948bfa052224089272c0e/man-och-jamstalldhet-fran-missiv-till-bilaga-8-sou-20146

[377] Council of Europe, (2019). *Safe at school: tackling homophobic and transphobic bullying*. Available at: https://www.coe.int/en/web/sogi/-/safe-at-school-tackling-homophobic-and-transphobic-bullying

[378] UNESCO, (2016). *Out in the open: Education sector responses to violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression*. Available at: https://www.right-to-education.org/resource/out-open-education-sector-responses-violence-based-sexual-orientation-and-gender

[379] Van Driel, B. (2021). *Thematic fiche: Education and LGBTIQ Diversity.* ET 2020 Working Group on Common Values and Inclusive Education. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/305973ae-5164-11eb-b59f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-198629214

promote more co-education, discussed further below.[380] While there are not many public single-sex schools, Eurydice notes that *"such schools can be found in the private sector in almost all countries",* and that the countries that have a large proportion of single-sex schools have *"a certain tradition of considering single-sex schools as better schools".*[381]

Figure 3-7   Public single-sex schools in Europe, ISCED 1-3 (2008/2009)
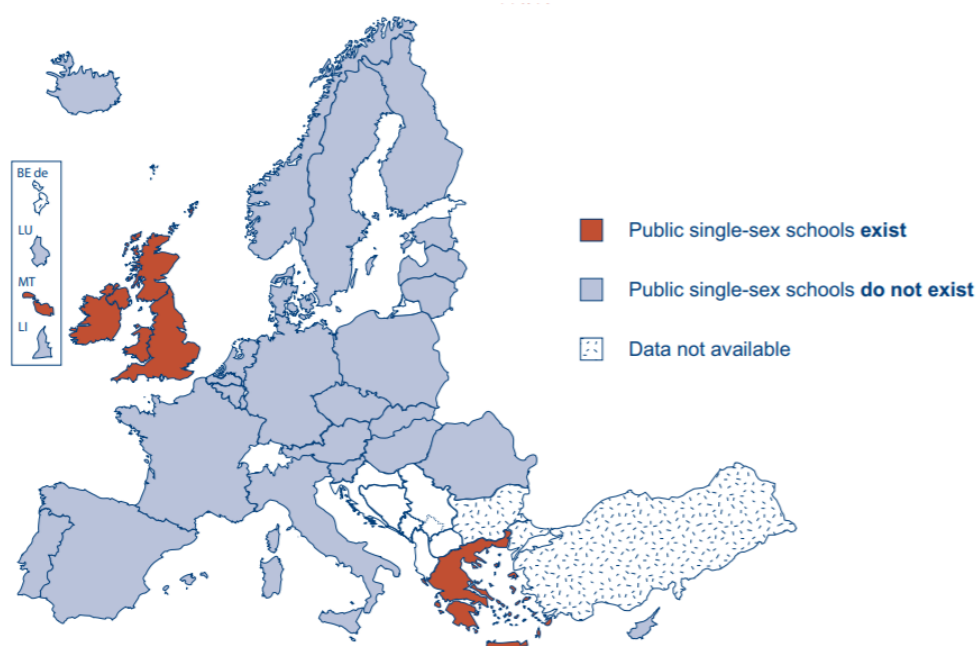
Source: Eurydice/EACEA/EC (2012). Gender differences in educational outcomes. Study on the measures taken and the current situation in Europe. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, p. 86. Available at:

https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/40271e21-ca1b-461e-ba23-88fe4d4b3fd4

Evidence, however, shows that **boys tend to perform better if they are in classrooms with high proportions of girls**. OECD data demonstrates that, on average across all OECD countries, students with higher reading scores tend to report a more positive disciplinary climate, and that *"student reports of disciplinary climate were more positive in schools where more than 6% of students were girls and in gender-balanced schools than in schools where more than 60% of students were boys".*[382] The reason for this is that, in classes with more girls, there are fewer (noise) disturbances, the behaviour of students overall is better, and girls' positive school culture positively impacts boys' attitudes towards learning, as well as their school

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[380] Eurydice/EACEA/EC (2012). *Gender differences in educational outcomes. Study on the measures taken and the current situation in Europe*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, p. 86. Available at: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/40271e21-ca1b-461e-ba23-88fe4d4b3fd4
[381] *Ibid.*, p. 85-86.
[382] PISA (2018) *What School Life Means for Students' Lives,* p. 66, available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/acd78851-en.pdf?expires=1610194550&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=B529DD3CECA5DAD111491A652E59D7AD

results.[383] Girls, on the other hand, seem to be less affected; their performance remains relatively constant whether or not there are more boys or girls in the classroom. In contrast, if boys are in single-sex classrooms, there is a negative impact on their behaviour and educational outcomes.[384] It can therefore be hypothesised **that policies which are focused on increasing the number of girls in certain disciplines** (e.g. in STEM or VET), even though they do not specifically focus on boys, **could in fact have a positive impact on boys' education outcomes** (see e.g. van Hek, Kraaykamp, and Pelzer (2018)[385]).

The single-sex vs. mixed-sex schools debate ties in with wider issues around educational segregation that increase educational inequality. The case study in **Sweden** explains that segregation correlates with negative school performance due to a lack of positive peer effects in more homogenous classes and that, in these classes, there is often also a lack of highly qualified teachers. In **Luxembourg**, which has a highly differentiated education system, educational segregation is also a key issue: in primary schools, stakeholders indicate that there are often classes with predominantly 'non-native' or 'native' students. **Pupils in homogenous groups of non-native students are "excluded from achievement"**, with the focus on improving student well-being and behaviour, rather than academic achievement. This is because teachers (and their parents) perceive education to be less important, as the children are likely to "become a truck driver or a cleaner anyway". The primary focus is on 'keeping these children in education' over anything else.[386]

Initiatives focused on changing the composition of the student body

Tackling educational segregation is a priority for many Member States, as can be seen, for example, by **Portugal**'s adoption of a Law on Inclusive Education[387] and changes to the Law on the Curriculum for Primary and Secondary Education,[388] both introduced in July 2018, or the 'M Decree' in **Flanders (Belgium)** of 2014. Both focus on encouraging schools to include students with special educational needs (SEN) in 'regular' education by providing them with specific support. Except for **Ireland**, however (which, as mentioned above, is transitioning from single-sex to mixed-sex schools in public education – see Box 3-10 below), there are **few initiatives tackling gender segregation targeting boys specifically**. As discussed earlier (see Section 2.3), most initiatives seeking to break down gender stereotypes in subject choices

[383] Van Houtte, M. (2004b). Gender context of the school and study culture, or how the presence of girls affects the achievement of boys. *Educational Studies, 30*(4), 409-423.

[384] Pahlke, E., Hyde, J. S., & Allison, C. M. (2014). The effects of single-sex compared with coeducational schooling on students' performance and attitudes: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 140*(4), 1042–1072.

[385] van Hek, M., Kraaykamp, G., & Pelzer, B. (2018). Do schools affect girls' and boys' reading performance differently? A multilevel study on the gendered effects of school resources and school practices. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, *29*(1), 1-21.

[386] Morinaj, J., Hadjar, A. and Hascher, T. (2019). School alienation and academic achievement in Switzerland and Luxembourg: a longitudinal perspective, *Social Psychology of Education*.

[387] See: https://dre.pt/web/guest/pesquisa/-/search/115652961/details/maximized?p_p_auth=MSX7XrzD

[388] See: https://dre.pt/web/guest/pesquisa/-/search/115652962/details/maximized?filterAction=TRUE&q=ensino+basico+e+secundario&perPage=25&fqs=ensino+basico+e+secundario&fq=2018

(leading to less mixed classes) focus on attracting more girls to areas like STEM and VET, in which they are typically under-represented compared with boys.

Box 3-10   Move towards mixed-sex schools – Ireland

Stakeholders interviewed as part of the Irish case study explained that the continued existence of a large number of single-sex schools in Ireland (approximately 17% of primary schools and 30% of secondary schools) is one of the main reasons for the gender gap in the Irish education system. From a negative perspective, single-sex schools are very likely to affect subject choices at school (e.g. male-only schools are less likely to have home economics facilities than woodwork, metalwork, or engineering facilities). While some 92% of boys' schools have physics, chemistry, and biology on their Leaving Certificate curriculum, only 77% of girls' schools do.[389] Interviewees from a student representative organisation considered that single-sex schools created an environment where 'toxic masculinity' is more likely to be prevalent due to the type of peer pressure created in an all-male environment. For example, physical excellence in sports is celebrated, whereas academic excellence can be ridiculed as being 'nerdy'.

There is, however, a growing trend towards mixed-sex schools due to a number of factors: religious orders no longer have the capacity to operate schools and to supply qualified teachers, and they are under financial pressure to merge with other schools. Education and Training Boards are now responsible for the patronage of newly created schools (about 17 new schools are created each year) and these are mixed-sex schools by default.[390] In 1984, an independent charity, 'Educate Together', began running several non-denominational mixed-sex schools in Ireland. The schools are state-funded, and guarantee *"equality of access and esteem to students irrespective of their social, cultural, or religious background"*. In 2020, Educate Together was operating a national network of 95 primary schools and 19 secondary schools in Ireland, catering to over 30,000 students.[391] However, interviewees felt that it would be decades before almost all schools in Ireland are mixed-sex schools, because schools and their communities change their ethos very slowly.

More information: Case study Ireland (see Annex III, Section 6.3.5)

3.4.2   The role of the teacher

In this section, we look at the influence of the teacher on boys' and girls' behaviour and education outcomes. First, we look at the composition of the teaching body, and whether or not a higher proportion of male teachers influences behaviour and

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[389] Donnelly, K., (2019) *Gender gap in science, maths and tech subjects on offer in girls' and boys' schools* https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/education/gender-gap-in-science-maths-and-tech-subjects-on-offer-in-girls-and-boys-schools-38657808.html
[390] Established in 2013, Education and Training Boards (ETBs) are statutory local education bodies responsible for education and training services in 16 different regions of the Republic of Ireland.
[391] https://www.educatetogether.ie/about/overview/

performance. Next, we discuss the importance of the quality of teaching and interaction with students, followed by an appraisal of the existence of gender stereotypes among teachers.

1. The composition of the teaching body

Several stakeholders believe in the importance of **increasing the number of male teachers as role models for boys**. According to figures from the European Parliamentary Research Service from 2019, 72% of all school teachers in 2017 were female, confirming the perception that teaching is 'a woman's world'.[392] The European Commission's 2019 Education and Training Monitor, which included a specific focus on teachers, shows however that in 2017 *"the percentage of female teachers drops as the level of education increases"*.[393] Of all teachers at pre-primary level, 95.8% were female, compared to 85.5% at primary level, and 64.7% at secondary level. The share of female academic staff only exceeded 50% in Lithuania (56.7%), Latvia (54.5%), Finland (51.9%), and Romania (50.8%). In all other EU countries, the percentage of female teaching staff ranges between 40% and 50%, except for Luxembourg, Greece and Malta, where less than 36% of all academic teachers were women.

One of the reasons for the lack of males in teaching, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, is **the persistence of gender stereotypes and gender segregation in a highly patriarchal and hierarchical labour market**. Stakeholders interviewed for the case study in **Czechia** reported that it is easier for women to be 'accepted' in industries traditionally dominated by males, such as ICT, because their access to these sectors represents a step up in the gender hierarchy. For men, it is the opposite: if they choose to enter professions dominated by women – such as teaching or care – they are faced with the additional societal pressure of not meeting masculine expectations, earning lower wages, and moving 'downwards' on the gender hierarchy. As such, male teachers often have to defend this 'non-standard' career choice, which is not in line with the socially perceived masculine ideal. This often intensifies in professional roles involving care for young children[394] (see Annex III, Section 6.3.2).

Although it can be important for boys to have male teachers as role models, evidence shows that **the gender of teachers does not have a significant impact on performance**.[395] This is confirmed in studies from **Luxembourg**,[396] the

[392] KATSAROVA, I. (2019). *Teaching careers in the EU: Why boys do not want to be teachers* European Parliamentary Research Service. Published October 18. Available: https://epthinktank.eu/2019/10/18/teaching-careers-in-the-eu-why-boys-do-not-want-to-be-teachers-policy-podcast/. [Accessed May 18 2020].

[393] European Commission, (2019) *Education and Training Monitor EU analysis,* volume 1 2019, p.21. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/document-library/education-and-training-monitor-eu-analysis-volume-1-2019_en

[394] Fárová, 2015. *Muži učitelé v mateřských školách – konstrukce maskulinity ve feminizovaném prostředí.*" *Gender, rovné příležitosti, výzkum* http://dx.doi.org/10.13060/12130028.2015.16.1.166

[395] See for example: Marsh, H.W., Martin, A.J., & Cheng, J. (2008). A multilevel perspective on gender in classroom motivation and climate: Potential benefits of male teachers for boys? *Journal of Educational Psychology,* 100, 78-95; and Martin, A.J., & Marsh, H.W. (2005). Motivating boys and motivating girls: Does teacher gender really make a difference? *Australian Journal of Education, 49,* 320-334.

396 Mayer, D., Beckh, K., Berkic, J. & Becker-Stoll, F. (2013). *Erzieherin-Kind-Beziehungen und kindliche Entwicklung: Der Einfluss von Geschlecht und Migrationshintergrund. Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, 6, 803-816.

Netherlands[397] and **Sweden**,[398] which all show that the sex of the teacher does not affect the school performance of boys. Other evidence exists, however; for example, another study finds that female teachers tend to increase student performance, but mainly among girls.[399] A more important predictor of boys' school success seems to be the quality, interaction, and support received from teachers, irrespective of the gender of the teacher. Despite these findings, there remain mixed views among stakeholders on the importance of male role models for boys. One group of stakeholders interviewed as part of the case study in **Ireland**, for example, felt that boys are more likely to be able to relate to male teachers and have more discussions with them about mutually interesting topics. Another group of stakeholders felt that the dominance of females in teaching was *"a reality rather than an issue"* (see Annex III, Section 6.3.5). In **France**, some research also shows that girls do better at school than boys because the majority of teachers are women (80%), which means they have a role model to identify with.[400]

Another view expressed, for example by a stakeholder interviewed for the **German** case study, is that the importance is not so much the sex of the teacher, but rather the *types* of masculinity or femininity male and female teachers portray to their students. For boys, the question which should be asked is: 'What type of masculinity do we want a male teacher to convey?'. The interviewee suggested that it is important to **increase the presence of *"alternative images of masculinity"* at school**, i.e. positive role models who demonstrate to boys that 'it's okay to show weakness', feel sad, or seek help (see Annex III, Section 6.3.4).

Initiatives to increase the number of men in teaching

Given the fact that females are still over-represented in teaching overall, and that certain stakeholders consider that boys may respond better to male teachers, several countries have put **incentives in place to attract and retain more men in teaching**. In the **Netherlands**, for example, the alliance for 'Diversity in front of the class' (*Alliantie divers voor de klas*) was set up by the Ministry of Education and Science to attract and retain more male teachers.[401] An important driving force behind this initiative is the *Meestert* Foundation (see Box 3-11 below). The Dutch Ministry of Education and Science also announced that it would fund additional research into what

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[397] See
https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjm3u325ZvtAhXEC-wKHev2AokQFjAAegQIBBAC&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nro.nl%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2016%2F05%2F039-Antwoord-Wat-is-er-bekend-over-de-effecten-van-het-geslacht-van-leraren-in-het-PO-2016.pdf&usg=AOvVaw2LO788Yz02noKiMvBSJ7hr
[398] Öhrn, Elisabet, (2014*). "Introduktion". I Att lyckas i skolan. Om skolprestationer och kön i olika undervisningspraktiker*. 11-30, Göteborgs universitet
[399] Hermann, Z., Diallo, A., (2017), *Does teacher gender matter in Europe?* Evidence from TIMSS data, Budapest Working Papers on the Labour Market No. BWP - 2017/2. Available at: https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/173673
[400] Travail, genre et société, n°31*, (2014). Filles et garçons sur le chemin de l'égalité*, DEPP 2020.
[401] Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen. (2020). *Voortgangsrapportage Emancipatiemonitor.* Den Haag: Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen.

the government, teacher training colleges, and school boards can do to create a more diverse teacher population.[402]

Box 3-11   Attracting and retaining more male teachers – Netherlands

The NGO *Meestert* is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Education and Science and is run by two engaged teachers who organise community meetings to facilitate knowledge dissemination and sharing on teaching for men. They also have a dedicated helpline for male teachers who need training. The NGO works closely with local and national administrations to attract and retain more men in education and keep this topic on the policy agenda. The two objectives that *Meestert* aims to achieve are: (1) 30% of all teaching teams in education should be male, if necessary, by the introduction of a quota at national level; and (2) 40% of all first-year trainee teachers should be male, and their dropout rate (currently at 60%) should be tackled.

For more information: https://www.meestert.nl/

In **Luxembourg**, MADAK (funded by the Ministry of Equality between Women and Men), aims to **increase the number of males in non-formal care and pre-schools** (see Box 3-12 below). In the **Netherlands**, a parliamentary debate is currently ongoing to split initial teacher education into two streams: one stream focused on 'the young child', and another stream on 'the older child', with some parties calling for a pilot project to start over the summer of 2021.[403] The reason for this debate is that evidence shows that one of the main reasons why men are not interested in (or more likely to drop out of) becoming a teacher is that they are not interested in teaching young children and the additional 'caring'-type tasks this entails.[404]

Box 3-12   Attracting more males to ECEC – Luxembourg

MADAK (*Méi Männer an der ausserschoulescher Kannerbetreiung)*, which stands for 'More Men in Non-Formal Education and Care', seeks to increase the number of male pre-school teachers as part of Luxembourg's approach to tackling gender stereotypes in society more broadly. The initiative is fully funded by the Ministry of Equality between Women and Men (MEGA), was set up in 2016, and is run by the Catholic University of Applied Sciences of Berlin (*Katholische Hochschule für Sozialwesen de Berlin* (IGD)) and *infomann*, which is part of the NGO ActTogether.

More information: https://madak.lu/ and case study Luxembourg (see Annex III,

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[402] Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen. (2020). *Voortgangsrapportage Emancipatiemonitor.* Den Haag: Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen.
[403] See https://www.scienceguide.nl/2020/02/kamer-is-traineren-van-opsplitsen-pabo-beu/
[404] Heest, F.V, (2021) *Pabo wordt opgesplitst om meer mannen aan te trekken*. Available at: https://www.scienceguide.nl/2021/01/pabo-wordt-opgesplitst-om-meer-mannen-aan-te-trekken/

2. Teacher quality, support, and interaction

There is strong evidence showing that the quality of teachers is a key factor for increasing the performance of students from disadvantaged families, and the same is found to be true for boys underperforming at school.[405] The reason for this is that underperforming students benefit more from individualised learning and instruction than high performing students. The case study for **Sweden** also suggests that disruptive behaviour in class can be triggered by pupils not being able to interpret instructions from teachers (see Annex III, Section 6.3.8), which underlines the importance of quality instruction. In addition, it is important for children to have a good relationship with their teachers; this has been found to be especially important for boys with a migrant background.[406]

Several studies show that **boys receive more negative attention from teachers than girls**.[407] Evidence of teachers having a more positive opinion and treatment of girls than boys was found in **Belgium (Flanders)**,[408] **Belgium (Wallonia)**,[409] **Denmark**,[410] **Estonia**,[411] the **Netherlands**[412], and **Slovakia**.[413] One key reason for this, according to these studies, is that teachers perceive boys to be more disruptive in class than girls, and thus have gendered expectations of their students when teaching and assessing them, which can lead to unequal outcomes. The study from **Belgium (French Community)**,[414] for example, shows that boys are given better grades than girls for good papers, but are graded more harshly for bad papers. Girls are also praised more often by their teachers in class because they complete their homework. This is confirmed by case study interviewees from **Luxembourg**, who said that most teachers think of boys as being more delinquent and less ambitious than girls, which typically leads them to giving boys worse grades than girls. They also said that the gender of the teacher does not matter in this regard, and that both male and

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[405] See for example SNS Analys nummer 42 "Könsskillnader i skolresultat" (2017)
https://snsse.cdn.triggerfish.cloud/uploads/2020/02/sns-analys-nr-42.pdf
[406] Mayer, D., Beckh, K., Berkic, J. & Becker-Stoll, F. (2013). Erzieherin-Kind-Beziehungen und kindliche Entwicklung: Der Einfluss von Geschlecht und Migrationshintergrund. *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik, 6*, 803-816.
[407] Maele D, Huyge E, Consuegra E, Van Houtte M, Engels N. *Teaching in the bed of procrustes: a focus on the role of macho culture and gendered teacher-student interactions in secondary education.* Open Seminar, Abstracts. 2013.https://lib.ugent.be/nl/catalog/pug01:4094597
[408] Maele D., (2014) *Een moeizame start van de secundaire schoolloopbaan: De rol van genderidentiteit en schoolverbondenheid.* Available at:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269703865_Een_moeizame_start_van_de_secundaire_schoolloopbaan_De_rol_van_genderidentiteit_en_schoolverbondenheid
[409] For more information, please visit: http://www.egalitefillesgarcons.cfwb.be/realite-ou-fiction/environnement-institutionnel/une-problematique-du-secondaire-lorientation-scolaire/
[410] Egelund, N., Nordahl, T., & Andersen, PG (2018) *Girls and boys at school*. Available at:
https://vbn.aau.dk/ws/files/292029360/Piger_og_drenge_i_skolen_TIL_UPLOAD.pdf
[411] Anniste, K., Batueva, V., Biin, H., Mägi, E., Osila, L. ja Turk, P. (2016). *Eesti üliõpilaste soolise võrdõiguslikkuse alane teadlikkus, hoiakud ja kogemused.* Tallinn: Poliitikauuringute Keskus Praxis. Available at: http://www.praxis.ee/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/uliopilased_sooline_vordoiguslikkus.pdf
[412] Onderwijsraad. (2020). *Een verkenning van sekseverschillen in het onderwijs*. Den Haag: Onderwijsraad.
[413] Kosová, B. (2008), Sociálna spravodlivosť a rodové rozdiely v slovenskej škole v zrkadle medzinárodného testovania PISA. *Pedagogická orientace*, 18(2), 81–94.
[414] For more information, please visit: http://www.egalitefillesgarcons.cfwb.be/realite-ou-fiction/environnement-institutionnel/une-problematique-du-secondaire-lorientation-scolaire/

female teachers have similar views of boys' and girls' behaviour (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6). A **German** academic interviewed also highlighted that there may be stereotypes related to gender and ethnicity. This suggests intersectional disadvantages for boys with a migration background due to stereotypical views of education professionals (see Annex III, Section 6.3.4).

Although boys typically receive more negative attention from teachers than girls, this does not mean that girls are not faced with challenges in their interaction with teachers. The most important challenge facing girls is that **teachers set the bar higher for them**, both in terms of their expected behaviour and grades (and the expected effort or skills to be demonstrated in order to achieve good grades). Evidence from the **Estonian** study cited earlier shows that boys are more easily forgiven than girls for disruptive behaviour because teachers acknowledge or 'accept' that boys are more active 'by nature' and therefore need to be given some leeway. This was confirmed by the interviews carried out for the case study in **Czechia** (see Annex III, Section 6.3.2), but in **Germany** some stakeholders reported that teachers were actually less tolerant towards boys misbehaving (see Annex III, Section 6.3.4). A teacher interviewed for the **Luxembourg** case study said that, while boys are punished more often, girls tend to be punished more severely (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6). In **Portugal**, one study finds that teachers believe more in the academic capabilities of boys than girls.[415] In **Poland**, one study finds that teachers consider boys to be better at, or easier to engage in conversations with than girls.[416] Some stakeholders interviewed for the **Bulgarian** case study said that teachers expect girls to display extra knowledge and skills in order to obtain the same grades as boys, and teachers also place greater expectations on them to concentrate and behave well in class, whereas for boys, this is more often overlooked (see Annex III, Section 6.3.1).

There is very strong body of evidence from across the EU that **certain styles of instruction and classroom management are less conducive to engaging and motivating boys**. It is possible that assessment methods which take into account, for example, non-cognitive skills, active participation, or good behaviour in the classroom (e.g. raising your hand, sitting still, or handing in assignments on time) are less favourable to boys, since (as seen earlier) girls can display better non-cognitive and social skills than boys.[417] A study from **Denmark** confirms these findings, showing that education settings in which boys are required to sit still and listen to blackboard instruction has a negative impact on their motivation for school.[418] In **Croatia** as well, both primary and secondary school curricula favour behaviour such as attentiveness, discipline, sitting still, and listening to the teacher, as well as using graphomotor skills (i.e. neatly copying material from the blackboard in to a notebook), which are often more associated with girls.

[415] HBSC (2014). *A saude dos Adolescentes Portugueses em Tempos de Recessao*. Avaliable at: http://aventurasocial.com/arquivo/1428847597_BROCHURA_HBSC%202014.pdf

[416] Kopciewicz, L (2008). *Grzeczne dziewczynki, niegrzeczni chłopcy – wytwarzanie różnic rodzajowych w dydaktyczno-wychowawczej pracy szkoły*, [w:] Wychowanie. Pojęcia – procesy – konteksty. Interdyscyplinarne ujęcie, pod red. M. Dudzikowej i M. Czerepaniak-Walczak, t. 4, Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2008, s. 349–392.

[417] COUGHLAN, S. 2015. *Teachers 'give higher marks to girls'*. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Published March 5. Available: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-31751672. [Accessed May 18 2020].

[418] Bacher, C., Iversen, SM, Laursen, KB, & Ulriksen, L (2012), Lazy boys or deadly math?. *MONA*, p. 40-42.

Research from **Sweden** shows that boys seem to do better in group work and that they do not cope well with assignments requiring a high degree of independence. Boys may also benefit more than girls from clear instructions, concrete examples, and clear methods to complete tasks.[419] As seen earlier (see Section 3.3.2), individual support from parents has been shown to be particularly important for boys, and the same is true for individual support from teachers. The **Dutch Education Council** points to the importance of individual guidance, management, and monitoring of boys' behaviour and motivation to increase their performance at school.[420] In a recent radio interview, Professor Nils Sakss-Konstantinovs (Child Psychologist at the University of **Latvia**) notes that boys would also benefit from *"a slightly different kind of psychological help. […] This is reflected in the fact that men are reluctant to seek help, because that type of help is simply not right for them"*.[421] Research from **Malta** shows that more boys than girls reported finding school examinations too difficult, and hence sought to leave education.[422]

The case study interviews confirm these findings, with stakeholders from **Bulgaria** saying that **teaching methods which trigger students' interest and motivation, including more work-based learning methods, would be particularly beneficial to boys** (see Annex III, Section 6.3.1). Stakeholders in **Portugal** highlighted the importance of investing in educational infrastructure and providing students with sports and other facilities, so that they can engage in extracurricular activities, which have a positive impact on both education outcomes and general well-being. The lack of spaces for active pedagogy and practical learning in schools was pointed out by some interviewees as a particular issue for boys and young men. This can create frustration, misunderstanding, and disruptive behaviour, which can negatively impact education outcomes, contributing to seeing school as an 'obligation' and a place of boredom (see Annex III, Section 6.3.7).

Initiatives focused on changing adapting styles to boys

A limited number of countries are promoting **gender-sensitive teaching practices focusing on the challenges facing boys**. In **Sweden**, for example, SALAR supports the 'Writing to Learn' method (*Skriva sig till lärande*). This method was initially designed to improve school performance in general, but turned out to help boys catch up. The premise of the approach is that teaching practices that benefit boys are the same teaching practices found in high-quality teaching in general.[423] In **Finland**, the Basic Education Forum under the Government's Comprehensive School Key project includes several projects aimed at increasing equality and supporting boys' learning

[419] Zimmerman, Fredrik (2018). *Så kan fler pojkar lyckas i skolan*. https://skolvarlden.se/artiklar/sa-kan-fler-pojkar-lyckas-i-skolan
[420] Oderwijsraad (2020)
[421] LSM (2020). *Puiku sasniegumi mācībās: šī brīža skolu sistēma rada negodīgu konkurenci (Boys' learning achievements: The current school system creates unfair competition)* https://lr1.lsm.lv/lv/raksts/gimenes-studija/puiku-sasniegumi-macibas-si-briza-skolu-sistema-rada-negodigu-ko.a134675/
[422] Ali and Farrugia (2013)
[423] See https://skr.se/skolakulturfritid/forskolagrundochgymnasieskola/digitaliseringskola/metoderochvagledningar/skrivasigtilllarande.7513.html

specifically. One nationwide project, SETSTOP,[424] developed teaching content for initial teacher education in Finland on gender equality. Another example is 'Supporting Each Other!' (*Tuetaan yhdessä!*),[425] which aims to develop pedagogy and support the education of different types of learners. In **Portugal**, under the National Programme for the Promotion of School Success,[426] the school system has been reformed to make it more supportive and tailored to the needs of different learners, including introducing more active teaching and learning methods. These methods are of particular benefit to boys and young men, who are considered by several interviewees to respond better to practical learning and 'learning by doing' (see Annex III, Section 6.3.7). In **Luxembourg**, as part of its National Action Plan on Equality between Women and Men,[427] schools also receive funding to re-design playgrounds and classrooms so that both boys and girls feel welcome.

3. Gender stereotypes among teachers

Although there are differences across Member States, many teachers hold gender stereotypical notions on the attitudes, behaviour, and academic performance of boys and girls. Research from the **Czech** School Inspectorate, for instance, shows that teachers tend to overestimate girls' performance in the subject of Czech language, while the performance of boys is overestimated in mathematics.[428] This is confirmed by the wider academic literature,[429] which shows that gender stereotypes have an impact on boys' and girls' self-perceived strengths (or weaknesses) in different subjects, as well as how teachers interact with boys and girls in general, manage classrooms, teach the curriculum, etc. Research from **Slovakia** shows that gender stereotypical treatment of children by teachers already happens as early as pre-school level (as seen in Section 3.3.3).[430] Much of this gender stereotypical treatment of pupils by teachers is of course subconscious. This **'gender-blindness' of teachers** was discussed in a recent study from **Belgium (Flanders)**.[431] The study found that most teachers are unaware that they treat boys and girls differently and that, if teachers had a better understanding of why boys behave the way they do at school, this could help them adapt their attitude to them, helping to improve boys' education outcomes.

[424] SETSTOP (20120) *Developing contents for teacher education in Finland related to gender equality planning and equality work*. https://setstop.wordpress.com/
[425] https://tuetaan.wordpress.com/
[426] https://pnpse.min-educ.pt/programa
[427] https://gouvernement.lu/dam-assets/documents/actualites/2020/07-juillet/Plan-d-action-national-Egalite.pdf
[428]Government Policy paper (2018). *Men in the education System.* Available at: https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/pracovni_skupina_muzi_a_rovnosti_zen_a_muzu/Policy-paper_muzi_v_systemu_vzdelavani.pdf
[429] Thomas, A. E. (2017). Gender Differences in Students' Physical Science Motivation: Are Teachers' Implicit Cognitions Another Piece of the Puzzle? *American Educational Research Journal, 54*, 35-58.
[430] Sedlák Vendelová, N., Gajdošová, V. (2011), *Rodové stereotypy v presvedčeniach a v práci, Učiteliek materských škol*. Available at: https://www.pulib.sk/web/kniznica/elpub/dokument/Istvan1/subor/Sedlak+Vendelova.pdf
[431] Maele D, Huyge E, Consuegra E, Van Houtte M, Engels N. (2013). *Teaching in the bed of procrustes: a focus on the role of macho culture and gendered teacher-student interactions in secondary education*. Open Seminar, Abstracts. https://lib.ugent.be/nl/catalog/pug01:4094597

Changing gender stereotypes among teachers also has the potential to impact career choices. An article published by Eurydice in September 2018 entitled 'Does it matter if men don't teach?' states that: *"Gender stereotypes affect the career choices for men and women, and as long as our culture continues to portray men as being unsuited for caring professions such as teaching, nursing, and social work, this is likely to continue".*[432]

In addition to being unaware of gender biases, evidence from the case studies shows that **many teachers**, in particular older teachers, **are unwilling to adopt gender-sensitive teaching practices**. As described by a teacher in **Luxembourg**, the main priority for many schools and teachers is on tackling underachievement among students in general, with a particular focus on students with a migrant or disadvantaged socio-economic background and students with special needs. As a result of the increasingly diverse student population, many stakeholders felt that adding a gender dimension would put additional pressure on teachers. One interviewee went as far as saying *"as far as I'm concerned, gender is the least of our problems […] the fact that there is an extremely diverse population in Luxembourg means that […] this needs to be tackled first"* (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6). In **Ireland**, interviewees also reported reluctance among some teachers to broaden the scope of professional development to include gender equality, as teachers are already under a lot of pressure to consider the many differing needs of students (see Annex III, Section 6.3.5). Interviewees from **Czechia** pointed to the high level of school autonomy as one of the main challenges to encouraging teachers to adopting gender-sensitive teaching approaches in the curriculum (see Annex III, Section 6.3.2).

Initiatives focused on tackling gender stereotypes among teachers

One of the potential reasons for teachers' unwillingness to adopt more gender-sensitive teaching approaches is the overall **absence of the gender dimension in policies on teacher education at national level**. A study by Eurydice (2012) on the situation of gender equality in education in Europe states that *"policies on teacher education do not particularly take into account the gender perspective, either with respect to initial training or continuing professional development activities for teachers or school heads".*[433] It notes that it is only in Belgium (Flanders) and Sweden that gender equality forms an integral part of initial teacher education. Nonetheless, in **Belgium (French Community)**, gender equality is included in the decree on initial teacher education; in **Denmark**, it is part of the bachelor programme for *Folkeskole*-teachers; in **Austria** it is included in the gender mainstreaming policy; and, in **France**, gender equality is part of the mission of all teacher education institutions. There are also action plans in **Spain**, **Luxembourg** and **Portugal** to integrate the gender dimension in initial teacher education. By contrast, in **Hungary** the lack of gender awareness is a key factor among educational stakeholders.[434]

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[432] Eurydice (2018). *Does it matter if men don't teach?* See: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/focus-does-it-matter-if-men-dont-teach_en
[433] P. 96 https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/40271e21-ca1b-461e-ba23-88fe4d4b3fd4
[434] Rédei D. (2012). *Sexing the School. Constituting Gender, Ethnicity and Class through Discourses of Sexuality in a Hungarian*

With regard to teacher continuing professional development (CPD) courses on gender equality, Eurydice notes that **only Malta reported compulsory CPD for teachers covering gender aspects**, but also underlines the important contribution made by NGOs in this domain, especially in Central and Eastern European countries. For example in **Czechia**, NGOs support and educate teachers in gender-sensitive education. The NGOs Konsent[435], Gender and Science[436], Nesehnutí[437], NORA[438], Otevřená společnost[439], and GenderStudies[440] are all actively engaged in gender equality in education, organise seminars and workshops for teachers and students on topics related to equal opportunities in education and gender-sensitive teaching, and prepare teaching materials on this topic, including a methodology on how to teach students about gender equality (see Annex III, Section 6.3.2). In **Belgium (French Community)**, the NGO '*Vie féminine*' has developed a training package designed to raise awareness of gender stereotypes among stakeholders working in the ECEC sector.[441] In collaboration with the NGO '*Université des Femmes*' and with support from the European Social Fund, the *Direction de l'Égalité des Chances* developed a training module for teachers called 'Girls-Boys: One and the same school?',[442] which has been available to teachers as part of their initial training or as part of CPD since 2018. At the **Belgium (Flanders)**, Ghent University, KU Leuven and the Vrije Universiteit Brussels developed the 'Procrustes Toolbox', a website with educational resources for secondary schools to the gender gap (see Box 3-13 below).

Box 3-13   Procrustes Toolbox on Gender Equality – Belgium (Flanders)

In collaboration with different secondary schools, the Procrustes project conducted research on the causes and potential strategies to reduce the gender gap in secondary education. The website Procrustes.be was developed, bringing together numerous resources for teachers and school leaders on how to develop school policies and practices to reduce the underperformance of both boys and girls. Some of the resources included on the website are: a book on 'Gender at School'; video materials; work sheets on gender stereotypes; and self-assessment tests for teachers on themes such as 'How gendered do you think?'.

More information: https://www.procrustes.be/

In **Luxembourg**, gender-sensitive teaching is also encouraged in initial teacher education and continuing professional development (see Box 3-14 below).

Box 3-14   Changing gender stereotypes among teachers – Luxembourg

The University of Luxembourg is in charge of initial teacher education, which includes a specific focus on encouraging teachers to adopt competence- and learner-

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[435] See https://konsent.cz/onas/
[436] See https://genderaveda.cz/
[437] See https://nesehnuti.cz/
[438] See https://www.gendernora.cz/
[439] See https://www.otevrenaspolecnost.cz/en
[440] See https://genderstudies.cz/
[441] For more information on this training package, please visit: http://www.viefeminine.be/
[442] For more information on this training module, please visit: http://www.egalite.cfwb.be/index.php?id=12431

oriented teaching and learning approaches, to meet the needs of individual learners – including those of boys and girls. The *Institut de Formation de l'Éducation Nationale* (IFEN) is responsible for the continuing professional development of teachers and is now also starting to introduce specific modules on gender-sensitive teaching.

<u>More information</u>: Case study Luxembourg (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6)

Although gender issues are increasingly introduced in teacher training programmes across the EU, there is **limited focus on the challenges facing boys in education**. An exception is **Greece**, where a specific course for trainee sports teachers was developed to provide mentoring support to young males underachieving at school.[443] The course aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of the rationale for a gender-sensitive approach, and how mentoring can improve academic achievement. In **Estonia**, by contrast, teacher training students report that gender equality issues are discussed in only a few courses,[444] and that teacher training institutes do not consider gender equality to be important enough.[445]

3.4.3   School autonomy, curricula, and differentiation

The level of school autonomy, as well as the degree of standardisation and differentiation in school curricula, also have an impact on either reinforcing or weakening differences in school performance, attitudes, and behaviours between boys and girls. It also influences the perpetuation (or weakening) of gender stereotypes.

Looking at standardisation levels[446] first, research looking across 23 of the EU-27 Member States found a positive correlation between lower curriculum standardisation and boys' performance.[447] The study shows that, where countries have higher levels of standardisation of school curricula and learning materials, gender gaps in reading scores are even more to the advantage of girls. This suggests that **standardisation enlarges the gender gap**, which is in line with findings discussed in previous

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[443] See https://sportsmentors.eu/

[444] Anniste, K., Batueva, V., Biin, H., Mägi, E., Osila, L. ja Turk, P. (2016). *Eesti üliõpilaste soolise võrdõiguslikkuse alane teadlikkus, hoiakud ja kogemused*. Tallinn: Poliitikauuringute Keskus Praxis. Available at: http://www.praxis.ee/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/uliopilased_sooline_vordoiguslikkus.pdf

[445] Kuurme, T. (2016). *Tüdrukud ja poisid koolist ja enesest koolis [Boys and girls about school and about themselves at school].* In Sugu ja haridus keeles ja meeles. Artiklikogumik. ENÜ Sihtasutus. http://www.haridusjasugu.ee/wp-content/uploads/Tydrukud_ja_poisid_koolist_ja_enesest_koolis.pdf

[446] The 'level of standardisation' refers to refers to the extent to which governmental regulations determine school curricula and learning materials. In this sense, it speaks to the level of freedom teachers have to tailor their approaches, e.g. by using their own textbooks and teaching material.

[447] Van Hek, M., C. Buchmann and G. Kraaykamp (2019). Education Systems and Gender Differences in Reading: A Comparative Multilevel Analysis. In *European Sociological Review 35* (2): 169-186. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcy054.

sections.[448] Based on an overview of country standardisation rates across the EU-27,[449] we have classified countries (see Figure 3-8) that have below average curriculum standardisation, and those which have average or above average standardised curricula.[450]

Figure 3-8   Levels of standardisation of school curricula across the EU-27[451]

Level of standardisation	Member States
Above average	BG, EL, ES, LU, LV, PT, SI
Average	AT, BE, DE, FR, SK
Below average	CZ, DK, FI, HU, IE, IT, NL, PL, SE

Source: Ecorys.

The extent to which national school systems are centralised (low school autonomy) or decentralised (secondary school autonomy) also has a bearing on boys' attainment. **Greece** has one of the most centralised education systems within the EU, with less than 20% of decisions taken at the school or local level.[452] This could in part explain why the gender gap in Greece is high compared to other EU countries. Reforms are in progress to give schools and local governments more autonomy to tailor curricula to the needs of local students. **Finland**, on the other hand, has one of the most decentralised education systems and lowest gender gaps in the EU (see Box 3-15 below).

Box 3-15   Education systems well-suited to boys – Finland

The high level of decentralisation of the education system allows schools in Finland to design their curricula to take into account local socio-economic features (e.g. unemployment, migration, school dropout rates, etc.). Even though there is no specific focus on gender, this allows schools to tailor education to the individual needs of students and minimise performance differences between different types of schools and pupils. In 2020, the government also launched the **'Right to Learn' programme (2020−2022)**, which has a budget of EUR 180 million to fund projects aimed at improving the quality of education and reduce educational performance differences between children based on their socio-economic background, migrant background, gender, or special needs.[453] Another important characteristic of the Finnish education system is its effective **special needs policy**.

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[448] See for example this study from Denmark, which suggests that boys would be less capable than girls to adapt to 'school norms': Egelund, N., Nordahl, T., & Andersen, PG (2018), Piger og drenge i skolen in: *Aalborg Universitetsforlag*. Available at:
https://vbn.aau.dk/ws/files/292029360/Piger_og_drenge_i_skolen_TIL_UPLOAD.pdf
[449] Van Hek, M., C. Buchmann and G. Kraaykamp (2019). Education Systems and Gender Differences in Reading: A Comparative Multilevel Analysis. In *European Sociological Review 35 (2):* 169-186. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcy054.
[450] As the EU-27 standardisation average is currently at 0.37, standardisation rates from 0.30-0.39 will be classified as ''average'', while rates below (0.01 – 0.29) will be considered ''below average'' and rates above (0.40- 0.99) will be considered ''above average''.
[451] No figures are available for CY, EE, HR, LT, MT and RO.
[452] OECD (2018), Table D6.1. See Source for more information and Annex 3 for notes
https://doi.org/10.1787/888933805933
[453] MEC (2020b). *The Right to Learn*. Ministry of Education and Culture. Available at :
http://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/161950/Comphrehensive%20school%20education%20programme%20-%20Brochure.pdf

As part of this policy, teachers are encouraged not to treat their classes as 'one entity', but to adjust their pedagogical approach to the individual needs of each student.[454] Since boys are over-represented in special needs classes (see Section 2.3.2), this policy is likely to be particularly beneficial for boys.

More information: Case study Finland (see Annex III, Section 6.3.3)

With regard to levels of differentiation in education systems,[455] evidence shows that **early tracking contributes to gender segregation and educational inequalities more broadly**. In the **Netherlands**, for instance, the Education Council (2020) found that, although there are advantages to the high level of differentiation of the Dutch education system, it could also contribute to the unequal representation of boys and girls in STEM and social sciences.[456] This is corroborated by the case study in **Luxembourg**, which has a high level of differentiation, both within education (i.e. the high number of educational tracks from lower secondary education onwards) and outside education (i.e. the high number of specialised education centres to support students with special educational needs, in which boys are over-represented). The stakeholders interviewed suggested that moving towards a stronger common core curriculum for lower secondary education could contribute to tackling inequalities (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6).

3.4.4   Gender stereotypes in textbooks

The content of schoolbooks and other educational materials, including the images and language used with respect to gender, also has a big influence on the development of a child's gender identity, as well as their motivation and performance at school. There is **a large body of evidence of gender stereotyping in school textbooks** across the EU. It has been the subject of academic research in many EU Member States including **Finland**,[457] **France**,[458] **Greece**,[459] **Latvia**,[460] **Lithuania**,[461] the **Netherlands**,[462] **Poland**,[463] **Romania**,[464] and **Slovakia**.[465] The main finding from these studies is that textbooks often still tend to use language that depicts men and

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[454] Jahnukainen, M. (2011). Different strategies, different outcomes? The history and trends of the inclusive and special education in Alberta (Canada) and in Finland. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 55(5),* 489-502
[455] Differentiation refers to 'streaming' or 'tracking' students in different education paths.
[456] Onderwijsraad. (2020). *Een verkenning van sekseverschillen in het onderwijs*. Den Haag: Onderwijsraad.
[457] National expert's personal opinion based on the information available.
[458] The Existence of Stereotypes and Discrimination in School Textbooks' drafted by the University of Metz.
[459] Χαρίκλεια Σταβάρα, 2016, Διαφορες Στις Επιδοσεις Αγοριων Και Κοριτσιων Στη Γλωσσα, Τα Μαθηματικα Και Τις Φυσικες Επιστημες: Μια Μετα-Αναλυση. Available at http://ikee.lib.auth.gr/record/287365/files/GRI-2017-18399.pdf
[460] The Ministry of Welfare in Latvia commissioned an analysis of gender-sensitivity in textbooks in 2005 and 2006.
[461] See https://www.lygybe.lt/lt/pranesimai-ziniasklaidai/tyrimas-vadoveliai-moko-lyciu-stereotipu/1073
[462] Onderwijsraad. (2020). *Een verkenning van sekseverschillen in het onderwijs*. Den Haag: Onderwijsraad.
[463] Chmura-Rutkowska, I. (2012). *Przemoc rówieśnicza w gimnazjum a płeć: kontekst społeczno-kulturowy*. Forum Oświatowe" 2012, nr 1 (46).
[464] C. Rughiniș, L. Grünberg, R. Popescu (coord.), *Alice în Țara Manualelor. O explorare a personajelor care îi inspiră pe copii în școală* (Alice in the Land of Textbooks. An exploration of the characters that inspire children in school), Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, University of Bucharest, 2015. Available online at: http://doctorat-sociologie.ro/wpd/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/SDS-MoRiS-Alice-Press-outline.pdf
[465] Smrtičová, A. (2011), *Rodové stereotypy v textualite základnej školy*. Available at: http://alis.uniba.sk/storage/ddp/dostupne/PD/2011/2011-PD-29356/35156v1.pdf

women in traditional social contexts: women are most often represented in caregiver roles and as those who worry about their appearance; there are fewer stories representing experiences of women; and men's activities and experiences are represented as being more important than women's. Such practices reinforce gender stereotypes and cultural identities about male identity at societal level (see 'The Man Box' model in Box 3-1). As discussed above, the more freedom teachers have to select and design their teaching content and material, the more tailored this could be to the needs of their students. Research from **Finland**, however, shows that teachers insufficiently use their autonomy to design teaching material and methods that can support male students.[466]

According to Eurydice,[467] **systematic evaluations of official guidelines for authors of educational material** taking into account gender issues exist only in a limited number of Member States, namely: Austria, Germany, Ireland and Latvia. It is unclear, however, to what extent these reviews focus on feminine stereotypes or also take into account stereotypes related to masculinity. An increasing number of ministries across the EU are, however, carrying out studies on the existence of gender stereotyping in textbooks. In **Sweden**, for example, the National Agency for Education conducted some ad-hoc evaluations of educational material. And in **Luxembourg**, as part of its National Action Plan on Equality between Women and Men, the ministry has asked the University of Luxembourg to conduct an analysis of gender stereotyping in textbooks in basic education. As part of the project, the university is analysing how often men and women are mentioned in textbooks, and in which roles. The results of this study should be available by the summer of 2021 (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6). In **Lithuania**, analyses of gender stereotyping are also being carried out (see Box 3-16 below).

Box 3-16   Tackling gender stereotyping in textbooks – Lithuania

In Lithuania, efforts to promote gender mainstreaming were formalised for the first time in 2010 with the adoption of a National Action Plan on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (2010−2014), now updated with a new action plan that runs until the end of 2021. The action plan was accompanied by specific national programmes for the implementation of the policy (2015−2017 and 2018−2021). The three priorities of the current action plan are: (1) to increase the number of women in the so-called 'masculine professions', (2) to increase the number of men with tertiary education, and (3) to promote non-discriminatory attitudes towards men and women in schoolbooks and other school materials.

More information: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/countries/lithuania

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[466] National expert's personal opinion based on the information available.
[467] European Commission, (2012). *Gender differences in educational outcomes*, p.65-66. Available at: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/40271e21-ca1b-461e-ba23-88fe4d4b3fd4

Eurydice notes that *"guidelines on gender awareness for schoolbook authors are also produced by NGOs or within the framework of European projects"*.[468] In the **Netherlands**, for example, upon the request of the Ministry of Education and Science, the School & Safety Foundation (*Stichting school en veiligheid*) developed teaching material for initial teacher education and the wider education sector to strengthen pedagogical expertise around working on sexual integrity.[469] In **Belgium (Flanders)**, the 'Procrustes Toolbox' (see Box 3-13 above) provides a number of tools and resources on gender-sensitive teaching. Rosa, the knowledge centre for gender and feminism, also offers a range of different teaching materials and methodologies to support schools and teachers to adopt more gender-sensitive teaching approaches,[470] including the 'Gender in the Classroom' toolkit (see Box 3-17 below).

Box 3-17   Gender in the Classroom Toolkit – Belgium (Flanders)

The 'Gender in the Classroom' toolkit was developed by the NGO Rosa and brings together a wide range of pedagogical practices and self-reflection tools for teachers and school leaders in different levels and types of education to use to (1) change their own policies and practices related to gender and (2) to effectively address and tackle gender stereotypes with children. There are specific materials for ECEC, primary education, secondary education, vocational education and training, and special needs education. The educational resources on the website include:

- <u>self-evaluation material for teachers</u>: tools to help teachers evaluate their own pedagogical practices;
- <u>tools for screening teaching material</u>: tools which teachers and schools can use to screen materials for gender stereotypes, such as a toolkit on 'imagery';
- <u>screening tools for school policy</u>: tools to help schools evaluate their overall gender policy.

More information: http://ww5.genderindeklas.be/

3.5   Societal factors

Overview of key findings

This section explores the influence of societal factors on attitudes, behaviour, and education outcomes. Some key findings are outlined below.

- **Gender equality is far from being a reality in the EU**. Although figures from EIGE's Gender Equality Index show that the situation has improved since 2010, inequalities between women and men remain in most layers of society, with different challenges facing men and women – this will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4. Gender equality in the EU-27 currently stands at 64.5 (on a scale of

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[468] Ibid.66
[469] Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen. (2020). *Voortgangsrapportage Emancipatiemonitor.* Den Haag: Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen.
[470] See https://rosavzw.be/nl/

100), with large differences between Member States.

- **Greater gender equality in society does not automatically lead to better education outcomes**. In societies where women play a more active role on the labour market, the 'void' left at home is often not filled by men. This means that, to achieve real gender equality, it is important to build societies where both women and men are equally engaged in the labour market and at home.

- **A total of 22 Member States have a gender equality action plan in place, covering a range of policy areas**. Several Member States have gender mainstreaming policies in place to achieve greater gender equality in a range of different areas, from employment to the family sphere. As part of these action plans, many Member States are implementing wide-ranging awareness-raising campaigns to change the way citizens think about what is typically male or typically female.

- **Few Member States focus specifically on tackling gender stereotyping in education**, although several countries do recognise the gender gap in education as an issue. In the countries which do focus on gender equality in education, the issue is most often approached through a 'female lens', focusing on tackling key challenges facing girls/women, in particular relation to attracting them to typically male study fields, such as STEM.

- **Even less Member States focus on the challenges facing boys in education, and policymakers and practitioners are generally 'at a loss' as to how these issues are best addressed**. Even in countries such as Sweden or Finland, where specific initiatives have been developed focusing on boys, the effectiveness of these initiatives is often still unknown, and several other challenges remain unaddressed by current practice.

The third major set of factors which influence children's attitudes, behaviour and results at school are gender stereotypes at societal level. These are, in turn, influenced by gender stereotypes at the family and school level. In addition, the underperformance of boys at school has consequences on society (discussed in more detail in Chapter 4). This demonstrates the complex interplay between individual, family, school and societal factors, making it **difficult to pinpoint cause and effect**. Is it the underperformance of boys at school and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in the family and at school which cause gender stereotypes to be perpetuated at societal level? Or is it society which perpetuates gender stereotypes at school and at home and, thereby, causes boys to perform worse at school than girls? Both processes are mutually reinforcing, and more research is needed to provide an answer to these questions.

It is, of course, beyond the scope of this study to explore all the different layers of society where gender stereotypes exist. Instead, we propose in this section to focus on two main dimensions which have been explored in the research. First, we provide an overview of the extent to which the promotion and mainstreaming of gender equality at societal level is a priority for different EU Member States (Section 3.5.1). Next, we discuss whether the gender gap in education is recognised as an issue

(Section 3.5.2), as well as whether the challenges facing boys (and men more generally) are part of the political debate and actions in EU Member States (Section 3.5.3).

3.5.1   Tackling gender stereotypes in society

The European Institute for Gender Equality has developed a Gender Equality Index, which is a composite indicator referring to a country's progress with gender equality on a scale from 1 to 100, with 100 being the highest.[471] Core domains measured include work, money, knowledge, time, power, and health. Additional domains include violence against women and intersecting inequalities. According to EIGE, **gender equality in the EU-27 stood at 64.5 in 2020**, which represents an increase of 4.7 since 2010 and 0.9 since 2017.[472] In two Member States, a decrease on the Gender Equality Index can be observed since 2017, namely: Romania (0.1 points decrease) and Slovenia (0.6 points decrease). The biggest increase can be observed in Italy, which has increased its score by 10.2 points on the Gender Equality Index since 2010 (bringing it up to 63.5, or just below the EU average). An overview of countries' Gender Equality Index score can be found in Figure 3-9 below.

Figure 3-9   Gender Equality Index score EU-27 (2020)

EIGI Index score (2020)	Member States
Above average (above 70)	BE, DK, ES, FI, FR, IE, LU, NL, SE
Average (between 60 and 70)	AT, DE, EE, IT, LV, MT, PT, SI
Below average (below 60)	BG, CY, CZ, EL, HR, HU, LT, PL, RO, SK

Source: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020

Regardless of how well or poorly EU Member States perform on EIGE's Gender Equality Index, Chapter 4 of this study shows that **gender inequality persists across a range of different areas in society**. The stakeholders interviewed for the case study in **Luxembourg**, for instance, which scores above average on the Gender Equality Index, said that Luxembourg remains a "*very hierarchical country*", with men retaining a comparatively favourable position in society (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6). Also, in **Sweden**, which has the highest score on the Gender Equality Index, significant gender stereotypes at societal level persist (see Annex III, Section 6.3.8). In **Germany**, which is one of the eight countries featuring among the 'average performers' on the EIGE Gender Equality Index, stakeholders referred to significant regional differences which still exist between eastern and western Germany, following the unification in 1990. Gender roles and the perception of typically 'male' and 'female' roles still differ significantly, although this gap is slowly closing (see Annex III, Section 6.3.4). In **Portugal**, also an 'average performer', gender roles have been rapidly changing since the fall of the dictatorship in 1974 (see Box 3-18 below).

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[471] See https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020
[472] The differences at a Member State level are as follows: Sweden (83.8), Denmark (77.4), France (75.1), Finland (74.7), the Netherlands (74.1), Ireland (72.2), Spain (72), Belgium (71.4) and Luxembourg (70.4) have the highest scores. The lowest scores are observed in Greece (52.2), Hungary (53), Romania (54.4), Slovakia (55.5), Poland (55.8), Czechia (56.2), Lithuania (56.3), Cyprus (56.9), Croatia (57.9) and Bulgaria (59.6).

Box 3-18   Evolving gender roles – Portugal

The case study for Portugal shows that, despite significant progress on gender equality and LGBTIQ rights since the end of the dictatorship in 1974, there are still several hurdles to overcome. Progress made in relation to gender equality has been met with resistance from the more conservative groups of society, particularly (older) men, who feel that the gains made by women in the last decade pose a threat to their position in society. Violence against women has increased in recent years in Portugal, with 8,720 women being assisted by the APAV (the Portuguese Association for Supporting Victims) in 2020.[473] Another persistent issue is domestic violence, which has proved difficult to overcome, particularly regarding awareness of the problem and prevention. In 2019, there were 26,573 reports of domestic violence, with 83% of perpetrators being men.[474] Another consequence is the growth of reactionary and violent political movements in Portugal, discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

More information: Case study Portugal (see Annex III, Section 6.3.7)

In **Estonia**, another 'average performer' on the EIGE's Gender Equality Index, a survey conducted among teacher training students shows that the family and school environment in Estonia are still considered to be heavily influenced by rigid gender roles and self-reinforcing gender stereotypes.[475] In **Greece**, a survey conducted in 2008 states that that *the model of the good and obedient female student and daughter in contrast to that of the independent and irreconcilable male student and son seems to remain a powerful factor in shaping the above results* [where girls perform better than boys in maths, science, reading and languages]*".*[476] Links have been made between the depiction of gender stereotypes around work and boys' and girls' educational choices.[477] **Czechia** also recognises in its latest Strategy of Equality of Women and Men (2021−2030)[478] that significant inequalities persist in Czech society, and that these have a negative impact on the position of women. The strategy also recognises that gender inequality negatively affects men's lives – particularly as regards health issues and gender stereotypes about the roles of men.

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[473] Please see: https://apav.pt/apav_v3/images/pdf/Estatisticas_APAV_Relatorio_Anual_2020.pdf

[474] See:
https://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_indicadores&contecto=pi&indOcorrCod=0008154&selTab=tab0

[475] Mägi, E., H. Biin., K. Trasberg, K. Kruus. (2016). Gender awareness and attitudes toward gender equality among students participating in teacher training. *Estonian Journal of Education.* Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.12697/eha.2016.4.1.06

[476] Χρήστος Τουρτούρας, Ελευθερία Μπάλη, Αχιλλέας Αλτιντασιώτης, 2008, Το φύλο ως παράγοντας διαμόρφωσης της σχολικής επίδοσης. Η περίπτωση των παιδιών από την πρώην ΕΣΣΔ στα Δημοτικά Σχολεία της Θεσσαλονίκης. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284177439_To_phylo_os_paragontas_diamorphoses_tes_scholikes_epidoses_E_periptose_ton_paidion_apo_ten_proen_ESSD_sta_Demotika_Scholeia_tes_Thessalonikes

[477] Επαγγελματικές επιλογές: Αποφασίζουν διαφορετικά μαθητές και μαθήτριες, Ερευνών Ανάλεκτα, Τεύχ. 4, 2001. Available at: http://www.isotita-epeaek.gr/iliko_sxetikes_ereunes/ekpedeusi/Epaggelmatikes_epiloges_reduce.pdf

[478] Strategie rovnosti zen a muzu 2021 – 2030, published 2021: https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/Aktuality/Strategie_rovnosti_zen_a_muzu.pdf

In some countries, achieving gender equality at societal level can be challenging due to certain political movements, negative media representation or the fact that other stakeholder groups still hold very traditional views of gender roles. For example, in **Italy**, according to the political party *Forza Italia*, gender issues do not have any place in education and are best addressed at home, within the family.[479] In certain professions, conservative views in relation to increasing the number of females also still exist. For example, in a video statement on 18 November 2020, which received a lot of media attention in Italy, Bioethics Professor Donato Mitola from the University of Bari said that *"there should not be female judges, because judging means being impartial and women, on the other hand, are conditioned by emotion"*, among other controversial statements.[480] Women are also almost never the focus of news in Italy – only 3% of written articles concern women.[481] In **Hungary**, an official government video released in December 2020,[482] featuring Hungary's Minister of Family Affairs, has received a lot of criticism. In this video, the minister says that men are simply 'better' or 'stronger' in certain domains (e.g. the labour market), and that women should, therefore, not feel compelled to compete with men in these areas, because this constitutes a *"false emancipation drive"*. Instead, she encourages women to *"accept the sacrifice and responsibility of motherhood because that is what makes them really happy"*.[483]

Initiatives aimed at mainstreaming gender equality

The country examples above demonstrate that **gender equality is far from being a reality across the EU**, even in those societies that are considered to be the most advanced or gender equal. To change the values, mindsets and day-to-day behaviour of citizens, several EU Member States have initiatives and legislation in place to mainstream gender equality in different policy fields and layers of society. **Luxembourg** is currently the only EU Member State with a dedicated Ministry for Equality between Women and Men (MEGA), which was established in 1995. Its missions and initiatives focus mainly on legal and factual equality between women and men. The main policy initiative is the National Action Plan for Equality between Women and Men, which was adopted in July 2020,[484] updating the previous action plans of 2015−2018, 2009−2014 and 2006−2009 (see Box 3-19 below).

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[479] Kirchgaessner, S., (2015), *School plan to change gender stereotypes causes storm in Italy*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/10/school-plan-change-gender-stereotypes-storm-italy

[480] La República (2020): https://video.repubblica.it/edizione/bari/no-alle-giudici-donne-le-madri-devono-stare-con-i-figli-la-lezione-shock-di-bioetica-all-universita-di-bari/371364/371970?ref=fbpr&fbclid=IwAR3WCe_nqbURNaLNfPdsjS9vZJEZYrYiLhtrfRIBmjbVN5Eyi4xzwTntPng

[481] EIGE, Using web 2.0 to promote debate on the relationship between men and women. Available at: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/good-practices/italy/using-web-20-promote-debate-relationship-between-men-and-women

[482] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaVOffr3CE8

[483] https://hungarytoday.hu/family-minister-novak-video-women-equal-press-roundup/

[484] See: https://gouvernement.lu/dam-assets/documents/actualites/2020/07-juillet/Plan-d-action-national-Egalite.pdf

Box 3-19   Mainstreaming gender equality – Luxembourg

In July 2020, Luxembourg adopted a revised **Action Plan on Gender Equality between Women and Men**, which includes 48 concrete actions across a range of policy fields. Overall, 19 of these 48 actions have a specific focus on addressing gender equality in the field of education. And all actions are centred around the following seven priorities: encouraging and supporting citizen engagement and political representation and participation, fighting against stereotypes and sexism, promoting equality in education, promoting professional equality, promoting equality at local level, fighting against domestic violence, and encouraging greater societal equality. The action plan explicitly states that *"equality is not only a concern for women, but should be a transversal political priority, calling for a shared responsibility of the entire government and all different actors of society. More specifically, each Ministry should ensure gender equality is part of its policy, legal texts, programmes and action plans, as well as any other measures, conforming to the principle of the respect for, and systematically taking into account, the gender dimension ('gender mainstreaming')".*[485]

An important recent development has been the **establishment of a National Observatory on Equality between Women and Men**. This was officially launched in March 2021 and is inspired by EIGE's data on equality between women and men in various domains. Minister Taina Bofferding highlighted the importance of the national observatory because *"we can only change and improve that which we can measure"*.[486] The observatory centralises the information from several ministries and other organisations on comparable data between women and men in Luxembourg and presents these in seven domains. At the moment, there is comparable data available on three domains: domestic violence, employment, and decision-making. Data on work-life, education, income and health will be made available over the course of 2021-2023.

<u>More information</u>: Case study Luxembourg (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6)

In **Belgium (Flanders)**, the newly appointed government announced that it intends to adopt a specific law called 'Gender and Society Neutral', which would have the following overarching objectives: supporting the LGBTIQ community, tackling gender-related violence, and equal opportunities and representation in politics and layers of

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[485] In French: *"L'égalité n'est pas uniquement une affaire de femmes, mais doit constituer une priorité politique transversale et faire appel à une responsabilité partagée au sein du gouvernement et de tous les acteurs/-trices de la société. Concrètement, chaque département ministériel doit respecter l'égalité entre les sexes dans l'élaboration de ses politiques, textes légaux, programmes et plans d'actions, ainsi que dans toute autre mesure, conformément au principe du respect de la prise en compte systématique de la dimension du genre (« Gender Mainstreaming »)."* MEGA (2020), National Action Plan on Equality between Women and Men, Luxembourg, MEGA, p. 3. Available at: https://gouvernement.lu/dam-assets/documents/actualites/2020/07-juillet/Plan-d-action-national-Egalite.pdf

[486] In French: *"on ne peut que changer et améliorer ce que l'on mesure"*. See https://mega.public.lu/fr/actualites/2021/Mars/TainaBofferding-presente-nouvel-Observatoire-de-legalite.html

society.[487] **France** also has several action plans in place to tackle specific elements of gender equality at societal level, such as a National Action Plan on Equality and the Fight against Hate and Discrimination against LGBTIQ.[488] **Portugal's** National Strategy on Gender Equality, launched in 2018,[489] includes a specific focus on tackling violence against women and domestic violence. **Bulgaria** and **Czechia** also have comprehensive strategies in place to support gender mainstreaming (see boxes 3-20 and 3-21).

Box 3-20   Mainstreaming gender equality – Czechia

The latest gender-related document published by the Czech government in February 2021 is the **Strategy of Equality of Men and Women (2021−2030)**. The strategy seeks to address persistent gender equality issues in Czechia, building on the strategic goals included in the previous strategy of 2014−2020.[490] The different actions in the strategy are presented around four strategic goals. The first strategic goal is to strengthen the competences of government and establish working groups responsible for implementing gender equality measures. The second goal is to strengthen and support the work of other government bodies which address gender topics as a cross-cutting issue. The third goal is to secure sufficient financial support for the implementation of gender equality measures and create a transparent mechanism for EU financial support and Nordic funds. The fourth goal is about strengthening collaboration between the ministries, collecting data about gender issues, and enabling evidence-based policymaking on gender-related issues.

More information: Case study Czechia (see Annex III, Section 6.3.2)

Box 3-21   Mainstreaming gender equality – Bulgaria

The overarching goal of the **National Strategy for the Promotion of Equality between Women and Men (2021−2030)** in Bulgaria is to achieve equality between women and men through the implementation of a unified, consistent and sustainable state policy. Equality between women and men is understood as equal rights, obligations and opportunities to access and fully participate in all areas of public life, allowing women and men to develop freely and make their own choices, without being restricted by stereotypes or discrimination. The different actions listed in the strategy are centred around five strategic priorities: achieving equality in the labour market, achieving equal pay, promoting equality between women and men in decision-making, combatting violence against women and providing better support to victims, and tackling sexism and gender stereotyping in various areas of social life.

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[487] Regering, V. (2019). *Regeerakkoord van de Vlaamse Regering 2019-2024.* Available at: https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/regeerakkoord-van-de-vlaamse-regering-2019-2024

[488]Government of France, (2020). *Plan national d'actions pour l'égalité, contre la haine et les discriminations anti-LGBT+ 2020-2023.* Available at: https://www.gouvernement.fr/plan-national-d-actions-pour-l-egalite-contre-la-haine-et-les-discriminations-anti-lgbt-2020-2023

[489] https://dre.pt/web/guest/home/-/dre/115360036/details/maximized

[490] Strategie rovnosti zen a muzu 2014 – 2020: https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/Projekt_Optimalizace/Strategie-pro-rovnost-zen-a-muzu-v-CR-na-leta-2014-2020.pdf

More information: Case study Bulgaria (see Annex III, Section 6.3.1)

A major component of many of the strategies listed above, is the development of tools and guidelines for specific target groups (e.g. teachers, parents, the wider public) and awareness-raising campaigns, in order to change gender stereotypes at societal level. In **Belgium**, for example, in addition to the 'Gender Click' initiative (see Box 3-5),[491] the Institute for Equality between Women and Men funds research, develops guidance material and runs promotional campaigns to promote gender equality across different layers of society. One example is the guidelines 'You're Right' (*Groot gelijk*), a set of guidelines for local councils on how to deliver their services in a gender-neutral way.[492] Another example is the campaign '*Et toi, t'es cassé-e*?', run by the French Community of Belgium, aimed at tackling homophobia and transphobia. The campaign website includes a number of videoclips and pedagogical resources.[493] A similar country-wide campaign against homophobia and transphobia was run in **France**.[494] In **Spain**, the Ministry of Equality supports campaigns to eradicate gender stereotypes in the media through specific initiatives such as the book *Hola, tú a mí no me conoces* ('Hello, You Don't Know Me').[495]

3.5.2   Tackling gender stereotypes in education

Women's participation in society and the labour market does not automatically translate into more equal education outcomes for boys and girls, unless there are equivalent behavioural adjustments by men. According to the OECD (2015), citing the World Value Survey,[496] an international survey examining people's values and beliefs, in many countries where women are taking up a more active role in the labour market, men are not necessarily 'filling the void' at home. This scenario is associated with lower performance in reading, mathematics and science, with the effects more pronounced for boys than girls[497]. The report, therefore, concludes that, in striving for gender equality, it is important to ***"build societies in which both men and women can play an active role in the labour market and be fully engaged in the lives of their children"***.[498]

In addition to promoting gender equality at societal level, **actions specifically targeting gender mainstreaming in education are needed**. Although our own research combined with evidence from EIGE[499] reveals that 22 Member States (the

[491] See https://genderklik.be/
[492] GROOT GELIJK (2008) https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/nl/publicaties/groot_gelijk
[493] For more information on the campaign, please visit: https://www.ettoitescase.be/index.php
[494] See https://www.education.gouv.fr/contre-l-homophobie-et-la-transphobie-l-ecole-40706
[495] The book has been organized around nine representations of women, which are the most frequent in advertising: girl, pretty, sexy, professional, friend, wife, mother, housewife and grandmother. In each epigraph, the characteristics with which each of these roles are constructed are listed and the images that deny those same characteristics are included below. More information of this initiative can be found here: https://www.clubdecreativos.com/hola-tu-a-mi-no-me-conoces/
[496] See http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp
[497] OECD (2014), The ABC of Gender Equality in Education, p.147, Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/the-abc-of-gender-equality-in-education/how-family-school-and-society-affect-boys-and-girls-performance-at-school_9789264229945-8-en;jsessionid=487WctddV6i8hW7PQPs6h3Pg.ip-10-240-5-5
[498] *Ibid.*
[499] See https://eige.europa.eu/countries

only exceptions are Estonia, Italy, Malta, Poland and Slovakia) have a national action plan in place on gender equality, very few include a specific focus on education.

In terms of political commitment for tackling gender equality in education, **Finland** is an example of a Member State where achieving gender equality in education has been high on the political agenda since the 1960s. Despite this high level of political commitment, some stakeholders reported that they have still not been successful at fully addressing the gender gap. One interviewee said: "*In Finland, we have paid attention to the gendered needs related to the teaching and learning since the beginning of 1960s, when the common compulsory school was designed. However, we have not been very successful. The change needs time.*" (see Annex III, Section 6.3.3). **Sweden** also has a long tradition of tackling gender equality in education and is also one of the few Member States to pay specific attention to the challenges facing boys in education (see Section 3.5.3 below and Annex III, Section 6.3.8).

As mentioned above (see Box 3-19), one of the seven pillars of **Luxembourg**'s National Action Plan on Equality between Women and Men focuses on achieving gender equality in education, and the gender gap in education is clearly recognised within this as a priority area, especially in relation to the areas of reading, mathematics and coding. To achieve gender equality in education, Luxembourg adopts an "*egalitarian approach to school and vocational education and guidance, for all pupils, regardless of their gender*".[500] The focus is on individual personality development (in Luxembourgish: "*Individuel Perséinlechkeetsentwécklung*"), so that students can make informed study and career choices, regardless of their gender. The action plan states that: "*Whenever the action plan mentions women or men, girls or boys, it refers to them in their full diversity. These are heterogeneous groups, especially when it comes to their sexual orientation, their gender identity, their gender expression, their sexual characteristics, their race, their ethnicity, their religion, their convictions, their disability or their age*".[501]

In **Ireland**, by contrast, despite the recognition of the gender gap in education, there appears to be a lack of consensus on what role education can play in the socialisation of young people, and to what extent, if any, it should address gender issues in society. Interviewees described a narrow focus on academic achievement, with a lack of focus on wider societal issues, including masculinity and gender stereotypes (see Annex III, Section 6.3.5). In **Portugal**, stakeholders also said that gender equality in education is not seen as a priority at national level; the gender gap in education is seen as 'normal' (see Annex III, Section 6.3.7). Stakeholders in **Bulgaria** and **Germany** also reported that gender equality in education is not seen as the most urgent priority to address in education (see Annex III, Sections 6.3.1 and 6.3.4). Interviewees in

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[500] In Luxembourgish: "*Déi verschidde Moossname viséiere generell, fir all d'Schülerinnen a Schüler, eng egalitar Schoulausbildung a Beruffsorientéierung, onofhangeg vun hirem Geschlecht*".
[501] In Luxembourgish: "*Lorsque ce plan d'action national mentionne les femmes ou les hommes, les filles ou les garçons, il les cible dans toute leur diversité. Il s'agit de groupes hétérogènes, notamment en ce qui concerne leur orientation sexuelle, leur identité de genre, leur expression de genre, leurs caractéristiques sexuées, leur race, origine ethnique, leur religion, leurs convictions ou encore leur handicap ou leur âge*". MEGA (2020), National Action Plan on Equality between Women and Men, Luxembourg, MEGA, p. 3. Available at: https://gouvernement.lu/dam-assets/documents/actualites/2020/07-juillet/Plan-d-action-national-Egalite.pdf

Czechia, however, recognised the role that education plays in helping children to develop their individual identity, free from stereotypes, emphasising the importance of gender-sensitive teaching[502] (see Annex III, Section 6.3.2).

Initiatives focused on tackling gender stereotypes in education

As seen above, despite high levels of political commitment in some Member States to tackle gender stereotyping in education, most stakeholders interviewed for the case studies felt that, especially among practitioners, **it is seen to be more important to focus on the issues facing other groups of students at risk of educational underachievement**. This includes, for example, students with a low socio-economic background, special educational needs, and rural or migrant background. Nevertheless, throughout this report we have shown that several countries do have initiatives in place to tackle gender stereotyping in education, for instance, around: tackling gendered educational choices (see Section 2.3), increasing the number of males in the teaching profession (see Section 3.4.2), tackling gender stereotyping in teaching practices (see Section 3.4.2) or tackling gender stereotyping in textbooks (see Section 3.4.3).

Few Member States have a specific strategy in place to tackle gender stereotypes in education. Whenever countries do focus on this issue, it is often as part of a wider gender equality strategy (e.g. in Luxembourg), focusing on only a limited number of key issues (often targeting girls). In **Lithuania**, for example, the Implementation Plan for the National Programme on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (2018−2021) includes three specific priorities related to education[503] (see Box 3-16). **Finland**, by contrast, has focused on tackling gender equality in education in a more comprehensive manner. In 2015, the National Agency for Education prepared a guide for the promotion of gender equality in primary education. The guide contains suggestions and practical examples on how to carry out equality work in primary education contexts and how to draw up a functional equality plan at school level.[504] **Sweden** is another example where tackling stereotyping in education has also been addressed in a more specific and holistic manner (see Box 3-22 below).

Box 3-22   Tackling gender stereotypes in education – Sweden

Sweden had a dedicated Delegation on Gender Equality in School 2008−2010 which proposed a package of targeted policy actions on gender equality in primary and secondary education, including more specific measures to counter-act the underperformance of boys. The delegation suggested **a gender mainstreaming strategy and to focus on the relational aspects of gender and gender equality**, rather than on strategies that focus on either of the sexes singularly to

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[502] Jarkovská, (2013). *Gender před tabulí. Etnografický výzkum genderové reprodukce v každodennosti školní třídy.* Praha.
[503]For more information, please visit: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/countries/lithuania
[504] Jääskeläinen, L., Hautakorpi, J., Onwen-Huma, H., Niittymäki, H., Pirttijärvi, A., Lempinen, M. & Kajander, V. (2015). *Tasa-arvotyö on taitolaji – Opas sukupuolten tasa-arvon edistämiseen perusopetuksessa [Equality work is a professional activity - A guide to promoting gender equality in primary education].* Oppaat ja käsikirjat 2015:5. Helsinki: Opetushallitus [National Agency for Education]. https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/173318_tasa_arvotyo_on_taitolaji_0.pdf

address sex-specific problems. Sex-specific measures were considered risky, since they could lead to more gender stereotyping and would forget to take into account the spread and diversity of identities within the sexes.

Given the central role of reading and writing skills in almost all school subjects, it was suggested to invest in **a programme to strengthen language, reading and writing skills**, acknowledging that, although the majority of pupils with weak reading and writing skills are boys, there are also girls in need of support. This measure was seen as having great potential to tackling the gender gap in education. A second key measure proposed was **early detection mechanisms to identity students and youth in need of extra support**, acknowledging again that there is a large group of boys falling behind in education who need support, but equally that there are many girls who suffer from stress and mental health issues in adolescence who need support (thereby stressing again the importance of not stereotyping or focusing on either boys or girls alone). The delegation also recommended the government to develop **preventive action to tackle offensive behaviour, bullying and violence** at school, as well as the need for more research on these issues at national level. Finally, the delegation added a list of actions centred around **mainstreaming gender equality at school level**, such as strengthening teacher and principal training on gender equality issues and pedagogies of child development. The delegation also underlined the importance of taking the issue of boys' underperformance seriously in education, and raising awareness and understanding of the problem.

In 2016, **the government added a new national goal on gender equal education** within the framework of national gender equality policy. It does not explicitly bring up the issue of boys' underperformance, but states that individuals should be free to develop personal interests and ambitions free from gender stereotypes and prejudice.[505] In 2020, the government decided to make teacher training on sexuality and relations compulsory for all teachers. The objective is to strengthen work on gender-based harassment and violence in schools.

More information: Case study Sweden (see Annex III, Section 6.3.8)

3.5.3 Tackling the specific challenges facing boys/men

An even lower number of EU Member States pay specific attention to the challenges facing boys and young men in education. **Most EU Member States approach gender equality in education through a 'female lens'** – often grounded in legitimate concerns about gender-based discrimination affecting girls within schools and the labour market. In **Malta**, for example, the main discourse on gender differences in the media is dominated by the under-representation of women in employment and certain areas of education (e.g. STEM). If there is any focus on boys,

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[505] Regeringen, (2019). *vuxenutbildning och yrkeshögskolan. Inte hindras av strukturer och fördomar*. Available at: https://www.regeringen.se/regeringens-politik/jamstalldhetsdelmal-3-jamstalld-utbildning/

this mainly relates to ELET affecting boys more than girls[506] or the education system being unsuited to the needs of boys.[507] In **Bulgaria** and **Hungary** the gender disparity in education is also rarely commented on, except in relation to higher education[508] or the fact that the teaching profession is dominated by women.[509] All stakeholders interviewed in Bulgaria confirmed that boys' underachievement is not a priority in current educational policies (see Annex III, Section 6.3.1).

In **Luxembourg**, despite the recognition that the challenges facing boys/men should be part of the political debate and actions to tackle gender stereotypes at societal level (see Box 3-23 below), the majority of the actions listed under the education pillar of the National Action Plan on Equality between Women and Men focus either on tackling issues facing both boys and girls, or on addressing key issues facing women/girls[510]. Similarly, in **Germany**, several stakeholders considered that boys' underperformance in education is not the most crucial problem in education; instead, they felt that it was more important to tackle the disadvantages facing students from migrant and low socio-economic backgrounds, and to continue focusing on the many challenges facing women (see Annex III, Section 6.3.4).

Although the focus is clearly primarily on tackling some of the key issues facing girls in education, especially the choices they make in higher education, **some Member States do recognise, to various degrees, boys as underperformers in education**. In **Denmark**[511] and **Portugal**,[512] the issue of boys' underperformance at school is frequently raised in relation to PISA results and, in **Czechia**, a 2018 policy paper entitled *Men in the Education System*,[513] focuses on how to address gender disparities in the education system. It refers to the lack of male teachers, gender stereotypes among parents and teachers towards boys, and the more advantageous position of men in society compared with women (see Box 3-23 below).

[506]Times of Malta (2019a). *Malta with second largest number of early school leavers in Europe.* 26 April 2019. https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/malta-with-second-largest-number-of-early-school-leavers-in-europe.708292

[507] Ibid.

[508] Zsilák Sz. (2019) *Nemhogy nemi egyenlőség nincs az iskolákban, még beszélni se akarnak róla [Not only is there no gender equality in schools, they don't even want to talk about it].* Available at: https://abcug.hu/nem-hogy-nemi-egyenloseg-nincs-az-iskolakban-meg-beszelni-se-akarnak-rola/

[509] Talabér D. (2018), *Eltűntek a férfiak az iskolákból: de miért baj, hogy elnőiesedett az oktatás?* [Men have disappeared from schools: but why is a problem that education is feminized?] Available at: https://eduline.hu/kozoktatas/A_diakok_ferfi_pedadogusok_nelkul_csokkeno__LUSKIT

[510] e.g. Action 2.6 on the abolition of the terms 'mademoiselle' and 'nom de jeune fille'; Actions 3.1 and 4.6, which focus on increasing the number of girls in ICT and mathematics at school and in the labour market through initiatives such as the 'Girls in Tech'[510] or 'Girls Exploring Maths'[510] days; or Action 4.11 on increasing the visibility and support for 'female skills' in decision-making

[511] Klingsey, M. and Richter, L. (2010). Erhvervslivet advarer: Danmark taber drengene, *Information*. Available at: https://www.information.dk/indland/2010/12/erhvervslivet-advarer-danmark-taber-drengene

[512] O Observador (2017), *Os meninos e as meninas não são iguais na escola. E isso importa*. Consulted on 03/12/2020 at https://observador.pt/especiais/os-meninos-e-as-meninas-nao-sao-iguais-na-escola-e-isso-importa/ ; Publico (2018) *Aumenta o fosso entre rapazes e raparigas no sucesso escolar.* Consulted on 03/12/2020 at https://www.publico.pt/2018/01/12/sociedade/noticia/no-sucesso-escolar-o-fosso-entre-rapazes-e-raparigas-esta-a-acentuarse-1799026

[513]Government Policy paper (2018). *Men in the education System*. https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/pracovni_skupina_muzi_a_rovnosti_zen_a_muzu/Policy-paper_muzi_v_systemu_vzdelavani.pdf

Box 3-23   Recommendations on improving the situation for boys and young men in education – Czechia

In 2018, the government published a **policy paper focused on boys and men in education**.[514] The paper outlines the discrimination and disadvantageous situation of boys and young men in the education system, highlighting issues such as the lack of male teachers, gender stereotyping by parents and teachers towards boys, and the advantageous position of men in a society which is not determined by the level of their education as much as for women. **One chapter focuses on stereotypes and teachers' expectations of, and attitudes towards, boys in schools**.

More information: Case study Czechia (Annex III, Section 6.3.2)

In **Sweden** also (see Box 3-22 above) boys' underperformance in education is clearly recognised as an issue. In **Germany**, despite the fact that girls are the primary focus of attention, local media also occasionally run stories on the underperformance of boys, outlining the issues and giving advice to parents.[515] In **Finland**, there have been more than 100 projects over the last ten years focusing on the gender gap in education,[516] and in the last five years there have also been two policy discussions focused on boys' underachievement and dropout (see Annex III, Section 6.3.3). In **Luxembourg**, the explicitly recognises the underperformance of boys in education as a key issue to be addressed as part of the wider National Action Plan on Equality between Women and Men, alongside more general issues facing men in society (see Box 3-24 below).

Box 3-24   Including boys and men in the gender equality debate – Luxembourg

Luxembourg's Ministry for Equality between Women and Men has a dedicated web page on men and equality, where it is explicitly stated that men should not be seen as the only cause of inequality or enemy of feminist action. The ministry believes that it is **important to recognise the many inequalities facing boys and men**: *"the fight against discrimination and inequality is not a one-way street […] involving boys and men in equality policy and action is closely linked with the fight against stereotypes".*[517] The inequalities which are listed include: caring responsibilities at home; school failure among boys; sexual abuse of boys in various institutional settings; and the increased risk of homelessness, substance abuse and mental illness (suicide in particular). The ministry states that gender stereotypes have a negative effect on boys and men and are the cause of deeply rooted negative

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[514] Government Policy paper (2018). *Men in the education System*. https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/pracovni_skupina_muzi_a_rovnosti_zen_a_muzu/Policy-paper_muzi_v_systemu_vzdelavani.pdf

[515] See: https://www.augsburger-allgemeine.de/panorama/Warum-Jungen-in-der-Schule-schlechter-sind-als-Maedchen-id58320151.html

[516] See a list of reports: https://thl.fi/fi/web/sukupuolten-tasa-arvo/tietolahteita/tasa-arvoselvityksia-ja-oppaita

[517] In French: *"la lutte contre les discriminations et les inégalités n'est pas à un sens unique […] associer davantage les garçons et les hommes à la politique de l'égalité est donc intimement liée à la lutte contre les stéréotypes"*.

attitudes, values and prejudices on 'what it means to be a man'. 'Toxic masculinity' is referred to as one of the main factors contributing to maintaining and reinforcing gender stereotypes which, in turn, contribute to sexual hatred, violence, and prejudice against boys and men who diverge from traditional gender norms. The media and society are seen as key drivers of perpetuating gender stereotypes, influencing the way men and women think they should behave, the careers they should pursue, and the tasks they should be responsible for at home.

More information: https://mega.public.lu/fr/societe/Hommes-et-egalite.html

Initiatives focused on the challenges facing boys/men in education

In a similar vein to our findings on the extent to which specific initiatives exist to tackle gender stereotyping in education (see Section 3.5.2), despite some level of political attention for the challenges facing boys in education, **it is clear that most countries consider that it is more important to focus on the issues facing girls in education**. Countries also more generally do not know how to address the challenges facing boys and young men in education; this is even the case in **Sweden** (see Annex III, Section 6.3.8). Only a few Member States have specific strategies to tackle gender equality issues in education with a focus on boys or young men.

Several **examples of initiatives focusing on issues facing boys in education** have been presented throughout this report, including **Germany**'s *Gender Equality Policy for Boys and Men* (which includes a focus on tackling the underperformance of men in higher education)[518], **Sweden**'s *Macho Factory* (which aims to tackle 'toxic masculinity' in schools), or several initiatives aimed at increasing boys' reading and wider language skills (see Boxes 2-3, 2-4 and 3-3). Another interesting example is a project in **Finland** focused on boys' learning difficulties (see Box 3-25 below).

Box 3-25   Boys' learning challenges and solutions until 2025 – Finland

Finland's National Agency of Education ran a project in 2019 focused on **boys' learning challenges and solutions until 2025**.[519] The project developed policy and measures related to new types of future-oriented operating models, which supported boys in different life situations. Perspectives on working life, leisure, well-being and health, family background, regional differences and gender roles were analysed and discussed. The report included, for example, recommendations to overcome the learning challenges of boys, emphasising that learning challenges of boys need to be addressed both through measures aimed directly at boys and indirectly through the development of service structures in society, such as family welfare services and guidance services for young people. Cross-sectoral cooperation

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[518] German Federal Government. *Gender Equality Policy for Boys And Men*. Available at: https://www.bmfsfj.de/blob/160754/f4f3a6b03c6e7451f56ab68ddea28ff8/gleichstellungspolitik-fuer-jungen-und-maenner-in-deutschland-langfassung-data.pdf
[519] National Agency of Education (2019). *Poikien oppimishaasteet ja -ratkaisut vuoteen 2025 [Boys' learning challenges and solutions until 2025].* Raportit ja selvitykset 2019:9. Opetushallitus. https://www.oph.fi/fi/tilastot-ja-julkaisut/julkaisut/poikien-oppimishaasteet-ja-ratkaisut-vuoteen-2025

between schools, the home, hobbies and working life should be strengthened.

More information: Case study Finland (see Annex III, Section 6.3.3)

4.0 Societal implications

This chapter explores the societal implications of the gender gap in education. It is structured around two main sections.

Firstly, it examines the **direct implications of underperformance of boys and young men in education** (Section 4.1), where there is evidence of a direct link between low performance in compulsory education and subsequent choices, and performance in further and higher education as well as the labour market. In the area of further and higher education, issues such as male and female participation, subject choices and attainment rates in tertiary education will be discussed in relation to attainment levels and study choices in compulsory education, including participation in lifelong learning (Section 4.1.1). the section then examines the labour market implications of boys' and girls' choices and attainment levels in primary, secondary and tertiary education, looking at employment rates and occupational segregation more specifically (Section 4.1.2).

Secondly, the chapter examines the **indirect implications of the underperformance of boys and young men in education** (Section 4.2). It looks into various areas where there is a difference in outcomes between males and females, but also where a strong causal link with education outcomes in compulsory education is missing, indicating that more research is needed to establish clearer links between these impacts and the educational performance of boys. The various implications and gender differences discussed do, however, highlight the need for a gender mainstreaming approach. The areas covered in this section include differences between men and women in terms of their health and well-being (Section 4.2.1), radicalisation, violent extremism as well as crime and custodial sentences (Section 4.2.2), and demographic implications, such as family life (Section 4.2.3).

This chapter concludes with an appraisal of **the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic** on boys' and girls' behaviour and education outcomes (Section 4.3).

4.1 Direct implications

Overview of key findings

This section explores the educational and labour market implications of the underperformance of boys and young men in education. Some key findings are outlined below.

- Traditional perceptions of gender role in society, at school and at individual level impact the **higher education choices** made by boys and girls, and their career choices. As a result of such stereotypes, boys typically choose **STEM subjects** at school and in higher education, and girls are more likely to choose **social sciences**. In the EU, women accounted for 59% of all tertiary graduates in 2012, but only represented 32% of all tertiary STEM graduates the same

year.

- **Women have a higher tertiary education participation rate than men**. In 2019, 35.1% of men and 45.6% of women participated in higher education. The gender gap in participation rates has also widened in the past decade, from 7.4 percentage points in 2010 to 10.5 pp in 2019. In the Member States, there is wide variety in the tertiary education participation rate gap − it is highest in Estonia and lowest in Germany. There is a direct link here between low educational attainment and under-representation in tertiary education.

- There are a number of policy actions in place to **tackle gender segregation in tertiary education choices**, although these tend to be focused on increasing the number of young women choosing STEM subjects. A number of countries (e.g. Austria and Germany) have Boys' Days initiatives, which aim to encourage boys to choose study areas and careers in sectors that are female-dominated.

- The **difference between the participation rates of men and women in lifelong learning is small**, but has been increasing over the past three years, from 1.7 pp in 2017, to 1.9 pp in 2018 and 2.1 pp in 2019.

- Across the EU, **the employment rate for men is higher than that for women**, by 12 percentage points in 2018. The gender employment gap varied significantly across EU Member States, with the largest gaps recorded in Malta (22%) and Greece (21%), and the lowest in Lithuania (2%).

- **Occupational segregation remains a reality in the EU**. The highest representation of women in the EU in 2016 was recorded in occupations related to personal care (89%), cleaners (84%), office clerks (80%), health technicians (78%) and teachers (71%). Conversely, men are over-represented among builders (97%), drivers and mobile plant operators (96%), metal workers (96%), science and engineering technicians (83%), and science and engineering professionals (74%). This is at least partly due to the choices made in secondary and tertiary education.

- **A lack of formal educational qualifications** can hinder labour market participation, and this can have a greater impact on boys, given the greater difficulties they face in education. Low levels of skills and qualifications can also limit choice of work, pushing individuals into low-paid and low-skilled work.

- There is **a higher percentage of females who are not in employment, education or training (NEETs)** compared to male NEETs for all years from 2010 to 2019. Policy measures to reduce NEET levels usually focus on both young women and men and are often linked to ELET strategies.

- Eurostat data shows that the **risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU was higher for women in 2019 than it was for men** (22.0% compared with 20.2%). The reasons are complex and include factors such as the gender pay gap and issues around employment, in addition to caring responsibilities. All these issues are likely to become more pressing in the future, as the labour market evolves. The number of low-skilled jobs is likely to decrease in the future, due to ongoing advances in automation and digitalisation. This will mean that low-educated men will find it even harder to gain access to the labour

market.

4.1.1 Educational implications

The previous sections in this report have looked at factors influencing the experience, behaviour and performance of boys and girls in schools. One of the most significant implications of the overall poorer education outcomes for boys at school (and in reading in particular) is that boys are at higher risk of dropping out and less likely to further their education by participating in either higher education or lifelong learning. Traditional conceptions of gender roles in society, at school and at individual level also impact the education choices made by boys and girls in higher education.

1. Participation, attainment and choices in tertiary education

The EU has raised its overall tertiary education attainment rate to at least 40%, thereby meeting its Europe 2020 target. However, data from 2010 to 2019 shows that **women have a higher tertiary education participation rate than men**. In 2019, 35.1% of men and 45.6% of women participated in higher education. The gender gap has also widened in recent years, with the differences in participation between men and women increasing from 7.4 percentage points in 2010 to 10.5 percentage points in 2019. There is a direct link here with boys' underperformance in compulsory school education, as participation in higher education is highly dependent on grades and obtaining an upper secondary education qualification.

Our case study research shows that there are other contributory factors. For example, in **Bulgaria**, some interviewees noted that boys are more inclined to enter the labour market immediately after they graduate from secondary school, which means that they do not go on to pursuing higher education or they do this later in life (see Annex III, Section 6.3.1). Figure 4-1 below shows tertiary education attainment by sex over the period from 2010 to 2019. It can clearly be seen that attainment levels have increased for both sexes, but that the gap between men and women has slightly increased.

Figure 4-1   Tertiary education attainment by sex (Eurostat 2010−2019)
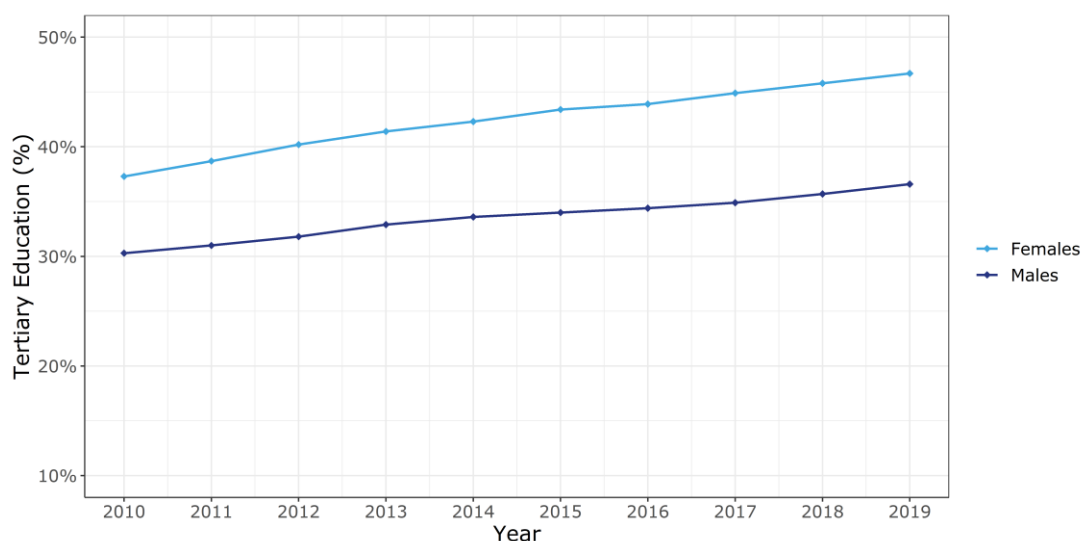
Figure 4-2 below shows the tertiary education attainment level for men and women in different EU Member States. Overall, the **levels of attainment for women are higher than those for men in all EU Member States**. For men, the percentage of tertiary education attainment was highest in Luxembourg, followed by Ireland and Cyprus. For women, the percentage of tertiary education attainment was highest in Lithuania, followed by Cyprus. The percentage of tertiary education attainment was lowest for both males and females in Romania, followed by Italy.

Figure 4-2   Tertiary attainment levels in EU Member States (Eurostat 2019)
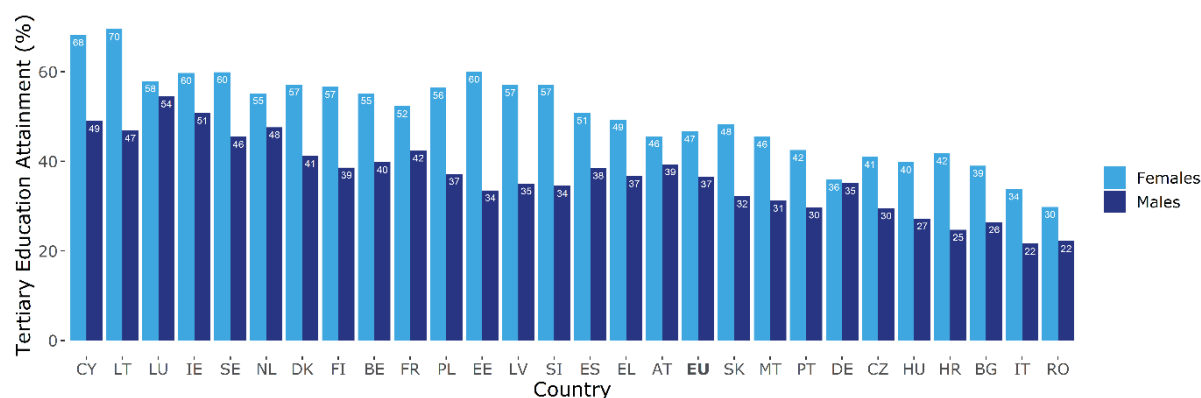
Germany stands out as having the narrowest gender gap in tertiary education attainment: the percentage of women (aged 30−34) with a tertiary qualification was 35.9% in 2019, compared with 35.1% for men. Conversely, the Baltic countries have some of the largest gender gaps in tertiary educational attainment: in **Estonia**, 33.5% of men aged 30−34 have a tertiary qualification, compared with 60% of women. The situation is similar in **Lithuania** and **Latvia**, where there is a large gender gap in favour of young women – 69.5% of women compared with 46.9% of young men in Lithuania, and 54% of women compared with 30% of men in Latvia.

There is still a clear **gender divide in terms of subject choices in higher education** across the EU Member States, with boys opting more often for technical and science subjects (including STEM subjects), in addition to engineering and ICT, and girls leaning more towards arts, humanities and social sciences. A 2016 European Commission study states that *"in the EU, women accounted for 59% of all tertiary graduates in 2012, but only represented 32% of all tertiary STEM graduates the same year […] while 31% of all male graduates were from a STEM programme in 2012, only 10% of all female graduates had obtained a STEM degree"*.[520]

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[520] EC (2016). *Does the EU need more STEM graduates?*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, p. 13. Available at: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/60500ed6-cbd5-11e5-a4b5-01aa75ed71a1

Statistics from the **Netherlands** also show that only a small percentage of Dutch female STEM graduates proceed into STEM professions, which is known as the 'leaky pipeline', a metaphor used to describe how women drop out of STEM fields at all stages of their careers. This is a well-known phenomenon in many countries, and there is a body of research examining this issue.[521] According to a review of relevant studies,[522] there are several overlapping reasons. The first is a range of environmental factors based on stereotypes about gender and STEM, which influence students as well as their peers, teachers, families, and future employers. As a consequence, girls experience less encouragement and support to choose STEM-related educational programmes and careers. A lack of female role models in STEM subjects and careers can also contribute to female students' feeling of not belonging in this area. There are also several school-related factors that can contribute, such as the teaching approach of STEM teachers, which can favour boys.

One of the exceptions is **Portugal**, where the study of mathematics and statistics is a largely female-dominated area, with women making up 60.9% of the sector while, on average in the EU, 64.5% of graduates in this area are men and only about 35% are women. In the manufacturing sector, most graduates in Europe are men (64.7%), but in Portugal there is no significant gender difference (49.3% are men and 50.7% are women). Although areas such as computing, mechanical and industrial engineering, architecture and construction, and physical sciences are male-dominated in Portugal, there are also higher proportions of women in these areas compared to the EU average. There are several **policy actions in place to tackle gender segregation in terms of tertiary education choices**, although these tend to be focused on trying to increase the number of young women choosing STEM subjects, as is the case in countries such as the **Netherlands** and **Poland**. A number of countries have Boys' Days initiatives in place, which aim to encourage boys to choose study areas and careers in sectors that are female-dominated (e.g. Austria, Belgium and Germany).

2. Participation and attainment in lifelong learning

The ET 2020 target was that an average of at least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning. However, recent data shows that there is still a way to go in this area, and that there remains a **significant gender gap: in 2019, only 9.8% of men and 11.9% of women aged 25 to 64 participated in learning**. As shown in Figure 4-3 below, despite the increasing importance of lifelong learning (for upskilling and reskilling), EU countries have not made significant progress on this indicator over the past 10 years. The rates in 2010 were 7.3% in the case of men and 8.4% in the case of women. The difference between the participation rates of men and women is small, but it has been increasing over the past three years, from 1.7 percentage points in 2017, to 1.9 percentage points in 2018 and 2.1 percentage points in 2019.

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[521] See, for example, Academic Careers and Gender Inequality: Leaky Pipeline and Interrelated Phenomena in Seven European Countries. Edited by Farah Dubois-Shaik and Bernard Fusulier: https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/garcia_working_paper_5_academic_careers_gender_inequality.pdf
[522] Van den Hurk A., Meelissen M., van Langen A. (2018). Interventions in education to prevent STEM pipeline leakage. *International Journal of Science Education, 41*, 2019 - Issue 2.

Figure 4-3   Adult participation rate in education and training by sex (Eurostat 2010−2019)
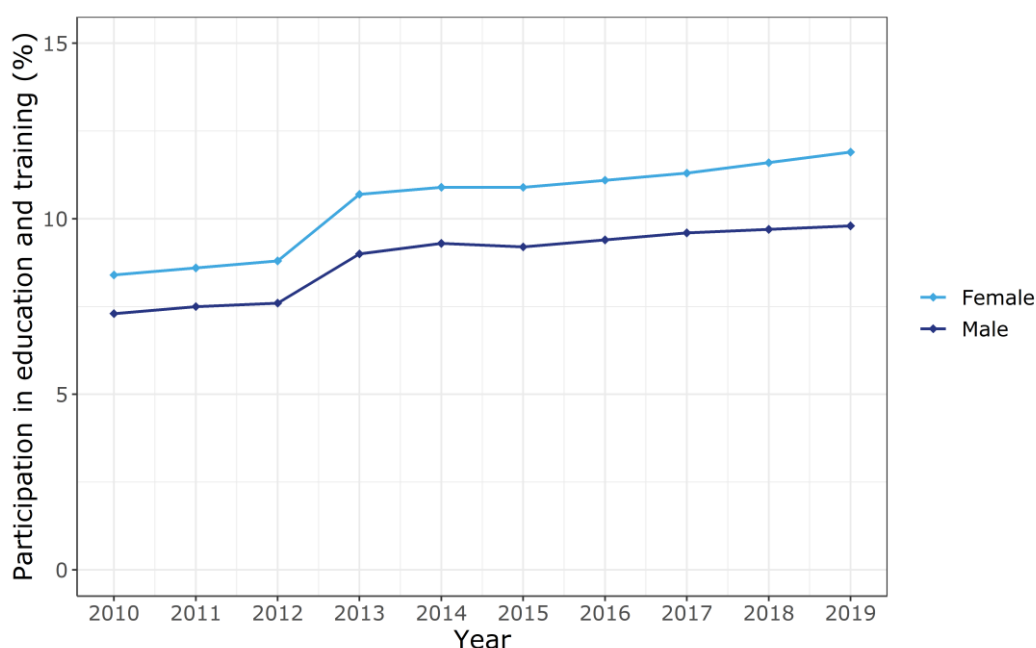
Source: Eurostat 2010−2019. Available at:
https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=trng_aes_100&lang=en

Many EU Member States have **policies in place to try to increase participation in lifelong learning, although this does not usually have a specific gender focus.** In **Flanders (Belgium)**, for example, there are general policies to increase participation in lifelong learning, but this mainly focuses on the ELET population.[523] In **Denmark,** some research projects have tried to identify the main explanatory factors for men falling behind and falling out of lifelong learning. In 2017, the Danish Ministry of Education published a report on equality in education, pointing to some explanatory factors for this.[524] However, the report was not followed up by any specific policy actions targeting boys or men. The **German** equality strategy for boys and young men states that lifelong learning is crucial for men and women in terms of maintaining employability, and that this should be investigated further in the context of enabling men to better combine work with family life and private life in general.[525]

4.1.2   Labour market implications

In this report (sections 2 and 4.1.1), we have compared the education outcomes for males and females at all stages of education, from ECEC through to adult learning, which shows that females outperform males on almost all education performance

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[523] See https://www.onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/samen-tegen-schooluitval
[524] Ministry of education (2017). *Rapport fra udvalget om ligestilling i dagtilbud og uddannelse*. Available at: https://www.regeringen.dk/aktuelt/publikationer-og-aftaletekster/rapport-fra-udvalget-om-ligestilling-i-dagtilbud-og-uddannelse/
[525] See https://www.bmfsfj.de/blob/160754/7d28de3c6617eba090e11b26f9e8b503/gleichstellungspolitik-fuer-jungen-und-maenner-in-deutschland-langfassung-data.pdf

indicators. In contrast, the picture seems to be reversed for labour market outcomes, with men maintaining a stronger position than women.

1. Employment rates

Across the EU, **the employment rate for men is higher than that for women.** According to Eurostat data from March 2020, in 2018 the gender employment gap was 12 percentage points in favour of men. Nevertheless, this gender employment gap had narrowed from 15 percentage points back in 2008. The employment rate for women (aged between 20 and 64) in the EU was 67% in 2018, representing an increase of one percentage point from 2017 and of 5 percentage points since 2008. By country, **Sweden** had the highest employment rate for women (80%) in 2018, whereas **Greece** (49%) and **Italy** (53%) reported the lowest rates.

The gender employment gap varied significantly across EU Member States in 2018, with the largest gaps recorded in **Malta** (22 percentage points) and **Greece** (21 percentage points), while the lowest gap was observed in **Lithuania** (2 percentage points). Conversely, the unemployment rate for women in the EU was 7.1% in 2019, higher than the rate of 6.4% for men among EU Member States. The female unemployment rate varied, ranging from 16.0% in **Spain** to 2.4% in **Czechia**. For details, see Figure 4-4 below.

Figure 4-4   Employment rate of women and men in the EU (Eurostat 2019)

Source: Eurostat 2019. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/-/tesem010
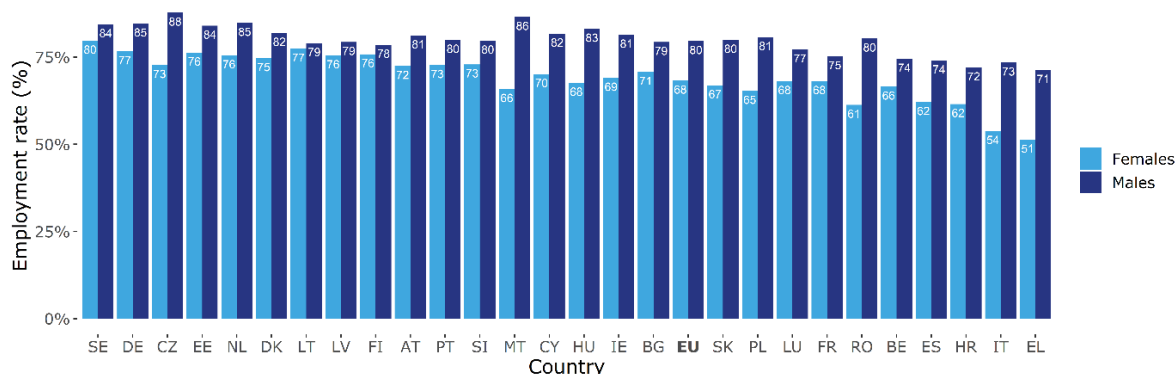
Looking at the nature of work, **women are much more likely than men to work on a part-time basis**. Eurostat data shows that almost one-third of employed women were working part-time (30%) in the EU in 2019, nearly four times the rate for men (8%). A similar pattern was observed across all Member States. The highest share of employed women working part-time was recorded in the **Netherlands** (77%), while the lowest share was in **Bulgaria** (2%). The Netherlands also has the highest share of part-time male workers (28%), according to Eurostat.[526]

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[526] See http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=lfsa_eppgacob&lang=en

There is also **some evidence of progress in terms of the proportion of employed women in managerial positions** (as a percentage of all managerial positions), according to statistics compiled by the European Institute for Gender Equality.[527] This shows that in the EU, the percentage of women in managerial positions rose slightly from 32.8% in 2008 to 33.8% in 2019. There are wide variations according to country, however, ranging from 45.8% in Latvia, 43.6% in Sweden and 40.4% in Poland, to 21.5% in Cyprus, 25.7% in Luxembourg, 26.1% in Croatia and 27.4% in the Netherlands.[528]

Much of the gap in employment rates between men and women and the higher number of female part-time workers is due to factors such as women choosing not to work as much as men and choosing to combine work and care responsibilities. However, one potential consequence of the educational underachievement of boys is that they might in the future find it harder to find work, as the labour market evolves, and fewer unskilled jobs are available. Another factor may also be increased labour market flexibility, which permits greater flexibility in the organisation and location of work.[529] As this tends to suit women, greater numbers of women may start to enter the labour market.

2. Occupational segregation

Occupational segregation remains a reality in the EU, reflecting the outcomes of study subject choices in secondary and tertiary education. For example, in the case of girls, a 2015 study by the OECD shows that fewer than one in 20 girls considers a career in STEM, compared to one in five boys, despite similar performance in the OECD's PISA science test.[530] This leads to occupational segregation, where occupations become gendered, with women typically over-represented in lower-paid jobs and professions, such as nursing, the care sector and cleaning, and men over-represented in higher-paid professions, such as engineering and IT. This, in turn, contributes to the gender pay gap.

Data from Eurostat demonstrates this clearly, showing that there are more females than males in occupations such as personal care, cleaning and teaching professions in the EU. In the most common 20 occupations that cover 76% of employed persons in the EU, the highest representation of women in the EU in 2016 was recorded in occupations related to personal care (89%), cleaners (84%), office clerks (80%), health technicians (78%) and teachers (71%).[531] Conversely, men are over-represented among builders (97%), drivers and mobile plant operators (96%), metal

[527] For more details, see: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/en/sdg_05_60_esmsip2.htm
[528] See https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/indicator/ta_wrklab_wrk_cond_wrkcultdiscr__tqoe1c2/datatable
[529] See e.g. Eurofound (2020). *Telework and ICT-based mobile work: Flexible working in the digital age*. Available at: https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2020/telework-and-ict-based-mobile-work-flexible-working-in-the-digital-age.
[530] OECD (2015a). *Early gender gaps drive career choices and employment opportunities, says OECD*. Available at: http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/early-gender-gaps-drive-career-choices-and-employment-opportunities.htm. [Accessed May 15 2020].
[531] It should be noted, however, that an increasing number of women are pursuing higher education studies and careers in biology and medicine, which represents an important share of STEM graduates and workers.

workers (96%), science and engineering technicians (83%) and science and engineering professionals (74%). For details, see Figure 4-5 below.

Figure 4-5   Occupational segregation in the EU (Eurostat 2016)
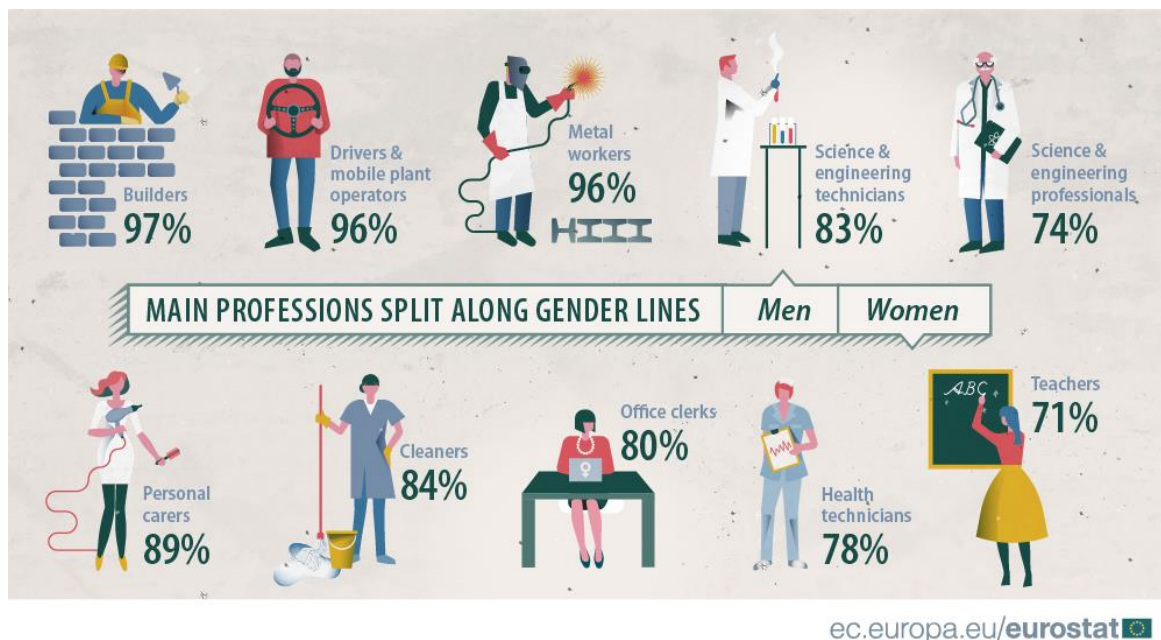
Source: Eurostat, based on European Labour Force Survey data. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20180307-1#:~:text=In%20the%20most%20common%2020,%25)%20and%20teachers%20(71%25).

As noted above, there is a link here between the subject choices made at school and in tertiary education. Girls are in general less attracted to STEM subjects than boys, and one reason for this is a negative perception among girls about the study environment in STEM classes. In an interview with the BBC, Peter Mapstone, head of IT at King Edward VI School in Hampshire, said that *"girls don't see IT as creative. It is that image of the geek or nerd in a room typing lines of code"*.[532] An important consequence of these negative perceptions around STEM among girls is an over-representation of boys in these subjects, who then later on in life are over-represented in the labour market in higher-paid professions, such as engineering or IT, although, at the same time, boys are still over-represented in manual trades, as seen by Figure 4-5 above. There is some movement, however, in that the number of women in some of the higher-paid and technical professions, such as law and medicine, is starting to increase in many European countries. Data also shows that the proportion of women who graduated in the field of technology in **Sweden** doubled between 1980 and 2005.[533]

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[532] See https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-18687247
[533] National Agency for Education. (2006). *Könsskillnader i måluppfyllelse och utbildningsval*. Stockholm. Available at: https://www.skolverket.se/publikationsserier/rapporter/2006/konsskillnader-i-maluppfyllelse-och-utbildningsval

Initiatives aimed at tackling occupational segregation

There are several policy initiatives in individual Member States that aim to tackle occupational segregation. Two examples from Czechia and Germany are presented in boxes 4-1 and 4-2 below.

Box 4-1   Reducing gender segregation in career choices – Czechia

The 'Break the Waves' project (*Prolomit vlny*) aims to increase equal opportunities for women and men in the labour market and education. It was divided into several work programmes, each addressing a different aspect of gender inequality. One of the work programmes focused on education, with the goal of supporting non-gender-stereotyped career choices for girls and boys at the end of primary and secondary schools. The project ran between 2004 and 2018 and produced a series of reports, policy papers, handbooks and case studies, including a handbook on gender-sensitive school management, gender auditing methodology and a gender equality tool for teachers.

More information: https://www.otevrenaspolecnost.cz/knihovna#prosazovani-genderove-rovnosti

Box 4-2   Cliché-Free Initiative (*Initiative Klisheefrei*) – Germany

The aim of this initiative, which has involved around 250 organisations, is to improve the career choices of boys and young men by showcasing non-traditional careers for men, such as work in the care sector. It works with boys and young men but also with all those who influence their career and study choices, such as educators at all levels, policymakers, employers and employer representatives. The service agency of the initiative comprises an office based at a not-for-profit registered association called the Centre of Excellence for Technology, Diversity and Equality of Opportunity and an editorial department located at the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB). It acts as a central point of contact to provide guidance and facilitate networking between participating institutions and active participants. It prepares and edits information, such as measures which have been structured in a gender-sensitive manner, other materials and examples of successful practice, and makes these available free of charge on the klischee-frei.de portal. It also implements specialist conferences.

More information: https://www.klischee-frei.de/

3. Low-skilled and low-quality work

A **lack of formal educational qualifications can hinder labour market participation**. Those with lower levels of educational qualifications (which, as seen, comprises a higher proportion of young men) may find it more difficult to find a first job, particularly in the context of the overall difficulties that young people have in gaining initial access to the labour market. Low levels of skills and qualifications will also limit choice of work, most likely pushing individuals into low-paid and low-skilled

work. This has consequences for the overall quality of life and earning power of individual men and their families. Eurofound notes in a 2015 study[534] that people in occupations with low levels of job quality (as measured by earnings, prospects, working time and intrinsic job quality) are disadvantaged in terms of being subject to high job strain, exposure to health risks and difficulties in accessing training. Individuals in these occupations also experience more job insecurity and poorer career prospects than in other occupations. The study also found that working in these types of occupations can have a detrimental effect on career prospects and, ultimately, participation in the labour market. According to the study, a high proportion of workers in most of these occupations reported that they would not to be able to work by the time they reached 60.

Difficulties in accessing the labour market in the case of young men with low levels of qualifications were confirmed by our case study research. In **Germany**, for example, although young men with good or average educational outcomes are relatively successful in their transition to work, low-qualified or unqualified young men face problems in finding a job because unqualified jobs in industry, crafts and agriculture are disappearing, and jobs in the low-wage service sector are perceived as 'female' (see Annex III, Section 6.3.4).

All of these issues are likely to become more pressing in the future, as the labour market develops and evolves. Relevant trends include the fact that the number of low-skilled jobs is likely to decrease in the future due to advances in automation and digitalisation, a trend that is already starting to be seen.[535] This means that men with low educational attainment will find it even harder to gain access to the labour market – digital skills will be increasingly necessary for all sorts of jobs, including those requiring vocational rather than academic qualifications. Further, increasingly flexible patterns of work organisation will enable more women to enter the labour market and increase their working hours by making it easier to combine work with family responsibilities. Men may, therefore, experience increasing levels of competition for jobs from women who are highly educated and who can work flexibly. This could then result in impacts in their lives more generally, such as underemployment or unemployment, and in implications for family income and relationships.

4. Risk of being NEET and social exclusion

Across EU Member States, there is a **higher percentage of female NEETs** compared to male NEETs for all years from 2010 to 2019, as seen in Figure 4-6 below. The percentage of male and female NEETS follows a similar pattern over time, both seeing an increase from 2010 to 2012, followed by a steady year-on-year reduction from 2012 to 2019, with little change of the gap between the rates for men and women.

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[534] Eurofound (2015). *Improving working conditions in occupations with multiple disadvantages*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef1544en.pdf
[535] See e.g. Cedefop (2018). *Skills forecast: trends and challenges to 2030.* Available at:
https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/3077_en.pdf.

Figure 4-6   EU average percentage of NEETs (Eurostat 2010−2019)
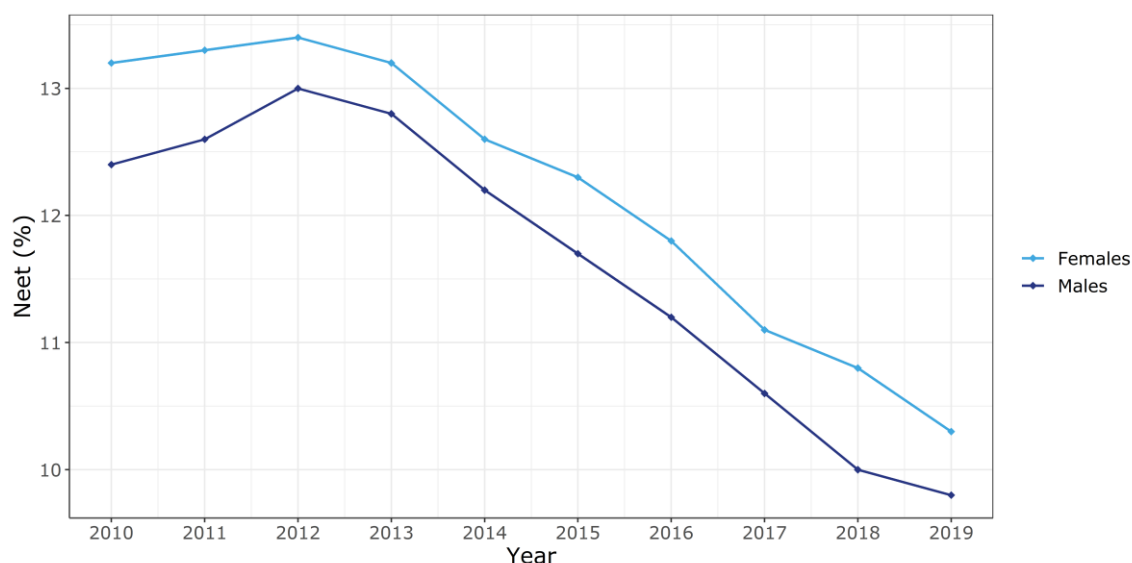
Among the EU Member States, the overall EU pattern is mainly replicated. In **Hungary**, the rate of female NEETs aged 15−24 is almost double that of male NEETs. In some countries, however, such as **Cyprus**, males are more likely to be NEET than females, although here the difference in rates has decreased since 2015. In **Austria** and **Italy**, men are also slightly more likely to be NEET than women. Additional data from Austria shows that gender-specific differences can also be found in the progression of NEET status among young women and men; whereas around 57% of male youths succeed in (permanently) leaving NEET status, this only applies to some 39% of female NEET youths. Conversely, 27% of male NEET youths are in a permanent NEET situation, whereas this share is 47% among women. Care obligations are cited as being among the main reason for the gender differences.

Policy measures to reduce NEET levels usually focus on both young women and men and are often linked to ELET strategies. In **Austria**, for example, the national strategy for prevention of early school leaving aims to address issues such as the NEET rates, poverty and social exclusion. In **Estonia**, there is a dedicated policy aimed at NEETs. The 'Youth Prop Up' (*Noorte Tugila*) programme is co-financed by the European Social Fund and implemented by the Association of Estonian Open Youth Centres at local level across the country. It is aimed at NEET youth aged 15−26 and focuses on supporting them through individual action plans.[536] In **Latvia**, the State Employment Agency has put into place support measures under the Youth Guarantee, which are open to young people who are NEET. This project aims to facilitate the

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[536] For more information on Youth Prop-Up, please visit: *https://tugila.ee/support-program-youth-prop/*

transition of unemployed young people into employment through acquiring labour market skills and promoting practical experience in the workplace.[537]

Eurostat data[538] shows that the **risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU was higher for women in 2019 than it was for men** (22.0% compared with 20.2%). At country level, women are generally at a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion than men. The reasons for this are likely to be complex and include factors such as the gender pay gap and issues around employment, in addition to caring responsibilities. However, in some Member States, such as **Romania**, men are significantly more at risk of in-work poverty than women, since more men work in low-paid jobs. Here, 18.5% of men compared to 11.6% of women are at risk of in-work poverty and social exclusion.

This section has highlighted some of the key direct educational and labour market implications and consequences that are attributable to the educational underperformance of boys. Educational choices and participation levels in higher education also have a range of other implications that increase the risk of men becoming marginalised. From our case study research, there is evidence of concern and debate in individual countries. In **Sweden**, for example, the imbalance in higher education has given rise to a discussion about a growing group of men that risk becoming marginalised in a number of ways. In part, the discussion is based on the observation that women often form intimate couple relations and a family with a partner with the same or higher level of education. Hence, due to the growing gender imbalances in education, there is a growing group of young men with incomplete or lower education that risk being excluded as potential partners, losing the prospect of forming intimate couple relationships and a family. This same group of young men experiences difficulties in establishing themselves in the labour market since the demand for low-skilled workers has decreased substantially in Sweden. There is evidence that people who do not complete their upper secondary education within four years are at greater risk of becoming unemployed, of becoming unemployed multiple times and of ending up in longer periods of unemployment. The risk is especially high for men, because women to a much greater extent supplement their studies with adult learning (see Annex III, Section 6.3.8). Some of these issues are explored in more detail in the next section.

4.2   Indirect implications

Overview of key findings

- **Life expectancy at birth in the EU is higher for women than for men**. It was estimated by Eurostat to be 80.9 years in 2017, reaching 83.5 years for women and 78.3 years for men, a difference of 5.2 years. The number of healthy life years is also higher for women than men: 64.2 years for women and 63.7

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[537] See https://www.csb.gov.lv/sites/default/files/publication/2019-10/Jauniesi%20Latvija_%2819_00%29_LV.pdf
[538] See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/-/tepsr_lm410

years for men.

- **Eurostat statistics show that men smoke more than women** and that the likelihood of smoking is highest among those with intermediate educational levels and lowest among those with higher educational levels, although there are some exceptions. Eurostat statistics also show that **men are more likely to engage in heavy episodic drinking** at least once a month in all Member States. On average, the respective percentage for men was 2.3 times higher than that for women. Factors contributing to unhealthier lives for men include job content – men suffer from greater exposure to physical and chemical hazards than women and may also be prepared to take greater risks than women – and a reluctance on the part of men to seek help for physical and mental health.

- Rates of depression are an important indicator of mental health. The main factor affecting rates of depression appears to be educational level across all Member States: **the higher the level of education, the lower the overall rate of depression**. Overall, women are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety than men, although men are more likely to commit suicide than women.

- Overall, there is evidence that boys seem to be more prone to physical aggression than girls and there is a **link between reading difficulties and antisocial behaviour.** The social impacts of this are associated with **higher levels of crime, misogyny, violence and membership in extremist movements.**

- Our research shows that **men are more likely than women to become involved in extremism and to be radicalised**, as men are more likely to be lured into joining extremist groups when they are struggling to fulfil their perceived needs and identities as men. However, we found **no clear evidence of any relationship between poor educational outcomes or low education levels and a willingness to support radical movements**. This was consistent across all countries studied, except for Sweden, where there is some study evidence of a link. Interviewees in our case study research pointed to the greater weight of other, broader, factors, such as poverty and deprivation.

- This study found some evidence of policy initiatives to prevent violence in schools and to counter extremism. Many Member States have plans in place to prevent radicalisation, although usually **not specifically targeted by gender**. Nonetheless, **challenging violence among men** is a key and emerging issue for youth policy across Europe.

- In all EU Member States, **men are more likely than women to commit violent crimes and to serve prison terms.** Between 2008 and 2018, only 1 in 20 adult prisoners in the EU-27 were women. There are a range of plans in place to try to tackle the root causes of violence and to engage with adolescents and young men to try to prevent violence.

- The demographic implications include the fact that **women with higher levels of education tend to have fewer children** and tend to have them later in life. However, in the Nordic countries, childlessness is now highest among the least

educated women, possibly linked to income levels. Childlessness is more common among men with lower levels of education.

In addition to the direct implications of low educational performance of boys, there are several more indirect implications, where the causal link is not as strong, but where there is some evidence of gender stereotyping having a societal impact. As we will see in this section, our case study research in **Sweden** shows that poor school performance is considered to be an important factor for many negative implications in areas such as health, criminality, and extremism, and for incidences of suicide and violence – although this is not the only factor explaining negative impacts (see Annex III, Section 6.3.8). In **Ireland**, interviewees also highlighted the negative impact that poor education has on men throughout their lives, which can play out in terms of poorer mental and physical health in the long term, alcohol addiction, criminality and suicide. It can also affect their relationships with women, as they may come to rely on their partner or spouse to complete administrative and financial tasks on their behalf.[539]

4.2.1   Implications for health and well-being

in this section, we first look at the differences between males and females in terms of their health and well-being outcomes (e.g. life expectancy, healthy life years and other unhealthy behaviours, such as smoking or drinking). Next, we turn to examining some of the potential causes for these differences, which includes education level.

1. Gender differences in health and well-being

Figure 4-7 and Figure 4-8 below show that there are differences between men and women in terms of life expectancy and healthy life years. Life expectancy at birth in the EU was estimated by Eurostat to be 80.9 years in 2017, reaching 83.5 years for women and 78.3 years for men, a difference of 5.2 years. **In all EU Member States, life expectancy at birth is higher for women than for men, although the size of the gap varies noticeably**. The largest differences between the sexes are in Latvia (9.9 years), Lithuania (9.8 years) and Estonia (8.8 years). The smallest differences are in Sweden (3.3 years) and the Netherlands (3.2 years).

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[539] Discussions with interviewees results in findings similar to a 2009 report by the National Adult Literacy Association (NALA) *'Men and Literacy: A Study of Attitude and Experiences of Learning'* https://arrow.tudublin.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=beschsprep

Figure 4-7   Life expectancy at birth, gender gap (Eurostat 2017)
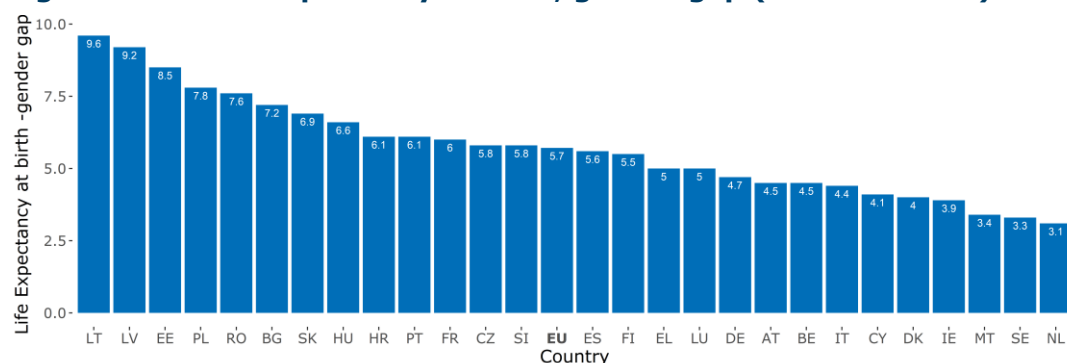
Source: Eurostat 2017. Available at:
https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=demo_mlexpec&lang=en

In 2018, Eurostat estimated the **number of healthy life years at birth at 64.2 years for women and 63.7 years for men in the EU**. This represented approximately 76.7% and 81.4% respectively of the total life expectancy for women and men. There are differences between Member States, however, as can be seen from Figure 4-8 below. The countries at the top end of the scale (for women) include Bulgaria, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Norway, Spain and Sweden.

Figure 4-8   Healthy life years at birth (Eurostat 2018)
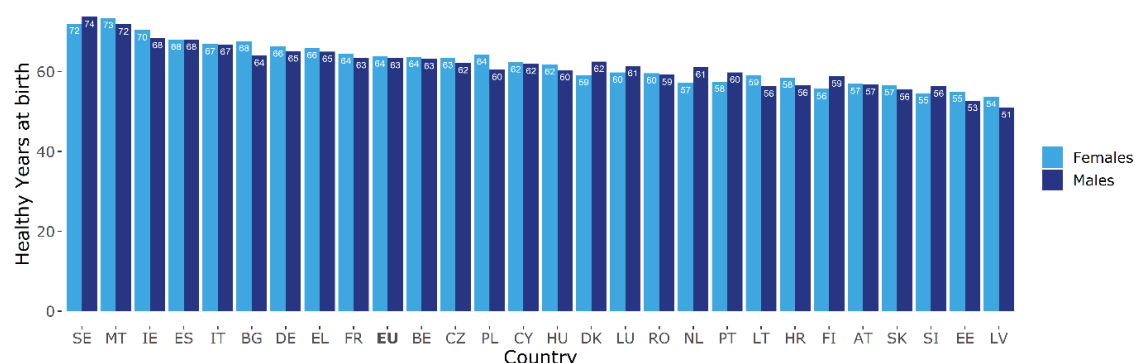
Source: Eurostat 2018. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Healthy_life_years_statistics

There is **little evidence of a direct causal link between low educational performance and life expectancy/number of healthy life years**. However, some of the behaviours exhibited by men and women, discussed in the following sections, may be linked to gender stereotyping and gender expectations, including those experienced in their education.

As noted in earlier sections of this report, there are significant differences in how boys and girls spend their free time. It seems as if boys and young men are more likely to engage in unhealthy, dangerous or risky activities, such as substance abuse or gambling. All over the world, men smoke, drink and take more risks than women. Figure 4-9 below shows that, in the EU, **men smoke more than women and that smoking levels are highest among those with intermediate educational levels**

and lowest among those with higher educational levels, although there are some exceptions.

Figure 4-9   Educational attainment levels by gender in the EU (Eurostat 2019)

	Males			Females		
	ISCED[540] levels 0−2	ISCED levels 3−4	ISCED levels 5−8	ISCED levels 0−2	ISCED levels 3−4	ISCED levels 5−8
EU-28	24	44.2	31.8	25.8	47	27.3
Austria	20.5	48.3	31.1	16.9	52	31.1
Belgium	24	35.9	40	27.7	40.3	32.1
Bulgaria	21.4	48.6	30	22.3	58.2	19.5
Croatia	19.9	54.4	25.7	16.3	65.3	18.4
Cyprus	20	34.5	45.5	23	42.8	34.2
Czechia	13.1	63.5	23.4	11.6	68.6	19.8
Denmark	23.9	38.4	37.7	28.3	43.1	28.5
Estonia	13	41.4	45.6	18.6	54.1	27.3
Finland	14.9	40.2	44.9	18.9	48.8	32.3
France	22.9	40.7	36.3	24	45.1	30.9
Germany	19.9	56.1	24	19.2	52.9	27.9
Greece	26	44.4	29.5	25.8	48.3	25.9
Hungary	20.8	52.8	26.4	19.1	62.4	18.5
Ireland	18.7	37.2	44.1	23.4	39.4	37.2
Italy	37.5	42.4	20.1	42.1	43.1	14.7
Latvia	12.3	49	38.7	17.6	58.8	23.6
Lithuania	9.5	45.8	44.7	12.8	56.3	30.8
Luxembourg	27.2	30.6	42.2	26.3	33.9	39.9
Malta	40.3	30.5	29.3	42.2	33.5	24.3
Netherlands	25.1	39.4	35.6	26	40.1	33.9
Poland	12.5	53.9	33.6	14.1	63	22.8
Portugal	43.6	28.4	28	51.9	29	19.2
Romania	26.3	56.4	17.3	23.9	61.3	14.8
Slovakia	15	57.9	27	14	66.7	19.3
Slovenia	16.1	48.5	35.4	15.5	60.9	23.6
Spain	36.3	25.8	37.9	43	24.7	32.3
Sweden	19.1	36.4	44.5	22.3	46.2	31.4

Source: Eurostat 2019. Available at:
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfse_03/default/table?lang=en

Eurostat statistics also show that **men are much more likely to engage in heavy episodic drinking at least once a month in all Member States** (see Figure 4-10).

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[540] ISCED levels 0-2: Less than primary, primary and lower secondary education; ISCED levels 3 and 4: Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education; ISCED levels 5-8: Tertiary education

On average, the respective percentage for men was 2.3 times higher than that for women (28.3% for men and 12.3% for women).

Figure 4-10 Prevalence of heavy episodic drinking (Eurostat 2014)
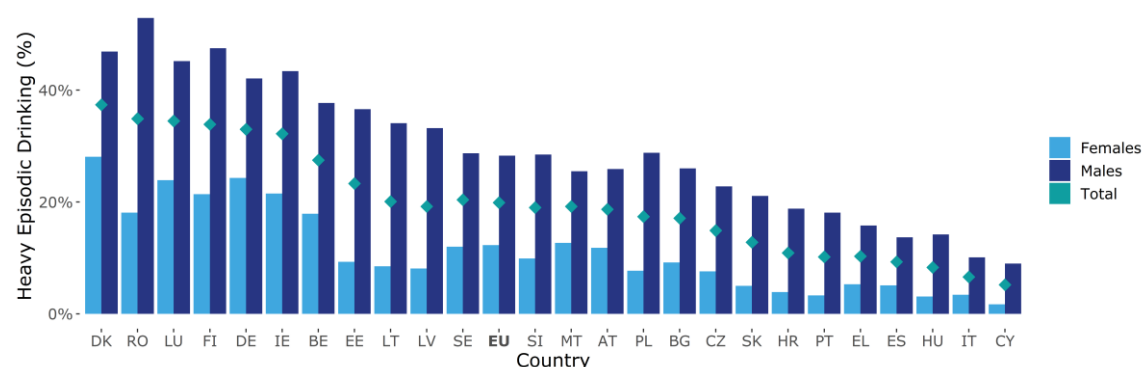
Source: Eurostat 2014. Available at:
https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=hlth_ehis_al3u&lang=en

These trends are borne out by our research in individual Member States, where many countries reported that men smoked and drank more alcohol than women. In **Estonia**, the differences are stark: according to 2018 data from the Estonian Institute of Economic Research,[541] deaths caused by alcohol poisoning in Estonia were about four times higher for men than women. Compared to the previous year, alcohol poisoning-related deaths among men increased by 11%, whereas for women the rate dropped by 11%. In **Hungary**, data from 2016 shows that men consumed around 24 litres of pure alcohol a year on average, compared to 8 litres for women.[542] Men were also three times more likely than women to have an alcohol use disorder in 2016 (13.0% to 4.1%) in **Ireland** and are more likely to have road traffic injuries, liver cirrhosis and cancer.[543] In **Sweden**, our case study shows that, despite overall improvements in health for the population in recent years, development towards better health has stagnated for the group of young men aged 15–29, where unequal health is increasing. Depression, drug problems, neck and back pain, suicide and self-inflicted injuries, and interpersonal violence are the main causes of young men's increased ill health (see Annex III, Section 6.3.8).

2. Potential causes of males' poor health and well-being

A first explanation for men's poorer health and well-being outcomes overall compared with women can be found in biology, which shows that women have some biological advantages which make them more resilient and give them more stamina than

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[541] Estonian Institute of Economic Research. (2019). *Alcohol market, consumption and harms in Estonia. Yearbook 2019,* Tallinn. Available
at: https://intra.tai.ee/images/prints/documents/157408089482_Alkoholi_aastaraamat_2019.pdf
[542] Official statistics are available at the site of the World Health Organisaion. Available at:
https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/topics/indicator-groups/indicator-group-details/GHO/levels-of-consumption
[543] WHO (2016) Ireland. Available at:
https://www.who.int/substance_abuse/publications/global_alcohol_report/profiles/irl.pdf?ua=1

men.[544] Nevertheless, these biological differences do not seem to outweigh the impact of society and masculinity norms on men's health. According to the Norwegian sociologist Oystein Gullvag Holter, there is a **direct correlation between the state of gender equality in a country and male well-being**.[545] The more gender equal a society, the better men's health. But if greater gender equality contributes to improved health and well-being, then why do not more men fight for women's rights? Holter speculates that this may have to do with the fact that men are simply not aware that high quality of life is connected to gender equality.

Indeed, much of the unhealthy behaviour described above is **reinforced by traditional conceptions of gender role at societal, school, family and individual level**.[546] A report from the World Health Organisation points to two other important reasons why men live shorter lives. The first is **the way men work** – men suffer from greater exposure to physical and chemical hazards than women. They may also be prepared to take greater risks than women. The second reason is **men's reluctance to take care of themselves** – men are in general less comfortable than women with doctors and less likely to visit a doctor than women, and this is particularly concerning when it comes to their mental health. Although on average three times more women than men attempt to commit suicide, the actual suicide rate of men is four times higher than that of women – the report mentions that men are 'more effective' at committing suicide than women, because they often use more violent means to end their life.[547] Overall, it would seem that the higher the adherence to the 'Man Box' (see Section 3.2.3 above), the more vulnerable men can be in times of societal crisis, whereas women seem to have better social support structures in place to help them in times of crisis.

The extent of these societal challenges is evident from the **stigma or hostility encountered by initiatives designed to tackle gender inequality through a 'male lens'**. For example, the organisation infoMann (see Box 4-3 below) encountered negative public attitudes and suspicion when it was first established to provide emotional support and counselling to men. This required action to raise awareness and challenge negative views that were rooted in unhealthy gender norms.

Box 4-3   infoMann: Helping men with difficulties – Luxembourg

infoMann starts from the idea that "*men are human beings, just like women*".[548] According to infoMann, over the course of many feminist waves, women have been able to mobilise against a common enemy: male domination. Men, by contrast, have always struggled to question the traditional model of male dominance, which society in many ways forces them to follow – that men should be rational, act and

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[544] Plank, L. (2019). Men's health is better, too, in countries with more gender equality. *The Sydney Morning Herald.* Available at: https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life-and-relationships/men-s-health-is-better-too-in-countries-with-more-gender-equality-20190924-p52ulc.html

[545] Gullvåg Holter, Ø. (2014). 'What's in it for Men?': Old Question, New Data. *Men and Masculinities 17* (5). Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1097184x14558237

[546] Plank, L. (2019). Men's health is better, too, in countries with more gender equality. In *The Sydney Morning Herald.* Available at: https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life-and-relationships/men-s-health-is-better-too-in-countries-with-more-gender-equality-20190924-p52ulc.html

[547] See https://www.who.int/data/gho/publications

[548] In French: *"les hommes sont des humains comme les femmes"*.

be decisive, be good at organising, be warriors and certainly not cry. Men facing difficulties, a representative from the organisation said, "*are looking for an external culprit, whether it be political, their partner or ex-partner*" and "*they try to understand the world as if it were a machine more so than their own needs and limits*".[549] Society does not take men's issues seriously. Some people ironically reacted when infoMann was set up, saying that it was good that there was 'finally' an organisation to support 'beaten men' (as if 'beaten men' were not real men); others believed that the organisation was mainly there to support divorced men or men who had been attacked by feminists. Only a limited number of people, still today, understand that the real goal of the organisation is to support men who are feeling suppressed and lost in a society based on a model of male domination, a society in which men (are expected to) exercise power.

More information: Case study Luxembourg (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6) and http://www.infomann.lu/index.php/infomann-home

Although it is **difficult to establish a direct causal link between low educational attainment and ill health**, there is some evidence of such links. In **Sweden**, for example, a number of studies show that men with low or incomplete grades from year nine are at higher risk of ill health, suicide and crime, although it should be noted that neither of these problems are caused by one single factor.[550] Those who finished ninth grade with the lowest average grades are about three times as likely of committing suicide at a young age compared with those who leave primary school with a top grade or just below. The same pattern was seen among boys and girls, although the risks were generally higher for boys.[551] Among men with only lower secondary education, mortality rate is 48% up to 80 years of age, compared with 22% among women with post-secondary education.[552] Anecdotally, experts interviewed for the **German** case study agreed that poor educational achievement has an effect on health, expressing the view that health is linked to income (see Annex III, Section 6.3.4).

Rates of depression are an important indicator of mental health, and the main factor affecting depression appears to be educational level: **the higher the level of education, the lower the overall rate of depression**. At both national and EU level, Eurostat data[553] shows that men with lower levels of education (ISCED level 0−2) are more likely than men with higher levels of education (ISCED level 3−4 and 5−8) to report having depressive symptoms or major depressive symptoms, with for instance 10.5% of men at ISCED level 0−2 reporting depressive symptoms, as

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[549] In French: "*cherchent un responsable extérieur, que ce soient les politiques, leur conjointe ou leur ex-conjointe*" and "*ils cherchent à comprendre le monde comme une machine plus que leurs propres besoins et limites*".
[550] National Board of Health and Welfare. (2010). *Social rapport 2010*. Stockholm: Socialstyrelsen.
[551] Björkenstam, C. & Ringbäck Weitoft, G. & Hjern, A. & Nordström, P. & Hallqvist, J. & Ljung, R. (2011). School grades, parental education and suicide – a national register-based cohort study. *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2011 65 993-998.
[552] Swedish Government Official Report SOU 2016:55. (2016). *Det handlar om jämlik hälsa*. [Report]. Stockholm
[553] See https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=hlth_ehis_mh1e&lang=en

opposed to 5.1% of men at ISCED level 5−8. Based on mental health data, there are, thus, grounds to believe that men with lower levels of education may be disproportionately more likely to commit suicide, a view which is supported by a sizeable literature on the socio-economic determinants of suicide internationally (see, for instance, Bourgoin, 1999;[554] Milner, McClure and De Leo, 2017;[555] DeBastiani, Norries and Kerr, 2019).[556] Overall, though, women are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety than men. Eurostat data shows that women are more likely than men to report depressive symptoms overall. However, in some countries, such as **Portugal**, some studies note that this gender difference in reporting rates may be linked to differences in how Portuguese men and women deal with mental health issues, specifically that women are more open than men to talking about these issues and seeking professional help.[557] Self-perception of health also tends to increase in accordance with educational levels.

Initiatives focused on encouraging men to adopt healthier lifestyles

In terms of policy initiatives, **some Member States are implementing targeted policies to encourage men to adopt healthier lifestyles**, although such initiatives remain rather limited. For example, in addition to organisations like infoMann mentioned above, the **Irish** Men's Sheds Association seeks to improve men's overall health and well-being (see Box 4-4 below).

Box 4-4   Men's Sheds Association – Ireland

The Irish Men's Sheds Association (ISMA) exists to support the development of Ireland's network of over 450 men's sheds. The 'Men's Sheds' movement started originally in Australia in the 1980s, and since its establishment in Ireland in 2011, IMSA has overseen the rapid growth of men's sheds in Ireland, which now enjoys the highest per-capita concentration of men's sheds anywhere in the world. The association strives for a future in which all men have the opportunity to maintain and improve their well-being on their own terms and within their own communities. Most sheds engage in activities such as woodwork, gardening, carpentry and community work. However, there are more special interest sheds that focus on things like music, fishing and restoration work.

More information: Case study Ireland (see Annex III, Section 6.3.5) and https://menssheds.ie/

The **Austrian** government is also developing a national health strategy for men, in recognition of the fact that men in Austria die on average five years before women (see Box 4-5 below).

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[554] See https://www.cairn.info/article.php?ID_ARTICLE=POPU_P1999_54N1_0101 ;
[555] See https://www.researchgate.net/publication/47795216_Socio-economic_determinants_of_suicide_An_ecological_analysis_of_35_countries
[556] See https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0941950018303191
[557] Lucas Jorge (2018). *Saúde Mental e Género: As diferenças de género em torno da depressão*. Avaliable at https://ubibliorum.ubi.pt/bitstream/10400.6/9760/1/6725_14095.pdf

Box 4-5 **National Health Strategy for Men – Austria**

The Austrian government (Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection) is developing a national health strategy for men in recognition of the fact that men in Austria die on average five years before women. The aim of this strategy is to improve awareness of health issues among men, including psychosocial risks. This includes discussion of involvement in the family, the prevention of violence and the promotion of inclusion and social integration.

As part of the preparations for this strategy, a workshop was held in 2018 to discuss the range of issues around men's health, including psychosocial risks that may lead to depression and suicide. The workshop brought together academics and interested parties. A session on psychosocial risks discussed contributory factors to male suicide, such as poverty, lack of participation in the tertiary sector, low levels of education, unemployment, and a lack of access to therapy or other mental healthcare.

More information: https://www.sozialministerium.at/Themen/Gesundheit/Frauen--und-Gendergesundheit/Männergesundheit.html

In addition, in **Belgium (Wallonia)** the community health plan (*Plan Wallon de Prévention et de Promotion de la Santé*) acknowledges that men are more likely than women to suffer from drug abuse.[558] The plan, therefore, outlines key prevention policy guidelines in the areas of drug use, smoking and mental health which, while it acknowledges the need to tailor support based on statistical evidence concerning specific groups, do not mention men specifically. In **Denmark**, the Danish Health Authority has for many years focused on men's health and launched several campaigns and other initiatives to place men's health onto the public agenda. One specific initiative is 'Men's Health Society', which is a multidisciplinary organisation dedicated to the field of men's health in all its aspects. The society cooperates with various patient organisations, municipalities and health authorities.[559]

Germany's equality strategy for boys and young men also covers physical and emotional health. In the area of psychosocial risks, it states that more support will be available for mental health initiatives relating to men and that service providers in this area should comprise mixed gender teams. In the **Netherlands**, a programme called 'Gender and Health Knowledge Programme' aims to reduce the knowledge gap about gender differences in health and care. Further, in 2018, the Dutch National Centre for Nutrition (*Voedingscentrum*) launched the campaign 'There Is More Than Meat' (*Er is meer dan vlees*).[560] The aim is to encourage people to eat more healthily and in particular to encourage men to lower their meat consumption.

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[558] See http://sante.wallonie.be/?q=node/4470
[559] See https://sundmand.dk/English.php
[560] See https://www.voedingscentrum.nl/nl/thema/meer-dan-vlees.aspx

4.2.2   Radicalisation and violent extremism

Many European countries have experienced an increase in radicalisation and violent extremism in recent years, with an over-representation of men in these groups.[561] To help counter this trend, the EU education ministers adopted a **Declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education** at an informal meeting in Paris on 17 March 2015.[562] This has formed the basis for EU Member State cooperation in education on countering radicalisation and violent extremism, supported at EU level by the work done by the ET 2020 Working Group on Common Values and Inclusive Education, which in 2021 published the *Compendium of Inspiring Practices on Citizenship Education and Inclusive Education*,[563] including several examples focusing on combating radicalisation and violent extremism both within and through education.

In all EU Member States, **men are more likely than women to commit violent crimes and to serve prison terms.** Eurostat notes that, between 2008 and 2018, only 1 in 20 adult prisoners in the EU were women. Eurostat data also shows that the highest share of women in prison on average was observed in Latvia (8.0%), while the lowest was in Ireland (3.1%). Specific data from Member States shows that, for example, in **Czechia**, in 2018, the number of men sentenced to prison for violent offences was almost 10 times the number of women (9,630 cases compared to 974 cases for women).[564] Similarly, 95% of the **Estonian** prison population is made up of men, and as at the end of 2018, 92% of those on probation were men.[565] In **Poland**, among minors, boys constitute on average 86−90% of the perpetrators of all types of crimes. Among adults imprisoned in Polish pre-trial detention centres and prisons, women constitute on average 3%, and in the case of juveniles − 2% of the population.[566]

Potential reasons for men's over-representation among extremist movements

The reasons for the rise in radicalisation and violent extremism across the EU are highly complex, and the reason why we see more men in these movements is even

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[561] In Portugal, for example, far-right extremist movements have seen an exponential growth in recent years. According to the latest report from the HopeNotHate organisation, hate speech (antigypsy, anti-LGBTI+, anti-feminist, anti-immigrants and anti-left) has been normalised to levels never seen before in the Portuguese democratic system, creating an environment prone to racist and far-right violence that is without precedent in the 45 years since the end of the dictatorship. See: https//www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ESOH-LOCKED-FINAL.pdf

[562] See https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/news/2015/documents/citizenship-education-declaration_en.pdf

[563] EC (2021). *Compendium of Inspiring Practices on Inclusive and Citizenship Education*. Prepared by the ET 2020 Working Group on Common Values and Inclusive Education. Edited by V. Donlevy , F. Staring, M. Battaglini, B. van Driel, J. can der Leeuw-Roord and A. Janum. Available at: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/2edab132-7fbe-11eb-9ac9-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF

[564] Criminal records by sex, National statistical office https://www.czso.cz/documents/10180/91605937/300002190606.pdf/0723ca9d-8172-4807-9af8-d75d30fc6f17?version=1.1

[565] Ahven, A., Kruusmaa, K-C., Leps, A., Solodov, S., Surva, L., Sööt, M.-L., Tamm, K., Tammiste, B., Tüllinen, K. (2018). Kuritegevus Eestis 2018, Tallinn. Available at: https://www.kriminaalpoliitika.ee/sites/krimipoliitika/files/elfinder/dokumendid/kuritegevus_eestis_2018_vii detega_lisadele.pdf

[566] Chmura-Rutkowska, I. (2019). *Presentation of project results "Peer gender based violence in the experiences of Polish lower secondary school students".*

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harder to understand. A first explanation could be found in **men's higher likelihood to display violent or aggressive behaviour**, as they have *"a neurodevelopmental predisposition to be more prone to antisocial behaviour"*.[567] Evidence also shows that reading difficulties (which, as seen in this report, are much more prevalent among men) and antisocial behaviour go hand in hand[568]. **The social impacts of such behaviour are associated with higher levels of crime, misogyny, violence and membership in extremist movements**.[569] According to a recent report by the United Nations' Counter-Terrorism Security Committee Executive-Directorate (CTED), the link between masculinity, radicalisation and violent extremism *"has been largely absent from mainstream discussions of radicalisation, with the exception of occasional references to a 'crisis of masculinity' and 'toxic masculinity'"*.[570]

Next, it seems that **young men are more likely to be lured into joining extremist groups when they are struggling to fulfil their perceived needs and identities as men**. Preventive policies should, therefore, focus on 'men-streaming' considerations in order to truly address the root causes of radicalisation.[571] The risk factors related to radicalisation and violent extremism include rigid gender attitudes, peer support of sexism and violence, having a dominant masculine identity, honour norms, discrimination, and devaluing women.[572] By tackling gender stereotypes in the classroom and at school, education systems can play a key role in preventing children – and boys in particular – from radicalising.

These trends are backed up by data from our mapping research in some countries. In **Greece**, for example, an analysis of supporters of the far-right Golden Dawn party, points first of all to the existence of a major gender gap in supporters. Over 75% of Golden Dawn's 2012 supporters were men, whereas men comprised a much smaller share of the total electorate. The majority of Golden Dawn supporters (58%) had attained only an intermediate level of education, completing secondary school or technical training.[573] In **Czechia**, a report published by the Ministry of the Interior in

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[567] Moffitt TE, Caspi A, Rutter M, Silva PA. (2001). *Sex Differences in Antisocial Behavior: Conduct Disorder, Delinquency, and Violence in the Dunedin Longitudinal Study*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press. See also OECD. 2017. *Girls better than boys at working together to solve problems, finds new OECD PISA global education survey*. OECD. Published November 21. Available: http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/girls-better-than-boys-at-working-together-to-solve-problems-finds-new-oecd-pisa-global-education-survey.htm. [Accessed December 5 2017].

[568] Trzesniewski K. H., T. E. Moffitt, E. Caspi, A. Taylor and B. Maughan (2006). Revisiting the association between reading achievement and antisocial behavior: new evidence of an environmental explanation from a twin study. *Child Dev.* 77 (1): 72–88.

[569] Plank, L. (2019). *For the Love of Men: A New Vision for Mindful Masculinity*. See: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Love-Men-Vision-Mindful-Masculinity/dp/1250196248

[570] CTED (2019). *Gender Dimensions of the Response to Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Research Perspectives.* CTED Trends Report February 2019. New York: CTED. Available at: https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Feb_2019_CTED_Trends_Report.pdf

[571] Ezekilov, J. (2017). Gender 'Men-Streaming' CVE: Countering Violence Extremism by Addressing Masculinities Issues. In *Reconsidering Development 5* (1).

[572] Kimmel, M. (2018). *Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into – and Out of – Violent Extremism.* University of California Press. Available at: https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520292635/healing-from-hate

[573] Vassiliki Georgiadou, (2013). Right-Wing Populism and Extremism: The Rapid Rise of "Golden Dawn". *Crisis-Ridden Greece*, in *RIGHT-WING Extermism in Europe, Country Analyses, Counter-Strategies and Labor-Market Oriented Exit Strategies* by Melzer,R., Serafi,S.

2015[574] shows that, out of all criminal offences related to extremism, 91.7% were committed by men compared to 8.3% by women (see Annex III, Section 6.3.2). In **Sweden**, pro-violence extremist movements attempt to recruit young men by propagating a hyper-masculine ideal promising power over others by using violence. Young men who decide to join this environment are in general not established in the labour market and have experienced some sort of conflict with the state. Many of these young men feel hatred towards school and have had antagonistic and, at times, violent interactions with teachers. Further research conducted by the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society shows that most pro-violence and right-wing extremist movements direct their recruitment efforts towards men – although several factors are involved in young people's decision to join right-wing and pro-violence extremist movements. One of several risk factors identified for young men deciding to join right-wing extremism in Sweden is not being able to develop a positive relation to school, work or other social contexts. By joining they feel that they achieve a higher status and respect based on instilling fear in others[575] (see Annex III, Section 6.3.8).

A third reason for men's high participation in radical or extremist movements, according to some case study interviews, is **an assumed relationship between radicalisation and poor educational attainment**. In **Germany**, for example, interviewees felt that underperforming boys were more likely to find acceptance and appreciation in extremist movements. Images of machismo and traditional stereotypical images of men are also thought to be attractive to boys, and in particular to boys with little experience of success and acknowledgement (see Annex III, Section 6.3.4). In **Luxembourg**, some interviewees also reported a potential link between mental health issues among males, low education outcomes, radicalisation and violent behaviour, such as xenophobia, crime or violent sexism: *"what we see is that men who are facing difficulties seek to put the blame on an external culprit, whether it's politicians, their partner or ex-partner […] they find it hard to re-examine their behaviour"* (see Annex III, Section 6.3.6).

There is also a **link between education levels and risk of incarceration**, shown in many EU Member States. In **Sweden**, for example, there are several studies that examine early school failure and a poor connection to school as risk factors for crime.[576] Further in Sweden, another study shows that school-related factors, such as low school grades, truancy, lack of commitment to schoolwork and dropping out of school have a clear connection with juvenile delinquency. Among both men and women who are registered on crime databases, school performance is significantly worse than for others. A follow-up of the correlation between low school grades and

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[574] Ministry of Interior Affairs (2019). *Zprava o extremism na uzemi Ceske Republiky v roce 2014, 2015*, Available at: https://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/zprava-o-extremismu-na-uzemi-ceske-republiky-v-roce-2019.aspx

[575] The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society. (2016). *Ung och extrem – högerextremism*. [Publication]. Stockholm.

[576] The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention. (2009). Orsaker till brott bland unga och metoder att motverka kriminell utveckling. En kunskapsinventering. [Publication]. Stockholm: The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention; The National Board of Health and Welfare. (2020). *Bedöma risk och behov för barn och unga som begår brott eller har annat normbrytande beteende. Kunskapsstöd för socialtjänsten.* [Publication]. Stockholm: The National Board of Health and Welfare.

more than one prosecution showed that young men with low school grades were heavily over-represented in juvenile delinquency.[577]

However, it is important to note that many factors contribute to radicalisation and that, while a low level of education may be a contributory factor, there is no clear evidence of a **direct causal relationship between poor educational outcomes and a willingness to support radical movements**. In **Germany**, for example, some of our case study interviewees noted that among right-wing extremists low-educated and school dropouts are not over-represented and that the right-wing party AfD (Alternative for Germany) has many voters from the middle class, such as pharmacists or VET graduates. Case study interviewees felt that radicalisation is related more to socio-economic problems, deprivation, and deficient regional infrastructure problems ('no bus, no jobs') that cannot be solved by education alone (see Annex III, Section 6.3.4). Similarly, in **Portugal**, according to a poll organised by the Institute of Social Sciences and the University Institute of Lisbon in February 2020,[578] support for the far-right *Chega!* political party is almost non-existent in those under the age of 25, and half of its supporters are women, one in five have a university degree and more than a third have completed secondary education, which is above the average education of Portuguese adults. This survey also notes that it is among these groups, and not among the less educated, that support for this party is the strongest. In Portugal overall, therefore, our research found no conclusive links between being male and/or with low educational outcomes and voting/being active in extremist movements. Rather, systemic causes (institutional racism, under-analysed colonial past, strength of religious convictions) and individual factors (overall perception of status/place in the societal hierarchy, attitude towards ongoing social changes) are a stronger determinant influencing membership of those movements (see Annex III, Section 6.3.7). In **Finland**, the Finnish National Election Study has not reported any strong links between radicalisation and low education outcomes,[579] although interviewees noted that schools can do much to increase the well-being of children and young people and prevent exclusion (see Annex III, Section 6.3.3). Likewise, in **Ireland**, case study interviewees noted that there was no evidence to suggest that there is a link between lesser-educated men being more susceptible to radicalisation, anti-immigrant sentiment or misogyny. If anything, one interviewee noted, it is possible that better-educated men are simply better able to disguise their prejudices (see Annex III, Section 6.3.5).

Initiatives focused on countering violence and extremism

Although this area is relatively under-researched, our mapping and case study research uncovered **some evidence of policy and awareness-raising initiatives** aimed at countering violence and extremism. In **Austria**, for example, there is a

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[577] The National Board of Health and Welfare. (2013). *Unga och brott i Sverige Underlagsrapport till Barns och ungas hälsa, vård och omsorg 2013. [Report]*. Stockholm: The National Board of Health and Welfare
[578] See: https://expresso.pt/opiniao/2020-02-15-Quem-quer-votar-no-Chega-
[579] Isotalo, V., Järvi, V., von Schoultz, Å, Söderlund, P. (2020). *Suomalainen äänestäjä [The Finnish Voter]*. Vaalitutkimuskonsortio – Valforskningskonsortiet – Finnish National Election Studies. https://oikeusministerio.fi/documents/1410853/4750802/Suomalainen+%C3%A4%C3%A4nest%C3%A4j%C3%A4+2003-2019.pdf/163efffe-7ba8-513c-e038-10624845b5c8/Suomalainen+%C3%A4%C3%A4nest%C3%A4j%C3%A4+2003-2019.pdf

national strategy to prevent violence in schools and counter extremism.[580] This focuses on prevention by sending relevant information to schools and encouraging discussion, and by holding workshops in schools. There is also a national policy on the prevention of extremism and de-radicalisation, which focuses on providing support and guidance for individuals at risk of marginalisation. It also focuses on breaking down gender stereotypes and addressing both genders in the same way, recognising that rigid gender roles can leave little room for the personal development of both boys and girls. Another example from **Germany** is described in detail in Box 4-6 below.

Box 4-6   Countering radicalisation and extremism – Germany

Germany's national equality strategy for boys and young men acknowledges that some men may feel that they are 'emancipation losers' in the context of progress towards equality between men and women, and this can lead to feelings of anger, bitterness and fear. It recognises that this subject is under-researched in Germany and, therefore, encourages the development of more knowledge in this area and in particular the potential of using incentives particularly targeted at men in order to prevent radicalisation. Research has also been carried out on migration from Germany due to radicalisation. A study for the European Parliament found that by the end of June 2016, 784 individuals had left (or tried to leave) Germany for Syria or Iraq due to Islamist motivations, and although the majority were men, 21% of the departees were women. It also noted that there are significant differences between the way men and women become radicalised. Women tend to become radicalised more quickly and in social environments that are less publicly accessible.

More information: Case study Germany (see Annex III, Section 6.3.4)

Many Member States have plans or projects in place to prevent radicalisation, although usually not specifically targeted by gender. In **Belgium (Wallonia)**, for example, it is compulsory for municipalities across Belgium to create local anti-radicalisation units called 'Local Security Cells for Radicalisation, Extremism and Terrorism' (*Cellules de sécurité intégrale locale en matière de radicalisme, d'extrémisme et de terrorisme*, or CSILS), although there is no evidence that the projects these entities carry out locally target boys explicitly.[581] In **Germany**, the government-funded 'ReMoDe' project (*Regional und Mobil für Demokratie* – 'Regional and mobile for democracy') aims to develop a pedagogical concept for interacting with young people from backgrounds where ideologies of inequality and right-wing radicalisation tendencies occur frequently.[582] Also in Germany, the *Netzwerk-Lotsen* pilot is a training and networking project in the state of Hesse. It addresses teachers,

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[580] See https://www.schulpsychologie.at/fileadmin/upload/persoenlichkeit_gemeinschaft/Bilanz_NAP_Schulische_Gewaltpraevention.pdf

[581] For more information on the CSILS, please visit: https://gouvernement.wallonie.be/home/presse/publications/les-csils-se-developpent-en-wallonie.publicationfull.html

[582] For more information on this project, please visit: https://www.demokratie-leben.de/projekte-expertise/projekte-finden-1/projektdetails/remode-regional-und-mobil-fuer-demokratie, https://www.mja-sachsen.de/modellprojekt-remode/

psychologists and social workers in schools and aims at providing them with expertise and knowledge about the process of radicalisation and forms of extremism.[583]

Linked to masculine stereotypes and extreme behaviours, challenging violence among men is a key and emerging issue for youth policy across Europe. However, in relation to country-specific initiatives, a 2012 study by EIGE found that **only 16 EU Member State-funded initiatives designed to combat violent behaviour were aimed at men**.[584] Many of the approaches towards combatting violence come through non-governmental organisations. At present, one of the most prominent movements which, although not funded by the EU does cut across several nations, is the 'White Ribbon Campaign'. This seeks to raise the profile of, and combat, gender-based violence across the world. **'MenEngage Europe'** is another EU-level initiative, which is a resource for organisations and individuals working with men and boys to achieve gender equality, end violence, and promote health for men, women and children in Europe.[585]

In terms of individual countries, an interesting case study is **Sweden**. Through embracing feminism at a political level, the country has allowed organisations aiming to prevent gender-based violence to flourish. It also has a national strategy on combatting and preventing men's violence against women, which explicitly examines the responsibility and engagement of men in prevention initiatives as well as the reform of concepts of masculinity[586] (see Annex III, Section 6.3.8). Another example is **Portugal**, where our case study research reveals that key aspects of the National Strategy on Gender Equality (adopted in 2018) include promoting equality between women and men, combatting violence against women and domestic violence, and reducing discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and sexual characteristics. Part of this strategy includes creating and promoting the conditions for an education system free of gender stereotypes, covering all levels of education in the country (see Annex III, Section 6.3.7). Another interesting initiative from **Estonia** is presented in Box 4-7 below.

Box 4-7   Inner Confidence (*Sisemine Kindlus*) – Estonia

'Inner Confidence' is an evidence-based four-month programme designed to help men to explore and learn to manage their emotions to prevent violence in intimate relationships. Its overall aim is to reduce domestic violence by empowering people through a group counselling–based approach. The programme was developed at the Centre for Applied Social Sciences at the University of Tartu. It includes best practices from similar programmes in Denmark, the United States, and the UK. The length of the group counselling-based programme is 50 hours, and it is focused on behavioural change. Besides discussing gender roles and masculinity, men are

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[583] For more information on this project, please visit: https://hke.hessen.de/projekte/weitere-projekte/netzwerk-lotsen
[584] EIGE (2012). *Review of the implementation of the Beijing platform for action in the EU Member States Violence against women – victim support: main findings.* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/7d9441b8-19d2-44c8-a012-5a0af8c6c08a
[585] See http://menengage.org/regions/europe/
[586] See https://www.jamstalldhetsmyndigheten.se/en/mens-violence-against-women/national-strategy-to-prevent-and-combat-mens-violence-against-women

equipped with stress and anger management skills and communication skills. It is delivered through the Family Centre of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church.

More information: https://virumaateataja.postimees.ee/term/617030/sisemine-kindlus

There are several other examples across Europe of **projects aimed at tackling (the root causes of) violence**. Examples include the National Action Plan on Tackling Violence against Women and Girls in **Belgium** (see Box 4-8 below) or the **Erasmus+ project 'Dare to Act'** (see Box 4-9 below).

Box 4-8   Tackling violence against women and girls – Belgium

In Belgium, there is a National Action Plan (2015−2019) on Tackling Violence against Women and Girls. In this document, reference is made to:

- developing didactical material on equality between men and women, and taking this up in all curricula and all education levels;

- tackling violence from a young age by introducing sex and relationship education as early as possible;

- developing measures to avoid stereotyping and promoting a culture of gender equality;

- promoting equality between men and women within informal education and training, such as sport, culture, recreation, religion and the media.

More information:
https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/nl/publicaties/nationaal_actieplan_ter_bestrijding_van_alle_vormen_van_gendergerelateerd_geweld_2015

Box 4-9   Dare to Act – Erasmus+

This project aims to tackle youth violence by enhancing youth group participation and lowering gender-based conflicts. The project recognises that prevention of violence among adolescents and young adults is a key strategy for reducing the rates of bullying, gender-based violence and school dropout, and a key tool in empowering social inclusion. It is based on the view that participation in youth groups helps young people to increase their self-confidence, increase critical thinking and reflective capacities, act in an informed way towards bullying and violence, create and maintain healthy and respectful relationships, and make responsible and informed decisions about their emotional, mental and physical health and well-being.

'Dare to Act' is based on youth group methodology and provides tools to be used in youth work outside of youth groups. It provides a training course for project partner organisations and participants to help them to develop their personal and professional capacities in working with violence prevention among teenagers between the ages of 12 and 18. It also aims to strengthen competencies to guide

young people towards developing confidence and assertiveness, dealing with conflicts, and embodying respect and tolerance towards different cultures, religions, ethnicities and other identities. Follow-up activities focus on dissemination and any potential support to the participants of the training in their activities. The project involves seven partner organisations: The Future Now (Bulgaria), MARTA Centre (Latvia), Beyond What they Sell (Italy), IPTA (Romania), HIGGS (Greece), AoE (Hungary) and Youthfully Yours (Slovakia).

More information: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplus-project-details/#project/2020-2-BG01-KA105-079310

Other examples include **Germany**'s *Männer Gegen Männer-Gewalt (*'Men Against Men's Violence'*)[587]* and **Austria**'s *Verein für Männer- und Geschlechterthemen Steiermark[588]* ('Association for Men and Gender Issues'). Similar organisations can also be found in **Spain** and **Italy**, as well as some parts of Eastern Europe – particularly in **Poland**. Looking specifically at Poland, this includes the *Głosy przeciwko przemocy* ('Voices against Violence') movement, which has released a guide for schools on working with boys and young men on *"topics of violence, power, or gender stereotypes"*.[589] In addition, the Polish National Emergency Service for Victims of Domestic Violence ('Blue Line') also includes reference to education materials around gender-based violence, as well as information on how gender stereotypes can contribute to violence.[590] Another interesting example relates to the Activity of *Liga otevřených mužu* ('League of Open Men') in **Czechia**,[591] which aims to approach gender-based violence by creating *"a model of men supporting other men"*. Their activities include workshops and guidance for young men and boys, as well as a 'Men in School!' programme, aimed toward supporting males working in education. In **Sweden**, the organisation *MÄN* was founded in 1993 as a platform for men to take action against men's violence towards women. It works to change toxic masculinity norms and reduce male violence.[592] Tackling violence against women and girls is also a strong priority for the **Luxembourgish** government, which adopted a National Action Plan for Equality between Women and Men in July 2020.[593] This plan includes specific pillars dedicated to fighting domestic violence and creating a gender-equal society.

4.2.3   Demographic implications

As discussed above (Section 4.1), the level of educational attainment has a significant impact on employment outcomes, which indirectly also impacts demographics and

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[587] See https://www.bmfsfj.de/blob/84590/a3184b9f324b6ccc05bdfc83ac03951e/studie-gewalt-maenner-langfassung-data.pdf
[588] See https://www.vmg-steiermark.at/
[589] See https://feminoteka.pl/glosy-przeciw-przemocy-poradnik-jak-pracowac-z-chlopcami-i-mlodymi-mezczyznami/
[590] See http://www.niebieskalinia.info/files/Ogloszenia/about_Blue_Line.pdf
[591] See https://ilom.cz/
[592] See https://mfj.se/en/home
[593] See https://mega.public.lu/content/dam/mega/fr/publications/publications-ministere/2020/MEGA-plan-action-nation-egalite-WEB.pdf

family life. **Women with higher levels of education tend to have fewer children and tend to have them later in life**.[594] This has a demographic impact and also an impact on the structure of the family, as people become parents at an older age. There is less research available on the effects of educational levels on the number of children in the case of men, although there is research[595] that suggests that childlessness is more common among men with lower levels of education.

Interestingly, however, **this pattern appears to be reversing in the Nordic countries**. According to a 2019 study conducted in **Denmark**, **Norway** and **Sweden**,[596] childlessness has increased among those with lower educational levels and remained relatively stable among high-educated women. One possible reason for this, put forward by this research, could be that if education is a proxy for earning potential, having a sufficiently high income or having the economic means to sustain a family may have become an increasingly important prerequisite for having (more) children for both women and men. Although the Nordic countries have numerous services and income schemes that encourage childbearing among all social groups, having children still appears to have become increasingly difficult for low-educated women and men. Additionally, the difficulties in reconciling a career with family, which previously hampered the childbearing of highly educated women in particular, seem to have been overcome in these countries. Research in **Denmark** finds that low-educated men are more likely to be childless and that 45-year-old men who have only finished a lower secondary degree are more likely to be childless than women with the same level of education.[597]

Elsewhere in the EU, other demographic and social trends have been recorded. For example, in **Belgium (Flanders)**, there was a drop in the number of married men between 2000 and 2016 (from 64% to 52%).[598] There is also an increase in the number of divorced women: men seem to be more likely to remarry, whereas women tend to remain single. Attitudes towards gender roles within the family also differ significantly between Member States. In **Poland**, for example, there is a high prevalence among young men (18−30 years) to believe in the patriarchal family model: 78% believe that 'a man's role is to work and support the family', coupled with a traditional view of femininity.[599]

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[594] See, for example, Kim J Female education and its impact on fertility, 2016. IZA World of Labour https://wol.iza.org/uploads/articles/228/pdfs/female-education-and-its-impact-on-fertility.pdf

[595] Miettinen A et al (2015*). Increasing childlessness in Europe: time trends and country differences. Families and Societies*. Working paper no. 33. http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/WP33MiettinenEtAl2015.pdf

[596] Jalovaara, M., Neyer, G., Andersson, G. et al. Education, Gender, and Cohort Fertility in the Nordic Countries. *Eur J Population 35*, 563–586 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10680-018-9492-2

[597] Rockwool fonden (2017). *Stigende risiko for aldrig at blive forælder blandt mænd og kvinder med kort uddannelse*. Avaliable at: https://www.rockwoolfonden.dk/app/uploads/2017/07/Kort-nyt-om-uddannelse-k%C3%B8n-og-fertilitet-1.pdf

[598] See https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/gehuwd-of-ongehuwd-samenwonen-met-een-partner-en/of-kinderen-trends-vooruitzichten-en-beleidsimplicaties-in-het-vlaamse-gewest

[599] Grabowska, M., Gwiazda, M. (2019). *Youth 2018*. Public Opinion Research Foundation CBOS, KBPN, Warsaw 2019. Available at: https://www.cinn.gov.pl/portal?id=1475772

4.3   The impact of COVID-19

Overview of key findings

This section includes a short appraisal of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on males and females and related gender equality issues. Some key findings are outlined below.

- COVID-19 has had a huge impact on the way in which EU citizens have been living over the past year. In some countries, there has been debate and some studies about the impact on gender roles. For example, in Belgium, there is debate about **whether the pandemic has pushed men and women back more into gendered roles**.

- **Distance and home learning** over the past year may also have contributed to exacerbating underachievement of boys in that girls can be more easily engaged in online learning.

- Research also shows that there has been an important **increase in the consumption of online pornography**, especially among boys. Unhealthy online sexual practices among specific sub-groups of boys and young men (e.g. the 'incel' community) can lead to reinforcing coercive or abusive behaviour between boys and girls, and merits further research.

One of the most important recent societal developments has been the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has had a huge impact on the way EU citizens have been living their lives. It is important to note that, at the time of writing, the **specific impact of COVID-19 in terms of gender is still evolving**.

In terms of the **impact of the pandemic on learning outcomes**, our case study research in **Bulgaria** found that the COVID-19 pandemic had significantly affected the country's education system and the quality of learning. The Institute for Research of Education found that, generally, girls perceived distance learning in a more positive manner compared to boys. The study also found that there were more boys with low behavioural engagement than girls – 26% of boys and 17% of girls. These factors could contribute to exacerbating the underachievement of boys in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Annex III, Section 6.3.1).

In some countries there, has been debate and some studies about the **impact on gender roles**. In the **Netherlands**, for example, the country's Cultural Planning Bureau has established that in the first phase of the COVID 19 lockdown (March and April 2020) women worked 16% fewer hours, while the decrease was 11% for men.[600] However, it must be noted that more men than women became unemployed from March to April 2020.[601] In **Belgium**, there is debate about whether the pandemic has

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[600] Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen. (2020). *Voortgangsrapportage Emancipatiemonitor.* Den Haag: Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen.
[601] Idem.

pushed men and women back into more gendered roles. Women are now even more likely to take responsibility for housework and childcare, including making facemasks for the family and taking more responsibility for helping children with schoolwork.[602] Researchers from the French Community (Belgium) found that men and women had different ways of using the free time gained by not commuting to work. Women tended to spend more time outdoors and on social networking sites, whereas men tended to spend more time online, but not on social networking sites.[603]

Evidence also points to a **rise in online pornography consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic**, particularly among boys and men. A 2020 study analysing Google Trends, for instance, found a correlation between the social distancing and self-isolation/quarantine measures as a result of national lockdowns, loneliness and stress, which can alter the consumption of pornography habits.[604] This is confirmed by another study, which noted an increase in Pornhub Premium memberships ranging from 4% to 24%, and also looked into the impact on problematic pornography consumption.[605] Several articles warned about "***pornography consumption normalising violence against women*** *and potentially leading people to engage in it in real life during the lockdown when women are alone with men in the house*".[606] There also appears to be a link between so-called 'incels' (involuntary celibates), mainstream pornography and misogyny. This online sub-group of people, the majority of whom are men, define themselves as being unable to find a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one, and are found to be attracted to some of the most aggressive sexual practices in online pornography.[607]

[602] See https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/05/05/bevestigt-de-coronacrisis-het-traditionele-rollenpatroon-nu-het/
[603] See https://www.ares-ac.be/images/Femmes_sciences/Impact-du-confinement-sur-les-activites-quotidiennes-F.Colette.pdf
[604] Zattoni, F., Gül, M., Soligo, M. et al. The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on pornography habits: a global analysis of Google Trends. Int J Impot Res (2020). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41443-020-00380-w
[605] Mestre-Bach G, Blycker GR, Potenza MN. Pornography use in the setting of the Covid-19 pandemic. J Behav Addict. 2020 Jun;9(2):181-183. doi: 10.1556/2006.2020.00015. PMID: 32663384
[606] See https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyt.2021.623508/full
[607] See https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1077801221996453

5.0 Conclusions and recommendations

This study has investigated the performance of boys and young men within compulsory education across the EU, exploring the causes as well as the outcomes on individuals and on wider society. It has also examined the extent to which the issue of boys' underperformance is recognised by policymakers and educational practitioners, and explored the range of approaches, policies and initiatives that have been implemented to tackle the issue.

In this concluding chapter, we draw together and distil the findings from the various research strands in a series of conclusions, followed by our recommendations for stakeholders at EU, national, practitioner and research level.

5.1 Conclusions

Drawing on the findings from the different strands of our research, in this section we summarise some of the key learning points emerging from the study, grouped under seven headline themes. Before presenting each of these learning points in detail, we underline some preliminary overarching considerations.

Firstly, each of the headline themes set out below is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional, reflecting the **complexity of the issues explored in this study**. As such, it is important to note not only the headline finding, but also the nuances and qualifications set out under each of the headings and further detailed within the main body of the report. For example, in relation to the first headline ('boys are underperforming in education across the EU'), it is important to note that, while overall boys are underperforming, there are pockets in which are boys do perform well, and that many girls are also underperforming at school.

Secondly, the insights emerging from the study have strongly benefited from the comparative nature of the research, conducted across 27 EU Member States. Much of the existing research into gender gaps in educational performance is set within a national context, or only includes limited comparisons. This study is **ground-breaking in exploring and comparing the situation across 27 national contexts**, and has generated a range of new insights.

Thirdly, it is important to **consider the ultimate objectives of exploring and addressing gender disparities in education**. Is the aim for boys and girls to achieve at the same level in every area, or is the goal to shift the cultural norms to allow girls and boys to achieve to their full potential, in whichever domain they choose, and without the pervasive influence of gender stereotypes? Wider debates on gender equality are often framed as being a 'female issue'; similarly, discussions on the underperformance of boys in education should not be considered as just a 'male issue'. At the heart of the issue is how the improved performance of boys can also help girls to thrive in education (and wider society) and vice-versa, as well as to better understand the interdependence of interactions between boys and girls in mutually reinforcing their socio-emotional and academic development.

Fourthly, and linked to the previous point, throughout the study research we encountered a questioning of the need to focus on the underperformance of boys in education since, as shown in our study, at the aggregate level men still strongly outperform women on the labour market in terms of (among others) employment levels, access to decision-making roles, pay and conditions. In this respect, it is important to emphasise that **there is a substantial sub-group of low-achieving men** who not only cause disproportionate damage to society through increased rates of crime, violence, radicalisation, misogyny and to themselves in the form of ill health, suicide and relational issues, but who will also be significantly disadvantaged by the direction of future labour market trends. Such trends include a decline in low-skilled, manual occupations, a growth in the need for soft or transversal skills and increased flexibility to move between occupations and sectors. This evidence strongly underlines the need to consider and tackle the underperformance of boys in education. Especially when we also consider the intergenerational dimension of these issues, and the risk that the cycle is repeated – namely that low levels of parental literacy, ill health and violence are strong predictors of negative educational outcomes.

Fifthly, we observe that attitudes and approaches to the underperformance of boys in education are strongly influenced by the **perception that the behaviour and attitudes of boys are 'natural' and somehow immutable**. This contributes strongly to the expectations of parents, teachers, wider society, and boys themselves about their performance in education (e.g. being 'unable' to sit still and concentrate for long periods, having less interest in reading), which become self-fulfilling prophecies. The pervasion of these attitudes not only within schools but also within family and community contexts is of concern when seeking to counteract such messages through interventions.

Finally, we note that concepts of, and attitudes to, gender equality in education (and in wider society) are in a state of constant and relatively rapid flux, often highly sensitive to contemporaneous issues. It will therefore be important to **consider the findings from the study within the evolving context of the longer-term impacts of wider societal phenomena** such as the #MeToo movement and the COVID-19 pandemic, and indeed in view of the growing recognition of the importance of LGBTIQ issues within educational policy debates, beyond an exclusive focus on 'girls' and 'boys', towards a more dynamic understanding of gender identities. While we have sought, where relevant in the study, to mention these issues, their impact is clearly still in its infancy and will further evolve over the coming months and years.

Framed within this context, we set out some of the key conclusions emerging from the study below.

5.1.1 Boys are underperforming in education across the EU

The study provides clear evidence that, despite pockets of success, boys are performing overall less well than girls in compulsory education across the EU and that the gap is growing in many areas. Despite some variation, there is a clear and worrying general pattern of boys underachieving across most key indicators of educational success, throughout the life-course and in all EU countries. Also of concern is the evidence that these gaps begin early, surfacing already by primary education

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stage (ISCED level 1) and indicating that what happens with boys' education at pre-school stage also matters.

In terms of **educational attainment**, the starkest gender disparity is in reading performance. Data shows that girls strongly outperform boys in reading proficiency in every EU Member State, with the average difference roughly equivalent to a year's schooling. A recent slight narrowing of the gender gap (PISA 2018) was largely due to a decline in girls' performance rather than an improvement in that of boys. Girls also perform slightly better on average than boys in science – a subject in which boys have traditionally outperformed girls –, with evidence showing that they move ahead of boys particularly in the latter years of schooling. In mathematics, while boys continue to slightly outperform girls overall, this gap is narrowing due to an improvement in girls' performance with a decline for boys; there is also more variation across the EU in relation to numeracy skills, with girls outperforming boys in several countries.

The **higher prevalence of SEN among boys than girls** has implications for the types of psychological and academic support that are provided. However, the gender gap remains contested. Although the literature indicates that boys have a greater predisposition towards SEN than girls, levels of diagnosis are affected by gender differences in presenting behaviours. Girls with ADHD often display signs of anxiety, depression or mood swings that are likely to go unnoticed, whereas boys are more likely to display hyperactivity and aggression. Furthermore, the report has shown that challenging behaviour among boys receives greater attention from teachers, who are more likely to refer boys for SEN assessment.

In terms of **educational participation**, gender gaps become more apparent as the trajectory through compulsory education progresses. Boys are more likely than girls to be early leavers from education and training, on average leaving school earlier than girls in 24 of the 27 Member States. Where data is available, boys also generally have higher rates of absenteeism, exclusion from school and grade repetition. **Educational choices and career expectations** of pupils in compulsory education are still strongly influenced by gender stereotypes, with qualitative data showing that in general a more limited effort is made to break down those affecting the choices of boys. Boys are much more likely to choose STEM subjects, while girls typically predominate in subjects such as art, the humanities, care and education. Boys are also more likely to choose vocational rather than academic pathways.

It is important however to note, particularly when considering policy responses and messaging, that boys do succeed in certain specific fields, and that **many girls are also underperforming at school**. While the overall pattern of boys' underperformance is clear, it is important to avoid generalisation and over-simplification. Although the gap is narrowing, the latest PISA results for example show that boys still outperform girls in mathematics by 3 points or more in 17 Member States.

In addition, within this overall pattern, it is important to note the **differences – and contrasts – between Member States**. Data from PISA 2018 for example shows that, despite Finland having one of the highest attainment levels in reading for boys

(and girls) in the EU, it also has the largest gender gap in reading performance (the smallest is in Belgium). Ireland, Luxembourg and The Netherlands have made the greatest progress in reducing the gender gap since 2012, while Bulgaria, Cyprus and Finland have made the least progress. Only a handful of Member States recorded improvement in boys' reading performance over that period (Estonia, Lithuania, Portugal, Sweden, Slovenia, and marginally Finland and Croatia). Differences are also apparent between Member States for mathematics and science, the causes of which could be further explored in future research.

5.1.2 A complex interaction between gender and other individual background characteristics

Throughout the study, the research team has made a particular effort to explore the intersectional aspects of the educational performance of boys and girls, looking at the gender differences for various population groups including people with a migrant background, low SES, low-income households and minority groups (e.g. Roma). The data confirms, as shown in other studies, that educational underperformance in general is correlated to specific individual background factors for both boys and girls.

However, the impact of gender presents a mixed picture. In some cases, **gender is directly implicated**, further compounding the underperformance of boys in particular fields, and suggesting that, in some cases, boys from low SES backgrounds, rural communities and migrant families may be at risk of a 'double-disadvantage' due to their gender and marginalised group status. There are also cases where girls are shown to be at a disadvantage; for example, Roma girls have been shown to be less likely to attend ECEC than Roma boys.

However, there is also evidence that, in other cases, **gender may be moderating the negative impact of certain individual characteristics**. For example, while our research has shown that boys with a migrant background are more likely to join so-called 'non-effort' peer groups at school, girls with a migrant background are more likely to join 'study' peer groups, which are more influenced by norms of femininity, and where 'openly' displaying studious behaviour at school is valued. In this case the girls' gender is moderating the statistical negative impact of having a migrant background.

In other cases, gender appears to have **no clear impact**: for example, the reading performance of boys with a migrant background is lower than that of girls with a migrant background, however this broadly corresponds to the gender gap within the wider population.

5.1.3 The root of the problem begins early and is exacerbated over the trajectory through compulsory education

One of the clear patterns emerging from the study, both from the quantitative and qualitative evidence, is that the **gender gap increases over the trajectory through compulsory education** in terms of both attainment (e.g. school grades in different subjects) and participation (e.g. early school leaving, absenteeism,

exclusion). There is limited (or no) evidence of gaps at pre-primary level but, at the entry to primary school, gaps to the detriment of boys already start to become apparent (e.g. in reading, learning autonomy), which often widen in lower secondary education and expand again at upper secondary level.

Although research is lacking at the level of ECEC, the study suggests that the **root of the problem already begins at ECEC level**, and even before, within families and home settings and potentially through the reinforcement of gender stereotypes within ECEC settings. As such, when children begin school, schools are already facing an uphill battle in combatting stereotypes, learned behaviours, life skills, personal and family expectations and even the capacity to learn. The lower performance of boys compared with girls within school readiness assessments provides a clear indication of this phenomenon.

However, the study also indicates that **overall education systems are not successfully countering these early gaps**, and indeed 'allow' them to widen over time. This poses some challenging questions regarding the success with which educational transitions are managed between ECEC and primary school, and of the 'child-ready school' as well as the 'school-ready child' – themes that are widely documented within the literature. These are important policy pointers which we return to in the recommendations.

5.1.4 Features of education systems can contribute to reducing or increasing gender gaps

Our study shows that certain features of education systems do have an impact in terms of reducing, or indeed increasing, the gender gap, but that it is important to consider the interplay of various features to understand boys' underperformance. For example, research[608] has shown that, on average, countries with higher levels of **standardisation** of school curricula and learning materials have larger gender gaps in reading scores (to the advantage of girls), suggesting that boys may benefit more than girls from more flexible curricula and individual support. Finland however has one of the most decentralised (and hence less standardised) education systems in Europe, yet the largest gender gap (in reading), showing that other education system (and/or other) factors come into play.

Higher levels of **differentiation** (streaming or tracking) and early separation into vocational/academic specificities have also been shown to contribute to the persistence – and sometimes deepening – of gender gaps. Due to early underperformance, boys are more likely to be streamed early into lower performing tracks (or indeed, in some countries, less academic schools) and often struggle to re-join the higher performing tracks, due to a variety of factors including peer influence, reduced motivation and less stimulating teaching methods. These trends are compounded by the low expectation of boys' achievements and parental and teacher

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[608] Van Hek, M., C. Buchmann and G. Kraaykamp (2019). "Education Systems and Gender Differences in Reading: A Comparative Multilevel Analysis". In *European Sociological Review 35* (2): 169-186. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcy054.

views about the optimal educational tracks for boys, which may not present an accurate reflection of their academic potential.

Research in countries such as Ireland, where **single-sex schools** are still relatively common, also shows that gender stereotypes in subject choices (often based on the availability of facilities e.g. for woodwork only in boys' schools) can be reinforced. Research also shows that single-sex schools can perpetuate unhealthy forms of hypermasculinity within an all-boys environment, despite their potential academic benefits.

At the sharp end of the scale, research has demonstrated the inter-relationship between boys' early underperformance, **over-representation in schools with high proportions of low SES pupils**, and heightened risk of engagement in criminality or violence. This is especially an issue where educational inequalities and territorial inequalities go hand in hand. In the US, for example, the 'School-to-prison pipeline (SPP)' leading low SES boys into jail has been widely documented as a result of these issues having become entrenched.[609] Similarly, boys' underachievement is one of a number of risk factors for involvement in violent extremism, as we explored further within the body of the report.

Finally, there is overwhelming evidence of **gender stereotyping in school textbooks**, reproducing traditional gender roles and attitudes, and this is clearly an open door for tackling gender gaps, both in schools and in wider society.

5.1.5 The causes of boys' underperformance are multi-systemic and often interrelated

There is no simple relation of causality between any individual factor and boys' underperformance in education. As shown in our study, the causes are multi-dimensional and often mutually reinforcing. The theoretical framework for our study drew on the work of Margriet van Hek,[610] which studied the influence of family context, school context and society on reading achievement (PISA) and educational attainment. Our theoretical model has built on this model and grouped these factors under four key interlocking domains: individual attitudes and behaviour, family, school, and societal factors, which are each influenced by norms of masculinity and femininity, as illustrated in Figure 5-1 below. The evidence collated and analysed during the course of the study very much reinforces and confirms this conceptual model, which can be further explained as follows.

Our study has shown that several **individual behaviours and attitudes** have an impact on boys' performance at school. Firstly, our study has shown that boys are less likely to read than girls, and this has an impact on their development of basic skills in

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[609] Heitzeg, Nancy A. (2009). "Education or Incarceration: Zero Tolerance Policies and the School to Prison Pipeline" (PDF). *Forum on Public Policy Online*: https://web.archive.org/web/20100827134754/https://forumonpublicpolicy.com/summer09/archivesummer09/heitzeg.pdf
[610] Van Hek, M. (2017). *Gender equality in educational attainment and reading performance*. BOXPress.

reading literacy and language proficiency in general, which is a foundational skill for learning. In addition, the study has shown that boys have less positive attitudes and behaviours than girls towards school and learning. This is influenced by a variety of factors, including masculinity norms which create a perception among boys *and* girls that schoolwork (just like reading) is 'feminine' and 'uncool'. At school, boys are also more likely than girls to display disruptive behaviour, which negatively impacts their interaction with teachers and their grades. Finally, boys are also more likely to engage in activities outside school which are not productive to learning (e.g. smoking, drinking alcohol), and are shown to spend less time doing their homework than girls.

Figure 5-1   Factors impacting school success or failure for boys
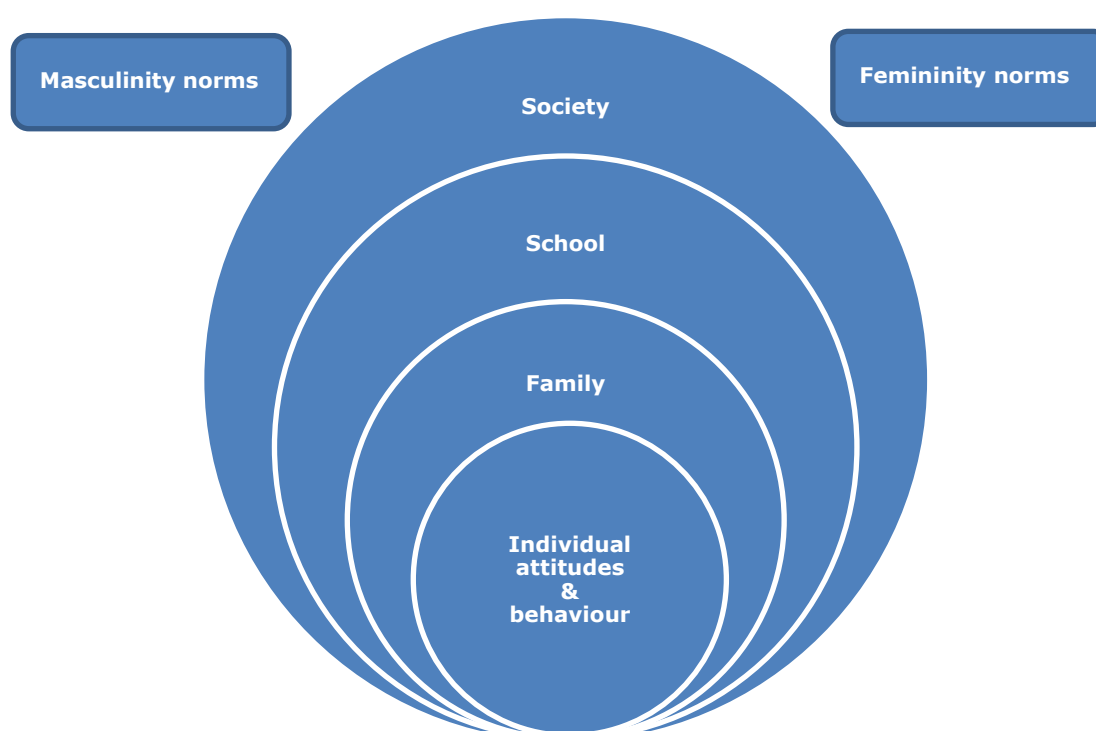
Source: Ecorys

Family factors are linked to parental background and the perpetuation (or erosion) of gender stereotypes at home. Gender stereotyping at home covers a range of different areas, from the way in which parents interact with their children, to their expectations and the toys they give their children to play with. Our study underlines the crucial impact of family resources on the performance of boys at school – in particular parents' educational background – as well as parental support, expectations and attitudes. ECEC is a crucial partner to support parents in preparing children for the transition to primary school by helping them to develop basic skills for learning.

School factors also have an important influence on boys' educational outcomes, with some research showing that that the school environment affects boys even more

strongly than girls.[611] Our study highlights the importance of a positive school climate (anti-bullying, school-oriented peer culture, absence of 'toxic' masculinity norms, active student participation in school bodies), the role played by the teaching staff (the composition of the teaching body, teacher quality, support and interaction), and – as mentioned earlier in the conclusions – the influence of standardisation and differentiation on school performance, and gender stereotyping in textbooks.

Finally, as an all-encompassing backdrop to the other factors, the study has also shown that the persistence of **gender stereotypes at societal level** also has a major impact on how boys and young men perform in the education system. There is a complex interplay of factors at work making it difficult to pinpoint cause and effect: attitudes, actions and behaviours of pupils, parents and teaching staff are influenced by wider society, while at the same time wider society reflects the gender stereotypes held by the individuals and communities of which it is composed. While an examination of all of the potential societal factors contributing to gender stereotypes (and by extension to boys' underperformance in education) was beyond the scope of this study, it did explore the extent to which the gender gap in education is recognised as an issue in EU Member States, whether the challenges facing boys (and men more generally) are part of the political debate and actions, and provides an overview of the extent to which the promotion and mainstreaming of gender equality at societal level is a priority. The results (further discussed below) show that there is considerable diversity across the EU in terms of both the recognition of the issue of boys' underperformance in education and whether – as well as the way in which – it is addressed in policy and practice.

In order to address the performance of boys (and indeed that of girls), it is therefore essential to consider each of these four intersecting domains, as well as the interplay between them. The theoretical framework, composed of the four factors (individual, family, school and society factors) can provide a useful framework for policymaking.

5.1.6 Boys' underperformance has impacts through the life course and on wider society

As noted briefly in the introductory considerations above, the underperformance of boys at school does have wide-ranging impacts, both for the individuals concerned, but also on wider society. The study also reminds us that there is no simple causality, however, and that these effects are cyclical – namely, gender stereotyping, which is also a problem among the adult population, and is subsequently reflected in boys' education and socialisation.

For individuals, there are implications in terms of further education, employment, the risk of social exclusion, and health; these implications also have a cost to society. As regards **further education**, our study has shown that men participate much less in tertiary education than women, reflecting their lesser participation in academic pathways in secondary education; the gap is already over 10 percentage points and

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[611] Legewie, J., & DiPrete, T. A. (2012). School context and the gender gap in educational achievement.*American Sociological Review*, *77*(3), 463-485.

continues to grow. Although exceptions exist, subject choices in tertiary education remain strongly influenced by gender stereotypes, leading to the ongoing masculinisation and feminisation of different professions and sectors. Women also participate slightly more than men in lifelong learning opportunities, with the gap also widening over the last three years.

The underperformance of boys and young men in the different levels of education does not (yet) however translate at aggregate level into **labour market outcomes**. At EU level, the employment rate for men is 12 percentage points higher than for women, there is a higher percentage of female NEETs and women are also more at risk of poverty and social exclusion. There is nonetheless a sub-group of men with low levels of education who do struggle on the labour market. And indeed, the rapidly evolving trends in the labour market, accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis, present further dangers for this group. Due to digitisation and automation, there is a decrease in the demand for low-skilled and manual labour, in which men have traditionally predominated (e.g. 96% of metal workers are men). The labour market requires more transversal or soft skills, agility to move between professions and sectors, and continuously learning new skills.

As the study has shown, men have poorer outcomes in terms of **health and well-being**. Their life expectancy is five years lower than that for women, and they are more likely to engage in damaging addictive behaviours (smoking, heavy drinking, drugs) and commit suicide. While it is difficult to isolate the influence of any one factor on the worse health outcomes of men, some studies have shown that men with incomplete studies are at higher risk of ill health and suicide. For instance, a Danish study notes that men with low or incomplete grades from year 9 are at higher risk of ill health, suicide or crime, although it should be noted that neither of these problems are caused by one single factor.[612] [613]

For society, there are implications in terms of violence, crime, antisocial behaviour, and radicalisation. Men are more prone to physical aggression than women, and there appears to be a link between reading difficulties and antisocial behaviour. While it is challenging to relate men's higher likelihood of antisocial behaviour to any one single factor, studies (e.g. in Sweden) have shown that one risk factor identified for young men deciding to join extremist movements is not having been able to develop a positive relations to school, to work or to other social contexts; joining such groups allows them to feel that they achieve a higher status and respect based on instilling fear in others.[614]

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[612] National Board of Health and Welfare. (2010). *Social rapport 2010*. Stockholm: Socialstyrelsen.
[613] Björkenstam, C. & Ringbäck Weitoft, G. & Hjern, A. & Nordström, P. & Hallqvist, J. & Ljung, R. (2011). School grades, parental education and suicide – a national register-based cohort study. *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2011 65 993-998.
[614] The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society. (2016). *Ung och extrem – högerextremism*. [Publication]. Stockholm

5.1.7 Policies and programmes aiming to tackle boys' underperformance are piecemeal and rarely systemic

While not seeking to be exhaustive, this study is unique in providing insight into the extent to which the issue of boys' underperformance is recognised and acknowledged by policymakers and other key stakeholders across the EU, as well as identifying the range and scope of approaches, policies and initiatives which have been implemented to tackle the phenomenon.

It is certainly true to say that the study exposed a very wide variation between – but also within – EU Member States and key stakeholders in terms of the recognition of the educational underperformance of boys. **Attitudes about the underperformance of boys in education typically fell into three broad types**: (a) a clear acknowledgement of the issue and the need to tackle it, (b) recognition of the issue but a reluctance to address it due to the better subsequent performance of men on the labour market and dominant role of men in society, and (c) a lack of acknowledgement of the underperformance of boys in education, typically insisting on the much greater influence of other individual factors than gender (e.g. migrant background, minority status, SEN), and with no intention of a focus within policy or programmes on gender equality in education. Teacher and school representatives, as well as NGOs involved in education, tended to be closer to these issues and to be able to give concrete examples. The diversity of views was also present at the level of education ministries in different Member States, with some clearly acknowledging the need to address the underperformance of boys, and others declining to participate in our study, citing the reason that the issue of boys' underachievement was not a policy priority in their Member State.

Where there was a degree of recognition of the need to address the issue of boys' underperformance, we typically found **three broad types of approaches with regard to the policy measures or interventions** that had been implemented to tackle the issue:

1. policies or initiatives directly seeking to address boys' underperformance at school;

2. other national (and regional) educational policies or programmes tackling key educational issues known to relate to boys' underperformance;

3. national gender mainstreaming or gender equality action plans or strategies covering a range of policy areas, including education.

In the first group, **policies or initiatives directly seeking to address boys' underperformance at school** were relatively rare. Where they did exist, they tended to be piecemeal, often only addressing one cause – or outcome – of boys' underperformance, rather than seeking to tackle the full range of contributing factors in a systemic or holistic manner. On occasion, the programmes themselves are designed based on interpretations of data not supported by research, running the risk of falling into gender stereotypes or myths on how to improve boys' performance. For example, due to the higher number of females in the teaching profession, several

countries have policies in place aimed at recruiting and retaining more male teachers (e.g. LU, NL), while research shows that the quality of teachers is primordial, not their gender. Many of these specific initiatives were implemented by NGOs, funded under programmes such as Erasmus+, and were therefore time-limited and did not always reflect ministerial priorities. Examples included: training sports students to be mentors for boys (Erasmus+ project), support for boys in reading (using male role models) (e.g. NL, SE), encouraging boys to enter care professions (BE, DE), 'Boys Days' career fairs (e.g. AT, BE, DE, LU), addressing machoism at school (PT, SE), encouraging fathers to become more engaged in education at home (e.g. LU), and seeking to recruit more males to the teaching and ECEC professions (e.g. LU). However, a limited number of measures were implemented by national governments or national agencies, for example a policy paper focused on boys and men in education produced by the Czech Government, or a project on boys' learning challenges and solutions run by the Finnish National Agency for Education. Specific policies and initiatives directly targeted at girls, for example to encourage more girls to go into STEM subjects or learn digital skills, were much more common.

Secondly, our study found more examples of **other national (and regional) educational policies and programmes which indirectly tackled key educational issues relating to boys' underperformance**, although targeted at both boys and girls. These included, for example, national strategies to reduce ELET and absenteeism (e.g. second chance education programmes, targeted provision for specific disadvantaged groups (e.g. migrants, pupils with SEN), national literacy and numeracy strategies, anti-bullying, anti-radicalisation and violence prevention programmes, mental health and well-being initiatives, measures challenging gender stereotypes in the family, or moving towards mixed-sex schooling. In a limited number of cases, such as the Maltese Literacy Strategy (2014–2019), strategies do make specific mention of the need to adopt a gender-specific focus in particular areas. Most of the strategies are gender-neutral, which can also be viewed as being gender-blind.

Finally, our research found that in some cases educational issues were also addressed in **national gender mainstreaming or gender equality action plans or strategies**. The educational issues addressed in these wider gender equality strategies tended to only address one (or a limited number) of causes or implications of gender inequality in education, focusing particularly on breaking down stereotypical career or subject choices (e.g. LT, RO) and, although on paper addressing gender equality in general, often had a heavily dominant focus on girls and women. Other measures in these wider action plans targeting gender equality that focused on the field of education included: training teachers to be more gender-sensitive (e.g. AT, BE, FR, LU), toolkits for gender equality in the classroom (e.g. BE-FL), tackling gender stereotypes in textbooks (e.g. LU, LT), monitoring of gender equality in education (e.g. LU) and gender-focused evaluations of educational materials (e.g. AT, DE, IE, LU, LV). While in principle these gender equality measures target both boys and girls, measures generally had a greater focus on issues related to improving girls' performance at school and beyond. Exceptions do however exist; Luxembourg's National Action Plan on Gender Equality (2018–2023), for example, encourages boys

to take up more socio-educational classes at school, with the ultimate goal of increasing the number of male teachers.

It is important to note that, while specific policies and programmes focusing on boys' underperformance in education are limited both in number and in scope, evidence suggests that even some of the small-scale initiatives at school or NGO level (e.g. 'Write to Learn' in Sweden) are having positive impacts and could provide relevant models to consider for potential upscaling and transfer into other contexts. Although assessing the effectiveness of such programmes was beyond the scope of this study, these examples show that it is possible to make a difference and to make changes in policy and practice, which can have a positive impact on the educational performance of boys.

5.2 Recommendations

Drawing on the evidence presented in the study, below we present a series of recommendations for three different groups of stakeholders: (1) EU-level stakeholders, (2) National (or regional) policymakers and practitioners in the field of education, and (3) Areas for further research.

As noted earlier in the conclusions, the study found that policy measures and initiatives designed to address boys' underachievement are somewhat underdeveloped (and under-evaluated) across the EU at the time of writing. Furthermore, there is a clear need for further research to explore the interrelationships between boys' and girls' outcomes in the context of gender norms within compulsory education, and to better understand the causes and consequences of gender stereotypes for LGBTIQ children and young people. As such, we have provided a more general framing for the recommendations, rather than specifically endorsing specific examples or practices. Through this approach, we have ensured that the recommendations only go as far as the study evidence permits.

5.2.1 EU-level stakeholders

- Stakeholders at EU level have a key role to play in **raising awareness** about the underperformance of boys in education systems and the implications of this growing gender gap, targeting key national and regional policymakers, practitioners, networks and the research community across the EU. This study can be used as an evidence base to support awareness-raising activities and as a source for designing potential future EU communication campaigns.

- It will be important to emphasise in framing policy discussions that tackling boys' underachievement will require **long-term political will and commitment**. Changing education systems, expectations and attitudes (of teaching staff, families and young people themselves) cannot happen overnight. Messaging at EU level should emphasise the need to start early (ECEC and even before) but also that such change will have to be accompanied by a parallel shift in attitudes towards men's role in society, for example in sharing responsibilities at home.

- While increasing the awareness of the underperformance of boys in education and the need to act, it will be important to **ensure in parallel that the focus remains on supporting girls to achieve in school (and beyond)** and on breaking down gender stereotypes for all pupils. The study highlights the need to support every child to achieve their full potential, and to tackle underachievement for all. In doing so, the study underlines that boys' and girls' needs are sometimes different, sometimes complementary, and sometimes constraining. As with gender mainstreaming in other (non-educational) contexts, this means that educational strategies must be gender-sensitive rather than 'gender blind'.

- There should be more **active monitoring** at EU level of the disparities in achievements between boys and girls, and analyses of differences to understand where gender is a causal factor and where it is a moderator for other characteristics such as SES or migrant birth. Member States could be further encouraged to focus on any persistent and unaddressed gender gaps through, among others, **country-specific recommendations** as part of the European Semester. Moreover, the EU may wish to consider a case for incorporating additional gender-related measures within established EU surveys (e.g. the Eurobarometer).

- Gender equality, including a focus on the underperformance of boys and the tackling of all gender stereotypes, should be a **transversal focus** of all policies and programmes in the field of education at EU level. Such **gender mainstreaming** would both promote a renewed focus on gender equality, but also avoid policies and programmes that are 'gender blind', and hence potentially reinforce existing (including subconscious) inequalities and stereotypes.

- Gender equality, including a focus on the underperformance of boys, could also be a **specific priority field in funding programmes in the field of education** such as Erasmus+ or ESF+. In addition, all projects in the field of education funded by the European Commission should be required to have a focus on gender equality. It could be interesting to consider a similar eligibility criterion to that in Horizon Europe, which will require any organisation applying for funding to have a gender equality plan in place from 2022. Moreover, it will be important to ensure that EU-funded projects and programmes with a gender dimension are evidence-based and avoid the types of interventions that the study has shown to be ineffective or counterproductive (e.g. boosting numbers of male teachers rather than tackling low expectations of all teachers for boys' academic achievement).

- Providing opportunities for **mutual learning** at EU level, between both national (and regional) policymakers and practitioners (e.g. representatives of schools or teaching staff), would allow the sharing of lessons learnt, as well as disseminating and exploring the transferability of promising practices. Mutual learning activities (in the form of seminars, working groups, expert groups, workshops at events, peer counselling, etc.) could also help to create a community committed to shining a spotlight on the challenges to boys'

educational achievement and the ways to tackle them. A repository of promising policies and practices aiming to address boys' underperformance, drawing on the examples already set out in this study, could provide inspiration to both policymakers and practitioners across the EU, where they are supported by robust evidence.

- **The voices of young people** and/or their representatives (e.g. OBESSU, European Student Union) should be actively sought in debate and action at EU level on tackling the underperformance of boys in education, including both boys and girls. Their involvement and buy-in will be a crucial part of the long-term solution, by capturing the rapidly evolving perceptions of young people and forming part of a larger debate on the changes in society which the education system needs to take into account. For instance, in any effort to tackle this issue, it will be important to acknowledge that an increasingly large proportion of young people no longer identify as male or female, that it is crucial to break down any barriers for LGBTIQ learners and take into account the evolving impacts of movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter.

- To assist policymakers and practitioners in addressing the issue, EU-level actors could support further research on the variety and interplay of contributory factors (individual, family, school, society) which could support the **development of a theoretical framework** (such as that developed in this study).

- At EU level, the availability of **more data on male emancipation** (e.g. involvement of men in caring duties, enrolment in higher education, up-take of subjects where boys are traditionally under-represented, and attitudes of boys towards school) would also be beneficial to monitor, recognise and stimulate change.

5.2.2 National (and regional) policymakers and practitioners

- There should be clear recognition and **commitment at the highest level of government** to promoting gender equality and breaking down gender stereotypes in education. Following the principles of a gender mainstreaming approach, this entails a need for inter-ministerial collaboration to ensure that gender-sensitive policies are embedded across all areas of social policy.

- **Systematic monitoring of the performance of boys and girls** within the education system would allow policymakers to identify any disparities and take appropriate action to address the issues. Monitoring should also consider intersectionality by looking at the performance of boys and girls from different groups (e.g. pupils with a migrant/minority background, pupils in urban/rural areas, pupils with SEN, pupils from low-income families, etc.).

- To address gender disparities, including the underperformance of boys, policymakers and practitioners can put in place **specific actions or policies**. In doing so, it will be essential to take into account the range of factors which contribute to the underachievement of boys, and also ensure that policies

contribute to the educational success of girls. It is also important to note that deficit-based approaches, focusing on the insufficiencies of boys (or girls) can be counterproductive; schools should move towards an asset (or strength)-based approach to tackling underachievement.

- All national (or regional) policies or programmes in the field of education, including those designed to tackle underachievement (e.g. ELET, absenteeism), should be reviewed through a **gender equality 'lens'** to ensure effective gender mainstreaming and to address any specific obstacles to the achievement of boys or girls. Without an active process of **gender mainstreaming**, policies and programmes risk being 'gender blind' and even reinforcing existing inequalities and stereotypes.

- Where relevant, **experts in gender equality** (e.g. from academia, specialist government agencies/gender equality ministries or NGOs) can be associated in the development of education policies or programmes to provide specific expertise and advice.

- **ITE** (initial teacher education) **and CPD** (continuing professional development) should include a greater focus on gender equality, allowing teaching staff to recognise and challenge gender stereotypes, and question their own expectations – as well as those of parents, communities, wider society, and even young people themselves – about how boys and girls are expected to behave and perform. Children and young people, including those who identify as boys, girls, or gender fluid, and young people who identify as LGBTIQ have a key role to play in informing teachers and teacher educators of their rights, needs and priorities, and ensuring that teacher education programmes are engaged with the rapidly changing place of gender identities within 21st century schools and society.

- Of particular importance within teacher education is **challenging low expectations of boys' achievement**, which the study has shown to be one of the most persistent and widespread challenges within European schools.

- **School leaders** should promote a peer culture and whole school approaches to promote greater inclusion and the active engagement of all pupils, encourage a positive school climate, tackle violence/bullying and provide openness to the wider community. A positive school culture should tackle the 'non-effort' culture which can be prevalent among boys; success is based on effort and positive engagement with learning, not on innate talent. Given the long-term nature of the efforts required to change gender stereotyping, it is essential to give pupils themselves a voice so that change is both bottom-up as well as top-down.

- The crucial role of **early intervention** should be recognised in policymaking in the field of education, both to address the underachievement of boys (and girls) but also to counter gender stereotypes and gender-biased expectations before they become entrenched. Policymakers should ensure a focus on gender equality in **ECEC** and also provide early support, which must be continued throughout the education system, for pupils with SEN.

- Policymakers and practitioners should also ensure effective communication mechanisms to signal any issues around underperformance at **key transition points** in the education system, starting with the transition into primary education, to prevent boys from falling further behind. It is often stated that children should be 'school ready' before beginning primary school; but there is also increasing policy recognition that there should be 'child-ready schools', able to deal with the full range of abilities presented by pupils.

- **Reading and language development** have been shown to be fundamental to learning throughout education, but also throughout life, and should be a key focus of education. This focus can have particular benefits for boys' capacity for learning throughout the life-course.

- Policymakers and practitioners should consider the impact of **features of school systems**, including curricula, teaching methods and materials, on the (under)achievement of boys and girls, and in combatting (or reinforcing) gender stereotypes, and adjust where possible. It is known for example that high degrees of differentiation (in particular early tracking) or standardisation can contribute to the underachievement of boys. Numerous studies have underlined the pervasive impact of the gender stereotypes present in school textbooks and other materials. Teaching methods should be gender-sensitive, participative and diverse: there is no one teaching method that works for boys or for girls.

- Having a greater focus on **sexuality education** can help to explore issues related to perceptions around gender, as well as recognising the different forms of masculinity and femininity and ensuring LGBTIQ inclusion.

- Alongside tackling gender stereotypes in the education system, it will be important to tackle stereotypes in other fields including **extracurricular activities and careers guidance**.

5.2.3   Areas for further research

- Further research is needed to better understand **intersectionality** in relation to gender issues (e.g. gender and migrant/minority background, gender and SEN, gender and low-income families, etc.). An improved understanding would help in finding approaches and solutions which can address the multiple disadvantages experienced by some pupils.

- Additional research would be beneficial to **understand how best to 'measure' masculinity norms** in terms of their prevalence and impact within a given population (e.g. at societal or institutional level), and to better understand the complex interactions between biological and social factors.

- While the study has looked at the situation and potential causes of underachievement across the EU-27, further studies could explore the **specific features of different Member States and their education systems** which may be contributing to the better/worse performance of boys in education. This could be achieved through a comparison between Member States where the

gender gap is the widest and those where it is the narrowest, to examine the contributory factors.

- Future research could also focus more specifically on the **different solutions (policies, programmes, practices, tools)** being implemented to tackle boys' underperformance and explore their **effectiveness**.

- Further research on the issue of boys' performance should also focus on exploring the **differences *between* boys**. Too often, boys (and girls) are considered as a homogenous group, whereas the differences between boys are often greater than the differences between boys and girls. It will be important, for example, to understand which boys feel that they need to conform to standard masculinity norms, and clearly recognise the variability in attitudes and behaviours.

- **Life-course research**, focusing on the trajectories and different growth patterns of boys (and girls), would also provide important insights into 'what makes a difference'. This might imply a role for longitudinal cohort studies.

- Due to the fundamental role played by **reading and language development** for all of the learning, and the large disparity between the reading skills of boys and girls, there would be merit in specific research looking at this specific area.

- Since language development, as well as other transversal skills for learning such as teamwork, self-regulation and critical thinking, are developed early on in life, more research on effective policies and practices to tackle **gender stereotyping in ECEC** is recommended. This could help to tackle some of the 'root causes' of the various societal implications which are associated with the underperformance of boys in education and ensure that there is effective coordination between ECEC and primary school settings to manage boys' academic and emotional needs during this transition (moving towards the 'child-ready' school).

- The study underlines the importance of avoiding an exclusive focus on boys' underperformance but also actively aiming to support girls' educational success. However, more research is needed on **the relationship between supporting the achievements of both boys and girls**. For example, do initiatives aimed at girls also have a beneficial impact on boys? If so, why? If not, why not?

- **Peer culture** clearly plays a key role in the perceived gender norms and behaviours. Specific research focusing on the influence of peers, and how this can be countered would provide an important contribution to tackling the issues.

- More research would also be needed to better understand the **link between boys' underperformance in education and the various societal implications** discussed in Chapter 4 of our study, including on women and their position in society (e.g. how they fuel gender-based violence, gender stereotyping, 'traditional' norms of masculinity and femininity, etc.):

o   There seems to be a link between **masculinity, radicalisation and violent extremism**, but this link is not well understood, nor are its impacts on society.

o   As noted in our conclusions, the **impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic** are only at their beginnings, and it will be important to examine the differing and evolving impacts on boys and girls and their educational performance. Some studies suggest, for example, that girls fare better in general in online or blended learning environments due to improved self-regulation.

o   Initial studies also suggest a large rise in online pornography consumption since the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among boys. **The phenomenon of increased consumption of online pornography** would merit further research, due to its links to various forms of toxic masculinity, and destabilising healthy/normal parameters for gender roles. Furthermore, this inquiry should extend to include other forms of unhealthy online sexual practices involving coercive or abusive behaviours between boys and girls.

o   In addition, there seems to be a strong link between the recent phenomenon of **'incels' (involuntary celibates), mainstream pornography and misogyny**. This is part of the wider debate around the possible demographic implications of boys' underperformance in education.

6.0 Annexes

Contents

6.1 Annex I: Research tools used for this study

6.1.1 Study research questions

Key questions	Method selection			
	Mapping desk research	**Case study desk research**	**Case study interviews**	**Analysis and conclusions**
RQ 1: What is the impact of gender on **learning outcomes** in primary and secondary education in EU Member States?				
Participation rates, attainment rates and educational choices • What type of outcomes can be and are measured? • What is the relative educational performance of boys and girls? • Do impacts of gender differ according to Member State? • Do impacts differ by age, level (e.g. primary, lower secondary, upper secondary) and type (e.g. vocational or general) of education? • What trends are apparent over time? How can these trends be explained?	✓	✓	✓	✓
RQ 2: Which factors contribute to the **challenges** faced by boys and young men, which could explain why they are increasingly falling behind in education?				
Individual factors	✓	✓	✓	✓

Key questions	Method selection			
	Mapping desk research	**Case study desk research**	**Case study interviews**	**Analysis and conclusions**
• To what degree do gender impacts differ according to other individual factors (e.g. migrant background, socio-economic status, parents' educational outcomes, home environment for learning, participation in ECEC, etc.) or school/education system factors (e.g. size of school, urban/rural location, teacher/pupil ratios, existence of inclusive education policies, existence of gender equality strategies, etc.)?				
• Which gender-related leisure/ extracurricular activities could have an impact on differences in competence development between girls and boys?				
Family-level factors				
• Which factors related to the home environment play a role? *(e.g. migrant background, socio-economic status, single parent household, parents' educational outcomes, home environment for learning)*				
School-level factors				
• Which factors related to the school environment play a role? *(e.g. size of school, urban/rural location, teacher/pupil ratios, presence of male teachers, single/mixed sex education, existence of inclusive education policies, existence of gender equality strategies, participation in ECEC)*				
• Are there challenges related to distraction and lack of				

Key questions	Method selection			
	Mapping desk research	**Case study desk research**	**Case study interviews**	**Analysis and conclusions**
concentration in the classroom? • What role does peer pressure play? **System-level factors** • What gender stereotypes exist and what challenges do they pose to the educational performance of boys? Why? • To what degree is the educational performance of boys linked to stereotypes around masculinity at country level? **Overarching questions** • What is the relative importance of these factors and does this vary during the course of the student's school and learning journey? • Do these challenges vary with age/type of learning environment or other factors?				
RQ 3: What are the **societal implications** of the underperformance of boys in education?				
Implications on education • What is the impact on men's educational progression? *(e.g. lower levels of participation in tertiary education and lifelong learning)*	✔	✔	✔	

Key questions	Method selection			
	Mapping desk research	**Case study desk research**	**Case study interviews**	**Analysis and conclusions**
Labour market implications • What is the impact on men's careers? *(e.g. types of jobs performed, overall career performance and progression, share compared with women in low-skilled and low-paid employment, etc.)* **Implications for health and well-being** • What is the impact on men's health and well-being? *(e.g. physical and mental well-being, depression rates, etc.)* **Other societal implications** • What is the impact on wider society? include *(e.g. social impacts such as higher levels of crime, membership of extremist movements, misogyny and violence; and economic impacts such as the reduced productivity resulting from a lower-skilled workforce and the economic cost of dealing with higher levels of crime and violence)* • Which factors can explain that more boys/men support extremist movements? • What evidence is there to support the theory that this is linked to underperformance at school?				
RQ 4: Which **policy measures and initiatives** can prevent this trend in increasing educational underperformance of boys and young men from				

Key questions	Method selection			
	Mapping desk research	**Case study desk research**	**Case study interviews**	**Analysis and conclusions**
escalating further?				
• How can boys be better included in education?			✔	✔
• How can the learning environment be adapted to support the inclusion of boys?				
• How can boys be prevented from dropping out of education? What more can be done, at both EU and national level, to reduce ESL among boys?				
• What can be done to improve the desirability of educational attainment among boys?				
• How can teachers work to improve the performance of boys without any resulting detriment to the performance of girls?				
• Given the predominantly female teaching force, what can be done to promote male role models in teaching and learning?				
• What types of initiatives have been implemented to tackle the underperformance of boys across the EU?				
• What are their key features, success factors and the obstacles they have faced?				
• Which initiatives, or elements of initiatives, can be considered good practice? Why?				
• What lessons have been learnt from unsuccessful				

Key questions	Method selection			
	Mapping desk research	**Case study desk research**	**Case study interviews**	**Analysis and conclusions**
experiences?				
• What can policymakers at national and EU level do to address the increasing underperformance of boys?				
• What role can individual schools play?				
• How can parents, families and the wider community (e.g. NGOs, extracurricular activities) contribute?				
• How can boys and young men be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning outcomes?				
• What types of initiatives have been implemented to tackle gender stereotypes across the EU?				
• What are their key features, success factors and the obstacles they have faced?				
• Which initiatives, or elements of initiatives, can be considered good practice? Why?				
• What lessons have been learnt from unsuccessful experiences?				
• What types of measures could be put into place in the learning environment?				
• What role can national and EU policymakers play?				

Key questions	Method selection			
	Mapping desk research	Case study desk research	Case study interviews	Analysis and conclusions
• How could teachers and other educational staff support these measures? • How could families, the home environment and the wider community support these measures? • How can young people themselves (girls and boys) contribute themselves to overcoming these stereotypes? • What could be the contribution of extracurricular activities to overcoming stereotypes?				

6.1.2 Intervention logic for tackling the underperformance of boys and young men in education

Needs

To address the underperformance of boys at school across the EU, and reduce the negative impacts for boys on:
- their educational outcomes
- their careers
- their lives overall
And reduce wider impacts including:

- societal impacts, such as higher levels of crime, misogyny, extremism and violence; and
- economic impacts, including reduced productivity and the costs of dealing with violence and crime

External factors

Economic situation
Political situation
Institutional framework

Impacts

Better educational achievement of boys
Improved career prospects
Improved life chances
Reduced membership of extremist groups
Reduced levels of crime, violence and misogyny

Results

Improved performance of boys in school, closing the gap between the performance of boys and girls

Objectives

To gain insight into the reasons why boys underperform in primary and secondary school education

To improve the performance of boys in primary and secondary school in EU Member States

Inputs

Putting in place initiatives to improve the performance of boys at school

Activities

Challenge gender stereotypes in society and in schools

Examine educational settings and methods

Examine the weight of factors such as socio-economic background and home environment

Outputs

Collaborative initiatives to reduce gender stereotyping in education and in wider society

Initiatives to support boys at school, without disadvantaging girls

Initiatives to provide specific support to boys from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, migrant backgrounds, or workless households

6.2 Annex II: Statics by gender for PISA (2012-2018), PIRLS (2011 & 2016) and TIMSS (2015 & 2019)

6.2.1 PISA reading achievement – broken down by gender (2012-2018)

Figure 6-1   PISA 2012-2018 gender gap in reading across the EU
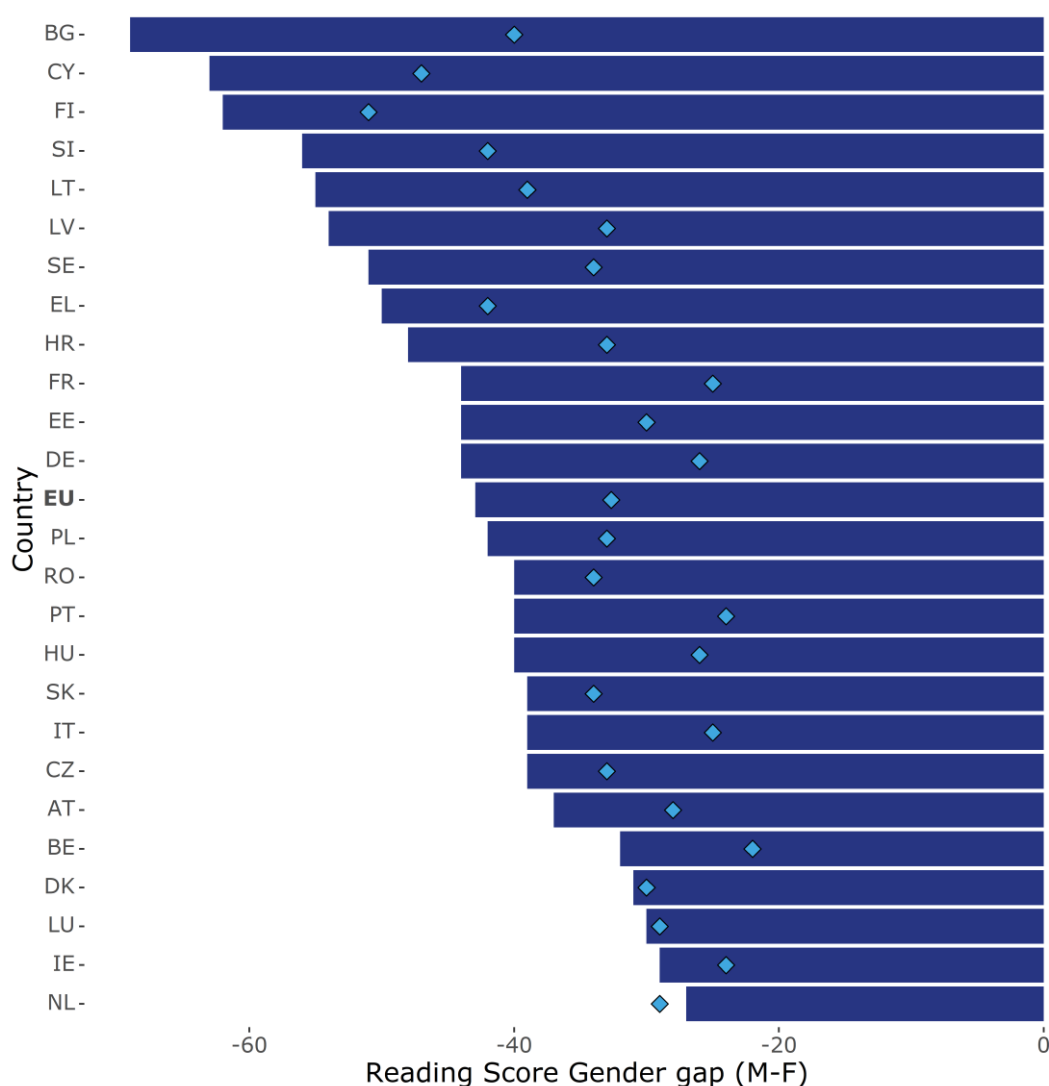
Source: PISA 2012 & 2018. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/. The dark blue bars represent the gap between male and female PISA scores in 2012, and the light blue diamonds the gap in 2018. [615]

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[615] All numbers in this chart are negative (gap = males-females). The gap has narrowed where the light blue diamonds (2018 values) are inside the bars (2012 values), so where values are closer to 0 than before.

Figure 6-2   PISA reading achievement – broken down by gender (2012-2018)

Country	Gender	Avg. score 2012	Avg. score 2015	Avg. score 2018	Change 2012-2018
Austria	Female	494	483	492	-2
	Male	517	510	505	-12
	Attainment gap	**23**	**27**	**13**	**-10**
Belgium	Female	509	500	502	-7
	Male	520	514	514	-6
	Attainment gap	**11**	**14**	**12**	**1**
Bulgaria	Female	440	442	437	-3
	Male	438	440	435	-3
	Attainment gap	**-2**	**-2**	**-2**	**0**
Croatia	Female	465	458	460	-5
	Male	477	471	469	-8
	Attainment gap	**12**	**13**	**9**	**-3**
Cyprus	Female	440	440	455	15
	Male	440	435	447	7
	Attainment gap	**0**	**-5**	**-8**	**-8**
Czechia	Female	493	489	498	5
	Male	505	496	501	-4
	Attainment gap	**12**	**7**	**3**	**-9**
Denmark	Female	493	506	507	14
	Male	507	516	511	4
	Attainment gap	**14**	**10**	**4**	**-10**
Estonia	Female	518	517	519	1
	Male	523	522	528	5
	Attainment gap	**5**	**5**	**9**	**4**
EU_28	Female	485	484	487	2
	Male	493	490	491	-3

	Attainment gap	**9**	**6**	**4**	**-4**
Finland	Female	520	515	510	-10
	Male	517	507	504	-13
	Attainment gap	**-3**	**-8**	**-6**	**-3**
France	Female	491	490	492	1
	Male	499	496	499	0
	Attainment gap	**8**	**6**	**7**	**-1**
Germany	Female	507	498	496	-11
	Male	520	514	503	-17
	Attainment gap	**13**	**16**	**7**	**-6**
Greece	Female	449	454	451	2
	Male	457	454	452	-5
	Attainment gap	**8**	**0**	**1**	**-7**
Hungary	Female	473	473	477	4
	Male	482	481	486	4
	Attainment gap	**9**	**8**	**9**	**0**
Ireland	Female	494	495	497	3
	Male	509	512	503	-6
	Attainment gap	**15**	**17**	**6**	**-9**
Italy	Female	476	480	479	3
	Male	494	500	494	0
	Attainment gap	**18**	**20**	**15**	**-3**
Latvia	Female	493	483	493	0
	Male	489	481	500	11
	Attainment gap	**-4**	**-2**	**7**	**11**
Lithuania	Female	479	479	482	3
	Male	479	478	480	1
	Attainment gap	**0**	**-1**	**-2**	**-2**

Luxembourg	Female	477	480	480	3
	Male	502	491	487	-15
	Attainment gap	**25**	**11**	**7**	**-18**
Malta	Female	NA	481	478	NA
	Male	NA	477	466	NA
	Attainment gap	**NA**	**-4**	**-12**	**NA**
Netherlands	Female	518	511	519	1
	Male	528	513	520	-8
	Attainment gap	**10**	**2**	**1**	**-9**
Poland	Female	516	499	515	-1
	Male	520	510	516	-4
	Attainment gap	**4**	**11**	**1**	**-3**
Portugal	Female	481	487	488	7
	Male	493	497	497	4
	Attainment gap	**12**	**10**	**9**	**-3**
Romania	Female	443	444	427	-16
	Male	447	444	432	-15
	Attainment gap	**4**	**0**	**5**	**1**
Slovak Republic	Female	477	472	484	7
	Male	486	478	488	2
	Attainment gap	**9**	**6**	**4**	**-5**
Slovenia	Female	499	508	509	10
	Male	503	512	509	6
	Attainment gap	**4**	**4**	**0**	**-4**
Spain	Female	476	478	478	2
	Male	492	494	485	-7
	Attainment gap	**16**	**16**	**7**	**-9**
Sweden	Female	480	495	503	23

	Male	477	493	502	25
	Attainment gap	**-3**	**-2**	**-1**	**2**

6.2.2 PISA mathematics achievement – broken down by gender (2012-2018)

Figure 6-3 PISA 2012-2018 gender gap in mathematics across the EU
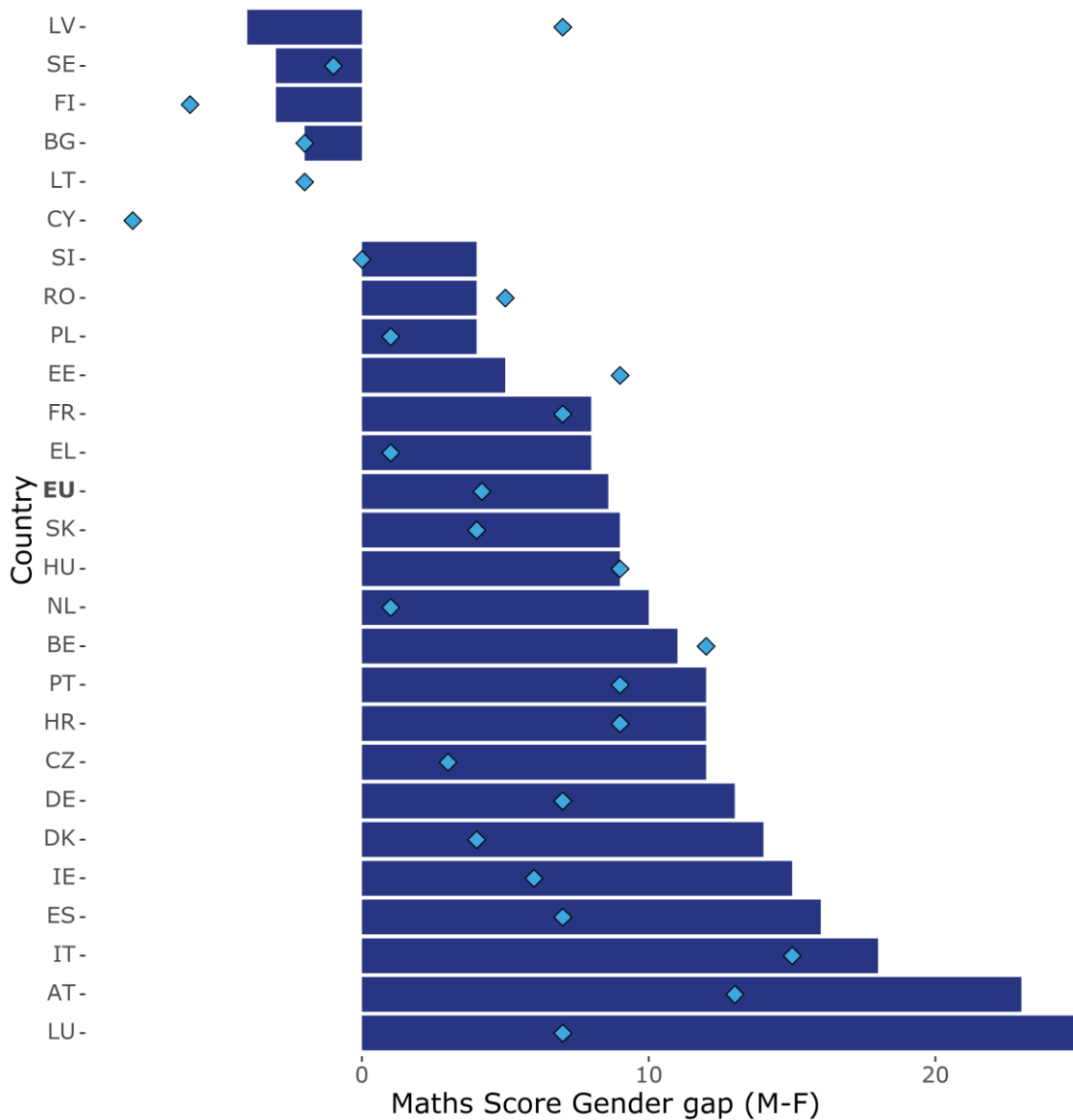
Source: PISA 2018. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/. The dark blue bars represent the gap between male and female PISA scores in 2012, and the light blue diamonds the gap in 2018.[616]

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[616] All numbers in this chart are negative (gap = males-females). The gap has narrowed where the light blue diamonds (2018 values) are inside the bars (2012 values), so where values are closer to 0 than before.

Figure 6-4   PISA mathematics achievement across the EU – broken down by gender (2012-2018)

Country	Gender	Avg. score 2012	Avg. score 2015	Avg. score 2018	Change 2012-2018
Austria	Female	494	483	492	-2
	Male	517	510	505	-12
	Attainment gap	**23**	**27**	**13**	**-10**
Belgium	Female	509	500	502	-7
	Male	520	514	514	-6
	Attainment gap	**11**	**14**	**12**	**1**
Bulgaria	Female	440	442	437	-3
	Male	438	440	435	-3
	Attainment gap	**-2**	**-2**	**-2**	**0**
Croatia	Female	465	458	460	-5
	Male	477	471	469	-8
	Attainment gap	**12**	**13**	**9**	**-3**
Cyprus	Female	440	440	455	15
	Male	440	435	447	7
	Attainment gap	**0**	**-5**	**-8**	**-8**
Czechia	Female	493	489	498	5
	Male	505	496	501	-4
	Attainment gap	**12**	**7**	**3**	**-9**
Denmark	Female	493	506	507	14
	Male	507	516	511	4
	Attainment gap	**14**	**10**	**4**	**-10**
Estonia	Female	518	517	519	1
	Male	523	522	528	5
	Attainment gap	**5**	**5**	**9**	**4**
EU_28	Female	485	484	487	2
	Male	493	490	491	-3

	Attainment gap	**9**	**6**	**4**	**-4**
Finland	Female	520	515	510	-10
	Male	517	507	504	-13
	Attainment gap	**-3**	**-8**	**-6**	**-3**
France	Female	491	490	492	1
	Male	499	496	499	0
	Attainment gap	**8**	**6**	**7**	**-1**
Germany	Female	507	498	496	-11
	Male	520	514	503	-17
	Attainment gap	**13**	**16**	**7**	**-6**
Greece	Female	449	454	451	2
	Male	457	454	452	-5
	Attainment gap	**8**	**0**	**1**	**-7**
Hungary	Female	473	473	477	4
	Male	482	481	486	4
	Attainment gap	**9**	**8**	**9**	**0**
Ireland	Female	494	495	497	3
	Male	509	512	503	-6
	Attainment gap	**15**	**17**	**6**	**-9**
Italy	Female	476	480	479	3
	Male	494	500	494	0
	Attainment gap	**18**	**20**	**15**	**-3**
Latvia	Female	493	483	493	0
	Male	489	481	500	11
	Attainment gap	**-4**	**-2**	**7**	**11**
Lithuania	Female	479	479	482	3
	Male	479	478	480	1
	Attainment gap	**0**	**-1**	**-2**	**-2**

Luxembourg	Female	477	480	480	3
	Male	502	491	487	-15
	Attainment gap	**25**	**11**	**7**	**-18**
Malta	Female	NA	481	478	NA
	Male	NA	477	466	NA
	Attainment gap	**NA**	**-4**	**-12**	**NA**
Netherlands	Female	518	511	519	1
	Male	528	513	520	-8
	Attainment gap	**10**	**2**	**1**	**-9**
Poland	Female	516	499	515	-1
	Male	520	510	516	-4
	Attainment gap	**4**	**11**	**1**	**-3**
Portugal	Female	481	487	488	7
	Male	493	497	497	4
	Attainment gap	**12**	**10**	**9**	**-3**
Romania	Female	443	444	427	-16
	Male	447	444	432	-15
	Attainment gap	**4**	**0**	**5**	**1**
Slovak Republic	Female	477	472	484	7
	Male	486	478	488	2
	Attainment gap	**9**	**6**	**4**	**-5**
Slovenia	Female	499	508	509	10
	Male	503	512	509	6
	Attainment gap	**4**	**4**	**0**	**-4**
Spain	Female	476	478	478	2
	Male	492	494	485	-7
	Attainment gap	**16**	**16**	**7**	**-9**
Sweden	Female	480	495	503	23

	Male	477	493	502	25
	Attainment gap	**-3**	**-2**	**-1**	**2**

6.2.3 PISA science achievement – broken down by gender (2012-2018)

Figure 6-5 Change in PISA science scores across the EU for boys and girls between 2012 and 2018

Source: PISA 2012 & 2018. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/
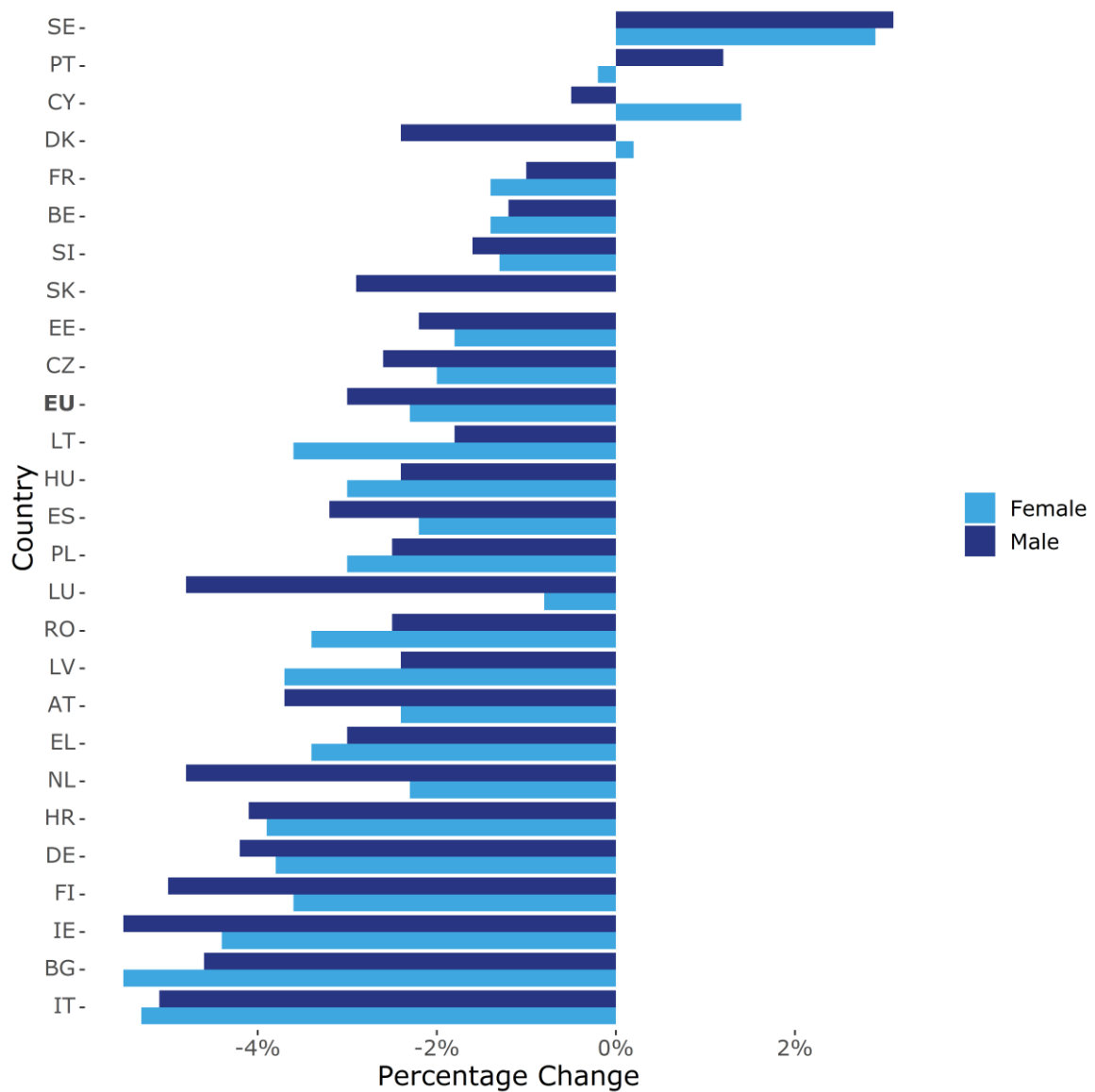
Figure 6-6 PISA science achievement across the EU – broken down by gender (2012-2018)

Country	Gender	Avg. score 2012	Avg. score 2015	Avg. score 2018	Change 2012-2018
Austria	Female	501	486	489	-12
	Male	510	504	491	-19
	Attainment gap	**9**	**18**	**2**	**-7**
Belgium	Female	503	496	496	-7
	Male	507	508	501	-6
	Attainment gap	**4**	**12**	**5**	**1**
Bulgaria	Female	457	454	432	-25
	Male	437	438	417	-20
	Attainment gap	**-20**	**-16**	**-15**	**5**
Croatia	Female	493	473	474	-19
	Male	490	478	470	-20
	Attainment gap	**-3**	**5**	**-4**	**-1**
Cyprus	Female	444	441	450	6
	Male	431	424	429	-2
	Attainment gap	-13	**-17**	**-21**	-8
Czechia	Female	508	488	498	-10
	Male	509	497	496	-13
	Attainment gap	**1**	**9**	**-2**	**-3**
Denmark	Female	493	499	494	1
	Male	504	505	492	-12
	Attainment gap	**11**	**6**	**-2**	**-13**
Estonia	Female	543	533	533	-10
	Male	540	536	528	-12
	Attainment gap	**-3**	**3**	**-5**	**-2**
EU_28	Female	498	487	486	-12
	Male	496	487	482	-15

	Attainment gap	**-2**	**0**	**-5**	**-3**
Finland	Female	554	541	534	-20
	Male	537	521	510	-27
	Attainment gap	**-17**	**-20**	**-24**	**-7**
France	Female	500	494	493	-7
	Male	498	496	493	-5
	Attainment gap	**-2**	**2**	**0**	**2**
Germany	Female	524	504	504	-20
	Male	524	514	502	-22
	Attainment gap	**0**	**10**	**-2**	**-2**
Greece	Female	473	459	457	-16
	Male	460	451	446	-14
	Attainment gap	**-13**	**-8**	**-11**	**2**
Hungary	Female	493	475	478	-15
	Male	496	478	484	-12
	Attainment gap	**3**	**3**	**6**	**3**
Ireland	Female	520	497	497	-23
	Male	524	508	495	-29
	Attainment gap	**4**	**11**	**-2**	**-6**
Italy	Female	492	472	466	-26
	Male	495	489	470	-25
	Attainment gap	**3**	**17**	**4**	**1**
Latvia	Female	510	496	491	-19
	Male	495	485	483	-12
	Attainment gap	**-15**	**-11**	**-8**	**7**
Lithuania	Female	503	479	485	-18
	Male	488	472	479	-9
	Attainment gap	**-15**	**-7**	**-6**	**9**

Luxembourg	Female	483	479	479	-4
	Male	499	487	475	-24
	Attainment gap	**16**	**8**	**-4**	**-20**
Malta	Female	-	470	468	-
	Male	-	460	447	-
	Attainment gap	**-**	**-10**	**-21**	**-**
Netherlands	Female	520	507	508	-12
	Male	524	511	499	-25
	Attainment gap	**4**	**4**	**-9**	**-13**
Poland	Female	527	498	511	-16
	Male	524	504	511	-13
	Attainment gap	**-3**	**6**	**0**	**3**
Portugal	Female	490	496	489	-1
	Male	488	506	494	6
	Attainment gap	-2	**10**	**5**	7
Romania	Female	441	438	426	-15
	Male	436	432	425	-11
	Attainment gap	**-5**	**-6**	**-1**	**4**
Slovak Republic	Female	467	461	467	0
	Male	475	460	461	-14
	Attainment gap	**8**	**-1**	**-6**	**-14**
Slovenia	Female	519	516	512	-7
	Male	510	510	502	-8
	Attainment gap	**-9**	**-6**	**-10**	**-1**
Spain	Female	493	489	482	-11
	Male	500	496	484	-16
	Attainment gap	**7**	**7**	**2**	**-5**
Sweden	Female	489	496	503	14

	Male	481	491	496	15
	Attainment gap	**-8**	**-5**	**-7**	**1**

6.2.4 PIRLS reading achievement – broken down by gender (2011 & 2016)

Country	Gender	Avg. score 2011	Avg. score 2016
Malta	Girls	470	463
	Boys	445	442
	Difference	**-25**	**-21**
Belgium (French)	Girls	509	503
	Boys	504	492
	Difference	**-5**	**-11**
France	Girls	522	515
	Boys	518	507
	Difference	**-4**	**-8**
Portugal	Girls	548	529
	Boys	534	527
	Difference	**-14**	**-2**
Belgium (Flem)	Girls	-	530
	Boys	-	520
	Difference	**-**	**-10**
Spain	Girls	516	532
	Boys	511	524
	Difference	**-5**	**-8**
Slovakia	Girls	540	539
	Boys	530	530
	Difference	**-10**	**-9**
Germany	Girls	545	543
	Boys	537	532
	Difference	**-8**	**-11**
Austria	Girls	533	544
	Boys	525	538
	Difference	**-8**	**-6**
Czechia	Girls	549	549
	Boys	542	538
	Difference	**-7**	**-11**
Netherlands	Girls	549	550
	Boys	543	540
	Difference	**-6**	**-10**
Italy	Girls	543	552
	Boys	540	544
	Difference	**-3**	**-8**
Slovenia	Girls	539	552
	Boys	523	533
	Difference	**-16**	**-19**
Denmark	Girls	560	554

	Boys	548	541
	Difference	**-12**	**-13**
Bulgaria	Girls	539	559
	Boys	524	544
	Difference	**-15**	**-15**
Hungary	Girls	547	561
	Boys	532	548
	Difference	**-15**	**-13**
Sweden	Girls	549	563
	Boys	535	548
	Difference	**-14**	**-15**
Latvia	Girls	-	566
	Boys	-	549
	Difference	**-**	**-17**
Lithuania	Girls	537	560
	Boys	520	539
	Difference	**-17**	**-21**
Ireland	Girls	559	572
	Boys	544	561
	Difference	**-15**	**-11**
Poland	Girls	-	574
	Boys	-	556
	Difference	**-**	**-18**
Finland	Girls	578	577
	Boys	558	555
	Difference	**-20**	**-22**

6.2.5 TIMSS science achievement at grade 4 – broken down by gender (2015 & 2019)

Country	Gender	Avg. score 2015	Avg. score 2019
Bulgaria	Girls	540	525
	Boys	532	518
	Difference	**-8**	**-7**
Finland	Girls	560	557
	Boys	548	552
	Difference	**-12**	**-5**
Latvia	Girls	-	544
	Boys	-	540
	Difference	**-**	**-4**
Lithuania	Girls	529	540
	Boys	526	536
	Difference	**-3**	**-4**
Poland	Girls	548	532
	Boys	546	529
	Difference	**-2**	**-3**
Sweden	Girls	544	538
	Boys	536	536
	Difference	**-8**	**-2**
France	Girls	487	489
	Boys	487	487
	Difference	**0**	**-2**
Netherlands	Girls	517	519
	Boys	517	518
	Difference	**0**	**-1**
Croatia	Girls	532	524
	Boys	534	524
	Difference	**2**	**0**
Spain	Girls	515	511
	Boys	521	512
	Difference	**6**	**1**
Ireland	Girls	526	526
	Boys	531	530
	Difference	**5**	**4**
Germany	Girls	527	516
	Boys	529	520
	Difference	**2**	**4**
Malta	Girls	-	493
	Boys	-	498
	Difference	**-**	**5**
Slovakia	Girls	516	518

	Boys	524	523
	Difference	**8**	**5**
Portugal	Girls	504	501
	Boys	512	506
	Difference	**8**	**5**
Austria	Girls	-	519
	Boys	-	525
	Difference	**-**	**6**
Hungary	Girls	538	526
	Boys	546	533
	Difference	**8**	**7**
Italy	Girls	512	506
	Boys	521	514
	Difference	**9**	**8**
Czechia	Girls	530	529
	Boys	538	538
	Difference	**8**	**9**

6.2.6 TIMSS science achievement at grade 8 – broken down by gender (2015 & 2019)

Country	Gender	Avg. score 2015	Avg. score 2019
Finland	Girls	-	552
	Boys	-	533
	Difference	**-**	**-19**
Cyprus	Girls	-	491
	Boys	-	476
	Difference	**-**	**-15**
Sweden	Girls	523	527
	Boys	522	516
	Difference	**-1**	**-11**
Romania	Girls	-	475
	Boys	-	465
	Difference	**-**	**-10**
Ireland	Girls	510	526
	Boys	504	521
	Difference	**-6**	**-5**
Lithuania	Girls	520	535
	Boys	519	533
	Difference	**-1**	**-2**
France	Girls	-	487
	Boys	-	490
	Difference	**-**	**3**
Portugal	Girls	-	516
	Boys	-	522
	Difference	**-**	**6**
Italy	Girls	494	497
	Boys	504	504
	Difference	**10**	**7**
Hungary	Girls	519	520
	Boys	535	540
	Difference	**16**	**20**

6.2.7 TIMSS mathematics achievement at grade 4 – broken down by gender (2015 & 2019)

Country	Gender	Avg. score 2015	Avg. score 2019
Bulgaria	Girls	527	514
	Boys	522	516
	Difference	**-5**	**2**
Finland	Girls	540	531
	Boys	531	533
	Difference	**-9**	**2**
Lithuania	Girls	537	540
	Boys	534	544
	Difference	**-3**	**4**
Latvia	Girls	-	544
	Boys	-	548
	Difference	**-**	**4**
Ireland	Girls	545	545
	Boys	549	552
	Difference	**4**	**7**
Denmark	Girls	536	521
	Boys	542	528
	Difference	**6**	**7**
Sweden	Girls	519	518
	Boys	518	525
	Difference	**-1**	**7**
Malta	Girls	-	505
	Boys	-	513
	Difference	**-**	**8**
Austria	Girls	-	535
	Boys	-	543
	Difference	**-**	**8**
Poland	Girls	534	516
	Boys	536	524
	Difference	**2**	**8**
Netherlands	Girls	526	533
	Boys	534	542
	Difference	**8**	**9**
Germany	Girls	520	516
	Boys	523	526
	Difference	**3**	**10**
Belgium (Flemish)	Girls	543	527
	Boys	549	538
	Difference	**6**	**11**
Czechia	Girls	525	527

	Boys	532	538
	Difference	**7**	**11**
Hungary	Girls	526	518
	Boys	532	529
	Difference	**6**	**11**
Croatia	Girls	496	504
	Boys	508	515
	Difference	**12**	**11**
Italy	Girls	497	509
	Boys	517	521
	Difference	**20**	**12**
Slovakia	Girls	493	503
	Boys	499	516
	Difference	**6**	**13**
France	Girls	485	478
	Boys	491	491
	Difference	**6**	**13**
Spain	Girls	499	495
	Boys	511	509
	Difference	**12**	**14**
Portugal	Girls	536	516
	Boys	547	533
	Difference	**11**	**17**
Cyprus	Girls	520	523
	Boys	526	542
	Difference	**6**	**19**

6.2.8 TIMSS mathematics achievement at grade 8 – broken down by gender (2015 & 2019)

Country	Gender	Avg. score 2015	Avg. score 2019
Romania	Girls	-	487
	Boys	-	471
	Difference	**-**	**-16**
Finland	Girls	-	511
	Boys	-	507
	Difference	**-**	**-4**
Cyprus	Girls	-	503
	Boys	-	499
	Difference	**-**	**-4**
Sweden	Girls	497	504
	Boys	504	501
	Difference	**7**	**-3**
Ireland	Girls	524	524
	Boys	523	523
	Difference	**-1**	**-1**
Lithuania	Girls	519	519
	Boys	521	521
	Difference	**2**	**2**
France	Girls	-	478
	Boys	-	487
	Difference	**-**	**9**
Portugal	Girls	-	495
	Boys	-	505
	Difference	**-**	**10**
Italy	Girls	491	491
	Boys	498	504
	Difference	**7**	**13**
Hungary	Girls	510	510
	Boys	524	524
	Difference	**14**	**14**

6.3 Annex III: Case studies

6.3.1 Bulgaria

1. Key trends and implications

1.1 Contextualisation

The gap in school performance and achievements between boys and girls in Bulgaria is not explicitly recognised as a political priority, despite evidence that it exists. Data from the National Statistical Institute (NSI) reveals that only 83.6% of men in the country aged between 20 and 24 had completed at least secondary education in 2019, compared to 85.4% of women. This gap has been widening since 2017. Although there is no significant difference in enrolment and completion rates in primary education, in secondary education they are consistently higher for boys than for girls.[617] In contrast, more women than men participate in higher education – making up 53.7% of all students – and data for 2019 revealed that 39% of women aged between 30 and 34 years had attained higher degree, compared to 26.4% of men. The share of early school leavers among girls is traditionally higher than among boys. However, this trend was reversed in 2019–2020, when 14.5% of boys left the educational system, compared to 13.3% of girls.

In 2018, the OECD's mean PISA score in reading for girls was 40 points higher than for boys. This indicates a decline from the 61-point-difference that previously existed in 2009 (mainly due to a deterioration in girls' performance). The gender gap in maths and science is narrower, at 2 and 15 points, respectively. The scores for both boys and girls in reading, writing, and science are lower than the OECD averages.

Some interviewed experts shared the opinion that **the PISA format differs from what is expected in a typical exam in schools in Bulgaria, which makes it difficult for students to perform well**. Average scores from the annual compulsory exams held in the 7th grade (13–14 years old) and 12th grade (18–19 years old) are announced for the cohort as a whole (no gender-specific average scores are published) and these have not revealed a significant improvement in performance, regardless of changes to the curriculum. Interviewed experts did feel, however, that there is most likely a positive gender gap in favour of girls, especially in the 7th grade exams. This was not deemed important, as most schools and universities do not have a gender quota for new students, and so it has not resulted in significant imbalances in most schools.

The socio-economic status of the students was identified as the factor with the largest impact on educational performance and attainment, irrespective

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[617] United Nations, *Minimum Set of Gender Indicators*. Available at: https://genderstats.un.org/#/indicators.

of the gender of the student.[618] A privileged economic background allows families to support the school performance of children by providing all necessary conditions, including access to diversified extra-curricular activities, and supporting a positive attitude towards education. This factor relates closely to uneven access to quality education, something which was identified by the experts. Again, this is not primarily gender-based, but is more related to other factors, such as the size of the city, the school specialisation, and the school neighbourhood. The impact of socio-economic factors was revealed in the PISA 2018 study, in which students in Bulgaria with a better socio-economic background outperformed disadvantaged students by 106 score points in reading, and none of the top-performing students in reading were disadvantaged. Similarly, socio-economic status has a strong impact on performance in maths and science. Moreover, compared to the OECD average, in Bulgaria it is more common that low- and high-performance students are clustered in the same schools.

It is important to note that **the education system in Bulgaria is quite unique and there are stratification issues at both the national and regional level**. The situation, in terms of educational attainment, is likely to be significantly different when comparing the two schools – one based in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, and one in a less populated rural area. Moreover, the difference in attainment and quality of education continues even in the capital, where secondary schools are separated into categories according to their quality of education. This can be easily observed in national testing after the 7th grade. On the one hand, there are elite secondary schools that require the best results in order for a pupil to be enrolled, and on the other hand we have low-performing schools that require the bare minimum for a pupil to be enrolled. Any analysis or data collected on the gender difference in attainment must therefore take this into account, as grades, dropout rates, pupil satisfaction, and other related factors will vary significantly among different schools.

Different expectations for boys and girls in school were recognised by interviewed experts. **Girls are expected to display deeper and broader knowledge to acquire high scores compared to similar scores for boys.** According to PISA 2018, girls in Bulgaria are often more anxious than boys about how their failure is perceived by others and how it could impact their future. In terms of fear of lacking talent, the gender difference between boys and girls is more than 10 points (PISA 2018 data), with girls being more fearful. Expectations for concentration and behaviour in class are deemed lower for boys compared to girls, and in some cases, stereotypes about which gender fares better in literature and social sciences compared to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects are also prevalent, twisting perceptions with regard to the academic results of boys and girls. The PISA 2018 study reveals that, at the age of 30, about a quarter of high-performing girls are expected to work in health-related professions, compared to 14% of boys. When it comes to ICT-related professions, the shares are 3% and 17%, respectively. Eurostat data on student enrolment in tertiary education confirms that

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[618] IRE (2019), *Качество и равенство в училищното образование: поглед през резултатите от PISA 2018*. Available at: https://ire-bg.org/wpsite/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/PISA-2018_First-Analysis_IRE.pdf.

education, the arts, humanities, and health and welfare are among the programmes with a very high share of female students. In contrast, women account for less than 30% of students enrolled on ICT, engineering, manufacturing, and construction programmes.

PISA 2018 data reveals that bullying in schools in Bulgaria is more common among boys than girls. This is widely believed to contribute to greater absenteeism and lower performance results, as feeling safe at school is directly related to having a sense of belonging.[619] Interviews with experts did not identify gender differences in terms of the impact of school bullying, however.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the education system in Bulgaria, including the quality of learning. The Institute for Research in Education ('*Институт за изследвания в образованието*' – IRE) has evaluated the impact of COVID-19 and distance learning on the efficiency of school education. This research indicates that generally, girls perceive distance learning in a more positive manner compared to boys. The study also found that significantly more boys demonstrate low behavioural engagement than girls – 26% of boys and 17% of girls, respectively. It is essential to pay special attention to the data on cognitive engagement of students according to their gender and class, and to the significant decrease in cognitive engagement among girls in the 7th grade. On the other hand, in the 13th grade, there is a sharp increase in cognitive engagement observed among girls, in contrast with boys. The data on the students grouped by their grade also shows significant differences. Self-esteem is lowest among students in the 7th and 12th grade, and highest among students in the 5th grade. There are significant differences between girls' self-esteem and boys' – in general, girls have higher self-esteem in relation to their ability to learn, except for in the 12th grade, when it sharply decreases. All these factors could potentially help to explain the underachievement of boys, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the study stresses the importance of other factors, such as social class, ethnicity, first language, and access to the internet and digital means, respectively. These are essential for a full understanding of the experience of boys and girls today.

1.2   Vulnerable sub-groups

The school enrolment, dropout rates, and educational attainments of children in the Roma community have been the focus of various initiatives. Although slowly, some positive outcomes have emerged in recent years. Initiatives have generally focused on Roma students as a whole (low enrolment, high dropout rates, high illiteracy rates, and low enrolment in higher education degrees). The main problems, in terms of gender differences, have stemmed from high dropout rates among Roma girls in secondary education. Through strong and persistent work with the Roma communities and local schools, the stereotypes around the roles and

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[619] Асенка Христова Институт за изследвания в образованието (2020), *Обратно в училище: качеството на училищния живот като предпоставка за ангажиране и превенция на отпадането.* Available at: http://ire-bg.org/wpsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/The-quality-of-school-life.pdf.

aspirations suitable for girls have changed. The survey cited above reveals that expectations for the educational attainment of Roma boys are still higher compared to those of Roma girls, but expectations in 2019 are higher compared to 2011 for both groups. Moreover, the share of people who believe that Roma girls should pursue higher education degrees increased significantly from 14.1% in 2011 to 25.1% in 2019.

1.3 Key implications

Despite the lower educational attainment and higher dropout rates of boys, labour market statistics do not reveal any long-lasting effects on the economic status of men and women. The coefficients of economic activity and employment of men are significantly higher compared to women. Less than 30% of the employers in the country are women and less than 40% are in managerial positions, data for 2019 from the National Statistical Institute shows. The gender pay gap has stayed relatively stable at about 12.5% over the last several years, although it is significantly higher for the age group 35–54 years. The share of women at-risk-of-poverty (with income less than 60% of the median equivalised income) is traditionally higher compared to that of men. According to one of the interviewed experts, this discrepancy between school attainment and economic outcomes in relation to gender indicates that the gap in school attainment between boys and girls might be of less importance at this stage, and that policy should be focused on providing access to high-quality education for all students and preventing stratification and clustering of schools.

In terms of access to and enrolment in higher education, **in 2018, more girls (126,871) were enrolled in university compared to boys (109,464).** The difference in enrolment levels is relatively small, compared to the gender gap in attainment levels – in 2019, only 26% of males completed their tertiary studies, compared to 39% of female students. The interviews can provide a partial explanation as to why this trend might occur. Some interviewees shared the view that boys are more inclined to enter the labour market subsequently after they graduate secondary school, which later interferes with their higher education. Contrary to the statistical data that reveals a higher number of girls enrolling in and completing their tertiary education, interviewees shared a common observation that men, irrespective of their level of education, find a job faster compared with women, usually within a year after graduating. Based on available data and data collected during the interviews it could be suggested that men in Bulgaria enter the labour market faster than women.

Career choice is another factor that could provide valuable insight into this topic.[620] According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, about 18% of women in Bulgaria work in education, health, and social work, compared to 4% of men. According to NSI data for 2019, the economic activities involving the highest

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[620] Republic of Bulgaria Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, *НАЦИОНАЛНА СТРАТЕГИЯ ЗА НАСЪРЧАВАНЕ НА РАВНОПОСТАВЕНОСТТА НА ЖЕНИТЕ И МЪЖЕТЕ 2021-2030*. Available at: https://www.mlsp.government.bg/uploads/41/ravni-vzmozhnosti/strategy-nsnrjm-2021-2030.pdf.

share of women in Bulgaria are education (79.6%), human health and social work (78.3%), and financial and insurance activities (69.5%). The economic activities involving the lowest share of women are construction (6%), transport, storage and post (17.9%), and production/distribution of electricity and heat and gaseous fuels (22.4%). Additionally, according to the National Strategy for Promotion of Gender Equality 2021–2030, although more women than men in the labour market have obtained a higher education degree, women continue to account for a larger share of the lower-paid workforce sectors and those in lower positions, and are less represented in professions with higher pay and positions related to decision-making. Women are fewer among employers and the self-employed, but predominate among unpaid family workers and part-time employees. Traditional views and stereotypes continue to significantly impact educational choices, as girls are guided towards well-known 'female' professions, which are generally lower paid. In their career development, women in Bulgaria face greater barriers to inclusion in the labour market, interruptions in professional activity due to the uptake of long maternity leave, and challenges in achieving a work-life balance, which hinder their career aspirations.

A recent survey on violence against women showed that **men more often agree than disagree that domestic violence against women is a personal problem that should be solved within the family, and that women often exaggerate their stories of experienced sexual violence.**[621] People with lower education levels share these stereotypes more often compared to those with tertiary or higher secondary education. One of the interviewed experts expressed the opinion that gender-based violence, in their experience, is not strictly determined by the educational attainment of the perpetrator or by socio-economic status.

2. Policy attention and actions

2.1 Policy attention and attitudes

The gender gap in compulsory education is not recognised as an issue at the national level and no relevant policy debate exists. Instead, policy debate is focused on low-literacy rates, school dropouts, and the curriculum. As the share of early leavers from education and training in Bulgaria has historically been among the highest in the EU, the issue is one of the policy priorities in the country, and is addressed by several policy initiatives. Measures focus on preventing dropouts regardless of the gender of the pupil. Another set of policy initiatives focus on updating and adjusting the curriculum so that it is better aligned with the needs of the labour market and increasingly digital society. Disparities in educational attainment between boys and girls and differences in educational choices are not explicitly on the political agenda.

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[621] Институт Отворено общество – София (2021), Обществени нагласи към равенството между мъжете и жените и насилието над жени: Резултати от национално представително изследване на общественото мнение. Available at: https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/EqualityReport_March_2021.pdf.

Interviews with experts revealed that policy stakeholders and educational administration are reluctant to open and lead debates on the gender gap, mainly due to passionate debates that have taken place on the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention) and several other national strategic documents that relate to family, children, and gender. These debates have confirmed that Bulgarian society is very sensitive in relation to gender issues, and it is a theme prone to be dominated by radical opinions, which hinders more pragmatic approaches and ambitions. Most interviewees agreed that **there is a gap in primary and secondary research around gender and gender issues** in Bulgaria, mainly due to a lack of expertise and little collaborative effort between institutions and universities, which directly affects understanding of the subject.

There are a number of strategies which aim to improve the overall educational performance of pupils in compulsory education, but these do not include a specific focus on the underperformance of boys, or on gender equality more generally. Below, we set out some of the main policies in this area:

- The main objective of the **National Strategy for Promotion of Gender Equality 2021–2030**[622] is the creation and implementation of a long-term and sustainable state policy for achieving gender equality, which includes guarantees of equal treatment and equal obligations, overcoming gender stereotypes, equal access to public resources, and equal participation in decision-making for men and women in the Republic of Bulgaria. This is with a view to their successful personal and social realisation, as well as to stimulating the equality of men and women in all spheres of social, economic, and political life in the country. There is no specific focus on the underperformance of boys in education in the document.

- **The Strategy for Prevention and Reduction of Dropouts and Early Leavers from the Educational System 2013–2020**[623] aimed to reduce early school leavers to 11% by 2020. It recognised the need for comprehensive policies and measures to ensure successful transition between different levels of education, flexible opportunities for the provision of continuing education in the enterprise system, and school education that allows students to acquire key competencies, various forms of training, and recognition and validation of non-formal (informative) learning outcomes.

- **The National Strategy for Promoting and Improving Literacy (2014–2020)**[624] focused on improving the overall level of literacy in Bulgaria,

[622] Republic of Bulgaria Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, *НАЦИОНАЛНА СТРАТЕГИЯ ЗА НАСЪРЧАВАНЕ НА РАВНОПОСТАВЕНОСТТА НА ЖЕНИТЕ И МЪЖЕТЕ 2021-2030*. Available at: https://www.mlsp.government.bg/uploads/41/ravni-vzmozhnosti/strategy-nsnrjm-2021-2030.pdf.
[623] Republic of Bulgaria Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, *СТРАТЕГИЯ ЗА НАМАЛЯВАНЕ ДЕЛА НА ПРЕЖДЕВРЕМЕННО НАПУСНАЛИТЕ ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛНАТА СИСТЕМА (2013 – 2020)*. Available at: https://www.mon.bg/upload/6565/strategy_napusnali_obr_sistema_2013_2020.pdf.
[624] Republic of Bulgaria Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (2014), *NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR LIFELONG LEARNING FOR THE PERIOD 2014 – 2020: As adopted with DCM No 12 of January 10, 2014*. Available at: https://www.mon.bg/upload/6561/strategy_LLL_2014_2020.pdf

particularly among vulnerable groups - those for whom low income limits learning opportunities and reduces motivation, for example, as well as those for whom language is a significant barrier to education. Emphasis was placed on creating an environment that promoted literacy, in which the role of teachers in modern media was at the forefront. A specialised qualification for all teachers in modern methods of teaching and diagnostics for reading was provided.

- The national **'Together for every child' (2020–2021) programme**[625] aims to increase the efficiency of educational institutions' work in relation to the inclusion of children and students in the compulsory preschool and secondary school systems, and thus contribute to lowering dropout rates. One of the more specific goals of the programme is to involve parents and other family members in the process of retention of children and students in the education system. The programme also aims to improve access to, as well as quality of, preschool and school education by creating and maintaining a stimulating educational environment that fosters sustainable educational development.

- The national **'At school without absence'** programme (2014–2016)[626] focused on reducing the number of absences and early school leavers among students in both primary and secondary education. The programme tackled the issues on a general level, rather than specifically in terms of gender disparities between boys and girls. Better communication between schools and parents to prevent absenteeism and to increase educational results was recognised as a strong supporting factor for achieving the programme's goals.

- The national **'Developing STEM environment in education'** programme (2020–2021)[627] aims to establish new school centres, where students can focus on learning and acquiring competencies in STEM fields. The centres will have all the necessary technology and equipment needed for learning. The programme is targeted at innovative schools, or schools with the potential to develop innovation, in STEM.

2.2 Key success factors and barriers

Underperformance of boys in education is not a common topic of discourse in Bulgaria, nor one that can be identified in the political agenda. It is therefore hard to identify particular success factors that may contribute to reducing it. All interviewees shared the opinion that the underachievement of boys is not a priority in current educational strategies and policies, and that there is no primary or secondary research, analysis, or debate around the topic in the country.

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[625] Republic of Bulgaria Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, *НП „Заедно за всяко дете"*. Available at https://www.mon.bg/bg/100823
[626] Republic of Bulgaria Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, https://www.mon.bg/upload/11929/NP6_uchilishte_bez_otsystvia_2015.pdf
[627] Republic of Bulgaria Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, *НП „Изграждане на училищна STEM среда"*. Available at: https://www.mon.bg/bg/100835 and https://stem.mon.bg/.

Subsequently, this information gap directly affects discourse around the issue. This could be one of the reasons why it is not identified as a problem in the country.

Teachers shared that **disciplinary issues in Bulgarian schools are a major problem in the educational process.** According to research, boys 'top the rankings' for poor discipline in the classroom and for provoking and participating in school bullying. Possible reasons given for this include changes in values and attitudes towards school and non-compliance with rules, as well as lack of family upbringing that fosters respect for teachers. In addition, certain teaching methods provoke a lack of attention in the students and do not hold their interest for long. Students are passive listeners, and there is a clear lack of individual approach to teaching each pupil. Interviewees predicts that this results in an inability to develop self-esteem and critical thinking skills. Awakening the interest, motivation, and stimulation of students to acquire new knowledge is a process that would help to overcome manifestations of bad discipline.

Teachers interviewed during the data collection process shared that **the underperformance of boys and gender-related issues are not topics discussed in schools or among school staff in Bulgaria**. Moreover, some interviewees shared that the challenge around **the ageing workforce** – in this case, teachers – also affects the issue. Almost half (49%) of teaching staff in Bulgaria are over the age of 50, and are therefore less familiar with issues around gender and gender inequality.

2.3   Overview of key initiatives and measures

It is difficult to identify key initiatives in Bulgaria that focus specifically on improving the underperformance of boys in education. Bulgaria's overall approach to education is one of improving enrolment and dropout rates by increasing quality of and access to education for every child. These actions are mainly done in a 'gender blind' manner. As highlighted in the sections above, gender-specific initiatives are rare in Bulgaria, and initiatives are more likely to address females than males. The **National Strategy for Promotion of Gender Equality (2021−2030)** encourages more women in STEM and IT spheres, for example.

National Strategy for Promotion of Gender Equality (2021−2030)

The goal of the National Strategy for the Promotion of Gender Equality (2021−2030) is to contribute to achieving equality between men and women in Bulgaria through the implementation of unified, consistent, and sustainable state policy. Equality between men and women means equal rights and obligations, and equal opportunities for access, participation, and realisation in all areas of public life, with men and women free to develop, make choices, and follow their chosen path in life without facing restrictions due to stereotypes and gender discrimination.

The five main priorities of the National Strategy are:

- Achieving equality of men and women in the labour market, as well as an equal degree of economic independence;

- Reducing the gender pay and income gap;
- Promoting equality between men and women in decision-making processes;
- Combating violence and protecting and supporting victims;
- Overcoming gender stereotypes and sexism in various spheres of life.

Although the strategy's main focus is on gender and gender equality, education is not a primary area addressed in the action plan. The educational aspect of the National Strategy mainly concentrates on the number of early leavers, the digital competencies of students, and the low number of women in STEM fields. The strategy aims to encourage women to pursue their chosen educational and professional path free of gender stereotypes; acquire digital skills and competencies; transform traditional notions of their role in the field of technology; and increase not only their economic independence, but also their status in society. It could therefore be suggested that the National Strategy focuses more on women, rather than men.

Institutions responsible for implementation of the strategy:

- The executive body at the central level is the Council of Ministers. The council determines the state policy on the equality of men and women, accepts the strategy, and oversees implementation plans and progress reports.
- The National Council on Equality between Women and Men (NCEWM) to the Council of Ministers is the executive body responsible for coordination, consultation, and cooperation of the strategy at the central level. The council participates in development, implementation, and reporting of the strategy, and also assists the Council of Ministers with the development and implementation of state policy on the equality of men and women.
- The Minister of Labour and Social Policy directs, coordinates, and controls the implementation of state policy on the equality of men and women, presides over the National Council on Equality between Women and Men, and coordinates the development, implementation, and reporting of the strategy through a specialised ministry administration unit.
- The central and territorial bodies of the executive power implement the policy on equality of men and women in accordance with the National Strategy.
- Regional governors are the executive body at territorial level. They ensure coordination between national and local interests in the field of equality between men and women, and facilitate interaction with local self-government bodies and administration, as well as with the territorial units of the workers' representative organisations, employees, and employers.
- The network of experts is responsible for the coordination of equality between men and women within the central and territorial bodies of executive power. Experts participate in the development, implementation, and reporting of the strategy, and support the central, territorial, and executive bodies to exercise their powers through implementation of the state policy on equality of men and women.

The main sources of funding for activities that are implemented as part of the strategy are the state budget, European funds and programmes, and other national and international sources. Funds are provided through the respective yearly budgets of the

institutions responsible for the implementation of activities under the strategy, as well as through national and international programmes and projects, sponsorships, and donations.

More information: *НАЦИОНАЛНА СТРАТЕГИЯ ЗА НАСЪРЧАВАНЕ НА РАВНОПОСТАВЕНОСТТА НА ЖЕНИТЕ И МЪЖЕТЕ 2016 –2020 г.* Available at: https://www.strategy.bg/FileHandler.ashx?fileId=9257

National Programme 'At School without Absence' (2015–2016)

'At school without absence'[628] (2015–2016) was a national programme that focused on reducing the number of absences and early school leavers among students in both primary and secondary education. The programme also aimed to support parents and teachers to ensure a better learning environment and quality of education.

The general objective of the programme was to reduce the number of 'free' hours and absences among students by ensuring that these were accurately and correctly recorded in their school documentation. By taking real, timely, and effective measures like this to motivate students to regularly attend classes, and by involving the active participation of parents, the student community, municipal structures, and civil society in this process, the programme aimed to increase the active participation of students in learning and training.

The initiative also aimed to increase cost-efficiency at schools by optimising the internal structure and quality of education implementation in line with state educational requirements. This was closely linked to the Strategy for Prevention and Reduction of Dropouts and Early Leavers from the Educational System, and contributed to its implementation.

'At school without absence' also had the following specific objectives:

- Stimulation and motivation of principals and pedagogical teams in schools to develop and implement their school programmes to reduce absences among students through their real and accurate reflection in school documentation;
- Development of measures to prevent premature departure from the educational system of students, as well as to facilitate the reintegration of previous early leavers in the education system;
- Reducing the number of incorrectly reported absences in schools.

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[628] *НАЦИОНАЛНА ПРОГРАМА „НА УЧИЛИЩЕ БЕЗ ОТСЪСТВИЯ".* Available at: https://www.mon.bg/upload/11929/NP6_uchilishte_bez_otsystvia_2015.pdf.

The programme provides a general approach for tackling issues related to education in Bulgaria. One of the main actions under the programme was facilitation of better communication between schools and parents in order to prevent absenteeism and to increase educational results among both boys and girls.

The main stakeholders involved in the programme were the Ministry of Education, regional departments of education, and state and municipal schools. The 'At school without absence' programme was financed by the Ministry of Education and Science.

More information:

https://www.mon.bg/upload/11929/NP6_uchilishte_bez_otsystvia_2015.pdf

The National Strategy for Lifelong Learning (2014–2020)

The National Strategy for Lifelong Learning (NSLLL) established a strategic framework for state policy on education and training in Bulgaria, which aimed to contribute to achieving the European goal of smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth.

The strategy was elaborated in response to various challenges, including those related to Bulgaria overcoming the consequences of the financial crisis (both in Europe and worldwide), and also to preserving the country's national identity and cultural diversity while implementing cohesion policies. The implementation period of the strategy was from 2014 until 2020, following the previous implementation period from 2008 until 2013.

The strategy document covered all forms of education, training, and learning – formal, non-formal, and informal – and also provided recommendations for the implementation period.

The strategy's scope for the implementation of lifelong learning included:

- All individuals within the country engaged in education or training, whether formal or informal;

- All training providers – institutions carrying out training (whether private or state kindergartens, schools, universities, training centres, culture institutions, etc.) – which meet society's needs and the labour market's requirements;

- Employers, trade organisations, labour unions, civil society organisations, and other partners (i.e. those that set out and meet the above requirements and deal with needs related to education and training);

- All regions, municipalities, and local communities, which have an important part to play in asserting their position as 'learning regions';

- Government bodies (e.g. ministries and agencies) responsible for setting out the national policies on education and training, as well as the relevant tools and

measures required to ensure efficiency in the supply and demand of lifelong learning.

The general aim of the strategy was to develop key competencies and achieve a reliable quality of school education and training outcomes through a lifelong learning system aligned with labour market needs. The strategy indicated one issue related to gender differences; the 'reading' cognitive area, where girls perform much better than boys. The strategy stated that:

'The reasons for the low scores in the OECD survey (reading, mathematics, and natural sciences) are likely due to the school system's lack of capacity to ensure access to quality education for all students.'[629]

The significant difference in the scores of students from comprehensive, profiled, and vocational secondary schools in Bulgaria were also striking.

The objectives of the strategy were to:

- Increase the share of children covered by preschool education and training (from 4-years-old to first grade enrolment age) from 87.8% in 2012 to 90% in 2020;

- Reduce the share of early leavers from the educational system aged 18–24 from 12.5% in 2012 to less than 11% in 2020;

- Reduce the share of 15 year-old pupils with poor scores in:

    o reading from 39.4% in 2012 to 30% in 2020;

    o mathematics from 43.8% in 2012 to 35% in 2020;

    o natural sciences from 36.9% in 2012 to 30.0% in 2020;

- Increase the share of those completing higher education aged 30–34 from 26.9% in 2012 to 36% in 2020;

- Increase the employment rates of the population aged 20–64 from 63% in 2012 to 76% in 2020;

- Increase participation of the population aged 25–64 in education and training from 1.5% in 2012 to more than 5% in 2020 (a four-week reference period);

- Reduce the share of illiterate people:

    o from 2.0% among people aged 15–19 in 2011 to 1.5% in 2020;

    o from 2.3% among people aged 20–29 in 2011 to 1.5% in 2020.

The strategy's implementation is funded by the national budget, European funds, and

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[629] Republic of Bulgaria Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (2014), NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR LIFELONG LEARNING FOR THE PERIOD 2014 – 2020: As adopted with DCM No 12 of January 10, 2014. Available at: https://www.mon.bg/upload/6561/strategy_LLL_2014_2020.pdf.

the European Commission's Erasmus+ programme, as well as through donations, sponsorships, and other sources.

In terms of evaluation of the strategy's effectiveness, the 2015 Monitoring Report[630] stated that progress towards meeting the strategy's objectives was insignificant and extremely unsatisfactory. In terms of effectiveness and results, according to Edu2030[631], the plan for implementation of the strategy in 2018 showed that the activities and measures outlined were small in scale. This shows that in practice, the steps planned in the strategy are often not enough, and thus have no potential to lead to the desired impact.

More information: https://www.mon.bg/upload/6561/strategy_LLL_2014_2020.pdf

3. **Overall assessment**

3.1 **Key findings**

The primary focus in compulsory education in Bulgaria is on reducing the number of early school leavers, increasing the percentage of children enrolled in education, promoting equality and inclusion, and the overall digitalisation of education in the country. Overall, trends in these areas are moderately positive. Data shows that the implementation of initiatives in these areas could be improved, especially if stakeholders adopted a more proactive approach, which would, in turn, result in better outcomes and a higher quality of education in Bulgaria.

Gender differences in performance, and more specifically, the underachievement of boys, are not recognised as an issue in Bulgaria, and active policy debate on these subjects is missing. Data reveals that differences in educational performance between boys and girls exist, with a slight decline observed in PISA 2018 results. The gender gap in Bulgaria in reading was 40 points in 2018, which is lower than the gap recorded in 2009 (61 points). Boys' performance remained stable, while girls' performance had declined over. At the time of writing, there is no active national strategy or initiative that addresses these trends, nor the underperformance of boys specifically.

Despite the lower educational attainment of boys, statistics reveal that men perform better in the Bulgarian labour market (in terms of economic activity, employment, and payment). This erodes the debate on gender gap and keeps the discussions within the agenda of improving enrolment rates, preventing early dropouts, and improving educational attainments for all pupils.

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[630] *ГОДИШЕН ДОКЛАД за изпълнението на Националната стратегия за учене през целия живот за периода 2014 – 2020 година*. Available at:
https://www.mon.bg/upload/6556/doklad_izpalnenie_2014_NSLLL_05.08.2015.pdf.
[631] *Ключови компетентности и умения за успех От закон към практика.* Available at: http://u2030.bg/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/key_competences_monitoring_report_2019.pdf.

The interviewees that took part in the data collection were happy to discuss the issue of boys'/young men's educational outcomes, but while some interviewees advocated for more of a focus on the issue, there was no clear expression of support for increased focus on boys' attainment levels. On the contrary, although the underperformance of boys was indicated as a trend, most of the interviewees supported current initiatives tackling the challenges mentioned above.

3.2   Recommendations

During the data collection process, interviewees shared some practical recommendations for increasing the success of boys in school, and more specifically:

- **Real implementation of the dual model of education (theoretical training and mandatory internship, depending on the specialty):** In this way, students gain practical experience and enter the labour market prepared, which often results in a better starting job and higher pay. This could potentially be beneficial, as there are more boys than girls enrolled in vocational education in Bulgaria.

- **The opportunity for early school completion:** This recommendation links to issues around early school leavers. Such an opportunity could potentially provide an option for students to obtain the necessary level of education, but graduate earlier, if they wish to work or support their families.

- **Better engagement and support of boys in education – more specifically, related to their sense of belonging:** Based on the practical recommendations above, this could be achieved through collective extracurricular activities and also through actively engaging parents, encouraging them to be more present and cooperative when they are faced with difficulties and challenges that can occur in the educational process.

- **A stronger focus on bullying prevention:** Bullying appeared to be a common issue among boys, especially as they grow up and enter secondary education. One interviewee who works in schools shared the view that emotional bullying is more common among girls, whereas physical bullying and violence are more common among boys. This is a potential area for improvement, as data shows that the actions previously taken, such as media and school campaigns on bullying, have not been sufficient to prevent it. Regardless of the type of bullying, it remains an issue for both boys and girls in compulsory education.

- **Collection of information and data surrounding the underperformance of boys:** The current lack of data on this could hinder future actions or support in relation to the topic. Interviewees shared the opinion that there is a significant need for more research and analysis into this area, and that this would be significantly beneficial for building a policy framework around the issue of underachievement, regardless of the level of education. This could be

stimulated through facilitating dialogue and ensuring better communication and shared work between different education stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education, schools, universities, and NGOs.

Interviewees expressed largely **similar views about the role of the EU in supporting Member States to tackle the gender gap in educational outcomes.** Some interviewees stated that the EU (and the OECD) have a positive impact on the Bulgarian education system due to the implementation of different EU projects, such as Erasmus+, and the availability of data and external assessment, such as PISA. One interviewee indicated that differences between education systems and policy contexts presents challenges in finding universal policies and practices that can be applied across all Member States.

6.3.2 Czechia

1. Key trends and implications

1.1 Contextualisation

At the early childhood education and care (ECEC) level, there is no evidence of gender disparities in Czechia. Data shows that the participation rate of boys and girls is very similar. The share of boys attending ECEC (aged four to seven years old) has increased from 86.1% in 2012 to 91.5% in 2018. The share of girls in the same age group follows the same trend, with 86% attending ECEC in 2012 and 91% in 2018.

However, gender disparities start occurring at the beginning of compulsory education. Based on data from the Ministry of Education,[632] the share of girls starting compulsory schooling at age six is higher than the share of boys. When comparing the number of children entering compulsory education at age seven, the share of boys is higher compared to the share of girls. In 2018, there was almost twice as many boys (30%) who were not 'school ready' compared to girls (16%).[633] This finding suggests that boys are more likely to start compulsory schooling one year later.

When looking at the learning outcomes of students at the end of compulsory education, **the continuous gender disparities are only visible when it comes to reading.** The international PISA assessment shows that on average 15 year-old girls achieve higher scores than boys in the same age group. The differences are statistically significant in the last four PISA assessment rounds in years 2009, 2012, 2015 and 2018.[634]

On the other hand, the standardised PISA results from mathematics assessments show that, on average, 15 year-old girls and boys achieve similar results. **In the past four rounds of PISA assessments, only one assessment showed statistically significant gender differences in 2015, when boys scored higher in mathematics compared to girls.** Similarly, the standardised PISA results from science assessments show that 15 year-old girls and boys have similar results. In the past four rounds of PISA assessments, only one assessment showed statistically significant gender differences in 2015, when boys scored on average slightly higher in science than girls.

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[632] Ministry of Education (2013), *Stav genderové rovnosti a Návrh střednědobého strategického plánu v oblasti genderové rovnosti v resortu Ministerstva školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy,* European Commission. Available at: https://www.msmt.cz/ministerstvo/genderova-rovnost

[633] iROZHLAS (2019), *Do školy s odkladem. České děti usedají do lavic ve vyšším věku, hlásí statistici*. Available at: https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/odklad-deti-zaci-skolstvi-cesky-statisticky-urad_1908281247_ako

[634] OECD (2021), PISA [data set]. Available at: https://pisadataexplorer.oecd.org/ide/idepisa/

Gender disparity in the Czech education system is also demonstrated by the larger number of boys repeating a school year compared to girls. In the 2019/2020 school year, out of total of 6,795 pupils repeating a school year in primary and lower secondary school, more than half were boys (3,897).[635]

The gender-based division in compulsory education is also evident in schools with specialised teaching curricula. **Traditionally, boys are represented more in schools with sports, mathematics and natural sciences, while girls are represented more in schools focusing on languages, music and social science subjects.** The gender disparity in education trajectories continues in secondary and tertiary education, which is directly linked to the gender division in the labour market.[636]

Attainment levels in different types of secondary and upper secondary education also show gender disparities. There is a wide range of secondary schools in Czechia which contributes not only to socio-economic disparities but also gender disparities. There are four main types of secondary schools: eight-year gymnasium (lower and upper secondary, ISCED 244+344), four-year gymnasium (ISCED 344), upper secondary education with a VET certificate (ISCED 353), and upper secondary education with specialisation (ISCED 344).[637]

Data consistently shows that more girls attend eight-year gymnasium schools (secondary and upper secondary level), as well as four-year gymnasium schools (upper secondary level), in comparison to boys. On the other hand, boys outnumber girls in upper secondary vocational education without the A level examinations. In the 2018/2019 school year,[638] for example, there were 65% of boys in upper secondary schools without the final examination (vocational track) compared to 35% of girls. This trend has been consistent and strong since 1993.

The specialised upper secondary education tracks also show gender disparities in subject choices. An annual summary report presented by CERMAT, the national examination centre, showed that the technical study programmes are mostly attended by boys (80–90%),[639] a trend that has been consistent since 2011. On the other hand, more girls participate in upper secondary programmes focused on humanities, education, arts, medical care, hospitality, and non-technical study programmes (more than 75% of participants are girls).

[635] Ministry of Education (2019/2020), *Statistical yearbook of education – performance indicators until 2019/20*. Available at: https://www.msmt.cz/vzdelavani/skolstvi-v-cr/statistika-skolstvi/statisticka-rocenka-skolstvi-vykonove-ukazatele-2017-18

[636] Ministry of Education (2013), *Stav genderové rovnosti a Návrh střednědobého strategického plánu v oblasti genderové rovnosti v resortu Ministerstva školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy*, European Commission. Available at: https://www.msmt.cz/ministerstvo/genderova-rovnost

[637] Eurydice (2021), *Czechia: Upper Secondary and Post-Secondary Non-Tertiary Education,* European Commission. Available at: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/upper-secondary-and-post-secondary-non-tertiary-education-7_en

[638] National Statistical Office (2019), *Focus on women and men – 2019: Children, pupils, and students of various types of schools by sex* [data set], European Commission. Available at: https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/3-vzdelavani

[639] CERMAT (2018), *Results of the graduation test in 2017 and its development since 2011*, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. Available at: https://data.cermat.cz/files/files/MZ2017_ZZ.pdf

Another indicator of gender disparities in the Czech education system is the results of the final (A level) examination. The evidence suggests that boys are more likely to succeed in the exam and achieve higher scores compared to girls. At the same time, increasingly more boys are failing the final exam. **This shows that boys represent a larger share among both the highest achieving students as well as the lowest achieving students.** The data from the final examination in 2020[640] shows that the gender disparities were the highest since 2013 in favour of boys. In 2020, boys achieved higher scores compared to girls in mathematics and foreign languages. Despite this, the share of boys that do not pass the final examination is increasing faster compared to that of girls: in 2017, the increase in the share of boys that did not pass the final examination was 1.8 percentage points in comparison to the previous year, while the increase in the share of girls that did not pass was only 0.8 pp.

In addition to the disparities of educational outcomes, there are several individual factors affecting gender disparities in Czechia. The first factor is that boys are more likely to skip school once or more times compared to girls. Data from PISA 2018 shows that almost 7% of boys skipped school once or twice, and additionally more than 5% of boys skipped school 3–5 times. While less than 6% of girls were reported skipping school once or twice and around 3% of girls skipped school 3–5 times.

The second individual factor is that boys are more competitive and want to perform better than others. The share of boys that strongly agreed or agreed that it is important to perform better than others was 53.7% compared to 46% of girls in PISA 2018 findings.

The third individual factor is that a significantly higher share of boys does not read for enjoyment and overall, boys read less than girls. Almost two thirds of boys do not read for enjoyment compared to one third of girls. Moreover, only 41% of boys read every day compared to 71% of girls, according to PISA 2018 findings.

The gender disparities in education are strongly affected by **family and societal stereotypes** in Czechia. Differing family expectations and support for each gender form a gender bias. A Czech research study[641] found that in general, parents tend to perceive boys in a stereotypical way, as providers for their future family, and are therefore more likely to support their studies which will lead to financially better occupations. By contrast, parents of girls tend to think about how their daughters will combine their future occupations, caring responsibilities and motherhood.

Such attitudes can be found not only in parents, but also in teachers, which strengthens gender stereotypes and influences the respective ambitions of

[640] iDNES (2020), *Chlapci u maturit překonali dívky. Jejich náskok je letos rekordní*. Available at: https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/maturity-divky-chlapci-znamky-cermat.A200623_195449_domaci_rik
[641] Jarkovská, L., Lišková, K., Smidova, I. (2010), *S genderem na trh : rozhodování o dalším vzdělání patnáctiletých,* Masaryk University. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/47804514_S_genderem_na_trh_rozhodovani_o_dalsim_vzdelani_patnactiletych

boys and girls. The Czech experts interviewed for this study reported that boys face different expectations in schools compared to girls. If boys exhibit problematic behaviour, it is more likely to be tolerated by teachers, as are bad grades and disrespectful behaviour towards authority figures. On the other hand, girls are expected to express non-conflicting behaviour, be diligent and obedient towards authority figures.

These expectations affect the way boys and girls are assessed at school as well as the way they are penalised for non-compliance. Although on average girls achieve better grades in school, their results are often seen by teachers as an ability 'to learn everything by heart' without understanding the logic or solution. On the other hand, boys are expected to understand the problems and not be willing to only memorise the learning content. Teacher's expectations and behaviour towards each gender consequently influence the ambitions and self-confidence of students.[642]

Similar findings are presented in a research study conducted by the Czech School Inspectorate (ČSI). The study found that the performance of girls is overestimated by teachers in language subjects, while the performance of boys is overestimated in mathematics.[643] This creates stereotypes towards each gender, and is reflected not only in mathematics and language classes but in the general approach of teachers towards each gender in the school environment.

It was reported by those interviewed for this study that the school environment, expectations of parents and teachers, as well as the overall gender stereotypes in society, play an important role in reinforcing gender stereotypes and consequently gender segregation in upper secondary school tracks. The implications of gender inequality in Czech society are that men are always in a better position compared to women, despite achieving the same level of education. Men with vocational education as well as men with higher education degrees, for example, are better positioned in the labour market. This is evident in data from 2019, for example, which shows that within one to three years after graduation from the highest level of education, 92.1% of men were in employment compared to 76.6% of women.[644] Men also earn higher wages compared to women with the same qualifications.

Reflecting this, **the unemployment rate is generally higher for women in Czechia.** In 2019, the unemployment rate of women in was 2.4% compared to the unemployment rate of men which was 1.7%. The same outcome is true for 15–24 year olds: in 2019, 6% of young women faced unemployment compared to 5.4% of

[642] Smetácková, et al. (2005), *Genderové aspekty prechodu žáku a žákyn mezi vzdelávacími stupni*, Výzkumná zpráva. Sociologický ústav, Praha. Available at: https://is.muni.cz/el/1441/jaro2010/TE2BP_SVP/um/Genderove_aspekty_prechodu_zaku_a_zakyn_mezi_vz delavacimi_stupni.pdf

[643] Šmídová, I., et al. (2018), *Muži v systému vzdělávání (Men in the education system),* Czech Government*. Available at: https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/pracovni_skupina_muzi_a_rovnosti_zen_a_muzu/Policy-paper_muzi_v_systemu_vzdelavani.pdf

[644] Eurostat (2021), *Employment rates of young people not in education and training by sex, educational attainment level, years since completion of highest level of education and degree of urbanisation*, European Commission. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDAT_LFSE_34__custom_330210/default/table?lang=en

men. Moreover, a higher share of women are at risk of poverty and social exclusion (14.6% of women compared to 10.4% of men). This is also true for women who work and are at risk of poverty (3.7% of women compared to 3.2% of men). Additionally, the share of young women (15-24 years old) neither in employment nor in education and training is consistently higher compared to men: in 2019, Eurostat data showed that 8.2% of women were NEET which is more than double the share of men (3.3%).[645]

1.2   Vulnerable sub-groups

There is a lack of available data on gender disparities in specific sub-groups of vulnerable students in Czechia and this was confirmed by the experts interviewed for this study. The only available data relates to early school leavers who are often from lower socio-economic backgrounds with lower parental support. However, **the data on early school leavers suggests that there are no significant differences between genders.** In 2019, 6.6% of men left education. This figure is slightly lower than the 6.8% of women. Both shares of early leavers are below the EU-27 average. Data on the sub-group of early school leavers with a foreign country of origin show that both shares for men and women were above that of the total population but were the lowest among all EU-27 Member States in 2019. The share of men reduced from 11.8% in 2018 to 8.3% in 2019. For the same group of women, the share reduced from 10.8% in 2017, (no data for 2018), to 8.2% in 2019, below the EU7 averages (20.3% and 19.9% respectively).[646]

1.3   Key implications

The problem of gender disparities and boy's underperformance in education is not an isolated one. Each gender is faced with different stereotypes and different social pressures deriving from these stereotypes. For example, it was reported by gender experts in Czechia that because society is traditionally based on a patriarchal model, it is easier for girls to be 'accepted' in traditionally male dominated industries such as ICT, because girls are moving up in the gender hierarchy. Whereas in the case of boys, it is opposite: if boys choose to enter professions dominated by women such as services and care or teaching professions, they are faced with additional societal pressures of not meeting masculine expectations, earning lower wages, and moving 'downwards' in the gender hierarchy.

Based on the Eurostat data from 2015 to 2018,[647] there is a **strong correlation between tertiary study programme choices and gender stereotypes**. In all four years, arts and humanities were chosen more than 2.2 times more by women compared to men. The same trend is visible in social sciences, journalism and information where more than 2 times more women chose to study these subjects

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[645] Eurostat data
[646] Eurostat data
[647] Eurostat, *Educational choices between men and women in tertiary education*, European Commission.

compared to men. Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics haves slightly lower shares of female students but the trend was still present with 1.4 times more women studying these subjects compared to men. The only field of study where men strongly outnumbered women was ICT. In all four years there were between 5 and 6 times more men studying this programme compared to women each year.

This gender disparity in study choices creates a feminisation/masculinisation of certain fields. Feminised professions are characterised by lower wages, lower prestige in society and a higher share of professional women. The opposite is true for male-dominated professions.

Female-dominant professions in Czechia include those in the fields of healthcare, education, social services and care for young children in early years and for old people in retirement. In the case of education, there is higher feminisation of this field compared to other countries.[648] In the education system most teachers are women, especially in pre-primary (99.7%) and primary education (84%).[649] Male teachers often have to defend this 'non-standard' career choice, which is not in line with the socially perceived masculine ideal. This often intensifies in professional roles involving care for young children.[650]

The gender disparities are further deepened not only by the way that female teachers approach boys and girls but also due to the lack of male role models showing that men can care for children, be gentle and sensitive towards children and show their emotions and weaknesses. Boys and girls need to see men in teaching professions who do not reinforce masculine dominance and gender stereotypes of men in society. The experts interviewed for this study held the view that more men in teaching professions will help to stop reinforcing the model of men not being suitable for female-dominated professions.

De-feminising the teaching profession, increasing the wages of teachers and consequently attracting more men to education is a topic that is debated in Czech society. It was reported by those interviewed for this study that men are not seen only as role models for boys and girls in schools, but also as 'saviours' of the teaching profession, which is currently not well-respected and has low financial remuneration compared to other professions requiring tertiary education. Based on this expectation, some expect that more men in teaching will increase the prestige of the profession, which, counter-intuitively, reinforces gender stereotypes even while trying to reduce them.

Therefore, to some extent Czech society is idealising the role of men in the education system and projects certain stereotypical masculine attributes on male teachers. This

[648] Liga otevřených mužů (2019). Available at: https://ilom.cz/
[649] Czech Government (2014), *Government strategies for equality between women and men in the Czechia for the years 2014–2020.* Available at: https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/Projekt_Optimalizace/Strategie-pro-rovnost-zen-a-muzu-v-CR-na-leta-2014-2020.pdf
[650] Fárová, N. (2015), *Male teachers in kindergartens – construction of masculinity in a feminized environment*, Gender and research. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.13060/12130028.2015.16.1.166

view is supported by the research study[651] which concludes that male teachers are perceived as professionals who are easy-going and have a playful spirit while being authoritative and respected by students. This idealisation does not involve authority-based teaching but rather the idea of authority as a leadership which is perceived to be a natural part of the masculine gender. This stereotypical view creates a barrier for male teachers to enter female-dominated professions because it puts pressure on them to exhibit stereotypical masculine attributes to fulfil these expectations, which they may not want to or be able to meet.

Linked to this, some experts interviewed for this study held the view that Czech society holds different expectations for male and female teachers. **Female teachers are generally perceived as those who can physically and emotionally take care of children and students, but male teachers are those who bring the intellectual stimulations and knowledge to their students.** This is a stereotypical view which is present in society and does not reflect the situation in schools. However, the data shows that there is significantly higher share of female teachers in pre-primary education (99.7%) and primary education (84%)[652] while male teachers dominate the higher education sector (62%).[653]

Gender stereotypes are not only creating barriers for men and women to enter professions dominated by the other gender, but they are also limiting the freedom and development of individuals. Society is creating expectations for each gender; however, no individual can be defined only by their gender and therefore this approach consequently prevents others from seeing the unique individual talents of each person. Some of the experts interviewed for this report suggested that instead of focusing on stereotypical views related to genders, society should see each person as an individual with unique set of characteristics of which gender is only one. This approach is reflected in gender-sensitive teaching which research suggests is one of the key elements in addressing gender inequalities in education. Gender-sensitive education promotes principles of gender equality and supporting teachers in their own reflections on gender inequalities and stereotypes, which will contribute to equal opportunities for boys and girls in education.[654]

The government strategy for equality recognises that men are faced with more health risks compared to women and not enough attention is paid to gender issues in the context of health and life expectancy. The evidence shows that there is a higher share of men addicted to alcohol and other addictive substances compared to women. Additionally, a higher percentage of men commit suicide (the suicide ratio of men and

[651] Fárová, N. (2015), *Male teachers in kindergartens – construction of masculinity in a feminized environment*, Gender and research. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.13060/12130028.2015.16.1.166

[652] Czech Government (2014), *Government strategies for equality between women and men in the Czechia for the years 2014–2020.* Available at: https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/Projekt_Optimalizace/Strategie-pro-rovnost-zen-a-muzu-v-CR-na-leta-2014-2020.pdf

[653] Evropa v Datech (2019), *Women among teachers.* Available at: https://www.evropavdatech.cz/clanek/33-zeny-mezi-uciteli/

[654] Jarkovská, L. (2013), *Gender před tabulí. Etnografický výzkum genderové reprodukce v každodennosti školní třídy,* Masaryk University, Praha. Available at: https://www.muni.cz/en/research/publications/1362978

women is 4.8: 1).[655] During 2006–2010, out of the total number of recorded suicides, 82.7% were conducted by men.[656]

It was confirmed by the experts interviewed for this study that the link between society's stereotypical views of men and extremism exist in the Czech context. The stereotypical views of men tolerate male aggression and violence as it is perceived as a characteristic of a 'true man'. In a school environment, male aggression is tolerated more and it is often excused by teachers with the stereotypical view that 'they are just boys'. This is then translated to a societal level where more men engage in violence and extremist behaviour. A report published by the Ministry of Interior in 2015[657] shows that out of all criminal offenses related to extremism, 91.7% were committed by men compared to 8.3% by women. This is a long-term trend which is consistent with the previous years as well. In 2018, there were almost 10 times more cases of men (9,630 cases) sentenced with an offence of violence compared to women (974 cases).[658]

2. Policy attention and actions

2.1 Policy attention and attitudes

In 2001, the Czech Government established a Government Council for Gender Equality. The council deals with gender discrimination, assesses the effectiveness of the government programmes tackling gender issues in society, suggests conceptual steps for the government, cooperates with other stakeholders, sets up priorities, and identifies the main gender issues in society.[659]

In 2014, the Czech Government implemented the 'Strategy for equality of men and women for 2014 – 2020',[660] developed by a government committee and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. The strategy presented the main gender issues in Czech society and set out the topic of gender equality as a societal priority and one of the

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[655] Úřad vlády ČR (2014), *Vládní strategie pro rovnost žen a mužů v České republice na léta 2014 – 2020*, Úřad vlády České republiky. Available at: https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/Projekt_Optimalizace/Strategie-pro-rovnost-zen-a-muzu-v-CR-na-leta-2014-2020.pdf
[656] National statistics office, *Number of suicides by gender,* p. 10. Available at: https://www.czso.cz/documents/10180/20566739/401211k4.pdf/4ec1b7b2-c3e4-48f2-af6b-4788a49857a6?version=1.0
[657] Ministry of Interior (2019), *Annual reports on extremism and the concept of combating extremism,* Ministry of Interior of the Czechia. Available at: https://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=cs&u=https://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/extremismus-vyrocni-zpravy-o-extremismu-a-strategie-boje-proti-extremismu.aspx&prev=search&pto=aue
[658] National Statistics Office, *Prosecuted persons by sex and type of criminal offence in 2018*. Available at: https://www.czso.cz/documents/10180/91605937/300002190606.pdf/0723ca9d-8172-4807-9af8-d75d30fc6f17?version=1.1
[659] Website of the Government Gender Committee (2021). Available at: https://www.vlada.cz/cz/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/rada-vlady-pro-rovnost-zen-a-muzu-121632/#:~:text=Rada%20vl%C3%A1dy%20pro%20rovnost%20%C5%BEen%20a%20mu%C5%BE%C5%AF%20(d%C3%A1le%20jen%20%22Rada,1033%20ze%20dne%2010.&text=Rada%20p%C5%99ipravuje%20n%C3%A1vrhy%20sm%C4%9B%C5%99uj%C3%ADc%C3%AD%20k%20prosazov%C3%A1n%C3%AD%20a%20dosa%C5%BE%C3%AD%20rovnosti%20%C5%BEen%20a%20mu%C5%BE%C5%AF
[660] Úřad vlády České republiky (2014), *Vládní strategie pro rovnost žen a mužů v České republice za léta 2014 – 2020*, Praha. Available at: https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/Projekt_Optimalizace/Strategie-pro-rovnost-zen-a-muzu-v-CR-na-leta-2014-2020.pdf

principles of democratic state. To achieve gender equality, the strategy outlines strategic priorities including tackling gender stereotypes in society, strengthening the legal framework supporting gender equality in society and implementing the policy in practice. The strategy includes actions such as collecting statistical data to monitor the gender disparities in the society, focusing on gender equality of both genders and equally supporting women and men entering professions dominated by the other gender, through close cooperation with all stakeholders including gender academics, NGOs and expert groups.

A specific goal of the strategy relates to gender equality in education and research, and 'gender equality in the knowledge society'. It identifies two main issues: first, horizontal and vertical gender segregation in the education system and second, the unbalanced representation of teachers at different levels of the education system. To address these issues in education, the strategy set up a framework aiming to eliminate gender-based patterns of behaviour that limit the balanced representation of women and men in education and their career choices, and that alleviate gender segregation in education.

In 2018, the government published a policy paper focused specifically on men in the education sector.[661] The policy paper examines on the disadvantageous position of boys in the education system as well as the position of male teachers in the system.

More specifically, the policy paper outlines the discrimination of men in the education system and describes the main issues such as the lack of male teachers in education, stereotypes of parents and teachers towards boys, and the advantageous position of men in a society which is not determined by the level of their education as much as in the case of women. One chapter specifically focuses on stereotypes and teachers' expectations of and attitudes towards boys in schools and what the advantages are for boys (such as more independence and trust from teachers) and what the barriers are (such as a lack of male role models in traditionally feminine professions). However, this policy paper is not binding and does not involve any implementation, it only maps the situation of men in the education system and presents three main recommendations.

- The first recommendation focuses on increasing **gender-sensitive teaching** in schools through teacher training. It recommends introducing an obligatory subject for all students at faculties of education to educate future teachers on gender-sensitive education.

- The second recommendation focuses on **strengthening the activities and good practices** of gender-sensitive teaching which is already present in some of the schools. This involves including gender as a topic for teaching the thematic area 'person and society' in order to introduce students in primary and secondary education to gender issues in society and to teach them about

[661] Šmídová, I., et al. (2018), *Muži v systému vzdělávání (Men in the education system)*, Czech Government. Available at: https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/pracovni_skupina_muzi_a_rovnosti_zen_a_muzu/Policy-paper_muzi_v_systemu_vzdelavani.pdf

gender without stereotypes. Another point includes **revising school material and textbooks** to promote the idea of gender equality and avoid gender stereotypes. The recommendation also suggests organising, in cooperation with the public and private sector, special days for each gender (boys days, girls days) aiming to introduce each gender to the professions dominated by the other gender. Other suggestions include mapping examples of good practices, sharing positive examples from schools and feeding back the results to policymakers.

- The third recommendation focuses on systemic support in tackling gender stereotypes in the education system as a whole. The suggested activities include supporting gender projects and campaigns, supporting male teachers and attracting more men to teaching, creating collaboration between education faculties and allocating financial rewards for schools that are actively engaged in gender sensitive teaching. It also suggests conducting **gender audits** in schools to map the situation in Czechia and analyse the school-level data, as well as increasing the wages of teachers to make the occupation more prestigious.

The government's latest gender-related document, the **'Strategy of equality of women and men for 2021-2030'**, was published in February 2021.[662] The strategy addresses the persistent inequalities between women and men and builds on the previous policy documents in this area. The strategy is the second government document for policy implementation of gender equality measures in Czechia. The aim of the strategy is to formulate a framework for state administration measures that will contribute to achieving equality between women and men. These measures aim to further develop the positive changes that have been achieved in some areas while refuting negative trends of gender inequalities where they persist or deepen.

The strategy recognises that gender inequalities remain in Czech society. In comparison to other EU Member States, Czechia is below average in terms of the level of equality between women and men. The main problems are inequalities in the labour market (including a large gender gap disadvantaging women), economic inequality (higher risk of poverty for women), very low representation of women in decision-making positions, horizontal gender segregation in education and stereotypical division of roles in the home and family care. A specific problem related to the inequality of women and men is sexual and domestic violence. The gender inequalities have a negative impact especially on the position of women in Czech society. The strategy also recognises that gender inequality negatively affects men's lives – this is primarily related to health issues or gender stereotypes about the roles of men.

The strategy outlines four main strategic goals. The first strategic goal is focused on strengthening the competencies of the government and working groups responsible

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[662] Úřad vlády ČR (2021), *Strategie rovnosti zen a muzu 2021 – 2030*. Available at: https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/Aktuality/Strategie_rovnosti_zen_a_muzu.pdf

for implementing gender equality measures. The second strategic goal is to strengthen and support the work of other government bodies which address gender topics as cross-cutting topics in their agenda. The third strategic goal is to secure sufficient financial support for the implementation of gender equality measures and create a transparent mechanism for financing using financial support from the EU and Nordic funds. The last strategic goal is focused on strengthening collaboration between the ministries, collecting data about the gender issues, and enabling an evidence-based policymaking process for gender related issues.

2.2   Key success factors and barriers

While gender as a topic is included in the education strategy and national education programme as a cross-curricular topic, universities preparing future teachers are not paying much attention to gender disparities and gender stereotypes. Gender-related subjects and sex education are not taught as standalone subjects in universities and faculties preparing future teachers for their profession. An interviewee for this study reported that Masaryk University in Brno is currently developing a subject aimed at future teachers studying at the Faculty of Education. The new subject is focused on gender-sensitive education and includes topics such as sex education and prevention of gender violence. However, there have been no other actions identified at university level which take gender-sensitive teaching into consideration at other Czech faculties of education. An alternative way of becoming a teacher in Czechia is through an accredited non-university-based programme called 'Učitel naživo' (Teacher Alive), which trains professionals with no teaching background to become teachers. However, this programme does not currently cover the topic of gender and gender-sensitive education.

A topic closely linked to gender-sensitive education in Czechia is sex education and prevention of sexual abuse. In 2016, a survey conducted by Amnesty International found that the majority of Czech people (67%) think that victims of sexual assault are partially responsible for the action.[663] In most cases, it is women who are victims of sexual assault and rape (9 out of 10 women don't report rape), and sexual assault is usually committed by men (50% of men agreed that women are partially responsible for being raped). This shows how deep gender stereotypes are engrained in society and the extent to which misconceptions about rape and sexual assault are present.

Sex education at school has the potential to start breaking down these misconceptions. The national survey conducted by Česká středoškolská Unie (Czech Union of secondary school students) explored the perceptions and experiences of students with school sex education.[664] The 2020 survey of more than 2,200 students covering all grades of secondary school (15–18 year old students) found that sex

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[663] Amnesty International (2015), *Výzkum pro Amnesty: Češi nemají ani přibližnou představu o tom, jak často u nás dochází ke znásilnění nebo jinému násilí na ženách*. Available at: https://www.amnesty.cz/zprava/1418/nosi-minisukne-o-znasilneni-si-koledovala-mysli-si-tretina-cechu

[664] Ceska Stredoskolska Unie (2020), *Zprava z pruzkumu sexualni vychova na strednich skolach*. Available at: https://stredoskolskaunie.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Zprava-z-pruzkumu-sexualni-vychova-na-strednich-skolach.pdf

education in schools is often limited to basic information related to the prevention of pregnancy and sexual diseases. The topics where the teacher is expected to have an opinion and lead a discussion in a class are often neglected even though students reported that these topics are important to them (for example sexual violence, masturbation, pornography, first sexual experiences). Some schools outsource sex education to NGOs who organise workshops for students covering gender and sex related topics. However, some interviewees noted that this cannot sufficiently replace the role of teachers in the prevention of sexual violence and supporting students in dealing with sex-related issues or gender stereotypes consistently throughout the year.

The topic of sex education is one of the cross-cutting curricula themes that can form part of several subjects in primary and secondary schools.[665] The school education programme for upper secondary education includes sex and gender education on topics such as partnerships, marriage, openness in relationships, tolerance, reproductive health, promiscuity, premature termination of pregnancy, pornography, paedophilia, child prostitution and bullying. Schools in Czechia have more autonomy than many other EU Member States and each school can decide the extent to which they cover sex education in their curriculum. The survey found that some students did not learn about these topics at all in school, while 4 out of 5 students reported that they would welcome schools and teachers paying more attention to these topics and teaching them in more informative way.

The main problem reported by some of the experts is that teachers are not actively trained to work with their own stereotypes and therefore unconsciously pass societal stereotypical views onto their students. As part of this study, we asked Czech teachers what extent to which they work with gender stereotypes in their classrooms and what extent to which they perceive tackling gender stereotypes in education to be an important topic. The questions were posted on a teacher union's Facebook group with more than 16,000 members. In response 11 teachers took part in the quick online survey and answered the questions. Most of the teachers perceived gender as a very important topic and some of them shared concrete examples of gender inequalities from a school environment including inappropriate behaviour of school staff and textbooks with gender stereotypes. On the other hand, there were also teachers who were not aware of the stereotypes in society and the concept of gender-sensitive education. Given that the majority of Czech society perceives gender topics as unnecessary and is disinterested in the topic, teachers are expected to hold a similar view in schools.

As suggested by some of the experts and secondary school student representatives from Česká Středoškolská Unie, it is not enough to only *speak* about gender stereotypes in education. The *behaviour* of teachers will always prevail over what the teacher is saying. Therefore, **it is crucial for teachers to *become* gender sensitive** and actively work with their own stereotypes, to prevent reinforcing the gender

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[665] Ministry of Education (2010), *Doporučení MŠMT k realizaci sexuální výchovy v základních školách*. Available at: https://www.msmt.cz/vzdelavani/zakladni-vzdelavani/doporuceni-msmt-k-realizaci-sexualni-vychovy-v-zakladnich

stereotypes in their behaviour and interactions with students. Those interviewed for this study reported that that there is a need to educate teachers on gender-sensitive education. However, in Czech society 'gender' as a topic is a sensitive topic as the majority of people do not consider gender stereotypes to be an issue. Therefore, workshops aiming to support teachers developing gender-sensitive teaching try to do so through other topics, which are not as 'controversial' and are regarded as important by teachers, such as the 'individualisation of teaching' and 'equal opportunities for all in education'.

NGOs play an important part in supporting and educating teachers in gender-sensitive education in Czechia. The NGOs include Konsent, Gender and Science, Nesehnutí, NORA, Otevřená společnost, and GenderStudies. All of these organisations are actively engaged in the discussion of gender equality in education, organise seminars and workshops for teachers and students on topics related to equal opportunities in education and gender-sensitive teaching, and prepare materials and teaching sheets for teachers and principals on this topic with a methodology on how to teach students about gender equality. The publications include:

A handbook for gender-sensitive school management:[666] This document is aimed at school leaders and principals who want to learn about gender-sensitive education and increase their sensitivity towards the gender stereotypes in a school environment.

The Gender in school brochure:[667] This brochure is aimed at students preparing to become teachers, however, all teachers might find this brochure valuable. The aim of this brochure is to question gender stereotypes and stimulate thinking of teachers about gender issues in society and in school environments.

Twelve proven methods for the development of peer cooperation:[668] This publication offers specific tools for teachers to create a fair environment in their classrooms and to provide all children with equal learning opportunities. During the creation of the handbook, the author collaborated with 16 teachers. Together they mapped and verified methods that lead to the development of teaching competencies. The result of this work is a set of twelve proven methods of peer support, which enable teachers to better recognise and provide learning opportunities and promote diversity, mutual respect and the principles of equality between children.

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[666] Smetackova, I. (2007), *Prirucka pro genderove citlive vedeni skol,* Otevrena Spolecnost. Available at: https://www.otevrenaspolecnost.cz/knihovna/otevrenka/prosazovani-genderove-rovnosti/genderove-citlive-vedeni-skol.pdf
[667] Smetackova, I. (2006), *Gender ve skole (Gender in school)*, Irena Smetackova, Otevrena Spolecnost. Available at: https://www.otevrenaspolecnost.cz/knihovna/otevrenka/prosazovani-genderove-rovnosti/gender-ve-skole-ucitele.pdf
[668] Babanová, A. (2019)*, Dvanáct ověřených metod pro rozvoj kolegiální spolupráce,* European Commission. Available at: https://aa.ecn.cz/img_upload/8b47a03bf445e4c3031ce326c68558ae/dvanact_overenych_metod_a4_web.pdf

Choice of profession without prejudice:[669] The aim of this publication is to make children aware of gender stereotypes and to think about their career choices on the basis of a realistic assessment of their own abilities and skills, regardless of whether they fit into the traditional social roles of men and women. At the same time, it develops critical thinking and reflections on gender stereotypes, which can have a major impact on children's career choices. The publication consists of 18 activities with practical worksheets which can be used by teachers in the classroom. Each activity relates to a specific educational area and cross-cutting themes of educational programmes. The publication won 'The Most Beautiful Czech Book of 2014' award in the category of textbooks for schools, as well as the National Award for Career Counselling in 2015.

2.3 Overview of key initiatives and measures

Equal opportunities in educational practice

The 'Equal opportunities in pedagogical practice' project focused on gender-sensitive teaching in primary schools. It aimed to educate teachers on gender and equal opportunities, helping them to educate students without prejudice. The NGO-led project brought together more than 30 professionals and experts (education experts, psychologists, sociologists, teachers) to create a teaching unit for primary school teachers and organised practical seminars for teachers to share the outcomes. The project also disseminated a brochure containing good practice examples and case studies. The goal was to assist teachers in applying gender-sensitive teaching and help children acquire healthy perceptions of both genders. This included increasing teachers' awareness of gender stereotypes in Czech society and training them on how to deal with them. The project was implemented between 2005 and 2006 and funded by the European Social Fund with support from the Czech Government.

The project proved effective and successful as it enabled interdisciplinary collaboration between gender experts in Czechia and helped to train teachers on gender-sensitive education. Workshops were organised for teachers and a practical brochure was created on this topic to support teachers in becoming more aware of gender   stereotypes.

More information: http://www.zabanaprameni.cz/gender/projekty.htm

Education for respect and tolerance: From teachers to children

The 'Education for respect and tolerance: From teachers to children' project aimed to develop and provide training for primary school teachers in order to help them to

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[669] Babanová, A. (2019), *Volba povolání bez předsudků*, Gender Studies, o.p.s., Ministry of Education. Available at: https://cizinci.npi.cz/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/volba-pov.pdf

address the topic of gender in the school environment.

Implemented from 2018 to 2019, the project facilitated the development of content for teacher training as well as a methodological manual on international best practices on how to teach children about gender and how to create collaboration among children in diverse groups. The project provided opportunities for teachers to participate in systematic training and learn about innovative teaching methods, taking into account the individuality of each pupil, developing their social and civic competences in an effective and sensitive way.

More information:

https://aa.ecn.cz/img_upload/8b47a03bf445e4c3031ce326c68558ae/dvanact_overenych_metod_a4_web_uprava_19_11-2.pdf

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PROLOMIT VLNYT – To break the waves

The 'To break the waves' project aimed to increase equal opportunities for women and men in the labour market and in education. It focused on school stakeholders, labour market stakeholders, employers and the municipality.

The project, implemented from 2005 to 2008, was divided into several programmes, with each one addressing a different aspect of gender inequalities in education and employment. One of the programmes focused on education with a goal to support non-gender stereotyped career choices for girls and boys at the end of primary and secondary schools.

The project successfully delivered more than 50 publications on promoting gender equality,[670] including reports, policy papers, methodologies and case studies. The most notable publications developed by the project include: the 2007 'Handbook for gender-sensitive school management' for school directors and leadership teams; the 'The gender in the school' tool for civic education teachers, published in 2005; and the 'Gender audit methodology municipality' published in 2007.

More information: https://www.otevrenaspolecnost.cz/kdo-jsme

3. Overall assessment

3.1 Key findings

The research found that gender issues in Czechia are approached by stakeholders in a holistic way and most of the evidence, policy papers and research publications focus on both genders. The evidence suggests that there

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[670] Website of Otevrena Spolecnost. Available at:
https://www.otevrenaspolecnost.cz/knihovna#prosazovani-genderove-rovnosti

are gender disparities in student outcomes which are strongly linked to gender stereotypes in Czech society. The situation of boys and young men is advantageous and disadvantageous in different areas, however, overall, men have a better position in Czech society and male is perceived as the dominant gender.

The evidence from school performance shows that boys score lower compared to girls in reading and literacy (PISA data), however, at the same time there is an expectation from parents and teachers that girls are naturally better in reading. As presented in the first chapter of this report, the evidence suggests that the performance of girls is overestimated by teachers in reading and language subjects, while the performance of boys is overestimated in mathematics. Therefore, differing expectations of boys and girls, as well as the different levels of support provided by teachers and parents, to some extent directly translate to the students' achievements.

Parents and teachers expect boys to naturally perform better in mathematics and science subjects. They believe that they are naturally intelligent and, if they are given enough time, they will come up with the solution. **However, the PISA results show that there is no significant difference between the performance of boys and girls in mathematics.** This relates to the finding that boys are not expected to study hard, to be diligent and detail oriented, and lower marks are more likely to be tolerated by teachers and parents compared to the lower marks of girls. As reported by some of the experts interviewed for this study, girls generally better fulfil the expectations of the Czech education system compared to boys.

Gender disparities in education start in primary education and continue through to tertiary education where there is a higher share of female students compared to male students. However, despite gender disparities in education and boys' underperformance and lower educational levels, **young men are more likely to find a job after graduation and to find a job more quickly than women.** Additionally, boys and young men are more often perceived as successful and earn higher wages, despite their average lower education level. Men that choose to follow vocational tracks, as well as men that complete tertiary education, are in a better position than women financially and are more likely to work in professions that are considered to be prestigious. This observation is also true in the education sector where teaching pre-primary and primary education, which comprises mostly female teachers, is not considered to be as prestigious as teaching upper secondary or tertiary education, which has higher share of male teachers.

3.2   Recommendations

The interviewees for this study put forward several recommendations to promote gender-sensitive teaching and equality between girls and boys in school. The suggestions included supporting teachers through professional development and training; integrating gender-sensitive education in strategic documents; supporting teacher networks and collaboration; promoting sharing best practices in the classroom; and financially supporting gender-sensitive education projects.

Creating practical teaching worksheets and gender-sensitive materials such as textbooks were also highlighted as a useful solution to dissolving gender stereotypes in education. In addition, the interviewees proposed increasing the number of male teachers, particularly in pre-primary and primary schools, supporting students to participate in study programmes traditionally dominated by a gender other than their own, creating campaigns to inform people of the significance of gender equality and engaging schools in gender-related projects.

6.3.3   Finland

1.   Key trends and implications

1.1   Contextualisation

The learning outcomes in compulsory education in 2018, measured by the International Student Assessment (PISA), are higher in Finland compared to the EU average. Despite this, the performance gap between girls and boys in the country was the largest across OECD countries in 2018. In reading, girls outperformed boys by 61 points, at 546 and 485 points respectively. The same was true for science, in which there was a 24-point difference, and mathematics, in which there was a 6-point difference.

In 2018, the performance gap in reading between girls and boys in Finland was the largest in the OECD countries. In autumn 2018, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) collected data on pupils' Finnish and Swedish skills at the start of primary education.[671] On average, girls were more proficient in Finnish and Swedish literature tasks than boys. The latest national level assessment of Finnish compulsory school students' skills in Finnish and Swedish (reading, writing, and literature) at the end of compulsory education showed that, on average, girls' competence was one grade level higher than boys'.[672] The largest gender differences were found in writing skills (between 0.8 and 1 average grade difference), and linguistic knowledge and interpretation of literature (0.8 grade difference). In contrast, the area with the smallest difference was interpretation of media texts, at 0.6 grades. Two recent national level evaluations show that the differences between boys' and girls' mother tongue skills develop during compulsory education. At the beginning of compulsory education, there were no statistically significant differences between boys' and girls' performance, while at the end, the differences were large.[673] Similarly, differences in students' learning outcomes in relation to Finnish and Swedish at upper secondary level are a result of differences that already exist at the beginning of upper secondary education.[674] Consequently, upper secondary school education is unable to eliminate gender differences in terms of learning outcomes related to mother tongue skills.

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[671] Karvi (2020), *Alkumittaus – Koulutulokkaiden matematiikan ja äidinkielen ja kirjallisuuden taidot ja osaamisen taustatekijät – Tiivistelmä* [Assessment in the beginning of compulsory school - Mathematics and mother tongue and literature skills and background factors for pupils at first grade - Executive summary]. Tiivistelmät 13:2020.

[672] Kauppinen, M. & Marjanen, J. (2020), *Millaista on yhdeksäsluokkalaisten kielellinen osaaminen? – Suomen kielen ja kirjallisuuden oppimistulokset perusopetuksen päättövaiheessa 2019* [What is 9th graders' linguistic competence like? – Learning outcomes in Finnish language and literature in the final stage of basic education in 2019]. Kansallinen koulutuksen arviointikeskus 2020 Julkaisut 13:2020. Available at: https://karvi.fi/app/uploads/2020/08/KARVI_1320.pdf.

[673] Ibid; Karvi (2020) *Alkumittaus – Koulutulokkaiden matematiikan ja äidinkielen ja kirjallisuuden taidot ja osaamisen taustatekijät – Tiivistelmä* [Assessment in the beginning of compulsory school - Mathematics and mother tongue and literature skills and background factors for pupils at first grade - Executive summary]. Tiivistelmät 13:2020.

[674] Harjunen, E., Marjanen, J., & Karlsson, J. (2019), *Äidinkielen pieni pitkittäisarviointi 2014–2017* [A longitudinal assessment of the mother tongue 2014–2017]. Kansallinen koulutuksen arviointikeskus. Julkaisut 4:2019.

PISA 2018 data on mathematics shows that girls performed statistically significantly better than boys for the second time. However, boys' mathematics-related self-assessment was better than girls. In autumn 2018, the National Center for Educational Assessment (Karvi, 2020)[675] collected data on pupils' skills in mathematics at the start of the first grade in primary (compulsory) education. On average, boys performed better in mathematics-related tasks than girls. The majority of students who performed both the best and the worst in mathematics were boys too, however. In PISA 2018, girls in Finland outperformed boys in science by 24 points.

Compulsory or basic education (grades 1–9) is conducted in non-selective public schools and aims to offer equal opportunities for all learners to engage in learning basic competences, such as reading skills, including immigrants and students with special needs.[676] Altogether, 0.75% of the age cohort (about 300 students) did not complete compulsory education in 2018, most of whom were boys.[677] The dropout rate is also rising, having been 0.5% in the period 2014–2018, and about 0.3% before that. In 2020, altogether, 53.7% of Finnish 16 year-olds continued in academically-oriented upper secondary school, and 36.3% in vocationally-oriented upper secondary school. 8.1% of Finnish-speaking boys and 7% of girls did not continue their education after compulsory education.[678] 58% of upper secondary students are female, and the number of female students is higher in high-performing upper secondary schools than in low-performing schools (Statistics Explained, 2020[679]).

According to Statistics Finland's annual average figures, in 2015, **about 15% of 20–24 year-olds were not in employment or education**. In 2018, the number had fallen to 11.8%. During the previous government period, therefore, measures in secondary and higher education are likely to have improved the position of young people. The situation of men, in particular, has improved since 2015, when 16.6% of men were not in work or education.

Based on the interviews and relevant studies, **individual factors**, such as intelligence and self-regulation skills, are the most important predictors for school success, but do not explain gender differences in performance.[680] During the interviews, several individual factors linked to abilities and skills were highlighted as contributing to

[675] Karvi (2020), *Alkumittaus – Koulutulokkaiden matematiikan ja äidinkielen ja kirjallisuuden taidot ja osaamisen taustatekijät – Tiivistelmä* [Assessment in the beginning of compulsory school - Mathematics and mother tongue and literature skills and background factors for pupils at first grade - Executive summary]. Tiivistelmät 13:2020.

[676] FNBE (2014), *The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education*, Helsinki: FNBE National Board of Education. Retrieved from: https://www.oph.fi/ops2016;
MEC (2020b), *The Right to Learn*:
http://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/161948/Early%20childhood%20education%20and%20care%20programme%20-%20Brochure.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

[677] Tilastokeskus (2020), *Peruskoulun keskeyttäneet* [Drop out in compulsory education]. Available at: http://tilastokeskus.fi/til/kkesk/2017/kkesk_2017_2019-03-14_tau_003_fi.html.

[678] Tilastokeskus (2020), *Peruskoulun 9. luokan päättäneiden välitön sijoittuminen jatko-opintoihin 2000 - 2018* [Immediate placement of graduates of the 9th grade of comprehensive school in postgraduate studies 2000 – 2018]. Available at: https://www.stat.fi/til/khak/2018/khak_2018_2019-12-12_tau_001_fi.html.

[679] Statistics Explained (2020), *Early leavers from education and training*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Early_leavers_2019-01.jpg.

[680] Spinath, B., Freudenthaler, H. H., and Neubauer, A. C. (2010), 'Domainspecific school achievement in boys and girls as predicted by intelligence, personality and motivation', *Personality and Individual Differences*, 48, 481–486.

gender disparity in educational outcomes. Some interviewed experts shared the view that girls are more successful in tasks that require linguistic intelligence, while boys are more successful in numerical tasks.[681]

A 2004 study suggested, however, that differences in performance between girls and boys in Finland depends on their interests, experiences, and different motivations, rather than on different abilities, skills, and competencies.[682] This correlates with factors that emerge in other Finnish reports on the subject.[683] These show that **attitudes and beliefs related to students' own ability to succeed** (such as subject related self-concept and self-efficacy) are relatively strong among female students, but not among male students. Negative perceptions related to their attitude to learning (such as being lazy) are more commonly held in relation to male students than female students. Attitudes that support learning are stronger among females, however, while attitudes that hinder learning are indeed stronger among males. These beliefs and attitudes related to learning about specific subjects correlate highly with performance in that subject. The differences are partly subject-specific. This view was echoed by interviewees: 'Boys' underperformance in reading literacy depends on general interest in learning and education.' In addition to motivational characteristics, one researcher emphasised differences in self-regulation skills. 'Girls' self-regulation skills develop better in early childhood education and care (ECEC) than boys. This influences their learning at school, specifically basic competences, such as reading, writing, and calculating.'

One other possible explanation for the lower performance of boys than girls highlighted was the difference in the speed of development or the duration and timing of puberty.[684] This view was emphasised by several interviewed experts: 'Puberty of boys starts later than puberty of girls. This influences boys' concentration and learning.' However, one held the view that: 'A professional teacher is able to support students' learning, whether a student is aggressive or is going through puberty.'

[681] Hyde, J. S. (2005), 'The gender similarity hypothesis', American Psychologist, 60, 581–592.

[682] Niemivirta, M. (2004), *Tyttöjen ja poikien väliset erot oppimismotivaatiossa. Julkaisussa Koulu – suku-puoli – oppimistulokset. Helsinki: Opetushallitus*, 42–53.

[683] Lahelma, E. (2009), *Tytöt, pojat ja kysymys koulumenestyksestä*, Teoksessa H. Ojala, T. Palmu & J. Saarinen (toim.) Sukupuoli ja toimijuus koulutuksessa. Tampere: Vastapaino, 136–156;

Laine, K., Ahonen, A, & Nissinen, K. (2020) Pisa 2018 talousosaaminen. Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriön julkaisuja 2020:18. Helsinki: Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö.

Leino, K., Ahonen, A., Heinonen, N., Hiltunen, J., Lintuvuori, M., Lähteinen, S., Lämsä, J., Nissinen, K., Nissinen, V., Puhakka, E., Pulkkinen, J., Rautopuro, J., Sirén, M., Vainikainen, M., & Vettenranta, J. (2019), P*ISA 2018 ensituloksia. Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriön julkaisuja* 2019:40. Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö;

Leino, K., Rikala, J., Puhakka, E., Niilo-Rämä, M., Sirén, M. & Fagerlund, J. (2019) *Digiloikasta digitaitoihin. Kansainvälinen monilukutaidon ja ohjelmoinnillisen ajattelun tutkimus* (ICILS 2018). Koulutuksen tutkimuslaitos: Jyväskylä;

Pöysä, S. & Kupiainen, S. (2018) (toim.) Tytöt ja pojat koulussa – Miten selättää poikien heikko suoriutuminen peruskoulussa? [Girls and Boys at School - How to Overcome Boys' Poor Performance in Basic education?] Valtioneuvoston selvitys- ja tutkimustoiminnan julkaisusarja 36/2018. Valtioneuvoston kanslia.

[684] Koerselman, K. & Pekkarinen, T. (2017), *The timing of puberty and gender differences in educational achievement*, VATT Working papers 97. Helsinki: Valtion taloudellinen tutkimuskeskus.

At the **classroom level**, an important factor influencing student performance is the emotional atmosphere.[685] The emotional support and guidance provided by teachers in classroom interactions, and in the organisation of activities, supports students' learning.[686] Interviewed experts held the view that teachers' attitudes towards boys and girls differ due to gender stereotypes: 'It is quite common that teachers have an opinion that "boys are boys".' A 2017 study recognised that teachers' stereotypical views of gender norms may influence attitudes towards certain subjects among students, finding that teachers expecting boys to perform better in the natural sciences than girls was positively associated with boys' self-image in this subject, while girls experienced negative motivational beliefs in relation to it.[687]

In a classroom, students work as role-models for each other in many ways. According to one interviewee: 'In boys' worlds, the influence of peers is an important factor. If some students are uninterested in learning and avoid education, this will influence the attitude of their peers, who, in turn, will influence others, and so on; especially in the countryside, where stereotypical attitudes among boys are stronger than in the city.'

Teachers' awareness of this appears to influence their expectations of boys more than girls: 'Boys look for support from similar types of boys. When there are low achieving boys in a group, a teacher perceives the whole group to be low-achieving, and does not expect good performance from them.' According to Eccles' expectation value theory (2002), the gender stereotypes of parents and peers are also linked to children's beliefs about their own abilities and behaviour, which, in turn, are linked to their success in school.[688] The influence of gender stereotypes in families was discussed during the interviews: 'The influence of family, especially mothers, is important for boys' learning.' Linked to this, it has been suggested that, by nature, boys are less study-oriented than girls, and this explains their poorer performance in school.[689] 'Among boys it is more acceptable to underperform than among girls.'

Several school-level factors also emerged in the research as contributing to gender differences in engagement and learning. It has been suggested, in general, **that school is a more feminine than masculine environment**.[690] Most of the interviewed experts agreed that the school environment and/or school culture is too female-orientated or better supports female students' aims and practices, thus influencing boys' performance: 'Boys' grades in their mother tongue are lower because their masculine traits are not accepted at school.' The dominance of women in teaching professions was seen as one element contributing to this perception of a

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[685] Howes, C, Burchinal, M., Pianta, R., Bryant, D., Early, D., Clifford, R., & Barbarin, O. (2008), *Ready to learn? Children's pre-academic achievement in pre-Kindergarten programs*, 'Early Childhood Research Quarterly', 23, 27–50.

[686] La Paro, K. M., Pianta, R. C. & Stuhlman, M. (2004), 'The classroom assessment scoring system: Findings from the prekindergarten year', *The Elementary School Journal*, 104, 409–426.

[687] Thomas, A. E. (2017), 'Gender Differences in Students' Physical Science Motivation: Are Teachers' Implicit Cognitions Another Piece of the Puzzle?', *American Educational Research Journal*, 54, 35-58.

[688] Eccles, J. S., & Wigfield, A. (2002), 'Motivational beliefs, values, and goals', *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 109–132.

[689] Van Houtte, M. (2004), 'Why boys achieve less at school than girls: The difference between boys' and girls' academic culture', *Educational studies*, 30, 159–173.

[690] Heyder, A., & Kessels, U. (2013), 'Is school feminine? Implicit gender stereotyping of school as a predictor of academic achievement', *Sex Roles*, 69, 605–617.

'female-orientated' school environment: 'There are more female than male teachers and school communities are female-oriented.' Research has found, however, that the influence of having a male or female teacher on boys' engagement and learning is, in fact, minimal, and that boys do not benefit more from being taught by male teachers.[691] To some extent, interviewed experts echoed this view, as they all emphasised that it is more important in a boy's learning to have a teacher that is highly educated and qualified than to have a teacher who is male.

Another school level factor that emerged was **the issue of belonging**: 'Studies show that boys experience less belonging to school and more bullying than girls. Both teachers and students consider cohesion and community to be an important part of an equal school.' Consequently, the question appears to not be about boys' skills or competences, but rather about the school environment, school culture, and moreover, the pedagogy, teaching methods, and learning materials used. In terms of the latter, most interviewed experts emphasised that teaching methods and tools support girls more than boys in school, with the view that boys need more activity-oriented approaches to learning, which are less common.

Sociocultural and **society-related environmental factors** partly explain the gender difference related to engagement and learning:[692] 'The old stereotypical views of male and female responsibilities in the home are deep and transformed from generation to generation. I will put it bluntly; females are cleaning and making food.' The influence of these gender roles can be seen in many ways in the school and home environment, with the views held by some of the interviewed experts also echoing these gender norms.

The **education level of parents** was also mentioned as a factor in children's school performance by several interviewed experts: 'Parents who are not well-educated are negative role models for their children; education is inherited.' The socio-economic background of a child's family also has an influence on their performance at school, as is observed consistently in PISA and and national level assessments in Finland. A 2019 study that combined data from 18 international student assessments recognised that inequality in achievement has increased in Finland over the last 10 years.[693]

The interviewed experts also emphasised the influence of friends and hobby activities on students' engagement and learning: 'Gendered leisure activities influence students' learning. For example, there are many girls who enjoy reading; heavy sport activities do not necessarily support the development of boys' competences.' The school–family partnership also influences boys' learning and engagement. The importance of this partnership was emphasised by several interviewed experts, as it provided boys with examples of parents engaging positively with school life: 'One consequence of this

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[691] Marsh, H. W., Martin, A. J., & Cheng, J. H. (2008), 'A multilevel perspective on gender in classroom motivation and climate: Potential benefits of male teachers for boys?', *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 100, 78–95.

[692] Hyde, J. S., & Mertz, J. E. (2009), 'Gender, culture, and mathematics performance', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 106, 8801–8807.

[693] Salmela-Aro, K., & Chmielewski, A. (2019), 'Socioeconomic Inequality and Student Outcomes in Finnish Schools', *Socioeconomic Inequality and Student Outcomes Education Policy & Social Inequality*, 153-168. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-9863-6

partnership are role-models offered by parents in different partnership activities, such as study visits and celebrations.'

Finally, the interviewed experts analysed the **influence of resources** on boys' learning and engagement specifically: 'The cuts in the education sector have influenced the implementation of inclusive education in practice. Boys especially have had challenges.'

1.2 Vulnerable sub-group

There are differences between immigrants and 'native' Finnish students' learning outcomes. Immigrants are at least two years behind other students in their mathematics, science, reading literacy, and problem-solving performance, and many do not reach the minimum level required.[694] Second-generation immigrants, however, are slightly less behind the majority. This is not specific to Finland, as many other countries in Europe face the same issue. Interviewees said: 'Immigrant background children participate little in ECEC. When this is connected to the low education of immigrant background mothers, immigrant background children, especially boys, have a more challenging start to basic education than native Finnish-speaking children.' And 'Immigrant students are a heterogeneous group. Students from Russian and Estonian backgrounds, for example, are very ambitious and willing to learn.'

1.3 Key implications

The number of females who have completed a higher education bachelor's or master's degree has been higher than males since the beginning of 2000. According to Statistics Finland, 58% of all those who had completed a university degree and 51% of those who had completed a doctorate degree in the year 2018 were female.[695] There were differences between the fields, however. 80% of the students in the education sector were women, while in information and communication technologies (ICT), the proportion of women was slightly over 20%, and in the field of engineering, manufacturing, and construction, around 25%. In contrast, both sexes represented around half of students in business, administration and law, and natural sciences, mathematics and statistics.

As a result of women's increased participation in higher education, some changes have also happened in the past 30 years on the Finnish labour market. Women have increasingly undertaken education in traditionally male dominant occupations, such as medicine and law. On the other hand, **gender segregation in ICT professions has actually increased since the early 1990s**, as female representation in these fields has fallen from 37% to 16%. In addition, men have not started to orientate towards

694 Harju-Luukkainen, H., Nissinen, K., Sulkunen, S., Suni, M. & Vettenranta, J. (2014), *Selvitys maahanmuuttajataustaisten nuorten osaamisesta ja siihen liittyvistä taustatekijöistä PISA 2012 – tutkimuksessa*. Jyväskylä: Jyväskylän Yliopisto koulutuksen tutkimuslaitos.
695 Tilastokeskus (2019), *Naiset suorittivat lähes 60 prosenttia kaikista yliopistotutkinnoista vuonna 2018* [Women completed nearly 60 percent of all university degrees in 2018]. Available at: https://www.stat.fi/til/yop/2018/yop_2018_2019-05-09_tie_001_fi.html.

traditional female dominant jobs as eagerly as women have towards male-dominated fields.[696]

In the year 2018, 53.1% of Finnish 16 year-olds continued in academically-oriented upper secondary school, and 40.8% in vocationally-oriented upper secondary school.[697] Of Finnish-speaking boys, 8.1% did not continue their education, in comparison to 7% of Finnish-speaking girls. **A slightly larger proportion of men than women aged 15–24 were in neither employment or education and training in 2019**; 8.5% of men (compared to the EU average of 9.8%) and 7.8% of women (compared to the EU average of 10.3%). These percentages have decreased since 2013, when they stood at 11.7% and 12.3% for men and women, respectively. The unemployment rate among young people (aged 15–24) is also higher among men. In 2019, it was 18.7% for men and 15.6% for women. While these percentages have lowered since 2013, the gender gap has increased; unemployment is now at 21% for men and 19.5% for women.

According to data from Statistics Finland for 2021,[698] employment has increased among those with initial vocational qualifications. Again, **a gender disparity can be seen, with 77% of women that hold initial vocational qualifications in employment, versus 63% of men**. Among those with higher university applied sciences degrees, 95% are in work one year after graduation, with no gender disparities to note. Of recently graduated doctors, a slightly higher share of women are employed (87%) than men (84%).

In relation to radicalisation and violent extremism, **the Finnish National Election Studies (FNES) do not report any strong links between radicalisation and low education outcomes**.[699] Radicalisation is, however, a slowly increasing phenomena in Finnish society. Hate speech, racism, and even violent extremism have increased. Schools can do a lot to increase the well-being of children and young people and prevent exclusion. Interviewed experts raised a link between boys/men with low levels of education and extremist movements: 'Extremist movements and radicalisation are an increasing phenomena in Finland. These movements are attractive for young men with low education.' The influence of negative role-models and peers also support young men's attitudes in this context.

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[696] Tilastokeskus [Statistics Finland] (2018), *Alle viidennes opiskelijoista opinnoissa joissa tasaisesti naisia ja miehiä – koulutus-alojen eriytyminen jatkuu* [Less than one-fifth of students in studies where women and men are evenly distributed - differentiation of fields of study continues]. Available at: http://www.stat.fi/tietotrendit/artikkelit/2018/alle-viidennes-opiskelijoista-opinnoissa-joissa-tasaisesti-naisia-ja-miehia-koulutusalojen-eriytyminen-jatkuu/.

[697] Tilastokeskus (2020), *Peruskoulun 9. luokan päättäneiden välitön sijoittuminen jatko-opintoihin 2000 - 2018* [Immediate placement of graduates of the 9th grade of comprehensive school in postgraduate studies 2000 – 2018]. https://www.stat.fi/til/khak/2018/khak_2018_2019-12-12_tau_001_fi.html.

[698] Statistics Finland (2021), *Employment improved among those with initial vocational qualifications, more difficult for men to find employment than for women*. Available at: http://www.stat.fi/til/sijk/2019/sijk_2019_2021-01-21_tie_001_en.html.

[699] Isotalo, V., Järvi, V., von Schoultz, Å, Söderlund, P. (2020), *Suomalainen äänestäjä* [The Finnish Voter]. 'Vaalitutkimuskonsortio – Valforskningskonsortiet' [Finnish National Election Studies]. https://oikeusministerio.fi/documents/1410853/4750802/Suomalainen+%C3%A4%C3%A4nest%C3%A4j%C3%A4+2003-2019.pdf/163efffe-7ba8-513c-e038-10624845b5c8/Suomalainen+%C3%A4%C3%A4nest%C3%A4j%C3%A4+2003-2019.pdf

2 Policy attention and actions

2.1 Policy attention and attitudes

In daily policy debate, gender issues are not frequently discussed. This was emphasised by interviewed experts: One stakeholder said that 'policymakers could talk more about gendered education, the low achievement of boys, and the influence of some role models, like unemployed parents.' Another said that 'in Finland, we have paid attention to gendered needs related to teaching and learning since the beginning of the 1960s, when the common compulsory school was designed. However, we have not been very successful; the change needs time.'

There have been more than 100 projects focusing on gender issues in Finnish society during the last ten years.[700] Over the last five years, there have been two policy-level discussions focusing on boy's underachievement and dropout specifically:

(1) As part of a collaborative project, the National Agency for Education prepared a **guide to promoting gender equality in primary education**.[701] The project report highlights the challenges of gender equality, encourages greater understanding of gender diversity, and provides information on gender-based and sexual harassment from the point of view of boys. The report contains suggestions and practical examples on how to carry out equality work and draw up a functional equality plan. The project was implemented after the implementation of the Equality Act, which emphasises that gender equality must be promoted in the education sector

(2) The National Agency of Education[702] organised a project that focused on **boys' learning challenges and solutions until 2025**. The project developed policy and measures related to new types of future-oriented operating models, which supported boys in different life situations. Perspectives on working life, leisure, well-being and health, family background, regional differences, and gender roles were analysed and discussed. The report included, for example, recommendations for overcoming the learning challenges of boys, emphasising that these need to be addressed both through measures aimed directly at boys, and indirectly through the development of service structures in society, such as family welfare services and guidance services for young people. Cross-sectoral cooperation between schools, the home, hobbies, and working life should be strengthened.

The current government programme emphasises equal learning opportunities for students at all levels of the education system, including immigrants and

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[700] See a list of reports: https://thl.fi/fi/web/sukupuolten-tasa-arvo/tietolahteita/tasa-arvoselvityksia-ja-oppaita.
[701] Jääskeläinen et al. (2015).
[702] National Agency of Education (2019), *Poikien oppimishaasteet ja -ratkaisut vuoteen 2025* [Boys' learning challenges and solutions until 2025], Raportit ja selvitykset 2019:9. Opetushallitus. Available at: https://www.oph.fi/fi/tilastot-ja-julkaisut/julkaisut/poikien-oppimishaasteet-ja-ratkaisut-vuoteen-2025.

students with special needs, as well as the learning of basic and transversal competences.[703] Emphasis on learners' and teachers' well-being is another important aspect of the programme. Specific actions/initiatives targeting the underperformance of boys have been implemented recently, as described below in Section 2.2.

One of the most important education policies of the current government is **the extension of compulsory schooling or raising of the compulsory school age to 18**.[704] The government has argued that it is no longer possible for young people to gain employment and prosper in their lives with a nine-year comprehensive school education. In three decades, 600,000 jobs for which such a nine-year basic education was previously sufficient have disappeared from Finland.[705] The employment rate of those with only a comprehensive school education is around 40%, and these jobs are typically done by men. One of the benefits of raising the school leaving age, therefore, is the indirect promotion of employment among men. In total, €22 million in funding is intended for planning and implementing the extension of compulsory education to the age of 18 and to free upper secondary education. The yearly costs will be around EUR 100 million.[706]

The projects and actions described below are examples of the implementation of national policy strategies and actions relevant to the gender gap in education, focusing in particular on tackling the underperformance of boys.

2.2 Key success factors and barriers

The interviewed experts emphasised that overcoming boys' challenges in engagement and learning and preventing dropout requires actions at different levels and in different situations, such as in the personal, family, school and society spheres, and in leisure-related situations. The proposed actions cover different stages of life, from early childhood to adulthood. Based on desk research and interviews, the following implications or measures can be identified.

At the individual level:

[703] Programme of Prime Minister Antti Rinne's Government (2019), *INCLUSIVE ANDCOMPETENT FINLAND – A socially, economically and ecologically sustainable society.* Publications of the Finnish Government 2019:25. Available at:
https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/161664/Inclusive%20and%20competent%20Finland_2019.pdf?sequence=9&isAllowed=y.

[704] MEC (2020), *Osaamisen, sivistyksen ja innovaatioiden ministeriryhmä hyväksyi oppivelvollisuuden laajentamisen lakiluonnoksen sisällön* [The Ministerial Group on Skills, Education and Innovation approved the extension of compulsory education to the content of the draft law], Ministry of Education and Culture (2020). *Oppivelvollisuuden laajentaminen etenee - päätöksiä toisen asteen maksuttomuudesta sekä ohjauksesta ja valvontavastuusta.*

[705] Government Communications Department (2020), *Announcement of Prime Minister Sanna Marin on the Government's policy in 2020,* Government Communications Department. Available at:
https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/artikkeli/-/asset_publisher/10616/paaministeri-sanna-marinin-ilmoitus-eduskunnalle-hallituksen-politiikasta-vuonna-2020;
MEC (2020), *Oppivelvollisuuden laajnetaminen* [Extending compulsory schooling]. Ministry of Educaton and Culture. Available at: https://minedu.fi/oppivelvollisuuden-laajentaminen.

[706] Ministry of Finance (2020), *Budget: Confidence and sustainable growth throughout Finland*. Available at:
https://vm.fi/-/budjettiehdotus-12.8.2020?languageId=en_US.

- **Supporting boys' interest, engagement, and motivation in learning:** The situational interest of boys could be aroused through choices in the topics or activities covered in the classroom. Interest is partially under the control of teachers, who can select a topic, a context (technological context, relevance), and an activity (including how much the activity supports autonomy and competence). This would respond to the view expressed by some interviewees that 'boys need more activity-oriented approaches in learning'.

- **Supporting the development of boys' social-emotional skills, such as grit, resilience, and self-regulation:** There are differences in the way that girls and boys develop social and emotional skills. Emphasis should be placed on supporting the development of social, emotional, and interaction skills in children from an early age. These skills develop, in particular, through face-to-face interaction with other people, but also through means such as reading, being artistic, or succeeding at a personal goal. One interviewee said that 'boys may find the road to working life too long; this refers to the fact that boys experience feelings of cynicism more than girls, for example.'

- **Supporting boys' literacy and language skills:** The biggest gender difference in Finland is in language skills. 'Reading and mother tongue have a strong link to learning. The most impressive and important thing, therefore, is to find ways to motivate and inspire boys to read.' In order to achieve these aims, one interviewee said 'support and special needs education services and inclusive education practices should be developed at school sites'.

At the school level:

- **Strengthening boys' faith in the future:** The various actors in society must pay attention to the way in which they talk and communicate about the future, and the skills (including transversal skills) needed in the future, in order to prevent negative images of masculinity being engrained in boys and young men. Secondly, boys should have the opportunity to identify their own individual role models regardless of their place of residence. One interviewee said that 'there are differences between the motivation and attitudes of boys related to the importance of learning and future opportunities.'

- **Breaking gendered practices at school and in society:** Gendered ways of thinking and practices in schools and society need to be broken down consciously and in different contexts. One stakeholder said that 'girls adapt to the school environment more easily than boys. This is because the school environment is more feminine than masculine. We should support boys through changed practices and also give them positive feedback.' The proportion of men in education, and welfare and social services, for boys and young men at different stages of life should be increased.

- **Ensuring inclusion and belonging to the school and community through diverse activities:** In addition to inclusive education at schools, inclusion should be promoted within communities and society as well. Inclusion means the opportunity, ability, and desire to participate. It can be strengthened by providing sufficient and varied leisure and hobby opportunities. There is also a need for the

development of co-operation between schools and providers of hobbies in order to help boys and girls find a hobby for themselves: 'The hobbies of boys and girls are differentiated,' one interviewee said. There are already models for a 'full' school day, which integrates both school and after school activities. One opportunity to develop access to hobbies is digital gaming; collaborative gaming, in particular.[707]

- **Strengthening social and life management skills in school, and hobbies:** In the future, early childhood education and schooling must focus more on the development of social and life management skills. Close co-operation between different actors, especially between schools and children's homes, promotes the feeling that they are well cared for.

- **Developing guidance services for different educational paths:** Systematic guidance on children and young people's educational paths and, if necessary, the creation of individual educational paths to support young people at risk of exclusion.

- **Developing leadership skills among educational leaders to develop the operating culture of schools:** There is a need to strengthen leadership skills among principals and other leaders in the education sector in order to develop multi-sectoral co-operation locally between different school-related actors. The operating culture of schools, which includes interaction channels and leadership activities, should be strengthened, for example through development projects and in-service training. Efforts are needed to promote networking and create various forums for the exchange of ideas and best practices, and peer learning.

At the level of society:

- **Developing family welfare services:** In order to be able to identify and respond to the needs of boys and men at different stages of life, welfare services should be built in a way that holistically supports them from childhood to adulthood. These measures include raising the quality of and participation in ECEC: 'The quality of ECEC influences choices across one's whole life.'

- **Supporting parents:** Readiness to be a parent or to parent is supported in counselling and in ECEC. This is important because parents influence learning and educational choices. One interviewee said that 'Parents should have an active role in supporting their children's engagement, learning, and in making education related choices. Parents should be aware of their important role and understand the consequences of their actions.' The school–family partnership supports parenting.

- **Supporting boys and young men to perceive female-dominant occupations as possible occupations for them:** Women have increasingly undertaken education in traditionally male-dominant occupations, such as medicine and law, but not vice-versa. Careers counsellors and teachers should

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[707] MEC (2018), *Peruskoulufoorumi luovutti esityksensä peruskoulun kehittämislinjauksiksi* [The Basic School Forum published the developmental plan for the basic school]. Available at: http://minedu.fi/artikkeli/-/asset_publisher/peruskoulufoorumi-luovutti-esityksensa-peruskoulun-kehittamislinjauksiksi.

support boys and young men to become familiar with current female-dominant occupations, such as nursing, teaching, and caring through counselling, study visits, and visits from appropriate role-models to schools. One interviewee said that 'from the point of view of equality in labour market, we should support men to become interested in currently female-dominated occupations.' Another interviewee said that 'walaries should be more equal.'

- **Creating a culture of cooperation and responsibility at all levels**: There is a need to further develop teaching and operating cultures in kindergartens and schools in order to support children in the transition from kindergarten to school. Kindergartens and schools need to recognise the autonomy of children and young people, at the same time as guiding them to take more responsibility for their own actions. The ideal situation is if families can participate in creating a cooperative culture in kindergartens and schools (school–family partnership). Cooperation is also needed between different ministries, and between municipalities and schools. Although previous ideas could be easily accepted, and some of them have been trying to commence implementation for a number of years, actual change is challenging to implement.

2.3 Overview of key initiatives and measures

The following initiatives were highlighted by interviewed experts as having been important in tackling boys' underperformance in compulsory education. Experts also emphasised that more resources are needed for equality work; one policymaker argued that there have been too many small-scale gender-related initiatives, and that it is not possible to create substantial change through such short-term, small initiatives.

The Basic Education Forum

The Programme of Prime Minister Sipilä's Government (2016–2019) had five strategic objectives, which included a total of 26 key projects. As a part of education-related key projects, the Ministry of Education established **the Basic Education Forum** in 2016. The main aim of the forum was to increase equality in education in terms of gender, minorities, immigrants, and other areas. The focus was on boys in subjects in which they were being outperformed by girls, or towards which they held a more negative attitude than girls.[708]

Intervention type: The Basic Education Forum (2016–2019) consisted of 30 experts from universities, national-level administrative offices, and partner organisations, such as the Trade Union of Education (OAJ). A parliamentary committee and research team were established to support the forum, which

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[708] MEC (2019). 'Finnish Basic Education: Excellence through Equity for All'. Available at: https://minedu.fi/documents/1410845/4183002/Finnish+Basic+Education+-+Excellence+through+Equity+for+All+2018+%28brochure%29.pdf/a30fb67b-ce02-416f-9a72-3d41a0ef5633/Finnish+Basic+Education+-+Excellence+through+Equity+for+All+2018+%28brochure%29.pdf?version=1.4&t=1526630804000.

published a Developmental Plan for Basic Education and introduced several measures in line with it.[709] The forum monitored the actions involved in and results of the measures.

Target group: All levels of education, i.e. the national level (e.g. the Ministry of Education and Culture and the National Agency of Education), the municipal level (providers of education), compulsory schools, teachers, pupils, parents, and teacher educators.

Aim and actions of measure: The forum aimed to renew comprehensive education learning environments in order to support gender, cultural, and district equality, and published a Developmental Plan for Basic Education.[710] According to the plan, the basic school of the future will be an equal community of teachers and pupils, which takes into account diverse learners (including gender differences), systematic development of expertise, strong pedagogical leadership and increased co-operation with parents and stakeholders (society). The forum introduced a special 'guarantee of learning'.

Strategic aims were implemented through specific actions and measures. Moreover, the forum organised several workshops all over Finland during the period 2017–2018 to engage local-level stakeholders to participate, and to be ready for the implementation of the developmental plan. The overall aim was to listen to stakeholders all around the country and increase equality in education.

Main stakeholder(s)/organisation(s) involved: The Basic Education Forum consists of researchers, experts, and stakeholders (such as teachers, principals, students, parents, heads of education and training, researchers, teacher educators, and experts).[711]

Funding and evidence of effectiveness, success factors, and weaknesses: Funding was allocated for several actions and measures which aimed to make progress in equality, including boys' equality. The Finnish National Agency for Education, for example, established a **National Development Centre** (*kokeilukeskus*).[712] This centre contacted the municipalities and schools that had never applied for resources for the development of teachers' competences, in order to support equality between schools. Furthermore, **2,000 tutor teacher positions were also established in Finnish municipalities** in order to support teachers in using new technologies and pedagogies, as well as in learning transversal competences, taking into account various learners in different classrooms. The tutor teacher guides other teachers in their professional learning.

Under the Basic Education Forum, several projects were introduced which aimed to

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[709] MEC (2018), *Peruskoulufoorumi luovutti esityksensä peruskoulun kehittämislinjauksiksi* [The Basic School Forum published the developmental plan for the basic school]. Available at: http://minedu.fi/artikkeli/-/asset_publisher/peruskoulufoorumi-luovutti-esityksensa-peruskoulun-kehittamislinjauksiksi.
[710] Ibid.
[711] Ibid.
[712] National Development Centre, 'Kokeilukeskus': https://kokeilukeskus.fi/me/.

increase gender equality and support boys' learning. The nationwide '**SETSTOP-project**' for example (which developed content for teacher education in Finland related to gender equality planning and equality work) aimed to motivate the inclusion of themes around gender equality and non-discrimination in curricula at all levels of education in Finland.[713] The 'Supporting each other!' (*Tuetaan yhdessä!*) project aimed to develop teaching methods and support the education of various learners.[714] In late autumn 2017, €90 million in funding was allocated for relevant local-level measures.[715]

Potential for transferability: The Basic Education Forum operated in line with OECD recommendations[716]. In order to transfer the Basic Education Forum or a similar idea to other countries, the following characteristics should be emphasised:

- enough time for planning and implementing aims;
- engagement of stakeholders, such as teacher educators, education providers, and teachers' unions;
- striving for consensus in design and implementation;
- providing sustainable resources for planning and implementation;
- emphasise in the call for pilot projects large proposals according to the aims;
- implement continuous quality assurance processes;
- and ensure holistic development of several sectors of education at the same time and organise interactions between all relevant national policy-level projects.

More information: https://minedu.fi/en/new-comprehensive-education

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Development of upper secondary legislation and raising the compulsory education age to 18 years old

Intervention types: There are two recent policy actions which aim to increase equality in education; the preparation of upper secondary legislation, and raising the compulsory education age to 18 years. An expert group nominated by the Ministry of Education and Culture prepared a new act on general upper secondary education in 2018–2019, followed by an act to raise the compulsory education age to 18 in 2020. The main aim of these policy actions is to increase equality in education in terms of gender, minorities, immigrants, and other aspects. The focus is on boys in subjects in which they are being outperformed by – or have more negative attitudes towards than – girls.

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[713] SETSTOP (2020), *Developing content for teacher education in Finland related to gender equality planning and equality work*. Available at: https://setstop.wordpress.com/.
[714] University of Oulo, *Tuetaan yhdessä!*. Available at: https://tuetaan.wordpress.com/.
[715] MEC (2017), *Osaamiseen ja tutkimukseen isot lisäpanostukset ensi vuoden budjetissa* [Next year budget promises more resources fior education]. Available at: http://minedu.fi/artikkeli/-/asset_publisher/osaamiseen-koulutukseen-ja-tutkimukseen-isot-lisapanostukset-ensi-vuoden-budjetissa.
[716] Burns,T., and Köster, F. (eds.) (2016)*, Governing education in a complex world: Educational Research and Innovation.*, Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264255364-en.

Date of implementation: Legislation was prepared in 2018–2019 and 2020. Implementation will start in autumn 2021.

Target group: Students aged 16–19.

Aims and description of measures: The new legislation on upper secondary education aims to increase its attractiveness and quality, as well as collaboration with higher education institutions, and to promote the well-being of students. Moreover, students should have better opportunities to enforce their right:

   (1) to receive guidance on their studies and transition to postgraduate studies;
   (2) to receive special education and other support;
   (3) to internationalise themselves.[717]

These actions aim to reduce dropout from upper secondary education, especially among males.

The government has argued in various situations that it is not possible anymore for young people to gain employment and prosper in their lives with a nine-year comprehensive school education (as detailed above). The proposal to raise the compulsory schooling age to 18 was accepted in parliament in spring 2021.[718] Secondary education degrees will be free of charge for young people, including learning materials, laptops, and transport. The aim is to ensure that every early school leaver completes secondary education. As part of the upper secondary education reform, guidance and student career services will be strengthened in order to provide everyone with sufficient competences to complete secondary education according to the new legislation. The right to fully-free upper secondary education will be implemented for the first time in autumn 2021.

Main stakeholder(s)/organisation(s) involved: The main bodies involved are the Ministry of Education and Culture, and stakeholders such as researchers, representatives of teachers' unions, municipality unions, and student unions.

Funding structure: The MEC have estimated the cost of raising the compulsory school age to 18 at about €110 million.[719]

Evidence of effectiveness, success factors and weaknesses: Raising the minimum school leaving age to 18 years is an important measure related to dropout among young people. The planned funding in the state budget for this is not enough, however. If the providers of education, municipalities, are to implement the measure effectively, they need more resources. It is clear that young people dropping out of schooling and the labour market need special support and special

[717] MEC (2018), *Uusi lukioLukiokoulutukselle vetovoimaa uudistuksella* [New Upper Secondary School – Upper Secondary Education More Attractive]. Available at: https://minedu.fi/uusilukio.
[718] MEC (2020), *Oppivelvollisuuden laajnetaminen* [Extending compulsory schooling]. Available at: https://minedu.fi/oppivelvollisuuden-laajentaminen.
[719] Ministry of Finance (2020), *Budget: Confidence and sustainable growth throughout Finland*. Available at: https://vm.fi/-/budjettiehdotus-12.8.2020?languageId=en_US.

training. They cannot be just included in ordinary vocational or upper secondary classrooms.

Potential for transferability: See above (the Basic Education Forum). The transferability of this measure is similar.

Views of pupils, parents, teachers, and stakeholders: In general, there is consensus about the importance and direction of the development of secondary education.[720]

National Literacy Forum

Intervention type: The government of Prime Minister Sipilä (2015–2019) was active in supporting the reading skills of young people, especially boys, and established a National Literacy Forum in 2017.[721]

Target group and aim: The forum aimed to develop children (6–16) and young people's (16–19) reading literacy, and published the guidelines for this in autumn 2018.

Description: The forum states that reading is the foundation of all learning and communicating in life, as well as of well-being, empathy, and trust. According to the guidelines, reading needs to happen at school and out of school more and more in everyday life. More virtual and physical spaces where children and young people spend their time reading should be created, and reading needs to be expanded from young people simply being 'receivers' of stories, towards encouraging them to produce their own stories. Positive attitudes towards reading must be fostered and barriers to reading should be eliminated in every way possible. Parents, caretakers, families, and other related parties are encouraged to support children and young people with reading. The different orientations and gender preferences of students in reading/writing were considered in the recommended 'new' practices and teaching/learning methods. One policymaker described the long history of supporting reading skills:

'While preparing the national-level curriculum, it has always been an important issue; how we can support the reading of girls and boys through selecting appropriate pedagogy, like co-reading, and content and context for reading, which

[720] HS (2019), *HS-analyysi: Rinteen hallitus jättää ikääntyvän Suomen talous-haasteet pitkälti tulevien hallitusten murheeksi*, [HS analysis: Rinne's government leaves the economic challenges largely to the concern for future governments]. Available at: https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000006130220.html. YLE (2019), *Näin hallitusohjelma on otettu vastaan: Enteilee konkurssia, on hiekalle rakennettu huvila – toisaalta auttaa Suomen yli laskusuhdanteen* [How the government program has been adopted: Envisioning bankruptcy, building a villa on the sand - on the other hand helping Finland over the recession]. Available at : https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-10813153.
[721] MEC (2018), *Kansallinen lukutaitofoorumi: Lukuliike innostaa lukemiseen ja vastaa taitojen heikentymiseen* [National Literacy Forum: The reading forum encourages reading and responds to the weakening of skills]. Available at: https://minedu.fi/artikkeli/-/asset_publisher/lukuliike-innostaa-lukemiseen-ja-vastaa-taitojen-heikentymiseen.

trigger situational interest among boys and girls. The role of reading has been emphasised in the learning of all school subjects.'

Main stakeholder(s)/organisation(s) involved: The main actors involved are teachers, teacher educators, students, and parents.

Funding structure: Approximately €5 million was distributed to various projects supporting the aims of the forum. An accurate total for the amount of resources is challenging to calculate because implementation was supported by development projects and in-service training activities, which were financed by the National Agency for Education.

Evidence of effectiveness, success factors, and weaknesses: It is too early to evaluate the outcomes of the forum. However, the forum's aims are important because two recent national level evaluations show that the differences between boys' and girls' mother tongue skills develop during compulsory education, as detailed above.[722]

Potential for transferability: The outcomes of the literacy forum have been transformed to in-service and pre-service teacher education practices. Implementation of these has been supported by the Basic Education Forum[723] and Finnish Teacher Education Forum.[724]

More information: https://minedu.fi/en/-/lukuliike-innostaa-lukemiseen-ja-vastaa-taitojen-heikentymiseen

3. Overall assessment

3.1 Key findings

There is clear evidence in national and international studies and statistics related to the underachievement and exclusion of boys in Finland. Interviewed experts emphasised similar issues as those identified in the studies and reports examined. The performance gap in reading between girls and boys was the largest in the OECD

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[722] Karvi (2020), *Alkumittaus – Koulutulokkaiden matematiikan ja äidinkielen ja kirjallisuuden taidot ja osaamisen taustatekijät – Tiivistelmä* [Assessment in the beginning of compulsory school - Mathematics and mother tongue and literature skills and background factors for pupils at first grade - Executive summary]. Tiivistelmät 13:2020;
Kauppinen, M. and Marjanen, J. (2020). *Millaista on yhdeksäsluokkalaisten kielellinen osaaminen? – Suomen kielen ja kirjallisuuden oppimistulokset perusopetuksen päättövaiheessa 2019* [What is 9th graders' linguistic competence like? – Learning outcomes in Finnish language and literature in the final stage of basic education in 2019]. Kansallinen koulutuksen arviointikeskus 2020 Julkaisut 13:2020. Available at: https://karvi.fi/app/uploads/2020/08/KARVI_1320.pdf.
[723] MEC (2018), *Peruskoulufoorumi luovutti esityksensä peruskoulun kehittämislinjauksiksi* [The Basic School Forum published the developmental plan for the basic school]. Available at: http://minedu.fi/artikkeli/-/asset_publisher/peruskoulufoorumi-luovutti-esityksensa-peruskoulun-kehittamislinjauksiksi.
[724] MEC (2018), *Opettajien osaamisen kehittämiseen haettavana 12 miljoonaa euroa* [Altogether EUR 12 million for the development of teacher educators and teachers' competences]. Available at: http://minedu.fi/artikkeli/-/asset_publisher/opettajien-osaamisen-kehittamiseen-haettavana-12-miljoonaa-euroa.

countries in 2018. Boys and men drop out more often than girls at all levels of education. 8.1% of Finnish-speaking boys and 7% of girls do not continue their education after education, for example. Altogether, 58% of upper secondary students and 60% of young people who complete a master's degree are female.

Differences in engagement and performance between girls and boys depend on different interests, different motivations, and varying self-regulation skills. One explanation for the lower educational performance of boys than girls that is often suggested in literature and everyday conversation is the difference in developmental speed and the influence of puberty. Based on the interviews and research, however, individual factors (such as intelligence and self-regulation skills) may be the most important predictors for school success, but do not explain fully gender differences in performance. Instead, performance is more influenced by classroom and school-level factors.

The emotional atmosphere in the class is one of the most important factors influencing engagement and learning-related gender differences. The emotional support provided by friends and teachers in classrooms fosters students' engagement and learning. Gender stereotypes of teachers, parents, peers, and the society influence children's beliefs about their own abilities and behaviour, which, in turn, influence their engagement and learning. Moreover, school-level factors have been associated with gender differences in engagement and learning. In general, school is perceived to be a more feminine than masculine environment. Alongside the view that boys' nature is less study-oriented than girls', this is considered an explanation for the poorer performance of boys in school. The socio-economic status of parents is another factor in children's performance at school, but no specific findings related to gender differences were identified.

To overcome boys' challenges in relation to engagement and learning, measures and actions at different levels or in different situations (such as those related to family, school, and leisure) are needed. The measures should cover different stages of life, from early childhood to adulthood. Challenges that boys face in learning can be addressed directly through measures that specifically target them (learning materials and activity-friendly pedagogy, for example) and indirectly through the development of service structures in society (supporting families and strengthening community spirit, for example). It is also important to realise that gender is only one variable that differentiates learners, and that measures which support boys' learning benefit all children and young people, regardless of gender.

3.2   Recommendations

Based on the desk research and interviews, the following recommendations could be proposed for overcoming underperformance and dropout among boys:

- **At individual level:** Supporting boys' interest, engagement, and motivation in learning, the development of boys' social-emotional skills (including grit, resilience, and self-regulation), as well as literacy and language skills.

- **At school level:** Strengthening boys' faith in the future; breaking gendered practices at school and in society; ensuring inclusion and belonging to the school and community; strengthening social and life management skills in school and hobbies; developing guidance services through the life path; principals' leadership skills to develop the operating culture of schools;

- **At societal level:** Developing family welfare services; supporting parents; encouraging diverse hobbies; supporting boys and young men in occupations perceived to be 'female' or female-dominated.

There have been more than 100 projects in the last 10 years which have focused on gender issues, such as the gender gap, in Finnish society. During the last five years, two policy-level discussions have focused on boys' underachievement and dropout. The National Agency for Education prepared a guide to promoting gender equality in primary education as part of a collaborative project, in addition to another project focused on boys' learning challenges and solutions for the period until 2025.

The following three initiatives were selected as being significant in the context of tackling boys' underperformance in compulsory education, and it is recommended to further explore their potential for upscaling and transferring to other country contexts:

- The **Basic Education Forum** consisted of 30 experts from universities, national-level administrative offices, and partner organisations. It aimed to renew comprehensive education learning environments and teachers' competence in order to support gender, cultural, and district equality. According to the plan, the basic school (common compulsory education) of the future will be an equal community of teachers and pupils.

- **Development of upper secondary legislation and raising the compulsory education age to 18 years old** aims to increase equality in education. Secondary education degrees will be a part of compulsory education, and will be offered free of charge for all people under 18 in Finland. This is an important measure related to dropout among young people.

- The **National Literacy Forum** aims to develop children (6–16) and young people's (16–19) reading literacy, arguing that reading is the foundation of all learning and communicating, as well as of well-being, empathy, and trust. According to the guidelines, reading needs to happen at school and out of school more and more in everyday life.

6.3.4 Germany

1. Key trends and implications

1.1 Contextualisation

Compulsory schools in Germany are governed at the regional level ('*Bundesländer*'). A national perspective is guaranteed through the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs ('*Kultusministerkonferenz*'). The Federal Ministry of Education is active in cross-cutting issues related to the education system at both the national and international level, including the expansion of all-day schools in Germany, and Germany's performance in international comparative studies, such as PISA.

There is **significant difference in rates of early leaving from education and training (ELET) between boys and girls**, with the rate higher for boys. In 2019, for example, the ELET rate for boys was 11.8%, compared with 8.8% for girls. The gap has widened significantly, from 0.6 of a percentage point in 2015 to 3 percentage points in 2019.[725]

The school performance and attainment o**f girls and boys in Germany differs in line with traditional gender stereotypes**. Girls outperform boys in reading (512 vs. 486 points, PISA 2018) and in foreign language learning, while boys outperform girls in mathematics (503 vs. 496 points, PISA 2018). The gender gap in reading was narrower in 2018 (26 points) than in 2009 (40 points), due to the fact that the trend for girls is downwards, while for boys it is stable. In mathematics, the trend for both girls and boys is downwards. The overall trend in science is also downwards, with girls only slightly outperforming boys.

Educational choices still follow traditional gender stereotypes.[726] Tertiary enrolment in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields is remarkably high in Germany. More than one-third of students choose to study in one of these fields. However, only 28% of young people who enrol in STEM fields are female, according to the OECD. Among high-performing students in mathematics or science in Germany, about one in four boys expects to work as an engineer or science professional by the age of 30, while only one in eight girls expects to do so. Conversely, around one in four high-performing girls expects to work in health-related professions, but fewer than one in ten high-performing boys expects to do so.

Educational gender-specific choices were also very present for the interviewees for this case study, and the **low rate of women in STEM studies** in particular. Educational preferences develop constantly over school careers towards gender-specific choices.

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[725] OECD (2016), *Society at a Glance 2016: A Spotlight on Youth*. Available at:
https://www.oecd.org/germany/sag2016-germany.pdf.
[726] WZB Discussion Paper, *The German vocational education and training system: Its institutional configuration, strengths, and challenges*, No. SP I 2014-502. Available at:
https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/104536/1/805013571.pdf.

One interviewee pointed to the sinking ratio of girls in dual vocational education and training (VET). In general, dual VET courses are preferred by male adolescents, while girls tend to choose school education. One reason for this lies in the different types of education for typically 'male' and typically 'female' professions. Health and care professions in Germany are not taught in dual VET courses, but in schools. Professions in the manufacturing sector such as metalworking, a sector typically considered to be 'male', are predominantly trained in dual apprenticeships. Together with a rising demand for health and care professionals and corresponding promotion of the sector, gender-specific choices are one reason why girls are under-represented in dual VET.

One recurring assertion in the interviews was that **gender stereotypes shape education in Germany to a large extent, and in various spheres**. Educational achievement reflects traditional gender stereotypes – girls perform better in reading and in languages, while boys perform slightly better in maths. In addition, self-assessment also reflects these stereotypes. Girls underestimate their mathematic competences, and this underestimation grows over the course of their school careers. Boys in general achieve poorer educational outcomes, but grades – according to several respondents – do not have the same importance for them as for girls.

Several interviewees questioned the study's focus on boys. For example, some noted that overall, **men are more successful in their careers and on the German labour market than women**, and boys are aware of this phenomenon. This may result in lower motivation at school for some (though not all) boys, who feel they do not need to bother trying when they can expect to get a good job with average or even poor grades. For the same reason, some interviewees expressed scepticism as to why boys should be supported and fostered, as long as girls and women continue to face multiple disadvantages and lack the same opportunities as men. Some interviewees felt that the accumulating disadvantages of girls and women over the course of their careers need to be addressed ahead of any specific focus on boys. One stated: 'Girls achieve better grades, they perform better at school and in higher education, so the key question is: Why don't they get to the top?'

Perhaps the most prevalent argument among those doubting the importance of boys' issues in education was that Germany has a severe problem with **social injustice in education**, which should be given priority. All interviewees were aware of the urgency of this problem, including those who acknowledged the study's focus on boys.

Of course, the relatively low performance of boys at school is not a new issue. **Since relevant data has been collected, boys have achieved lower educational scores than girls.** In Germany (as in other German-speaking countries) there is debate around the **feminisation of schools**. Indeed, the majority of schoolteachers are female, especially in compulsory schools, and this is even more prevalent in early (pre-school) education. However, it should be noted that boys also achieved lower grades when most teachers were male, which was the case until the 1960s. Some interviewees indicated that female teachers can be positive role models for boys, and male teachers for girls. Others pointed out that the presence of a male teacher alone does not support boys in developing a positive gender role, as a lot is dependent on the concept of masculinity that a male teacher fosters. The solution according to some

interviewees, therefore, is not simply to increase the number of male teachers, but rather, to encourage the presence of '**alternative images of masculinity**'; positive role models who demonstrate that it is OK for boys to seek help, for example, among other traditionally 'unmanly' behaviours. According to one interviewee: 'What we need in schools is more diversity, in every respect.'

As mentioned above, **gender roles are deeply rooted in Germany**, and traditional images of masculinity imply male supremacy. This can mean that boys are less motivated at school, firstly because they expect to be preferred (on the labour market, for example), and secondly because putting effort in is not 'masculine' – a 'real man' is successful without having to try. Many interviewees noted that girls try more because 'they realise that they need to work'. Boys are less willing to work hard, and this is linked to pressure from their peer groups: 'It is ok for boys to be successful, but only without effort.' Being masculine is associated with being smart, and success should therefore be achieved without effort.[727] To do homework and to study is 'uncool', so boys may sometimes even study secretly.

After the *Wende* (unification of East and West Germany in 1990), gender roles in the east re-traditionalised. The gap in women's employment between eastern and western/southern federal states is slowly levelling out (before 1990, the female employment rate in the former East Germany was higher than in the former West Germany). Nevertheless, **gender roles and the perception of typically 'male' and 'female' features still differ between 'old' and 'new' federal states** (*Bundesländer*), although this gap in perception is slowly closing. More than one interviewee pointed to East German 'heritage', in terms of the availability of childcare and high female employment rates. According to one interviewee, basic attitudes toward women's employment and childcare are quite different between eastern and western/southern federal states. In eastern regions, the percentage of three year-olds in nurseries/kindergartens is significantly higher than in Bavaria, for example. The figure below illustrates the difference for children under three, which is even greater – 31.0% of children under 3 are in childcare in the 'old' western and southern federal states, compared to 52.7% in the 'new' eastern federal states (including Berlin).[728] For details, see Figure 6-7 below.

[727] According to one interviewee, parents systematically overestimate their sons' intelligence when asked to assess the intelligence of their children.
[728] Statistisches Bundesamt (2021), *Kindertagesbetreuung Betreuungsquote von Kindern unter 6 Jahren nach Bundesländern*. Available at: https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Soziales/Kindertagesbetreuung/Tabellen/betreuungsquote-2018.html;jsessionid=89425DE0C3EDD1D42018DC2BC131EAE4.live722.

Figure 6-7 Percentage of three-year olds in nurseries/kindergartens in 2020

Betreuungsquote 0 bis unter 3 Jahre
in %

Betreuungsquote 0 bis unter 3-Jährige

| 14,5 bis unter 26,7 | 26,7 bis unter 34,7 | 34,7 bis unter 47,0 | 47,0 bis 62,4 |
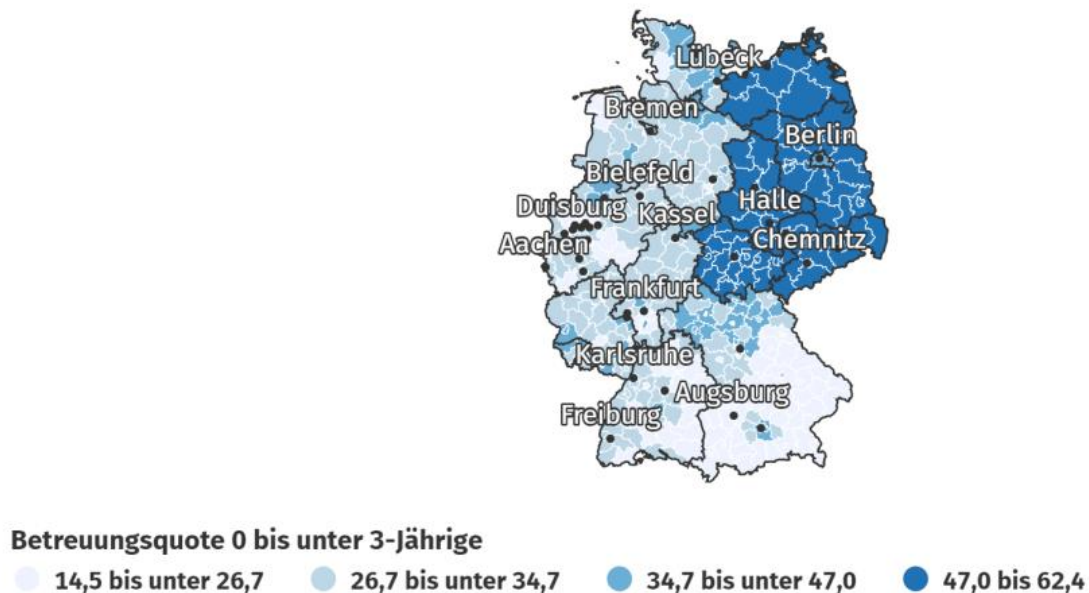
Copyrights: © GeoBasis-DE / BKG 2019 | Quellenangaben und methodische Hinweise
© Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, 2020

Source: Statistisches Bundesamt Destatis, https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Soziales/Kindertagesbetreuung/_inhalt.html

As noted above, students' **parents and their educational level influence the educational achievement of students significantly**, both for girls and boys. Educational attainment is inherited in Germany, not achieved – this was seen as an urgent issue in general, but most interviewees did not have an adequate solution to hand. One respondent, a student herself, observed that family and the home environment have a stronger influence on boys than girls, which she related to the slower development of boys: 'Girls are able to keep more distance, at a younger age, because they develop faster.'

The attitude of teachers can also play a role, according to some interviewees, who noted that evidence suggests that teachers assess girls and boys differently. Boys achieve lower scores for the same work, both from male and female teachers. Interviewees felt, therefore, that the lower performance of boys should be examined and analysed in a differentiated manner, which focuses on the factors that contribute to differences in performance between genders, and whether these are based on competence or grades. This might lead to boys' competence moving closer to girls' than the difference in grades suggests.

Interviewees felt that **boys are over-represented in types of school with high dropout rates**, such as schools for children with special educational needs (SEN) (*Förderschulen*) and lower secondary schools (*Hauptschulen*), and that the reasons for this should be researched. One interviewee suspected that this could be explained by biological factors related to gender, among others, 'even if this is not a popular idea', and stated that boys develop more slowly than girls, so entrance to school may be too early for some.

Other factors influencing performance cited by interviewees included **behaviour at school and activities outside of school.** Behaviour influences grades, and teachers show less tolerance for disturbing or deviant behaviour from boys. Interviewees felt that girls are treated with more tolerance than boys when 'misbehaving', and are therefore more likely to get a second chance from teachers. This contrasts with one interviewee's observation that girls are expected to be silent and quiet at school, so much so that they are often drowned out by boys. Interviewees noted that boys' social life takes place outside of school to a greater extent than girls', and that they are less accepted and acknowledged at school (or at least feel they are). They experience less recognition and are less 'seen' than girls, and this could contribute to a greater sense of alienation at school. One respondent linked this to a greater need for more practical learning among boys.

1.2   Vulnerable sub-groups

Although not all boys have problems with education, specific sub-groups of boys do experience certain issues. Many boys with a stable social background who are supported by their families perform well in compulsory school. Some face challenges at school, however, and many of those interviewed for this study associated this with lower motivation. One view was that in peer groups of boys, it is **not cool to study**. To work hard and to learn is not associated with a masculine attitude. Again, boys are trapped in a traditional gender role that puts pressure on them to act in a specific way. Boys with low self-esteem and a history of failure and underachievement are more susceptible to pressure from their peer group, according to one interviewee.

As noted above, **educational outcomes in Germany are strongly linked to social background and to parents' educational achievements**. This persistent phenomenon is well-known and recognised in policy, but it is hard to combat and – according to some interviewees and supported by data – has not changed significantly since the 1960s. This results in persistently low opportunities for children from socially disadvantaged groups, households with insufficient economic resources, and educationally deprived families, both for girls and boys.[729] These statements are supported by the National Education Report (*Nationaler Bildungsbericht*). According to the authors of this report, three risk factors influence educational achievement in Germany: parents' level of formal qualification, social background, and financial

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[729] OECD (2016), *Society at a Glance 2016: A Spotlight on Youth*. Available at:
https://www.oecd.org/germany/sag2016-germany.pdf.

resources.[730] Interviewees had a similar view and pointed to **intersectionality**, when several factors combine, meaning children face intersectional challenges. Factors such as gender, plus migrant background, plus social disadvantage multiply, and sum up to serious disadvantages in education.

According to the National Education Report, the three risk factors set out above are often combined with a migration background. Moreover, the authors indicate disparities according to region of origin. Disadvantages are not so significant for children with parents from the new EU Member States (Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and Southeast Europe (SEE)) and for children born in Germany.[731] One interviewee added that intersectional disadvantage does not apply to all migrant groups. Instead, factors overlap and interact for certain migrant groups with specific regional backgrounds.

These **risk factors also evolve over time**. In the 1960s, a person with the greatest risk of low educational achievement was characterised by the features of 'girl', 'catholic', and 'rural area'. According to one interviewee, the main risk characteristics are now 'boy', 'migration background', and 'urban environment'. Migration as a factor can be broken down further to consider whether children with a migration background face challenges that differ according to their parents' social background and origin. Children with parents from the USA, Sweden, Poland, or China in general perform well, whereas having parents from Turkey, or Arab or North African countries, seems to be disadvantageous, according to one of the interviewees. It should be noted, however, that it is unclear whether data supports this.

One interviewee experienced in research said that **discrimination on the part of teachers** can also play a significant role. Often, prejudices or stereotypes related to gender and race/origin overlap, leading to intersectional disadvantages for boys with a migration background due to stereotyped views among educational professionals. In addition, discrimination in the classroom can be taboo, because of clear commitments to non-discriminatory actions in school. Nevertheless, this interviewee felt that teachers are sometimes hindered by unconscious prejudices and stereotypical thinking, leading to instances of discrimination.

1.3   Key implications

The implications and consequences of boys' underperformance concern specific sub-groups, not boys or men in general. Young men with good or average educational outcomes are relatively successful in their transitions to work. They are often favoured over better-qualified young women; so – as one respondent noted – 'Why should they make an effort to perform better at school?' In contrast, **low-qualified or unqualified young men face problems finding a job**, because unqualified jobs in

[730] Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung ed. (2020), *Bildung in Deutschland: Ein indikatorengestützter Bericht mit einer Analyse zu Bildung in einer digitalisierten Welt. WBV*, p 6. Available at: https://www.bildungsbericht.de/de/bildungsberichte-seit-2006/bildungsbericht-2020/bildung-in-deutschland-2020.
[731] Bildung in Deutschland (2020), p. 6.

industry, crafts, and agriculture are disappearing, and jobs in the low-wage service sector are perceived as 'female' jobs.

Low-qualified young men also face problems finding a partner. Traditional gender roles suggest that women can marry 'upwards' in the traditional gender hierarchy, but men cannot. As a result, **two groups have a reduced chance of finding a (heterosexual) relationship – poorly-qualified men, and highly-qualified women.** This can result in misogyny, with disadvantaged men perceiving themselves as victims, and blaming women. However, misogyny is not only a problem relating to educational dropout – it is found at all educational levels.
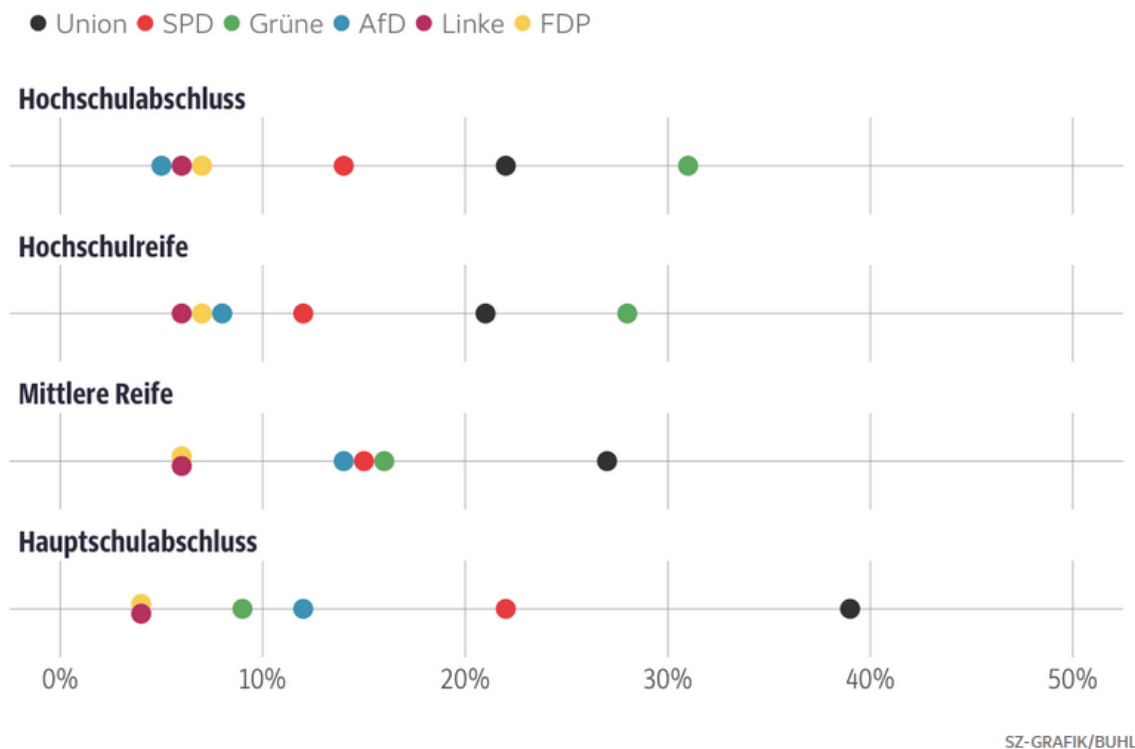
In relation to radicalisation, the interviewees presented **no clear picture of any relationship between poor educational outcomes and willingness to support radical movements**. While some said that data supports a relationship, others were very clear that among right-wing extremists, low-educated people and early school leavers are not over-represented. The right-wing party AfD ('Alternative for Germany') has many middle-class voters, such as pharmacists and VET graduates. Interviewees felt that radicalisation is more related to socio-economic problems, deprivation, and deficient regional infrastructure – 'no bus, no jobs'. According to one respondent, these problems cannot be solved through education.

Voter analysis of the 2017 federal election finds that the AfD achieved above-average results among manual workers, the economically dissatisfied, and the unemployed. An important group of supporters was men between 25 and 59 years of age.[732] Analysis of the 2019 EU election shows a similar picture. More men than women voted for the AfD, and most support for the AfD was found among manual workers. Most AfD voters were those with a low to medium level of education (intermediate and lower secondary school leaving certificates).[733] However, one interviewee drew attention to the fact that the educationally disadvantaged typically do not vote at all. This makes it less plausible that low educational success is an explanation for the success of right-wing parties.

[732] Bukow, Sebastian (2017), Bundestagswahl 2017 Ergebnisse und Analysen, p. 16. Available at: https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/boell-brief_bundestagswahl_2017.pdf?dimension1=division_demo.
[733] Süddeutsche Zeitung (2019), *Wer hat in Deutschland wen gewählt? Wahlanalyse zur Europawahl*. Available at: https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/europawahl-wahlanalyse-deutschland-1.4463723.

Figure 6-8 Voting results of the 2017 federal elections in Germany

● Union ● SPD ● Grüne ● AfD ● Linke ● FDP

Hochschulabschluss

Hochschulreife

Mittlere Reife

Hauptschulabschluss

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%

SZ-GRAFIK/BUHL

Source: https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/europawahl-wahlanalyse-deutschland-1.4463723

A relationship between radicalisation and poor educational attainment was assumed on a psychological level, however, with underperforming boys finding acceptance and appreciation in extremist movements. More generally, images of machismo and traditional stereotypical images of men are thought to be attractive to boys, particularly boys with little experience of success and acknowledgement. These are merely assumptions based on interviewees' own perceptions, however.

Interviewees agreed that **poor educational achievement has an effect on health**, as health is clearly linked to income. Low qualification was not assumed to have an effect on crime rate; the crime rate is similar across all backgrounds in terms of quantity, although it differs in quality (white-collar crime). Neither correlation was drawn with gender-based violence, as this exists across all social backgrounds and all levels of education.

Several interviewees pointed out that the disadvantages experienced by girls and women are more urgent than boys' disadvantages in education, and that the disparities in educational achievement of girls and boys are small, compared to social injustice in education. Socially and economically disadvantaged children face challenges, regardless of their gender. Social disparities are very hard to combat, and very little progress (some interviewees said none) has been achieved since the 1960s. One respondent even considered the measures against gender inequality in education

to be a sideshow, expressing the view that the debate has shifted because educational disadvantage has not been solved thus far.

2. **Policy attention and actions**

2.1 **Policy attention and attitudes**

Gender equality is prominently grounded in Germany on a political level. There is a strong national commitment on the topic, which is included in the current government programme. A **national equality strategy for boys and young men** is also in place.[734] Low educational achievement in general is a prominent topic in Germany. The first PISA results in 2000 were a shock to many, as self-perception suggested much better results.

In contrast, **gender differences in education were not perceived to be a significant topic in the public and political discourse** by a number of interviewees. Some said that it is a topic that is raised, based on the existence of national commitment and strategies, while others said it is not or is hardly ever present in media discourse. There have been some recent studies that are relevant in this area, however[735]. One respondent who has researched the topic for many years observed that the issue emerges on a cyclical basis every few years. The performance of boys and male adolescents is not present in political discourse, although gender disparities are briefly discussed each time PISA results are published. The focus on education has long been fixated on the disadvantage of girls and on supporting them. This turned on boys and male adolescents for the first time when girls outperformed boys in secondary school examinations (*Abitur*). The reason for this, according to one of the interviewees, was that the topic had at that stage reached the conservative middle class.

Several interviewees noted that in their opinion, **boys' disadvantage is not the crucial problem in education.** Disadvantages based on social background are more serious and should be tackled first. Similarly, experts also emphasised that girls' disadvantages are more prevalent than boys' disadvantages, so the primary perspective of the study is to be questioned: 'Instead, we should ask ourselves why girls/women don't reach the top.' Accordingly, one interviewee did not see the necessity for a greater level of attention: 'The attention it gets is appropriate.' Another expressed this is stark terms: 'It seems to me that the discrimination of women is currently the more pressing problem. The contribution that women and girls in particular make to keeping society and the environment fit for the future also seems to me so relevant that I consider all measures that restrict male privileges to be sensible.'

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[734] Bundesministerium für Familie (2020), *Gleichstellungspolitik für Jungen und Männer in Deutschland*. Available at: https://www.bmfsfj.de/blob/160754/7d28de3c6617eba090e11b26f9e8b503/gleichstellungspolitik-fuer-jungen-und-maenner-in-deutschland-langfassung-data.pdf.

[735] Riphahn R and Schwientek, C. (2015), *What drives the reversal of the gender education gap? Evidence from Germany. BGPE Discussion Paper No. 159.*

Other interviewees emphasised that a lot is already being done to tackle gender disparities in education, yet social background plays such a significant role that the measures are not always efficient: 'We are trying everything that could work.' Several of the interviewees were at a loss as to how to combat boys' underperformance and gender inequalities in general: 'We are good at facts and statistics, but not so good at the why and the how, although this is true for other countries as well.' One expert refused to contribute to the study, saying he was absolutely pessimistic about a change for the better, due to a lack of interest on the part of the decisive authorities, both in politics and administration and in educational institutions.

2.2   Key success factors and barriers

A number of factors can be identified as success factors, in terms of measures and practices aimed at improving the performance of boys in education. The first is a need for appropriate **resources and commitment**. In order to be successful and have an impact, measures need to have sufficient resources. Relevant public authorities, both central and local, should therefore guarantee support and commitment so that adequate funding can be dedicated to measures.

Measures need to be devised and implemented by the right types of stakeholders and actors. It is therefore important to involve a **broad network** of relevant actors in order to ensure that all key players are included. One example of such a network includes schools, kindergartens, ministries and political administrative bodies, employers, and social partners at national, regional, and local level. The importance of the **right expertise** is also crucial, as no measure can be efficient without sound know-how and competences.

Measures should have a **broad focus**, be proven to be advantageous to both girls and boys, and include all stages of education, from early childhood/pre-school, to university and adult education.

Increasing the number of male teachers was seen as a possible solution for the lack of (positive) male role models. Progress on this is very slow, however, and some interviewees indicated that the presence of male teachers has no measurable effect on boys' performance. Instead, more **diversity** in all aspects was estimated to be more effective.

Among the barriers and obstacles which can prevent or hinder the success of measures, interviewees mentioned, above all, persistent **gender roles**. Traditional images of masculinity are still very strong in Germany, and hard to tackle.

Furthermore, gender equality is not (or not well) represented in **teacher education** or in teacher training courses. Teachers are not trained in gender topics, and thus reproduce stereotypes (or at least, do not prevent their reproduction) in schools, which contributes to their persistence. More broadly, it would seem that boys' pedagogy is caught in a trap; it cannot avoid addressing boys in an assumed masculinity, and in this way, reproduces gender stereotypes. One can either try to

eradicate these 'male' stereotypes among boys, or encourage them interpret them in a positive way. Either way, traditional images of male behaviour are reproduced.

Linked to this, **awareness** of gender injustice is still low. In business and industries, commitment to gender equality is rare. Interviewees associated the awareness of gender equality in society with the success of measures, stating that as long as citizens remain ignorant to gender injustice, relevant measures cannot be effective.

In terms of measures aimed at prevention of radicalisation, although educational failure can play a part in this, wider societal issues (such as **poor infrastructure and socio-economic deprivation**) represent a major challenge, one that cannot be solved by education alone.

2.3   Overview of key initiatives and measures

This section presents a selection of key initiatives which aim to improve the educational performance of boys through means such as challenging gender stereotypes, breaking down gender segregation in education choices, and instilling attitudes of equality in children at a young age.

> ### Cliché Free Initiative (*Initiative Klischeefrei*)
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> The Cliché Free Initiative is an alliance between representatives from the education and training, policymaking, business, and research sectors. The overall aim of this initiative is to improve the career choices of boys and young men by showcasing 'non-traditional' careers for men, such as working in the care sector. It therefore campaigns for career and study choices to be offered free from gender stereotypes. This is a particularly important area of work, given the issues raised by the interviewees for this case study surrounding educational choice and gender roles in Germany.
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> The Cliché Free Initiative was launched in December 2017, and targets multipliers who influence boys' career choices. It provides a range of material for boys and male adolescents, ranging from pre-school age up to university.
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> The Service Agency of the initiative acts as a central point of contact to provide guidance and facilitate networking between institutions and active participants. It prepares and edits information, such as measures which have been structured in a gender-sensitive manner, other materials, and examples of successful practice, and makes these available free of charge on the klischee-frei.de portal. It also implements specialist conferences that are staged by the Initiative. The third *Klischeefrei* conference was held online on 9 March 2021.[736] The Service Agency comprises a technical unit and a press office located at the *Kompetenzzentrum Technik-Diversity-Chancengleichheit* (Centre of Excellence for Technology, Diversity

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[736] Klishcee Frei, *3. Fachtagung Klischeefrei „Tschüss Klischees, hallo Talente! Lebenswelten junger Menschen" Der Rückblick*. Available at: https://www.klischee-frei.de/de/klischeefrei_97905.php.

and Equal Opportunities), as well as an editorial department based at the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB). It is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ).

The forum is a permanent advisory board for this initiative, and includes four ministries, regional ministries, the Public Employment Service (*Bundesagentur für Arbeit* (BA)), social partners, as well as representatives and practitioners from academic research, trade, and industry.

Partners in this initiative include education and training institutes, research institutes, chambers of crafts and trades, institutes of higher education, nursery schools, local government bodies, schools, companies from various sectors, asociations, federations, and others.

Overall, to date this initiative has involved around 250 organisations. Success factors include the broad support of ministries and administration, the focus on both genders, the high technical quality, and also great expertise. However, it should be noted that this large network requires a significant level of coordination, which ties up a large share of resources.

More information**:** https://www.klischee-frei.de/de/klischeefrei_92804.php

Boys' Day

Boys' Day is a nationwide action day, offering opportunities for boys to learn about professions that traditionally are perceived as 'female' jobs. Professions in healthcare, social care, education and the service industry are included. Boys can also attend career guidance activities and workshops on gender and gender roles.

The Day was launched in 2011, and is open to boys from the fifth school year (age 11) upwards, in addition to schools and educational business partners. The main aim of this initiative is to improve the career choices of boys and young men by offering opportunities in a variety of sectors that are not traditionally seen as 'male', such as education and care. This issue is seen as fundamental to improving the educational and labour market outcomes of boys in Germany. The initiative is funded by the BMFSFJ.

This is an annual Day, which takes place in April each year and offers boys information and the chance to participate in activities related to professions that are not traditionally male. Participants can also take part in career counselling sessions or in workshops on concepts of masculinity and gender issues. The next Boys' Day is scheduled for 22 April 2021, and will be held online.

Since its launch in 2011, around 290,000 boys have taken part in more than 52,000 initiatives offered as part of Boys' Day in Germany. An estimated 64% of those taking part have learned more about a profession in which they are interested. A total of 24% of companies have received job applications from former participants in

Boys' Days. 94% of participations said that they thought the initiative was good or very good. Further details on evaluation results are available on the initiative's website.[737]

The long-term nature of the initiative is one of its success factors. Short-term measures cannot have a sustainable impact on gender stereotypes. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to offer more digital and online services.

More information: https://www.boys-day.de

Courageous children (*Couragierte Kinder*)

This initiative is based in the district of *Sächsische Schweiz-Osterzgebirge*. It offers materials and workshops for children in day-care centres and primary schools. Launched in 2017, *Couragierte Kinder* targets children aged 3 to 12, teachers and educators in day-care centres and primary schools, and parents.

The initiative aims to foster democratic values in children. It organises and conducts workshops for children with the aim of strengthening their self-awareness, empathy, and conflict-solving skills. Children are supported to develop their social skills and values, such as respect and non-violence, in order to prevent violence, bullying, and discrimination. *Couragierte Kinder* is part of *Aktion Zivilcourage* (the Civil Courage Initiative), a registered non-profit association founded by local adolescents at the end of the 1990s, which sought support from committed citizens, the police, the mayor, and other local administration and associations. According to the 2020 annual report[738], 25% of funding was granted by federal ministries and another 25% by the state, districts, and municipalities.

According to the annual report, between March and December 2020, 10,995 people participated in *Aktion Zivilcourage* measures in total, including 413 children under 14. The initiative indicates that combining idealism with a professional approach is a success factor.

More information: https://www.aktion-zivilcourage.de/angebote/kinder

Other initiatives and organisations of interest

There are a range of other initiatives that are relevant in terms of actions to improve the educational performance of boys in Germany.

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[737] For more information, see this report: https://www.boys-day.de/daten-fakten/zahlen-und-fakten/evaluation-und-statistiken/evaluationsergebnisse2.
[738] Aktion Zivil Courage (2020), *Jahresbericht*. Available at: https://www.aktion-zivilcourage.de/_Resources/Persistent/8/2/e/d/82ed86d7ba312c45c9d3d4a96ab72dc8a01f108d/Jahresbericht_Aktion_Zivilcourage_2020_Digital.pdf.

Lesen macht stark **(Reading makes you strong)** is a regional initiative, based in *Schleswig-Holstein*, which provides reading materials designed to improve the reading skills of children in compulsory schools (primary school and secondary school level one). The aim of the initiative is to make reading fun for children. Although there is no specific focus on boys, evidence from PISA (see sections above) shows that boys tend to struggle more with reading than girls. *Lesen macht stark* materials are developed by the *Institut für Qualitätsentwicklung an Schulen Schleswig-Holstein*.

More information:
https://www.schleswig-holstein.de/DE/Landesregierung/IQSH/iqsh_node.html

The *Freiburger Forschungsräume* (Freiburg research rooms) link science education to language education, ranging from pre-school to upper secondary level. This includes a joint qualification programme for teachers from kindergartens, and compulsory and secondary schools, as well as outdoor trainers. The programme is governed by the municipality of Freiburg, together with school partners and partners from teachers' education. Although there is no specific focus on boys, the initiative aims to reduce gender segregation in terms of educational subject choices.

More information:
https://www.freiburg.de/pb/627238.html, https://www.freiburg.de/pb/627371.html

The aim of the **ReMoDe – *Regional und Mobil für Demokratie* (Regional and mobile for democracy)** project is to develop a pedagogical concept for interacting with young people from backgrounds where ideologies of inequality and right-wing radicalisation tendencies occur frequently. It is funded by the BMFSFJ.

More information:
https://www.demokratie-leben.de/projekte-expertise/projekte-finden-1/projektdetails/remode-regional-und-mobil-fuer-demokratie

Netzwerk-Lotsen (Network pilots) is a training and networking project in *Hessen*. It addresses teachers, psychologists, and social workers in schools, and aims to provide them with expertise and knowledge about the process of radicalisation and forms of extremism.

More information:
https://hke.hessen.de/projekte/weitere-projekte/netzwerk-lotsen

The *Institut für genderreflektierte Gewaltprävention* (Institute for gender reflective violence prevention (IFGG)) offers anti-violence training for children, adolescents, parents, teachers, and pedagogues. It is based in Berlin.

More information: https://www.ifgg-berlin.de/

3. Overall assessment

3.1 Key findings

The **pervasiveness and the persistence of traditional gender roles** is the most prominent background to gender inequality in general and boys' underperformance in education in Germany. This has proven to be the crucial finding of this case study and feeds into actions on the issue in a variety of ways. Traditional gender roles restrict boys (and girls) to specific stereotypical attitudes and behaviour. Traditional images of masculinity are adopted by boys at an early age, influenced by family and the home environment[739]. These are furthered and reproduced by parents and family, the media, and later by peers and teachers, for both males and females. Gender roles harden with increasing age; support for children must therefore start at pre-school age when children are more open to alternative gender roles. The difference between girls' and boys' attainment also increases during the educational pathway. Language produces and reinforces gender roles, both in schoolbooks and in the classroom.

Peer group pressure plays a decisive role in the low educational achievement of boys. The majority of the difference between girls and boys can be explained by differences in motivation and effort. The German traditional image of masculinity suggests that men are bright, so there is no need for them to work hard for success. It is therefore often considered 'uncool' for boys to study hard, which obviously impacts school attainment.

Early school leaving rates are higher among boys due to a complex network of factors. Boys are over-represented in schools with higher dropout rates, which should be researched separately. However, gender roles also play a part; following the traditional role model of the family breadwinner, boys feel a stronger desire to be independent and earn their own money than girls.

Positive male role models are rarely available to boys, be it at school, in leisure activities, or in the media, and it should also be considered what exactly a 'positive' role model looks like. More diverse images of masculinity would allow boys to form their own identity, and give them a chance to compare and select aspects based on their own preference. Gender boundaries have become more permeable in Germany, but a lot still needs to be done. Many boys accept and support the idea of gender equality, and have begun to understand that their female schoolmates will later be their competitors on the job market.

Gender competence is missing from the curriculum of teachers' education and training. Gender equality is not a topic that is discussed in Germany often. Instead, teachers are expected to rely on their own knowledge and experiences of the subject. It is therefore predictable that stereotypes and prejudice can influence

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[739] Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung (2018), *Bildung in Deutschland 2018. Ein indikatorengestützter Bericht mit einer Analyse zu Wirkungen und Erträgen von Bildung*. Available at: https://www.bildungsbericht.de/de/bildungsberichte-seit-2006/bildungsbericht-2018/pdf-bildungsbericht-2018/bildungsbericht-2018.pdf.

teachers' attitudes towards students. Origin, gender, and social class interact and sum up to intersectional discrimination of boys with a migration and deprived socio-economic background. Differences in the attainment of boys and girls are also related to pedagogical and teaching methods. They tend to dissolve in situations of student-centred teaching, or more generally speaking, in inclusive education that is oriented to each child's potential. An inclusive school environment, not only with respect to gender, is an advantage for all.

Social background has a huge impact on educational success in Germany. Low household income, low qualified parents, and a deprived social background are risk factors that make educational success unlikely. This affects boys and girls in the same severe way, and is a persistent problem with little and very slow progress being made on it. Boys who show deviant behaviour often have problems in their families. They are usually unable to express themselves and to talk about their problems. Teachers can compensate for a lot and have a large impact. If boys with disturbing behaviour receive help early enough, and teachers 'see' and communicate with them about it, their behaviour and hence their school performance can change. It is also important to remember that any student can change their behaviour at a later stage, despite having previously broken rules or performed poorly.

3.2   Recommendations

Among the ideas raised on how to progress toward gender equity, **tackling traditional gender stereotypes** stood out as the most salient, and this is not limited to education and school. There is a clear connection and interdependency with society, the economy, and the labour market. Traditional images of masculinity (and of femininity) need to be challenged. This would help to reduce gender-specific expectations and pressure on boys, who should be reminded that they are allowed to show perceived 'weakness' and ask for help. However, suggestions for concrete action and examples of successful measures are, thus far, rare.

Gender education should start early. It is crucial to include this in pre-school education. Gender stereotypes strengthen and become harder to let go of with increasing age, while young children are more open to alternative role models. Children should therefore be supported to develop a healthier concept of gender from an early age through the provision of alternative gender concepts or, more generally, diversity in various aspects of life.

Strong emphasis should be put on combating social disadvantages in education. Disadvantages and discrimination due to origin, gender, and socio-economic background affect both girls and boys. Inclusive teaching and a student-centred pedagogy foster all pupils and students. Inclusive schools contribute to building an inclusive society and are a benefit for all.

In order to be able to work with every student on an individual level, **schools** need more funding and resources. Quality management should be fostered so that the quality of teaching and education, as well as the effects of school strategies and

measures, can be monitored. **Teachers** and educators themselves lack knowledge on and competences in gender issues. Gender education should therefore be integrated into the curriculum of teachers' education and training.

German school education is very language-oriented and **language competence** is crucial at school entrance.[740] There is evidence that boys lag behind girls in their development, and a later entrance to school could therefore be an advantage for them. More practical experience in schools could also help boys to feel more at home at school. In order to improve the performance of girls and boys, segregated classes for specific subjects have been tested. The effectiveness of such interventions is uncertain, however. A higher number of male teachers is most likely not an appropriate answer to boys' underperformance.

On a wider scale, **political action** contributes to improvements in gender equality. Suggestions include tackling the traditional distribution of work in society (i.e. men earn money, women are responsible for household and care work, in line with traditional gender roles) as well as rethinking family benefits which, together with the effects of the income tax system and social insurance, apparently have an anti-equality effect in Germany: 'You calculate, and in the end, it is always more favourable if the woman stays at home.'

In order to combat gender segregation on the labour market, wages in 'female' sectors should be increased. This would make health and care professions more attractive to boys and young men. Conversely, health and care professions could be trained in dual VET, which would allow girls, who currently constitute the majority of learners in these professions, to earn income during their education, just as in male-dominated industries.

Awareness of the necessity of gender equality is still low in the German economy, and sometimes companies limit their engagement to a declaration of intent. Economic incentives could raise the commitment and the implementation of concrete measures to enhance gender equality in the workplace. Their effectiveness and success should be monitored.

Transfer of information across EU Member States can make an important contribution to progress in gender equality. Networking, and EU-wide and international exchange help to promote measures which have already proven successful in other countries. Equally important is **researching the topic across Member States**, in addition to appropriate research funding, particularly for basic research that does not provide direct economic value.

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[740] It should be noted that the term 'language competence' usually denotes 'German language competence'. Competences in first languages other than German are often not recognised as valuable language competences.

6.3.5   Ireland

1. **Key trends and implications**

1.1   **Contextualisation**

Ireland performs well overall according to EU and international educational metrics. Ireland meets the EU2020 target to reduce early school leavers (ESL) from education and training (18–24 year olds) to below 10%, and it also meets its national target of 8% or lower. Its overall ESL rate stood at 5.1% in 2019, while the EU-28 rate was 10.3%.[741] When the OECD PISA results were published in 2019, the Minister for Education at the time, Joe McHugh, welcomed the results and said that Ireland was in an *'envious position'* when it came to reading performance in particular.[742] The percentage of the population aged 30–34 educated to tertiary level in Ireland was significantly higher than the EU average in 2015 (54% to 39%), 2018 (56% to 41%) and 2019 (55% to 42%). The adult participation rate in lifelong learning was lower than the EU-28 average in 2015 (21% to 17%), but has since risen above it in 2018 (21% to 23%) and 2019 (21% to 24%).

Nevertheless, there are differences in the educational performance of males and females throughout all stages of education. As in other EU Member States, Eurostat data shows that males are more likely than females to be early leavers from education and training (5.9% to 4.3% in 2019). Females have long performed better than males in most subjects in the Leaving Certificate exam, which marks the completion of secondary level education. Females are more likely to sit the exam at 'higher' level (the 'foundation' and 'ordinary' levels are at a lower level of difficulty) than boys and, in 2019, in 23 of 37 Leaving Certificate subjects taken at the higher level, female students were more likely to achieve higher grades than males. As well as dominating at the top of the results table, females were also less likely to feature at the lower end, with males much more likely to achieve a mark of below 40% (the pass mark) or below 30%. However, males fared better than females in mathematics, applied mathematics and chemistry, both at higher and ordinary level.[743] In Q2 2019, females aged 20–24 years old were slightly more likely than males to attain at least a higher secondary level education (95% versus 93%).[744] An interviewee from a higher education organisation emphasised that males tended to drop out of higher education at a much higher rate than females, with a completion rate for females of 81% as opposed to 69% for males.[745] In 2020, females overtook males for the first time in terms of achievement of the highest grades (first class honours). Previously, the

[741] Eurostat data

[742] O'Brien, C. (2019), *Pisa rankings: Irish teens among the best at reading in developed world*, The Irish Times. Accessed on 18/11/2020: https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/pisa-rankings-irish-teens-among-the-best-at-reading-in-developed-world-1.4102951

[743] Donnelly, K. (2019), *Leaving Cert 2019: Fears weaker boys may be left behind as girls top class*, Independent.ie. Accessed on 18/11/2020: https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/education/leaving-cert-2019-fears-weaker-boys-may-be-left-behind-as-girls-top-class-38405149.html

[744] Central Statistics Office (2019), *Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2019*. Accessed on 18/11/2020: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/eda/educationalattainmentthematicreport2019/

[745] Interview with a higher education stakeholder.

majority of females had always achieved the grade below (upper second class). There are also issues with males underperforming in subjects where they make up the majority of students, e.g. computer science.

OECD PISA data shows that there was a **gender gap in reading performance** in Ireland in 2012, 2015 and 2018. Females scored on average 22 points higher than males across the three years, but this gap is among the lowest on average for OECD countries (30 points in 2018).[746] Ireland's comparative success in PISA studies measuring reading ability is partially credited to the introduction of the 'National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011–2020', which aimed to improve the literacy of all pupils.[747] The strategy includes a specific reference to including a wider range of reading material in order to boost engagement among young boys who were underperforming compared to girls. However, one interviewee involved in education research highlighted that there was no concrete follow-up in relation to boys in implementing the strategy. The interviewee expressed concerns more specifically about the growing gap between boys and girls in primary school who read for enjoyment, with boys reading far less than girls.[748]

OECD PISA data shows that there was a **gender gap in performance in mathematics** in 2012, 2015 and 2018. Males scored on average 13 points higher than females across the three years. The trend is observed across EU Member States, although the average gap between boys and girls is smaller, at 6 points. In terms of science, OECD PISA data shows that there was a **gender gap in performance in science** in 2012 and 2015, with males performing better than females (average gap of 8 points), but this gap was reversed in 2018 when girls performed better than boys (gap of 2 points). The Educational Research Centre, a statutory body of the Department for Education and Skills, deemed the score differences between males and females in 2018 to be not statistically significant. This was not the case in 2015 when male students performed significantly better than females in mathematics and science.[749]

There are issues around the perception of male and female performance in mathematics, both in the school and in the home environment. A study in 2020[750] concluded that girls are systematically less likely to be rated 'excellent' than boys, even when taking account of their actual performance levels. The gap is largest at higher levels of mathematics attainment. The perceived gap between boys and girls at the highest level is much wider in the case of parents than in the case of teachers.

[746] OECD PISA data.
[747] O'Brien, C. (2019) *How did Irish schoolchildren become the best readers in Europe?,* The Irish Times. Accessed on 18/11/2020: https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/how-did-irish-schoolchildren-become-the-best-readers-in-europe-1.3316259
[748] Interview with an organisation involved in education research.
[749] McKeown, C., Denner, S., McAteer, S., et al. (2019) *Learning for the Future: The performance of 15-year olds in Ireland on reading literacy, science and mathematics in PISA 2018*, Educational Research Centre. Available at: https://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/B23307-PISA-2018-Executive-Summary-rev3.pdf
[750] McCoy, S., Byrne, D. & O Connor, P. (2020) *Gender Stereotyping in Parents' and Teachers' Perceptions of Boys' and Girls' Mathematics Performance in Ireland*, Geary Institute, University College Dublin. Available at: https://ideas.repec.org/s/ucd/wpaper.html

Teachers are significantly less likely to rate girls as 'above average' than boys, even when taking account of their actual performance in robust mathematics tests. Stereotypes about boys being excellent/above average in mathematics persist among both teachers and parents (mainly mothers). These stereotypes are so strong that they override the evidence of girls' and boys' own achievements in nationally validated mathematics assessments. In this context, the frequent calls for girls to consider STEM careers are unlikely to be effective: girls from as young as nine years old will have learned that even if they excel in this area, their teachers and parents will not perceive them as excelling. Girls may thus feel that they are better off choosing careers that are more compatible with existing gender stereotypes: thus, in many cases perpetuating their position in lower-paid and less personally satisfying career positions and leaving the field clear for boys.

Influencing factors

There was a strong consensus among interviewees that socio-economic status (SES) is the key determining factor in students' achievements in education in Ireland. Factors such as race, ethnicity and gender also play a role, but SES is more likely to explain good or poor performance in education than any other factor. This factor is reflected by the main education policy at primary and secondary school level: 'Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) – the Action Plan for Educational Inclusion'.[751] DEIS was launched in May 2005 and the latest iteration of the scheme, the DEIS Plan 2017, reemphasises the scheme's role as the primary policy instrument to address educational disadvantage in Ireland. The action plan focuses on addressing and prioritising the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through to second-level education (3 to 18 years) and provides a framework within which DEIS schools receive additional financial support from the government. Almost all interviewees referred to this policy as being the main tool used to address gaps in educational attainment in Ireland. It is notable, however, that the original DEIS action plans in 2005 and 2017 make no reference to gender, or make any differentiation between boys' and girls' educational outcomes.

At both primary and post-primary levels, the mean achievement scores of both boys and girls in DEIS schools remain significantly and substantially lower than those of their peers in non-DEIS schools, but this gap has been narrowing in recent years. In DEIS post-primary schools, in PISA 2018:

- In reading literacy, the gender gap (favouring girls) was of similar magnitude in DEIS and non-DEIS schools in Ireland. It is notable that 24% of boys and 19% of girls in DEIS schools performed below proficiency level 2, compared to 12% of boys and 6% of girls in non-DEIS schools.

- In mathematical literacy, there was no overall gender gap at national level, or in DEIS schools. However, in *non*-DEIS schools, boys significantly outperformed girls. (Note that the magnitude of the gender gap was similar in DEIS and non-

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[751] Department of Education and Science (2005), *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools – An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion*. Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/deis_action_plan_on_educational_inclusion.pdf

DEIS schools – about 10 scale score points – but was only statistically significant for non-DEIS schools.)

- In scientific literacy, there was no overall gender gap at national level, or within DEIS and non-DEIS schools.[752]

The continued existence of a large number of single-sex schools (approximately 17% of primary schools and 30% of secondary schools)[753] was identified by many interviewees as a key feature in terms of gender issues in Irish education. From a negative perspective, it is very likely to affect males' subject choices at school, i.e. male schools are less likely to have home economics facilities than woodwork, metalwork or engineering facilities. While 92% of boys' schools have physics, chemistry and biology on their leaving certificate curriculum, only 77% of girls' schools have the subjects on theirs.[754] Interviewees from a students' representative organisation said that single-sex schools created an environment where 'toxic masculinity' is more likely to be prevalent due to the type of peer pressure created in an all-male environment. For example, physical excellence in sports is celebrated, whereas academic excellence can be ridiculed as being 'nerdy'.

There is, however, a growing trend towards mixed-sex schools due to a number of factors. Religious orders no longer have the manpower to operate schools and to supply qualified teachers, and they are under financial pressure to merge with other schools. Education and training boards are now responsible for the patronage of newly created schools (about 17 new schools are created each year) and these are mixed-sex schools by default.[755] In 1984, the independent charity 'Educate Together' began operating a number of non-denominational mixed-sex schools in Ireland. The schools are state-funded, and guarantee *'equality of access and esteem to students irrespective of their social, cultural or religious background'*.[756] In 2020, Educate Together was operating a national network of 95 primary schools and 19 secondary schools in Ireland, catering to over 30,000 students.[757] However, interviewees felt that

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[752] Gilleece, L., Nelis, S., Fitzgerald, C., Cosgrove, J. (2020) *Reading, mathematics and science achievement in DEIS schools: Evidence from PISA 2018*, Educational Research Centre. Available at: https://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ERC-DEIS-Report_Sept-2020_A4_Website.pdf

[753] At primary school level, a large majority of schools in Ireland are state-aided parish schools, having been established under church patronage with the state giving explicit recognition to their denominational character. 92% of primary school children are educated at Catholic denominational schools, with the remainder attending non-Catholic denominational schools and multi-denominational schools. Of the Catholic schools, approximately 17% are single-sex schools simply because they were established at a time when separate schooling for males and females was the norm. These single-sex schools, often originally set up by religious congregations, continue to exist mainly in older residential areas in cities and towns where the school-going population is large enough to sustain at least two separate schools;
Doris, A., O'Neill, D., Sweetman, O., (2013) *Gender, single-sex schooling and maths achievement,* Economics of Education Review. Available at: http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/8691/1/1-s2.0-S0272775713000514-main.pdf

[754] Donnelly, K., (2019) *Gender gap in science, maths and tech subjects on offer in girls' and boys' schools,* Independent.ie. Available at:
https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/education/gender-gap-in-science-maths-and-tech-subjects-on-offer-in-girls-and-boys-schools-38657808.html

[755] Established in 2013, education and training boards (ETBs) are statutory local education bodies responsible for education and training services in 16 different regions of the Republic of Ireland.

[756] Website of Educate Together. Available at: https://www.educatetogether.ie/about/values/

[757] Website of Educate Together. Available at: https://www.educatetogether.ie/about/overview/

it would be decades before almost all schools in Ireland became mixed-sex schools, because schools and their communities change their ethos very slowly.

Interviewees had different views on the importance of having male teachers as role models for boys. The teacher workforce in Ireland is overwhelmingly female. In 2017/18, 85% of primary school teachers were women, but almost half of all school principals were men. At secondary school level, 69% of teachers were women, but just over half of all principals were men.[758] Some interviewees emphasised that the statistical evidence shows that the gender of the teacher is irrelevant in terms of educational outcomes – it is the quality of teaching that counts. Another interviewee involved in education provision described the situation as *'a reality rather than an issue'*. However, other interviewees felt that boys were more likely to be able to relate to male teachers and to have more discussions with them about mutually interesting topics. In 2016, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), the largest primary school teachers' union in the county, called for a new initiative to address the low level of men entering teacher training colleges, but it did not support the use of quotas to achieve this.[759] Such initiatives are largely seen as having failed as the number of male entrants into teacher training colleges has not increased.

Interviewees had differing views on the importance of role models in a wider sense and the role of extracurricular activities. The issue of role models from an immediate socio-economic perspective was seen by many as a major factor. Interviewees said that parents from well-off families are more likely to have attended higher education and have a good understanding of its value in economic terms and are more likely to support their children's education. This is less likely to be the case in families with a lower socio-economic status. In most households, irrespective of socio-economic status, it is more likely to be the mother who plays the leading role in guiding their children's education; they are the ones who check their children's homework, who attend parent-teacher meetings, who help their children to complete their CAO forms,[760] etc. In families where the male parents/guardians themselves have had a negative education experience and do not see it as a rewarding experience, these male figures tend to be less visible and less engaged in their children's education, and this can have a knock-on effect on young boys who feel that 'if you can't see it, you can't be it'.[761] Interviewees from a students' representative organisation highlighted the #MeToo movement and role models such as Greta Thunberg as being empowering for young women and said that there was not a similar figure for young men. An interviewee from a men's organisation disagreed, saying that Greta Thunberg could equally be a role model for young men. In terms of extracurricular activities, interviewees involved in the provision of education pointed

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[758] Department for Education, *Teacher statistics.* Available at:
https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/teacher-statistics/
[759] Maccarthaigh, S. (2016) *INTO demands action to address teacher imbalance,* Irish Examiner. Available at: https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-20424926.html
[760] The Central Applications Office (CAO) processes applications for undergraduate courses in Irish higher education institutions (HEIs). Entry into HEIs is determined by the grades (translated into a point scoring system) achieved in the leaving certificate exam.
[761] Interview with representatives from a student organisation.

out that most schools try to provide mixed sports activities and other mixed extracurricular activities as much as possible, e.g. chess, choirs, music, etc., and that any perceived benefits about males having better teamwork skills as a result of playing more sport are likely to be mitigated by the fact that schools are increasingly introducing group work into their curricula.

A number of interviewees mentioned the school environment and the tradition of discipline in Irish schools as a potential contributory factor towards educational outcomes. Interviewees agreed that the Irish school environment suits girls better as they are socialised to be more compliant and well-behaved. Boys are more likely get into more of a negative dynamic with teachers leading to detention and suspension (which can be precursors to ELET). Sometimes teachers themselves, particularly male teachers, can reinforce these negative behaviours by taking an overly narrow and confrontational approach to what might be perceived as 'discipline issues'. An interviewee involved in youth work said that for young men from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the school environment is likely to be *'a different world'* in terms of rules, structure and expectations, and despite teachers' best efforts to engage these men, teachers will always be viewed as separate and distant. An interviewee involved in education provision said that there was a big emphasis on discipline in Irish schools around 2006,[762] but they questioned whether this was a reaction to other societal developments and if the issue was overblown. Discipline in Irish schools today is discussed in the context of emotional behaviour disorders (EBDs) rather than misbehaviour, although it remains the case that boys are more likely to be the subject of such discussions. Data from the 'Growing Up in Ireland' survey shows that boys were much more likely than girls to report all types of antisocial behaviour in all settings, with 10% reporting theft (compared to 5% of girls), 6% reporting vandalism (compared to 2% of girls) and 8% reporting violent behaviour (compared to 3% of girls). These trends strongly reflect findings from international literature.[763]

1.2 Vulnerable sub-groups

Interviewees identified a number of vulnerable sub-groups within which boys might be particularly affected. As highlighted elsewhere in this report, children (and boys in particular) from lower socio-economic backgrounds are the most clearly identifiable vulnerable sub-group. One interviewee pointed to the results of the Growing Up in Ireland study, which they said showed that within the sub-group, children from 'jobless households', i.e. where one or both parents is long-term unemployed, perform worse in education than other children.

A cross-cutting factor is that the **majority of children with special education needs (SEN) or who have been identified with a disability** (autism, ADD, ADHD)

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[762] Department of Education and Science (2006), *School Matters: The Report of the Task Force on Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools.* Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/tfsb_school_matters_2006.pdf
[763] Williams, J., Nixon, E., Smyth, E., Watson, D., (2016), *Cherishing all the children equally? Ireland 100 years on from the Easter Rising, Ireland,* Oak Tree Press.

are boys.[764] The reasons for this are not clear, but it could be because boys display their special needs earlier and more clearly than girls. Interviewees also said that older men who seek to return to education in later life recognise that they might be dyslexic and that this could be a reason why they struggled at school. Despite the large disparity in numbers (approximately twice as many boys as girls), there is no evidence to suggest that there is a specific focus on gender in SEN education – it is treated as a broader social inclusion issue.

Interviewees also identified '**traveller boys**' as a vulnerable sub-group. The National Traveller and Roma Integration Strategy 2017–2021 has as a key target: *'Access, participation and outcomes for Travellers and Roma in education should be improved to achieve outcomes that are equal to those for the majority population'*.[765] Interviewees said that it was difficult to get granular data on the educational outcomes of traveller children because they are a hard group to sample. As a whole, however, traveller children perform poorly in education in comparison to the overall average. Traveller boys are unlikely to attend early childhood education and care (ECEC) and therefore join primary school at a disadvantage in terms of familiarity with the school setting. One interviewee highlighted the **difficulties faced by traveller children trying to access online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic** when they might not have access to fixed broadband or the physical space in family caravans to carry out their learning. Traveller boys and men go on to face much greater difficulties in adulthood, with higher rates of imprisonment, ill health and suicide than national averages.[766]

Interviewees had differing opinions on whether **boys from migrant backgrounds** are a vulnerable group. One interviewee involved in the Growing Up in Ireland study said that gender was not a decisive factor when it comes to the educational achievement of children from migrant backgrounds. On the other hand, another interviewee involved in career guidance for students questioned whether there might be extra pressure on these children to do well in school and to benefit as much as possible from the opportunities available in the 'new' country that would never be available in the 'home' country, and that boys would be directed towards traditional 'male' professions.

Interviews also highlighted a potential gap between **rural and urban schools**, with rural schools providing boys with older and out-of-date facilities, a smaller range of

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[764] Banks, J. & McCoy, S. (2011), *A Study on the Prevalence of Special Educational Needs' National Council for Special Education Research Report No.9*, ESRI. Available at: https://www.esri.ie/system/files?file=media/file-uploads/2015-07/BKMNEXT198.pdf. Central Statistics Office data shows that in 2016, 156,968 people identified themselves as having 'difficulty in learning, remembering and concentrating', 85,861 (55%) of whom were male.
[765] Department of Justice and Equality (2017), *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021*. Available at: http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/National%20Traveller%20and%20Roma%20Inclusion%20Strategy,%202017 -2021.pdf/Files/National%20Traveller%20and%20Roma%20Inclusion%20Strategy,%202017-2021.pdf
[766] Department of Justice and Equality (2017), *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021*. Available at: http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/National%20Traveller%20and%20Roma%20Inclusion%20Strategy,%202017 -2021.pdf/Files/National%20Traveller%20and%20Roma%20Inclusion%20Strategy,%202017-2021.pdf and interviews with stakeholders.

subjects to choose from, and probably more limited career guidance than urban schools.

1.3 Key implications

The negative consequences of getting a poor educational outcome in Ireland are very well understood, hence the huge pressure on young men and women to complete the leaving certificate. As one interviewee put it, *'even the most dysfunctional child knows that you need a leaving certificate in Ireland in order to be able to get any sort of job'*. Interviewees highlighted the negative impact that a poor education has on men throughout their lives. It affects their overall confidence in themselves and their abilities, and it can stunt men's professional growth in all types of professions, including manual labour where a degree of self-confidence to act as a foreman or to negotiate labour costs and job valuations is also necessary. This can also play out in terms of poorer mental and physical health in the long term, alcohol addiction, criminality and suicide. It can also affect their relationships with women, as they may come to rely on their partner or spouse to complete administrative and financial tasks on their behalf.[767] At the same time, however, an academic interviewee emphasised that there are other gender patterns in the labour market which benefit men and don't reflect the better educational performance of women, e.g. pay gaps and promotional patterns in favour of males in multiple professions.

There are clear gender differences after compulsory education between higher and vocational education, and later in professional careers. Interviewees identified an overemphasis in Ireland on the pathway to higher education, i.e. completing your CAO form,[768] then completing the leaving certificate, and then going to higher education. Interviewees said that there is less information available to students about other post-secondary education pathways, for example, post-leaving certificate courses (PLCs),[769] and there is still a stigma attached to vocational education (apprenticeships), which is proving hard to overcome. In addition to the existing negative perceptions around apprenticeships, one interviewee involved in the provision of career guidance to students also said that young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds would also find the apprenticeship environment difficult to navigate as it requires a level of familiarity and socialisation with the world of work that they may not have, particularly if they come from an environment where there is no recent family history of employment. They might find it difficult to convince family members that completing a comparatively low paid apprenticeship over a three to four year period is more rewarding than taking up immediate low-skilled employment at minimum wage level, or simply relying on social welfare. It is also interesting to note that only 4% of the apprenticeship population in Ireland at the end of 2019 was

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[767] Discussions with interviewees resulted in findings similar to a 2009 report by the National Adult Literacy Association (NALA): *Men and Literacy: A Study of Attitude and Experiences of Learning*. Available at: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=beschsprep
[768] The Central Applications Office (CAO) processes applications for undergraduate courses in Irish HEIs.
[769] https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/vocational_education_and_training/post_leaving_certificate_courses.html#

female,[770] and males made up almost 100% of the enrolments in apprenticeships in engineering, manufacturing and construction. However, improving the gender ratio in apprenticeships is only one part of creating a more diverse apprenticeship population, with the government also focusing on issues such as disability and ethnic background.[771] Another interviewee involved in higher education said that there is an issue with young men choosing to enter higher education courses in ICT but then struggling with the level of mathematics involved and dropping out. These young men would be better off choosing an apprenticeship in an ICT-related field and entering the industry in that way.

All interviewees agreed that the gender imbalance in teaching, and in other 'caring' professions such as nursing and social work, could have an impact in terms of how young men view the world and value they place on certain professions. However, they also stated that gender is just one aspect of diversity in the teaching profession that needs to be addressed. Greater diversity is also needed in terms of religion, race, socio-economic background, etc., in order for teachers to more accurately reflect society around them.

Interviewees said that a consequence of the comparatively high number of single-sex schools and the ongoing involvement of religious orders in the governance of individual schools is that **issues relating to LGBTQI identity, sex education and sexual consent** are less likely to be acknowledged and discussed in an open manner.

Radicalisation and violent extremism are not seen as major issues in Ireland, although they are most likely happening to some degree. Interviewees discussed radicalisation in terms of the violent and racist incidents in response to the state's system of 'direct provision', whereby asylum-seekers are provided accommodation in special facilities such as former army barracks and hotels, and in terms of the recent protests against the COVID-19 lockdown measures. Interviewees representing secondary school students said that groups were using ambiguous messaging to circulate misinformation in schools and that it could be difficult to police. Schools also had to walk 'a fine line' between educating students to have their own opinion and stopping misinformation. In terms of a specific link between the educational outcomes of boys and young men and radicalisation, one expert interviewee familiar with the Growing Up in Ireland study said that there was **no evidence to suggest that there is a direct link between lesser-educated men and increased susceptibility to radicalisation, anti-immigrant sentiment or misogyny**. If anything, it is possible that better-educated men are simply better able to disguise their prejudices. It is possible that extremism is linked to stereotypes around masculinity, but that gender/masculinity can come out in the expression of extremism/violence rather than being the cause of its existence. More evidence would be required in order to draw conclusions about a link to education. Interviewees also

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[770] Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2020), *Consultation on the Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021–2025.* Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/13be2-consultation-on-the-apprenticeship-action-plan-2021-2025/
[771] Dulee-Kinsolving, A., Guerin, S. (2021) *A study into Further education and training in Ireland – Women in FET*, SOLAS.

cautioned against assuming that similar problems and solutions in other EU Member States could be mapped onto an Irish context. However, interviewees were concerned about radicalisation in the sense of the 'grooming' of young men (and to a lesser extent young women) by criminal gangs. In some inner-city areas, children as young as 10 years old are being used to transport drugs, money, weapons, etc. and are being educated in a life of crime where violence is seen as a given.

2. Policy attention and actions

2.1 Policy attention and attitudes

The EIGE Gender Equality Index shows Ireland's score rising consistently between 2012 (67.7%), 2015 (69.5%), 2017 (71.3) and 2020 (72.2).[772] **Throughout these years, Ireland's score was higher than the EU average.** This comparatively high gender equality score, and the comparatively low gender gaps in educational attainment, led one interviewee to conclude that the issue of gender in education in Ireland was largely seen as 'solved'. Other interviewees agreed, saying that gender is seen as just one factor of a much broader social inclusion issue. The issue comes into focus twice a year when the junior and leaving certificate results are published and media outlets produce stories highlighting differences in results across different aspects of society, including gender, but then it goes quiet again. This conclusion is reinforced when one examines official government documents and strategies from recent years.

In 2005, the then Department of Education and Science launched DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools), a national programme aimed at addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities. However, the DEIS programme did not have any specific targets for boys.[773] The '**Better Outcomes Brighter Futures – The national policy framework for children & young people 2014 – 2020**' strategy published in 2014 set out a comprehensive approach to improving the lives of young people in Ireland. While it included a specific reference in Commitment 2.4 of the strategy to promoting '*different styles of learning to better engage boys'*, the strategy did not include any practical measures to focus on boys specifically.[774]

In 2017, the Irish Government published '**Languages Connect, Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017 – 2026**'. The strategy's four overarching goals were: (1) Improve language proficiency by creating a more engaging learning environment; (2) Diversify and increase the uptake of languages

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[772] European Institute for Gender Equality, *Gender Equality Index.* Available at: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020/IE

[773] Department of Education and Science (2005), *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools – An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion*. Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/deis_action_plan_on_educational_inclusion.pdf

[774] Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2014), *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures - The national policy framework for children & young people 2014 – 2020*. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/23796/961bbf5d975f4c88adc01a6fc5b4a7c4.pdf

learned and cultivate the languages of the new Irish; (3) Increase awareness of the importance of language learning to encourage the wider use of foreign languages; (4) Enhance employer engagement in the development and use of trade languages. There is no specific mention in the strategy of boys'/men's ability to speak foreign languages.[775]

The **National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030**, published in 2011 and still in force today, addresses the need for broadened participation in higher education, but it does so in the context of socio-economic equality and not gender equality.[776] In 2015, despite the higher participation rate of females in higher education, 81% of professorial positions in Ireland were held by men and, while women represented 62% of non-academic staff, 72% of the highest paid non-academic staff were male. One interviewee highlighted that it was around this time that some female higher-education professionals took legal against higher-education institutions after being repeatedly passed over for promotion, and this prompted the creation of Ireland's **Higher Education Gender Equality Plan**,[777] perhaps Ireland's only strategy that focuses specifically on gender equality.

In July 2019, both houses of the Irish parliament approved the establishment of a **Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality**. The assembly's mandate was to consider gender equality issues and to make recommendations to the parliament upon its completion. The assembly has recently started to examine a range of issues relating primarily to economic, but also social, equality between men and women. It began its deliberations in January 2020, but had to postpone some of its work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the assembly has brought some gender issues to the fore of public debate in Ireland, it has not yet discussed gender issues in relation to education specifically and it is not clear if it will do so.[778]

Interviewees highlighted the reforms to the junior cycle and the planned reforms to the senior cycle (leaving certificate) as positive developments in terms of addressing gender disparities in education. In 2011, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) published reports proposing a major reform of the junior cycle following consultations with stakeholders, and amid concern over the heavy emphasis on 'teaching to the test' in secondary schools. By 2015, the finalised report 'Framework for Junior Cycle' was circulated by the Department of Education and Skills. In 2017, English became the first subject to be issued with the new grading system. As highlighted elsewhere in this report, not all changes to the

[775] Department for Education and Skills (2017), *Languages Connect, Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017 – 2026*. Available at: https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Curriculum-and-Syllabus/Foreign-Languages-Strategy/fls_languages_connect_strategy.pdf
[776] Department of Education and Skills (2011), *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. Available at: https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Strategy-for-Higher-Education-2030.pdf
[777] Website of the Higher Education Authority. Available at: https://hea.ie/policy/gender/
[778] Website of The Citizen's Assembly. Available at: https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/what-we-do/oireachtas-resolution/

junior cycle have been welcomed (e.g. removing civic, social and political education (CSPE) as an examinable subject).[779]

The NCCA is currently conducting a review of the senior cycle education. It has conducted widespread consultations among education and non-education stakeholders, and the next step is to produce an advisory report for the government to consider. The report will comprise the priority areas, longer-term goals and a proposed timeline and advice on the pace and scale of developments in the senior cycle.[780] Some of the feedback received during consultations with students was that **the senior cycle should embed life skills in the curriculum to better prepare young people for further/higher education, employment and adult life**. Suggestions included work experience placements, the development of life skills (such as online safety and handling of social media) and enhancing personal skills such as independence and resilience. Some participants supported greater flexibility in terms of combining different elements of senior cycle programmes (for example, taking leaving certificate applied modules alongside some leaving certificate established subjects)[781] and allowing students to take subjects or courses at a different pace or degree of difficulty to cater to different needs. Participants felt that such reforms would help to address current challenges, including a heavy workload and pressure to 'cover the course', which result in a focus on rote learning. These issues were seen as having a negative effect on student well-being, with young people reducing their involvement in sports and social activities in the lead-up to exams. Students were particularly vocal about the impact on their stress levels, with even junior cycle students expressing apprehension at facing the pressure of the senior cycle. Many participants highlighted the view that the current senior cycle programme provides limited pathways to success for students with a more practical orientation.[782]

2.2   Key success factors and barriers

There appears to be a lack of clarity and consensus on the role education has to play in the socialisation of young people in Ireland, and to what extent, if any, it should address gender issues in society. Interviewees described a narrow focus on academic education, and no overarching and coherent message for schools on whether and how to address wider societal issues, including masculinity and gender stereotypes, through education, and little incentive from teachers to deviate from core subjects that feature in compulsory exams. These points were reflected in comments made by the OECD's Head of Education, Andreas Schleicher, in March 2021: *'Students get taught one curriculum, it's quite heavily focused on the*

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[779] Ó Caollaí, E. (2019). *Junior Cert CSPE: 'Addressed core concep*ts', The Irish Times. Available at: https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/junior-cert-cspe-addressed-core-concepts-1.3915839

[780] Website of the NCCA. Available at: https://ncca.ie/en/senior-cycle/senior-cycle-review/introduction-to-senior-cycle-review/

[781] The four programmes offered in senior cycle, Leaving Certificate Established (LCE), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Transition Year (TY), aim to cater to the different needs and preferences of the student body.

[782] Smyth, E., McCoy, S., Banks, J. (2019), It is time to change senior cycle education, say students, parents and teachers, Economic and Social Research Institute. Available at: *https://www.esri.ie/publications/student-teacher-and-parent-perspectives-on-senior-cycle-education*

reproduction of subject matter content, and not that much focus on getting students to think out of the box and link across the boundaries of subject matter disciplines'.[783] When asked whether a possible successor to the 'Better Outcomes Brighter Futures - The national policy framework for children & young people 2014 – 2020' strategy would be likely to include a focus on gender, one interviewee said that any such strategy is likely to be focused on dealing with the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, and that gender issues may not feature as a result.

One interviewee involved in education provision said that **teachers themselves are not good lifelong learners and could be unwilling to learn more about gender issues and adapt their teaching practices accordingly**. Despite new concepts in pedagogy and the import of ideas from neurological science into teaching, teachers in Ireland view their professional development and further learning as 'in-service learning', e.g. learning how to use the latest digital blackboard or physical education equipment, but it is not seen as the acquirement of further qualifications and deep study. There is a perceived reluctance to broaden this area of activity, and there is currently no clear data available about the type of learning that teachers are engaging in, and at what qualification level that learning is in place. Furthermore, teachers' unions in Ireland agreed in 2018 that their members would not have to account for the professional learning they did each year like in other professions such as nursing and dentistry.[784]

Another interviewee questioned why **young males struggling in education are only picked up by the system when they are at the point of leaving school early**. The interviewee highlighted that children are particularly vulnerable once they move from primary to secondary school, and *'they can get lost very quickly'* if their problems are not addressed.

2.3   Overview of key initiatives and measures

It is difficult to identify projects in Ireland focusing specifically on improving the educational outcomes of males. Ireland's overall approach to education is one of improving social inclusion and supporting students' well-being, and this is largely done in a 'gender blind' manner. Gender-specific initiatives in education are more likely to address females than males, for example, the 'I WISH' programme to encourage more females in secondary education to pursue further education and careers in STEM subjects[785] or the government's plans to diversify the apprenticeship population.

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[783] O' Brien, C. (2021) *Irish schools need to modernise '20th century' approach to learning, warns OECD*, The Irish Times. Available at: https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/irish-schools-need-to-modernise-20th-century-approach-to-learning-warns-oecd-1.4516222?mode=amp
[784] The Teaching Council, the professional standards body for the teaching profession in Ireland, has developed COSÁN, a national framework for teachers' learning (CPD) which seeks to provide reassurance to the profession and the public that teachers are engaging in life-long learning by publicly acknowledging the full range of learning activities that teachers undertake including formal, informal, personal and professional. However, the *Cosán* framework does not mandate CPD hours or credit requirements for teachers. More information is available at: https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/faqs/cosan-/
[785] Website of I Wish. Available at: www.iwish.ie

TUSLA Education Support Service – HSCL Home School Community Liaison

TUSLA is Ireland's Child and Family Agency responsible for improving well-being and outcomes for children. It operates a Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) and one of these services is the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL). Given the importance of socio-economic factors in educational outcomes, the scheme concentrates solely on DEIS schools and seeks to promote partnerships between parents, teachers and community family support services. A HSCL coordinator is a teacher from a participating school who is released from teaching duties, for a maximum of five years, in order to work intensively with and support parents/guardians. The HSCL coordinator's overarching goal is to improve educational outcomes for children through their work with the key adults in the child's life. A minimum of 10% of a school's DEIS grant is to be allocated to HSCL activities.

Visiting parents in their own homes is a core part of the HSCL scheme. The HSCL coordinator acts as a bridge between home and school, and this allows the coordinator a unique opportunity to get the perspective of the family. Parents tend to be more comfortable in their own environment. HSCL coordinators are expected to spend about one third of their time doing home visits. In addition to home visits, HSCL coordinators organise parent classes in the relevant school/s and provide information and guidance to parents/guardians with regard to accessing community-based programmes and support.

The HSCL scheme also supports families as their children transition from early education to primary school, from primary school to post-primary school and finally from post-primary school to further and higher education, training or employment.

More information: https://www.tusla.ie/services/educational-welfare-services/hscl/

Men's Development Network and The Best of Young Men

The Men's Development Network (MDN) is a non-profit organisation in Ireland that has been working with men and young men for 20 years with a mission to achieve 'better lives for men, better lives for all'. It has developed a range of training programmes around engaging men in men's health, men's development, masculinity and gender, and men addressing violence against women.

In this Erasmus+ project, which took place in 2019–2020, 9 European participants from the UK, Portugal and Greece and 20 participants from Ireland took part in a range of participant-led interactive-style workshops led by MDN. The workshops were based on sharing information and aligning the learning with personal contexts. The project acknowledged that the majority of young men today have overcome or are at least aware of the social conditioning that has been imposed on previous generations of men. Today's men are increasingly aware that the roles of men and women have

changed, and that gender equality has moved considerably towards balancing the books for women. However, with the ever-increasing changing dynamic of families, role models for young men have become transient or can be found in less traditional places.

Project participants were youth workers and workers who worked with young people on the front line in either housing, employment, social services or addiction services. Participants were tasked with reviewing their organisation's strategies to engage young men and set up a framework of analysis and an action plan to address it. This project was the first step for MDN to reach out within the youth sector and to develop best practices with youth organisations around engaging young men in the above issues. It is intended to be a collaborative approach towards improving the services available to young men into the future.

More information: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplus-project-details/#project/2019-2-IE01-KA105-051621 and https://mensnetwork.ie/

SpunOut.ie – Ireland's youth information service

SpunOut.ie is Ireland's youth information service created by young people, for young people. It provides information to more than 180,000 active readers each month, and the website receives about 2 million hits per year. It also has active accounts on Snapchat and Instagram, which direct viewers to the website.

Established in 2005, SpunOut.ie's vision is to help create an Ireland where young people aged between 16 and 25 are empowered with the information they need to live active, happy and healthy lives. The website offers easy access to relevant, reliable and non-judgemental information free of any shame or bias. The information is broken down into sections: education, employment, health, life and opinion.

A group of 150 young people from around the country forms the SpunOut.ie youth action panels, which provide leadership to the organisation. Hundreds of young people volunteer their time to the work of the organisation through writing and proofreading content, making videos and giving feedback. SpunOut.ie also has a voluntary board of professionals who take responsibility for the good governance of the organisation and who quality assure the content produced by young people before it is published on the website.

One of the difficulties faced by the organisation is getting young men from lower socio-economic backgrounds to participate in its youth action panels, of which females currently make up 75%. This is perhaps reflective of the reluctance of these young men to engage in activities which could be perceived as 'showing weakness'. SpunOut.ie posted a number of articles on its website in November 2020 around the issue of 'toxic masculinity' and how to recognise and deal with it.

More information: www.spunout.ie

3. Overall assessment

3.1 Key findings

The primary focus in compulsory education in Ireland is on reducing the gap in educational outcomes between children from lower socio-economic backgrounds (primarily in DEIS schools) and children from middle and upper-class backgrounds (primarily in non-DEIS schools). The overall trends are positive in this area, and there appears to be little incentive to adopt a more gender-focused approach in tackling this gap. Some interviewees expressed concern, however, that the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic could undo some of the progress made in recent years in reducing the gaps in educational attainment. Interviewees were happy to discuss the issue of boys/young men's educational outcomes, but while some interviewees advocated more of a focus on the issue, there was no clear expression of support for having more of a focus on boys' attainment levels. The ongoing and planned reforms to the junior and senior cycles in secondary education are likely to address the gender-related concerns expressed at these levels of education.

3.2 Recommendations

Interviewees had broadly positive views about the role of the EU in supporting Member States to tackle the gender gap in educational outcomes. The most positive views stated that the EU (and the OECD) are important policy drivers in the Irish education system due to the global nature of Irish economy and society. The Europe 2020 strategy was seen to have greatly influenced the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2014–2020 in Ireland, and Ireland's Inspectorate of Education is reportedly based on other EU Member State models. Many interviewees agreed that the EU can send an important signal for gender equality by keeping these issues at the forefront of the policy debate, and EU funding is always welcome in supporting such policy initiatives. On the other hand, some interviewees felt that Ireland's geographical location as an island, 'cut off by Great Britain' due to Brexit from continental Europe, means that the EU is unlikely to be able to influence the gender debate in Ireland. Changes to the junior cycle curriculum in the Irish secondary school curriculum in 2019 mean that CSPE no longer features as an examinable subject in the junior certificate examination and this is likely to reduce students' opportunities to learn about the EU and the role it plays these matters.[786] In addition, the EU's policy levers for influencing national practice are few and diffuse, and it would be hard to find one that works across all Member States.

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[786] Ó Caollaí, E. (2019), *Junior Cert CSPE: 'Addressed core concepts*, The Irish Times. Available at:
https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/junior-cert-cspe-addressed-core-concepts-1.3915839

6.3.6   Luxembourg

1. Key trends and implications

1.1   Contextualisation

International student assessment data shows that students in Luxembourg have been consistently performing slightly below the EU average. The OECD's PISA data , for instance, shows that in 2012, 2015, and 2018, across all three subjects of reading, mathematics, and science, students in Luxembourg scored consistently below the EU average. Looking at boys' and girls' performance in reading, we can see that **the gender gap in reading has remained constant over time**, with girls outperforming boys. In 2012, the gender gap stood at 30 points in favour of girls (which is lower than the EU average of 42.9 points); in 2018, the gap stood at 29 points, with both boys' and girls' performance significantly declining (i.e. a performance drop of almost 20 points for both boys and girls). The gender gap in mathematics stood at 25 points in favour of boys in 2012, but this gap has narrowed over time to only 7 points in 2018, with girls' performance improving and boys' performance declining. This suggests that **girls are catching up in mathematics**, which is a subject where boys have traditionally always outperformed them. PISA also shows that **girls are now outperforming boys in science**. While in 2012 boys still scored 16 points better on average than girls in the PISA science test, the latest results of 2018 show that girls scored 4 points better than boys.

Data from the *Épreuves Standardisées* (EpStan), **Luxembourg's nationwide standardised testing system, confirms these international findings**, showing that girls in Luxembourg outperform boys in reading comprehension, but that boys do better in mathematics at both primary and secondary level.[787] These findings should, however, be interpreted with caution; one interviewee pointed out that EpStan tests do not count towards students' final grade point average, which means that they are typically not taken as seriously by students – especially by boys – as other tests which do have an impact on their school record.

In addition to motivation, another interviewee underlined **the influence that teachers' perceptions of students' behaviour has on grading**. All interviewees said that the gender of the teacher does not matter in this regard; both male and female teachers have similar perceptions of boys' and girls' behaviour, and these influence their teaching and grading practices. Interviewees reported that most teachers think of boys as being more delinquent and less ambitious than girls, which typically leads them to giving boys worse grades than girls. Boys are also punished more often than girls, although one interviewee said that girls are punished more severely. Teachers – especially older teachers – are often unaware that they have this gender bias towards their students, and despite the move towards more 'competence' or 'skills'-based recruitment on the labour market, grades do still matter for companies. This means that despite the fact that 'the gender gap in competences

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[787] Université du Luxembourg, *Rapport national sur l'éducation au Luxembourg 2018.* Available at: https://men.public.lu/fr/publications/statistiques-etudes/themes-transversaux/18-bildungsbericht.html.

is often smaller than the gender gap in grading', as one interviewee phrased it, grades are still an important predictor of success at school and later on in life.

Another factor underlying boys' worse performance in reading (and other subjects) compared to girls could be that boys tend to read less for enjoyment. PISA data from 2018, for instance, shows that significantly less boys (39.1%) than girls (59.4%) in Luxembourg report reading for enjoyment. Since (reading) literacy is a basic skill for learning, this could also affect their performance in other subjects. One interviewee pointed out that the **gender gap in reading literacy** also translated into the International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS)[788], which shows that girls typically perform better in digital literacy (which tends to be more text-heavy), and that boys typically perform better in computational thinking (which is more related to mathematics).

Although the figures are most pronounced for reading and in secondary education, one interviewee highlighted that 'the gap opens very, very early', and this is confirmed by national level data. As early as primary school, boys are under-represented among high achievers in all subjects, except for mathematics and sport.[789] Likewise, there is evidence that, in each of the three cycles of primary education, more boys than girls repeat grades, a trend which increases with age. In the first cycle of primary education (6–7 years), boys account for 52.4% of grade repeaters, and 61.5% in the third cycle (10–11 years).[790] One interviewee explained that grade repetition is one of the main mechanisms used by the Luxembourg education system to tackle underachievement, and that insufficient language skills is one of the most common reasons for not allowing students to progress to the next year[791]. He said that in such a system, very quickly, 'a specific deficit becomes a generic deficit', which has detrimental consequences on pupils' later educational success. He continued by saying that at the beginning of grade three, many students are not on track anymore, and that their chances of attending higher education are already 'close to zero'.

The underperformance of boys in primary education translates into **more girls than boys opting for the more 'academic' or 'prestigious' secondary education paths**. Luxembourg's education system is highly differentiated and, after completing primary education, students choose between enrolling in either 'classic' secondary education (*Enseignement secondaire classique* (ESC)) or 'general' secondary education (*Enseignement secondaire general* (ESG)), the latter offering the opportunity to move towards vocational education and training. In 2018, girls accounted for 55.1% of classic secondary education students and 48.6% of general secondary education students.[792] The gendered differentiation of academic paths

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[788] IEA (2018), *International Computer and Information Literacy Study 2018*. Available at: https://www.iea.nl/studies/iea/icils/2018.

[789] Ministry of Education, Children and Youth, *Enseignement fondamental: Statistiques globales et analyse des résultats scolaires 2018-2019*. Available at: https://men.public.lu/fr/publications/statistiques-etudes/fondamental/2011-ef-statistiques-globales-2018-2019.html, p.54.

[790] Cycle 1: 6-7 years old; Cycle 2: 8-9 years old; Cycle 3: 10-11 years old.

[791] The rigorous linguistic requirements of the Luxembourgish education system will be described in more detail further down in this case study.

[792] Ministry of Education, Children and Youth, *Statistiques globales et analyse des résultats scolaires : enseignement secondaire classique 2018-2019.* Available at:

occurs mostly after the third year of secondary education, which is when students have the option to either switch to more technical or vocational courses, or to continue pursuing general or classic education.[793] Data shows that while girls are comparatively more likely to pursue general or classic education, or to leave the lower aspiration track (*Enseignement modulaire*) to re-join general education, boys are more likely to leave classic education to enrol in the general track, or to leave general education to enrol in the *modulaire* track. As a result, in 2019 there was **a gender gap of 5.8% in VET**, with 58.7% of secondary female students being enrolled in VET courses, as opposed to 64.5% of their male counterparts.

One explanation for these differences between boys and girls in terms of their education outcomes and choices could be that **behaviour which is traditionally considered 'female' seems to increase chances of educational success**. This view was echoed on several occasions during the interviews, including by one interviewee who made an 'educated guess' and described girls as 'more conscientious', and by another who described girls as 'more focused on their education', with 'more willpower' to achieve what they set their mind to, as opposed to boys who are less driven and 'less focused on achieving specific academic goals'. These claims are supported by PISA data from 2018, which shows that girls in Luxembourg are far more likely (48%) than boys (33%) to report that they feel pressured by schoolwork, which seems to signal greater involvement in their academic endeavours.

Interviewees reported that having negative attitudes towards school and learning and obtaining bad grades are closely related and mutually reinforcing and, in the medium term, can lead to school alienation. School alienation refers to the process of gradual disengagement from education, ultimately resulting in a student's 'failed attachment to school as an institution of learning and education, and lack of further academic qualification'.[794] One 2019 study showed that boys in Luxembourg exhibited higher levels of alienation from learning, teachers, and classmates than girls, and this was echoed by several interviewees.[795] Looking at alienation from learning, evidence shows that slightly fewer boys (66%) than girls (68%) report liking school[796], and boys also tend to skip school slightly more than girls. There is also evidence which shows that boys in Luxembourg are less likely than girls to aspire to higher education, and more likely to aspire to lower educational pathways instead.[797] With regards to alienation from teachers, one interviewee observed that most student-teacher

https://men.public.lu/fr/publications/statistiques-etudes/secondaire/2010-esc-statistiques-globales-18-19.html, p.10.

[793] Ibid.

[794] Tina Hascher and Gerda Hagenauer (2010), *Alienation from school*. Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0883035511000188.

[795] Morinaj, J., Hadjar, A. and Hascher, T. (2019), 'School alienation and academic achievement in Switzerland and Luxembourg: A longitudinal perspective', *Social Psychology of Education*.

[796] hbsc (2018), *Trends from 2006 - 2018 in Health Behaviour, Health Outcomes and Social Context of Adolescents in Luxembourg*. Available at: https://orbilu.uni.lu/bitstream/10993/42571/1/HBSC%20Trend%20Report%202006_2018.pdf.

[797] Hadjar A, Scharf J, Hascher T. (2021), 'Who aspires to higher education? Axes of inequality, values of education and higher education aspirations in secondary schools in Luxembourg and the Swiss Canton of Bern', *Eur J Educ*, p.9.

conflicts involve male students, as girls are better at 'smoothing things over' with teachers themselves and preventing conflicts from escalating further. With regards to alienation from fellow students, national data shows that in 2006, bullying among boys and girls stood at 19% and 8% respectively[798], while in 2018, it stood at 6% and 2%.[799] There was, therefore, a significant drop in the percentage of bullying among both genders.

School alienation, in turn, is strongly connected to early leaving from education and training (ELET). EU and national level data shows that **ELET rates are higher among young men than young women in Luxembourg**. Eurostat data from 2019, for instance, shows that 8.9% and 5.5% of young men and women aged 18–24 in Luxembourg were early leavers. According to the latest national report on ELET in Luxembourg[800], 60% of early leavers in 2015–2016 were boys, with students being most likely to drop out when they have two (29.3%) or three years (20.6%) of school delay.[801] As mentioned above, boys are over-represented among grade repeaters, and in the medium-term, grade repetition has a negative impact on students' perception of their own academic ability.[802]

1.2   Vulnerable sub-groups

The Luxembourg education system is characterised by a high share of non-native students. In 2018, 44.9% of students enrolled in cycles one to four of primary education (4–11 years old) had a nationality other than Luxembourgish, the most common one being Portuguese (19.8%).[803] As mentioned above, Luxembourg operates on the basis that all students should master the country's three official languages (i.e. German, French, and Luxembourgish), putting non-native speakers at a significant disadvantage. Evidence shows that students with a migrant background are almost twice as likely as their non-foreign counterparts to experience grade repetition at primary education level.[804] They are also more likely to be early leavers

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[798] Ibid.

[799] hbsc (2018), *Trends from 2006 - 2018 in Health Behaviour, Health Outcomes and Social Context of Adolescents in Luxembourg*. Available at: https://orbilu.uni.lu/bitstream/10993/42571/1/HBSC%20Trend%20Report%202006_2018.pdf, p.18.

[800] Ministry of Education, Children and Youth, *LE DÉCROCHAGE SCOLAIRE: ANNÉE SCOLAIRE 2015/2016*. Available at: https://men.public.lu/content/dam/men/catalogue-publications/statistiques-etudes/statistiques-globales/decrochage-15-16-fr.pdf.

[801] ELET was also found to be most common in grades 9 to 11, in the 16-18 year old age range, and to disproportionately affect students with a migrant background.

[802] Klapproth, F., Schaltz, P., Brunner, M., Keller, U., Fischbach, A., Ugen, S., Martin, R (2016), 'Short-term and medium-term effects of grade retention in secondary school on academic achievement and psychosocial outcome variables', *Learning and Individual Differences*, 50, pp. 182-194. Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1041608016301583?via%3Dihub.

[803] Ministry of Education, Children and Youth, *Enseignement fondamental: Statistiques globales et analyse des résultats scolaires 2018-2019*. Available at: https://men.public.lu/fr/publications/statistiques-etudes/fondamental/2011-ef-statistiques-globales-2018-2019.html, p.54.

[804] For the school year 2018-2019, 28,8% of students with a migrant background were grade repeaters, as opposed to 14,7% of pupils without a migrant background. See: Ministry of Education, Children and Youth (2020), *Enseignement fondamental: Statistiques globales et analyse des résultats scolaires 2018-2019*. Available at: https://men.public.lu/fr/publications/statistiques-etudes/fondamental/2011-ef-statistiques-globales-2018-2019.html.

from education and training.[805] Given this situation, all interviewees said that, in Luxembourg, **gender is seen as a secondary variable to migration and socio-economic background, in terms of tackling educational underachievement**.

An important issue to tackle in this respect, according to one interviewee, is educational segregation. Apparently, in primary schools there are already classes with predominantly 'non-native' students. The interviewee explained that, in these classes, **students are 'excluded from achievement'.** The focus is on improving student well-being and behaviour, rather than on developing their academic abilities, because teachers (and their parents) perceive education to be less important, as they are likely to 'become a truck driver or a cleaner' anyway. The primary focus is on 'keeping these children in education' more than anything else. Contrary to expectations, the students in *modulaire* secondary education were found to be 'much less alienated from school than those in other settings', which could be explained by their teachers' focus on well-being and support, as well as the limited emphasis on 'achievement' compared to what has been observed in more academic educational tracks.[806]

Another interviewee said that it is important to **better understand the impact that the family backgrounds of children from different migrant groups can have on their education outcomes.** They gave the example of Portuguese and Balkan families, two big immigrant groups in Luxembourg. For Portuguese children, whose parents and grandparents mainly came to Luxembourg during the 1970s to get 'any job they could get their hands on', there is far less pressure to perform well in school. The motivation of families coming from the Balkans, however, is very different. The educational background of these parents is often high and, having had high-skilled jobs 'back home', they often place high expectations on their children's educational career.

Looking at the performance differences between boys and girls within these vulnerable sub-groups, several interviewees indicated that **boys are typically over-represented among underperformers within vulnerable sub-groups**. Looking at students with a migrant background, PISA data shows that for first-generation immigrants, girls scored 20 points better than boys (472 vs. 452) and for second-generation immigrants, 34 points better (467 vs 433), a gender gap which is comparable to that of the native population, at 26 points. Likewise, socio-economic disadvantage seems to have a stronger adverse impact on the underperformance of boys from underprivileged backgrounds than on their female counterparts. One interviewee said that it was very common in Luxembourg to find 'low aspiration level school tracks' in vocational education (*enseignement modulaire*) made up 'just or mostly of boys of Portuguese origin with a working-class background'.

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[805] While students with a migrant background accounted for 38.5% of secondary education students in 2015/2016, they accounted for 47.1% of early school leavers. Within this category, students with Portuguese nationality were the largest group, accounting for 61.8% of early school leavers with a migrant background. (See: https://www.bildungsbericht.lu/media/ul_natbericht_fr_web.pdf, p.27).
[806] Morinaj, J., Hadjar, A. and Hascher, T. (2019), 'School alienation and academic achievement in Switzerland and Luxembourg: A longitudinal perspective', *Social Psychology of Education*.

1.3   Key implications

Looking at the societal implications of the gender gap in primary and secondary education shows a mixed picture. While Luxembourg has made some progress in reducing the gender gap in some key areas of tertiary education and the labour market, **it remains, in the view of one interviewee, a 'very hierarchical country'**, with men retaining a comparatively favourable position in society. There are also some important differences between men and women in terms of their general health and well-being outcomes, and their likelihood of being at risk of radicalisation, violent behaviour, and extremism.

Despite the increasing gender gap in compulsory education, we can see that **the gender gap in tertiary education attainment has narrowed significantly over time**, from 10.9% in favour of women in 2010 to just 3.4% in 2019. Today, 57.9% of women aged 30–34 in Luxembourg have completed tertiary education, as opposed to 54.5% of men.[807] Men, however, remain markedly over-represented on courses related to high-paying sectors, such as science and IT, where they account for 59% and 90% of graduates respectively. Women are also severely under-represented in professorship positions at universities.[808]

Looking at some of the of the most important labour market implications, evidence shows that **Luxembourg has the smallest gender pay gap in the EU-27**, standing at just 1.3% of average male gross hourly earnings in 2019, as opposed to the EU-27 average of 14.1%. Nevertheless, as a result of gendered study choices in tertiary education, the labour market remains characterised by a high degree of occupational segregation. While men account for only 10% of workers in the education, health, and social work sectors, they account for 83% of ICT specialists and 87% of engineers and scientists in high-technology sectors.[809] Men also remain more likely to hold important positions within private firms. In 2020, only 22% of company boards had women sitting on them. A further indication of the lasting impact of gender stereotypes in Luxembourg is that while the gender gap in employment has narrowed over time, male residents (77.2%) remain more likely than their female counterparts (68.1%)[810] to actively participate in the labour market. Likewise, in 2020, 30% of women in employment worked part-time, as opposed to 6% of men. This indicates that the male breadwinner/female homemaker model remains rather common.

There are also important differences between men and women in terms of their mental well-being. Statistical evidence shows that **men in Luxembourg are, on average, three times more likely than women to commit suicide**, with male suicides accounting for 72.5% of all recorded suicides between 2009 and 2018.[811] Looking at the age distribution of suicides, a surge in the number of male suicides can

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[807] Eurostat (2020)
[808] Eurostat (2018)
[809] European Institute for Gender Equality, *Gender Equality Index 2020: Luxembourg*. Available at: https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-luxembourg.
[810] https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do
[811] Sante.lu, *Suicide: Plan national de prévention du suicide (PNPSL) 2015-2019*. Available at: https://sante.public.lu/fr/politique-sante/plans-action/plan-prevention-suicide-2015-2019/index.html.

be observed between the ages of 35 and 54 years old.[812] This echoes the observations one interviewee who reported that his largest group of patients was men aged 40–45 years 'going through what is usually labelled as a midlife crisis'. He went on to describe a midlife crisis in the following words: 'Up until a certain age, one does exactly what they are expected to, until they start wondering whether this is really all that life has to offer, and whether this was all really worth it. Couples experience conflicts, and there are often also children in the picture.'

This interviewee also argued that that men and women have different attitudes to seeking external help, with women being more inclined to talk about their issues and men wanting to solve their issues themselves, only seeking help at a much later stage. This interviewee also expressed concerns that men were 'not able to articulate their emotional needs' in order to efficiently work through interpersonal issues, which, to a certain extent, may account for higher reporting of symptoms of depression. While no data on the socio-economic background of those who commit suicide is available for Luxembourg, it is worth noting that at both national and EU level, data shows that men with lower levels of education (ISCED 0–2) are more likely than men with higher levels of education (ISECD 3–4 and 5–8) to report symptoms of depression or major depression. Of men with an ISCED 0-2, 10.5% report depressive symptoms, compared to 5.1% of men with an ISCED 5-8. Based on mental health data, there are therefore grounds to believe that **men with lower levels of education may be disproportionately likely to commit suicide**, a view which is supported by considerable literature on the socio-economic determinants of suicide internationally.[813]

Some interviewees also reported **a potential link between mental health issues among males, low education outcomes, radicalisation, and violent behaviour** (such as xenophobia, crime, or violent sexism):'What we see is that men who are facing difficulties seek to put the blame on an external culprit, whether it's politicians, their partner, or ex-partner […] they find it hard to re-examine their behaviour.' Another interviewee felt that for girls, school failure is less of an issue, because in the back of their minds they still think that if they can get married and have kids, they will not necessarily have to work. For boys, this is more difficult; they may instead be forced to resort to crime in order to get by. In the multicultural Luxembourgish context, where most of the workforce is not 'native', the far-right narrative is mostly about 'over-foreignisation', and is propagated by the Alternative Democratic Reform Party (Alternativ Demokratesch Reformpartei (ADR)), known for its critical stance on immigration, its attachment to the Luxembourgish language, and its opposition to

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[812] https://statistiques.public.lu/fr/actualites/conditions-sociales/sante-secu/2015/07/20150731/20150731.pdf

[813] Nicolas Bourgoin, 'Suicide et activité professionnelle', *Population*, 1999/1 (Vol. 54), pages 73–101. Available at: https://www.cairn.info/article.php?ID_ARTICLE=POPU_P1999_54N1_0101;
Milner, A. et. al. (2010), 'Socio-economic determinants of suicide: An ecological analysis of 35 countries', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 47(1):19-27. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/47795216_Socio-economic_determinants_of_suicide_An_ecological_analysis_of_35_countries;
DeBastiani, S. et. al. (2019), 'Socioeconomic determinants of suicide risk: Monroe County Florida Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey, 2016', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 47(1):19-27. Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0941950018303191.

voting rights for foreign residents.[814] One interviewee also mentioned the traditional gender role ideology of the ADR. There are thus grounds to believe that the ADR's rhetoric may appeal to those looking for an 'external culprit', especially since **racial discrimination remains a major issue in Luxembourg**. According to a Fundamental Rights Agency survey on being black in the EU[815], Luxembourg recorded the third highest rate of respondents who reported that they had experienced racist violence (11%), the second highest rate of respondents who reported that they had been racially discriminated against in access to housing (36%), and the highest rate of respondents who reported having been racially discriminated against when looking for work (47%). There are also grounds to believe that the issue has become even more severe in recent years; according to national data from the Luxembourg Grand Ducal Police, the annual number of racial discrimination offences has grown from 17 in 2007 to 28 in 2018, with a peak in the number of recorded offences (43) in 2014.[816]

2. **Policy attention and actions**

2.1 **Policy attention and attitudes**

As confirmed by a representative from Luxembourg's Ministry of Equality between Women and Men (MEGA), **achieving gender equality is a key political priority for Luxembourg**, as evidenced by a clear commitment to making gender equality a priority for all policy fields and layers of society. The National Action Plan for Equality between Women and Men (2020) states that 'equality is not only a concern for women, but should be a transversal political priority, calling for a shared responsibility of the entire government and all different actors of society. More specifically, each Ministry should ensure gender equality is part of its policy, legal texts, programmes, and action plans, as well as any other measures, conforming to the principle of respect for, and systematically taking into account, the gender dimension ('Gender Mainstreaming').[817] The gender gap in education is clearly recognised as an issue in the Action Plan, especially in relation to the areas of reading, mathematics, and coding. Promoting gender equality in education is therefore one of the seven political priorities listed in the action plan – these are described in full detail in Section 2.3 below. In addition to this, of all the 48 measures included in the Action Plan, 19

[814] Mulhall, J. and Kahn-Ruf, S*., State of hate: Far-right extremism in Europe.* Available at: https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ESOH-LOCKED-FINAL.pdf.
[815] https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2018-being-black-in-the-eu_en.pdf, p.12.
[816] https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2018-hate-crime-recording_en.pdf
[817] In French: *L'égalité n'est pas uniquement une affaire de femmes, mais doit constituer une priorité politique transversale et faire appel à une responsabilité partagée au sein du gouvernement et de tous les acteurs/-trices de la société. Concrètement, chaque département ministériel doit respecter l'égalité entre les sexes dans l'élaboration de ses politiques, textes légaux, programmes et plans d'actions, ainsi que dans toute autre mesure, conformément au principe du respect de la prise en compte systématique de la dimension du genre (Gender Mainstreaming).*
MEGA (2020), *National Action Plan on Equality between Women and Men*, Luxembourg: MEGA, p. 3. Available at: https://gouvernement.lu/dam-assets/documents/actualites/2020/07-juillet/Plan-d-action-national-Egalite.pdf.

include a focus on education, which demonstrates that education is also seen as a key vehicle for tackling gender equality issues at the societal level.[818]

The MEGA also has a dedicated web page on men and equality[819], where it is explicitly stated that men should not be seen as the only cause of inequality or the enemy of feminist action. The Ministry believes that it is **important to recognise the many inequalities boys and men face**: *'The fight against discrimination and inequality is not a one-way street […] involving boys and men in equality policy and action is closely linked with the fight against stereotypes.'[820]* The inequalities which are listed include caring responsibilities at home, school failure among boys, sexual abuse of boys in various institutional settings, and increased risk homelessness, substance, abuse and mental illness (suicide in particular). The Ministry then goes on to say that gender stereotypes have a negative effect on boys and men in particular, and are the cause of deeply rooted negative attitudes, values, and prejudices on 'what it means to be a man'. Toxic masculinity is referred to as one of the main factors contributing to maintaining and reinforcing gender stereotypes which, in turn, contribute to sexual hatred, violence, and prejudice against boys and men who diverge from 'traditional gender norms'. The media and society are seen as key drivers of perpetuating gender stereotypes, influencing the way men and women think they should behave, the tasks they should be responsible for at home, well as the careers they should pursue.

Despite this commitment at the political level to focus on issues facing boys and men, and the recognition that boys underperform in education, **specific actions targeting boys and (young) men remain limited**. As will be discussed in Section 2.3 below, actions are limited to increasing the number of male teachers in education (linked to Action 3.5) and improving men's health and well-being (linked to Action 3.6). Measures in Luxembourg instead focus primarily on either collectively tackling issues facing both men/boys and women/girls, or on specifically addressing key issues (still) facing women/girls (e.g. Action 2.6 on the abolition of the terms '*mademoiselle*' and '*nom de jeune fille*'; Actions 3.1 and 4.6, which focus on increasing the number of girls in ICT and mathematics at school and in the labour market through initiatives such as 'Girls in Tech'**[821]** or 'Girls Exploring Maths'**[822]** days; or Action 4.11 on increasing the visibility and support for 'female skills' in decision-making).

Moreover, despite the strong commitment to tackling gender equality, given the high diversity of Luxembourg's student population, **the main focus among schools and teachers is on tackling underachievement among underperforming students in general**, especially among students with a migrant or disadvantaged socio-

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[818] Ibid, p. 62-63.
[819] MEGA (2020), *Hommes et Egalité*. Available at: https://mega.public.lu/fr/societe/Hommes-et-egalite.html.
[820] In French: *La lutte contre les discriminations et les inégalités n'est pas à un sens unique […] associer davantage les garçons et les hommes à la politique de l'égalité est donc intimement liée à la lutte contre les stéréotypes.*
[821] WIDE (2016), Press release, *WIDE, a new name for Girls in Tech Luxembourg*. Available at: https://wide.lu/2016/10/13/wide-a-new-name-for-girls-in-tech-luxembourg/#:~:text=Girls%20in%20Tech%20Luxembourg%20changed,already%20close%20to%203%20years.
[822] University of Luxembourg, *GEM Day: Girls Exploring Math*. Available at: https://wwwfr.uni.lu/fstm/actualites/gem_day_girls_exploring_math.

economic background. According to several interviewees, the Luxembourgish education system has always struggled with diversity. One interviewee went as far as saying: 'As far as I'm concerned, gender is the least of our problems […] the fact that there is an extremely diverse population in Luxembourg means that it is just a completely different story […] this needs to be tackled first.'

As a result, **schools are more concerned with addressing inequalities and ELET in general, rather than focusing on issues facing boys (or girls) specifically**. Despite the measures announced under Action 3.3 of the Action Plan around sensitising educational staff on gender issues[823] (discussed in more detail in Section 2.3), most interviewees reported that educational staff in Luxembourg remain insufficiently informed and trained on gender equality issues, with some saying that many teachers are reluctant to adopt a perspective on gender. According to these stakeholders, the education system already puts a lot of pressure on teachers to tailor their educational approaches to the needs of an increasingly diverse group of students. Asking teachers to also adopt a 'gender dimension' on top of this, without putting in place the right support measures, would further increase the pressure on teachers and make their job even more challenging.

To tackle educational underachievement in compulsory education, Luxembourg relies on a number of mechanisms. The first key mechanism is **grade retention**. As highlighted in the previous section, in primary school, many students (especially boys) are already off-track, and one of the main reasons for this is that students are held back due to insufficient language proficiency.[824] The second key mechanism is **differentiation**, which is a key characteristic of Luxembourg's secondary education system. Within regular secondary education, there are numerous educational tracks to ensure that students are able to follow classes in line with their skills and interests. As a result, there is a first layer of differentiation between 'high performing' (or more academically oriented) tracks and 'low performing' (or more vocationally oriented) tracks, with boys being over-represented in the latter. There are also a high number of special needs centres in Luxembourg, which are used to deal with students' behavioural and learning difficulties outside the regular secondary education system, adding a second layer of differentiation. Boys, again, are over-represented in these centres. Figures from 2016/2017[825], for instance, show that boys are over-represented in 'differentiated education centres', which were set up by the Ministry of Education in 1980 to host children with mental, physical or behavioural difficulties.[826] Another example is Izergestee VTT[827], which targets children between the ages of 11 and 15

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[823] WIDE (2016), Press release, WIDE, a new name for Girls in Tech Luxembourg. Available at: https://wide.lu/2016/10/13/wide-a-new-name-for-girls-in-tech-luxembourg/#:~:text=Girls%20in%20Tech%20Luxembourg%20changed,already%20close%20to%203%20years, p. 22.

[824] Ministry of Education, Children and Youth (2020), *Enseignement fondamental: Statistiques globales et analyse des résultats scolaires 2018-2019*. Available at: https://men.public.lu/fr/publications/statistiques-etudes/fondamental/2011-ef-statistiques-globales-2018-2019.html.

[825] https://www.bildungsbericht.lu/media/ul_natbericht_fr_web.pdf

[826] https://www.ediff.lu/?com=0I14I0I0I

[827] Ministry of Education, Children and Youth (2013), *Izegerstee VTT - Le comportement et le développement socio-émotionnel*. Available at: https://men.public.lu/fr/publications/enseignement-secondaire/informations-generales-offre-scolaire/izegerstee-vtt.html.

with severe behavioural issues and seeks to develop their socio-emotional skills, or *Mosaik* classes, which were introduced by the Ministry of Education in 2005.[828] Although technically offered inside schools, *Mosaik* classes are offered separately from regular education for children with behavioural difficulties as a sort of 'time-out class' for six to twelve weeks in order to improve their behaviour and allow them to re-enter regular education. The CePAS (Centres for Psycho-Social Support and School Orientation), funded by the Ministry of Education, also support schools, pupils, and teachers to deal with behavioural difficulties at school and tackle ELET.[829]

One of the most important developments in the area of special needs education in Luxembourg was the **introduction of competence centres specialised in psycho-pedagogy in 2018** to improve social inclusion and individual support for students with special educational needs (SEN).[830] With eight competence centres, each focusing on a specific area (e.g. visual impairment or socio-emotional difficulties), individualised support is provided to pupils, parents, and teachers for SEN.[831] An NGO specialising in the inclusion of children with SEN reported that, based on their experience, children with SEN followed gendered patterns which are similar to that of the general population in terms of education outcomes. According to this NGO, girls with Downs syndrome have better language skills than boys and more developed vocabulary. They are also less afraid than boys to be misunderstood when attempting to speak. Regarding children with physical disabilities, the NGO observed that girls are more inclined to accept help and actively engage with others in social contexts, such as games or parties, whereas boys tend to value their autonomy and independence, and may often be reluctant to accept help from their peers.

Finally, given the high degree of differentiation and the early age at which students need to make a study choice (i.e. at the end of primary school), Luxembourg also has a well-developed **study and career guidance offering**. On 27 February 2012, the Ministry of Education set up the *Maison de l'orientation* (House of Orientation)[832], bringing together several initiatives in the area of study and career guidance. With the exception of the annual Girls' Day/Boys' Day initiative (GDBD), which was recently cancelled, the *Maison de l'orientation* does not explicitly try to change the study choices or attitudes of boys or girls to specific professions or study fields in which they are typically under-represented. An interview with a representative of the *Maison de l'orientation* revealed that the reason the Ministry decided to cancel the GDBD initiative is because it was felt to be better and more important for students to

[828] Garcia, S. (2015)*, La classe mosaïque ou comment lutter contre le décrochage scolaire*. Available at: https://portal.education.lu/inno/Travaux-de-candidature/ArtMID/3717/ArticleID/7821/La-classe-mosa239que-ou-comment-lutter-contre-le-d233crochage-scolaire.

[829] CePAS, *Dernières actualités*. Available at: http://cepas.public.lu/fr.html.

[830] Journal officiel du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg (2018), *Loi du 20 juillet 2018 portant création de Centres de compétences en psycho-pédagogie spécialisée en faveur de l'inclusion scolaire et modification de 1° la loi modifiée du 6 février 2009 portant organisation de l'enseignement fondamental; 2° la loi modifiée du 15 juillet 2011 visant l'accès aux qualifications scolaires et professionnelles des élèves à besoins éducatifs particuliers*. Available at: http://legilux.public.lu/eli/etat/leg/loi/2018/07/20/a664/jo.

[831] Ministry of Education, Children and Youth, *Centres de compétence.* Available at: https://men.public.lu/fr/themes-transversaux/eleves-besoins-specifiques/centres-competences.html

[832] Maison de l'orientation Luxembourg, *Agenda*. Available at: https://maison-orientation.public.lu/fr.html.

discover all study and career options available to them, with a clear underlying message that choices should not be influenced by gender stereotypes.[833]

2.2 Key success factors and barriers

As mentioned above, one of the most important success factors of Luxembourg's approach to tackling the gender gap in education is its **long tradition and history of promoting gender equality across all layers of society**, from the highest political level to the family and individual level, including among youth. This is crucial for changing the day-to-day attitudes and behaviours of children and the choices they make at school. Luxembourg is currently the only EU Member State with a dedicated Ministry for Gender Equality between Women and Men, established in 1995.[834] It has had National Action Plans in place specifically aimed at promoting gender equality since the early 2000s, with the latest one adopted in July 2020.[835] The Action Plan includes seven political priorities:

(1) Encouraging and supporting engagement at the level of politics and civil society;

(2) Tackling gender stereotypes and sexism;

(3) Promoting equality in education;

(4) Promoting professional equality;

(5) Promoting equality at **the** local level;

(6) Fighting against domestic violence;

(7) Encouraging greater societal equality.

To achieve greater gender equality in the family sphere and among young people specifically, the Action Plan includes specific actions focused on raising awareness among young people (Actions 1.2 and 2.2), tackling sexism in advertising (Action 2.3), supporting civil society initiatives (Action 1.1) and raising awareness on gender stereotyping in toys (Action 3.9). In relation to the latter, one interviewee confirmed that one of the biggest challenges to tackling the gender gap in education is changing 'what [children] get for Christmas', alluding to the way that gender stereotypes are perpetuated in the family sphere.

As a result, **in terms of gender equality at the societal level, Luxembourg has been performing very well compared to other European countries**. With 70.3 points out of 100 points, Luxembourg ranks tenth on the EU Gender Equality Index. Its score is 2.4 points above the EU average and, with the

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[833] Le gouvernement luxembourgeois (2018), *Le «Girls' Day - Boys' Day» revu et reporté*. Available at: https://gouvernement.lu/fr/actualites/toutes_actualites/communiques/2018/03-mars/gdbd-reporte.html

[834] Luxembourg: Let's Make it Happen, *Equal Opportunities*. Available at: https://luxembourg.public.lu/en/living/family/equal-opportunities.html.

[835] MEGA (2020), National Action Plan on Equality between Women and Men, Luxembourg, MEGA. Available at: https://gouvernement.lu/dam-assets/documents/actualites/2020/07-juillet/Plan-d-action-national-Egalite.pdf

exception of Italy, it has been progressing faster than any other European country, improving its score by 9.1 points since 2010 and by 1.1 points since 2017.[836] A 2013 study, which analysed the evolution of age and sex differences in gender role attitudes in Luxembourg between 1999 and 2008, stated that: 'During the past 10 years, Luxembourg's residents have become significantly less traditional when it comes to attitudes towards the childcare and economic aspects of gender roles. Young women are the strongest supporters of more egalitarian division of labour between the sexes, while young men lag behind their female counterparts. This gender gap appears to persist especially in the case of attitudes towards women doing homemaking.'[837] A more recent study on the existence of gender stereotypes among young people aged 14–30 years old shows that young people (especially young men) still hold rather traditional gender roles, especially in relation to jobs.[838]

Despite the high level of political commitment to tackling gender equality, and recognition that boys are underperforming in education and that boys/men should be involved in the gender equality debate, there is still a fairly limited range of targeted actions addressing the challenges boys face in compulsory education. In addition to this, there are only limited actions tackling the issues facing boys and men more generally, as will be discussed in Section 2.3. This may be one of the reasons why gender inequality persists in compulsory education in Luxembourg. Another reason for the persisting gender gap, and educational inequalities more broadly, is related to **inequalities in the overall educational structure and approach to tackling underperformance** in Luxembourg. As mentioned above, one of the main approaches in Luxembourg to tackling educational underperformance is grade repetition, which primarily affects boys. Several interviewees, however, pointed out that instead of reducing underperformance, this approach has a negative effect on students' overall motivation for school and learning, and increases their likelihood of misbehaving, and in the most extreme cases, leading to ELET. Stakeholders also pointed out that, although Luxembourg's highly differentiated education system in theory allows for education tailored to students' individual needs, in reality this leads to a system with high levels of educational segregation. One interviewee said that it is not uncommon to find classrooms with predominantly migrant and low socio-economic background students, many of whom are boys. Evidence shows that, despite all the efforts at Ministry level to promote gender equality in education and the large number of study and career guidance resources available to parents and students, this has so far been insufficient to address the imbalances in the education system (both in terms of gendered educational choices and the performance differences between pupils with a migrant and non-migrant background).[839] The report recommends structural changes to the education system in order to create greater educational equality, such

[836] European Institute for Gender Equality, Gender Equality Index 2020: Luxembourg. Available at: https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-luxembourg.
[837] http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.901.9130&rep=rep1&type=pdf
[838] See study (in German): https://mega.public.lu/dam-assets/fr/societe/letzstereotype18/Letzstereotype18-Abschlussbericht.pdf.
[839] Ministry of Education, Children and Youth, Statistiques globales et analyse des résultats scolaires : enseignement secondaire classique 2018-2019. Available at: https://men.public.lu/fr/publications/statistiques-etudes/secondaire/2010-esc-statistiques-globales-18-19.html, p.10.

as prolonging the 'common core curriculum' from the end of primary up to the end of lower secondary education, as this is proven to have high potential to reduce inequalities.[840]

2.3 Overview of key initiatives and measures

As mentioned above, promoting equality in education is one of the seven priorities in Luxembourg's **National Action Plan on Equality between Women and Men**, which was adopted in July 2020.[841] Under this pillar, nine specific actions are listed through which the Ministry has committed to tackling the gender gap in education. In a Parliamentary response letter dated 3 March 2021, the Minster of Equality between Women and Men, Taina Bofferding, provides more information on current priorities and progress in relation to implementing these nine actions.[842] With the exception of recruiting more men to the teaching profession and actions aimed at improving men's general health and well-being (described in detail below), education-related actions do not focus on key issues specifically facing boys or young men. Instead, as stated in the Parliamentary response letter, the approach underpinning the various actions in Luxembourg is an 'egalitarian approach to school and vocational education and guidance, for all pupils, regardless of their gender'.[843] The focus is on individual personality development (in Luxembourgish, *individuel! Perséinlechkeetsentwécklung*) in its full diversity, so that students can make informed study and career choices, regardless of their gender. The plan formulates this overarching goal as follows:

'Whenever the action plan mentions women or men, girls or boys, it refers to them in their full diversity. These are heterogeneous groups, especially when it comes to their sexual orientation, their gender identity, their gender expression, their sexual characteristics, their race, their ethnicity, their religion, their convictions, their disability, or their age.'[844]

Looking firstly at the **actions targeting boys and girls collectively**, the first action listed under the education pillar relates to **tackling the gender gap in digital skills** (Action 3.1). To do so, the Ministry puts specific emphasis on coding skills in primary and secondary education. In September 2020, coding was introduced as a transversal skill in mathematics courses in lower secondary education. From the academic year

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[840] University of Luxembourg (2018), *RAPPORT NATIONAL SUR L'ÉDUCATION AU LUXEMBOURG 2018*. Available at: https://www.bildungsbericht.lu/media/ul_natbericht_fr_web.pdf.
[841] MEGA (2020), *National Action Plan on Equality between Women and Men*, Luxembourg: MEGA. Available at: https://gouvernement.lu/dam-assets/documents/actualites/2020/07-juillet/Plan-d-action-national-Egalite.pdf
[842] La Chambre des Députés, *Rôle des affaires*. Available at: https://chd.lu/wps/portal/public/Accueil/TravailALaChambre/Recherche/RoleDesAffaires?action=doQuestpaDetails&id=20495.
[843] In Luxembourgish: *Déi verschidde Moossname viséiere generell, fir ail d'Schülerinnen a Schüler, eng egalitar Schoulausbildung a Beruffsorientéierung, onofhangeg vun hirem Geschlecht*.
[844] In Luxembourgish: *Lorsque ce plan d'action national mentionne les femmes ou les hommes, les filles ou les garçons, il les cible dans toute leur diversité. Il s'agit de groupes hétérogènes, notamment en ce qui concerne leur orientation sexuelle, leur identité de genre, leur expression de genre, leurs caractéristiques sexuées, leur race, origine ethnique, leur religion, leurs convictions ou encore leur handicap ou leur âge*. MEGA (2020), *National Action Plan on Equality between Women and Men*, Luxembourg, MEGA, p. 3. Available at: https://gouvernement.lu/dam-assets/documents/actualites/2020/07-juillet/Plan-d-action-national-Egalite.pdf.

2021–2022, coding was introduced in primary school, along with teacher education (ITE) and continuing professional development (CPD) courses for teachers, and specific competence centres to support schools and teachers (including a dedicated website with pedagogical resources).[845]

The second action relates to **improving reading literacy** (Action 3.2), for which the Ministry is coordinating various actions, including offering schools access to various digital and interactive libraries of visually attractive reading material, in order to encourage reading among young people.[846]

The third, fourth, and eighth actions (Actions 3.3, 3.4, and 3.8) focus on **awareness-raising and training on gender equality among various target groups** (youth, teachers, parents, school leaders, non-formal education and training practitioners, etc.). The key tools used to reach these target groups are ITE and CPD, the development of gender-neutral textbooks for teachers, and targeted communication campaigns and materials (such as flyers, videos, and other resources developed by RockMEGA[847]). To increase the involvement of fathers in the education of their children, the Ministry developed a video called **'Men Who Care'** for International Men's Day on 19 November 2019. The video shows fathers explaining the importance of being closely involved in the education of their children.[848] To further increase its impact on the influence that family life has on gender stereotyping, the Ministry is committed to **tackling gender stereotyping in toys** (Action 3.9), and promotional material developed as part of the RockMEGA initiative aims to contribute this. Finally, the Action Plan also includes a specific action (Action 3.7) to **improve the gender balance in education management** positions, especially in higher education, where there continues to be a 'glass ceiling' for women.

> **Awareness-raising and training on gender equality**
>
> A key approach in Luxembourg to tackling the gender gap in education has been the development of educational and promotional material on gender stereotyping for various target groups, as well as more targeted training for (future) teachers
>
> Tackling gender stereotyping in teaching
>
> For teachers, the Ministry has asked the University of Luxembourg to conduct an **analysis of gender stereotyping in textbooks in basic education**. As part of the project, the University is analysing how often men and women occur in textbooks, and in which roles. The results of this study should be available by the summer of 2021. The University of Luxembourg is also in charge of the **initial teacher education programme**, which includes a specific focus on encouraging teachers to adopt

[845] Ministry of Education, Children and Youth Coding, *à l'école : « Je veux que tous les enfants aient accès à la langue du 21e siècle »*. Available at: https://men.public.lu/fr/actualites/communiques-conference-presse/2020/10/201012-coding-ecole.html.
[846] Ministry of Education, Children and Youth Coding, *Promotion de la lecture.* Available at: https://men.public.lu/fr/themes-transversaux/themes-pedagogiques/promotion-lecture.html.
[847] MEGA, Equality in Education. See: https://www.rockmega.lu/.
[848] MEGA (2019), *Les pères prennent la parole*. Available at: https://mega.public.lu/fr/actualites/2019/11/Weltmaennerdag.html.

competence- and learner-oriented teaching and learning approaches, to meet the needs of individual learners. The *Institut de Formation de l'Éducation Nationale* (IFEN) is in charge of the **continuing professional development** of teachers and is now also starting to introduce specific modules on gender-sensitive teaching.

Awareness-raising on gender stereotyping

As part of a wider awareness-raising campaign, the RockMEGA organisation (funded by MEGA) has also developed a wide range of flyers, videos, and brochures, and runs a number of other promotional activities to tackle gender stereotyping. For **children aged 3-6 years old**, RockMEGA has developed the PIXI booklets[849], which cover topics such as 'I Can Also Do This' (focused on making children aware that their study and career choices are limitless, regardless of their gender), 'Mummy the Mayor' (to make children see that women can also take up leadership positions), and 'The Unicorn and Robot are Moving' (on tackling gender stereotyping in toys). For **children aged 12-20 years old**, a specific flyer entitled 'We Are Equal' was developed[850], which explains the current actions and political priorities in Luxembourg with regards to gender equality, and encourages young people to reflect on how they can change their attitudes and behaviour. **Three promotional videos**[851] on toys, day care, and clothes shopping were also developed, aimed at tackling gender stereotypes in these domains. Finally, RockMEGA also **actively reaches out to school** through its MEGA-Jumper[852] and Mini-Exhibition[853] initiatives, which schools can book through the RockMEGA website to come and raise awareness on gender equality in their school.

Next, looking at the **actions with a specific focus on boys/men**, there are two Ministry-funded actions which stand out in particular. The first one is MADAK (*Méi Männer an der ausserschoulescher Kannerbetreiung*), which is part of Action 3.5 on increasing boys' interest in socio-economic professions and aims to increase the number of men in the ECEC.[854] The second one is infoMann, which is part of Action 3.6 of the Action Plan on Improving the Health and Well-being of Boys and Girls, and provides counselling services to men facing difficulties.[855]

MADAK: Attracting more men to ECEC

MADAK (*Méi Männer an der ausserschoulescher Kannerbetreiung*), which stands for 'More Men in Non-Formal Education and Care', seeks to increase the number of male pre-school teachers as part of Luxembourg's approach to tackling gender stereotypes

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[849] ROCKMEGA (2020), *IVRETS POUR ENFANTS – PIXI*. Available at: https://www.rockmega.lu/materiel-sensibilisation/livrets-pour-enfants-pixi-2/.

[850] ROCKMEGA (2019), *BROCHURE POUR JEUNES: WE ARE EQUAL*. Available at: https://www.rockmega.lu/materiel-sensibilisation/brochure-we-are-equal/.

[851] ROCKMEGA (2020), *VIDÉOS DE SENSIBILISATION*. Available at: https://www.rockmega.lu/materiel-sensibilisation/videos/.

[852] ROCKMEGA, *RÉSERVATION MEGA-JUMPER*. Available at https://www.rockmega.lu/informations-generales/reservatioun-mega-jumper/

[853] ROCKMEGA, RÉSERVATION MINI-EXPO. Available at: https://www.rockmega.lu/informations-generales/reservatioun-mini-expo/.

[854] Madak*, les hommes dans l'education non formelle des enfants*. Available at: https://madak.lu/.

[855] InfoMann, see: http://www.infomann.lu/index.php/infomann-home.

in society more broadly. The initiative was set up in 2016 and is fully funded by the Ministry of Equality between Women and Men (MEGA). It is run by the Catholic University of Applied Sciences of Berlin (*Katholische Hochschule für Sozialwesen de Berlin* (IGD)) and infoMann, which is part of the NGO ActTogether.

The initiative was set up after the third International Conference on Men and Equal Opportunities, which took place in Luxembourg in October 2016 (previous editions took place in Berlin in 2012 and in Vienna in 2014). At this conference, it was pointed out that male teachers in the non-formal education and care sectors were under-represented, and that information was missing on the exact number and reasons for their under-representation. This is why, as part of the first phase of the MADAK project, in collaboration with the University of Luxembourg, **a working group was set up and research conducted** on the number of male teachers in early childhood education and care (ECEC), the reasons for their under-representation, and what could be done to improve their participation.[856]

Based on the findings from this first phase, **six pilot projects were set up** in collaboration with academics and schools, which will run until the end of 2021.[857] The results from these pilot projects will inform a wider awareness-raising campaign aimed at attracting more male teachers to ECEC. For several pilot projects, infoMann worked closely with participating schools to organise seminars bringing together teachers and school leaders to reflect on their educational practices from a gender perspective, including the way tasks are divided between male and female staff, the way they treat boys and girls, and how they could change their practices in order to break free of gender stereotypes. As part of one pilot project, a video was developed promoting all the attractive elements of being an ECEC teacher from a male perspective.[858] As part of another project, a module entitled 'More Men in Non-Formal Education in Luxembourg?' was developed in collaboration with the University of Luxembourg.[859] The module consists of six seminars and was piloted in the initial teacher education programme at the University of Luxembourg between October and December 2020.

infoMann: Helping men with difficulties

infoMann[860], funded by the Ministry of Equality between Women and Men (MEGA), was set up in 2012 and is part of the NGO ActTogether. The organisation has been set up to support men from the age of 18 years old facing difficulties. As explained by a

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[856] Madak*, les hommes dans l'education non formelle des enfants*. Available at: https://madak.lu/base-de-donnee/

[857] Madak*, Programm base de donnée*. Available at: https://madak.lu/projets-pilotes/.

[858] Madak, *Programm D'Attraktivitéit vun der pedagogescher Aarbecht an der Crèche a Maison Relais siichtbar maachen*. Available at: https://madak.lu/program-dattraktiviteit-vun-der-pedagogescher-aarbecht-an-der-creche-a-maison-relais-siichtbar-maachen-fr/.

[859] Madak*, Mehr-Männer-in-der-non-formalen-Bildung-in-Luxemburg_Modulbeschreibung*. Available at: https://madak.lu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FCE-BSSE-E-3.11-Mehr-M%C3%A4nner-in-der-non-formalen-Bildung-in-Luxemburg_Modulbeschreibung.pdf.

[860] InfoMann, see: http://www.infomann.lu/index.php/infomann-home.

representative of infoMann, the organisation starts from the idea that 'men are human beings, just like women'.[861] According to infoMann, over the course of many feminist waves, women have been able to mobilise themselves against a common enemy: male domination. Men, by contrast, have always struggled to question the traditional model of 'male dominance', which society in many ways forces them to follow. Men should be rational, act and be decisive, be good at organisation, and certainly not cry. Men facing difficulties, he said, 'are looking for an external culprit, whether it be political, their partner or ex-partner' and 'they try to understand the world as if it were a machine more so than their own needs and limits'.[862]

The representative also explained that, when infoMann was first set up, there were many negative reactions, which shows that **society does not take men's issues seriously**. Some people ironically reacted saying that it was good that there was 'finally' an organisation to support 'beaten men' (as if 'beaten men' were not real men); others believed that the organisation was mainly there to support divorced men or men who had been attacked by feminists. Only a limited number of people, even today, understand that the real goal of the organisation is to support men who are feeling suppressed and lost in a society based on a model of male domination, and in which men (are expected to) exercise power.

Each year, the organisation supports 220–250 men in Luxembourg, with the biggest target group being **men around the age of 40-45 years** old who are going through a midlife crisis and are experiencing issues in their marriage. Another big target group are **men from migrant and low socio-economic backgrounds**, although the interviewee did underline that there is no clear link between having a certain socio-economic background and treating women a certain way. What he did observe, however, is that first-generation, non-European migrants often find it challenging to see their wife getting more opportunities and individual freedom than in their home country and, as a result, feel 'lost' with regards to their own position in society.

As mentioned above, most men who contact infoMann have **difficulties dealing with their emotions**, and this is what infoMann tries to help them with in particular, in order to improve their overall well-being and sense of 'belonging' in society.

As mentioned above, the National Action Plan includes numerous actions to improve gender equality at wider societal level beyond education alone. This includes actions centred on combatting domestic violence, for which there has already been specific legislation in place since 2006.[863] Again, education is seen as a key vehicle to address this issue, in particular by focusing on deconstructing gender stereotypes and helping children to develop their own identity (for instance, through sexual and health

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[861] In French: *les hommes sont des humains comme les femmes*.
[862] In French: *cherchent un responsable extérieur, que ce soient les politiques, leur conjointe ou leur ex-conjointe*, *ils cherchent à comprendre le monde comme une machine plus que leurs propres besoins et limites*.
[863] MEGA (2020), *Prévention et lutte contre la violence domestique*. Available at:
https://mega.public.lu/fr/societe/Lutte-et-prevention-contre-la-violence-domestique.html.

education). Action 6.2 stresses **the importance of investing in prevention** in order 'tackle the plague [of domestic violence] at its source'.[864]

Another important recent development has been the **establishment of a National Observatory on Equality between Women and Men**. This was officially launched in March 2021 and is inspired by the EIGE's data on equality between women and men in various domains. Minister Taina Bofferding highlighted the importance of the National Observatory because *'we can only change and improve that which we can measure'.*[865] The Observatory centralises the information from several Ministries and other organisations on comparable data between women and men in Luxembourg and presents these in seven domains. At the moment, there is comparable data available on three domains; domestic violence, employment, and decision-making. Data on work-life, education, income, and health will be made available over the course of 2021–2023.

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[864] In French: *combattre le fléau à la source*.
[865] In French: *on ne peut que changer et améliorer ce que l'on mesure*. See: https://mega.public.lu/fr/actualites/2021/Mars/TainaBofferding-presente-nouvel-Observatoire-de-legalite.html.

3. Overall assessment

3.1 Key findings

Looking at the OECD's PISA data, students in Luxembourg have been consistently performing below the EU average on all three subjects of reading, mathematics, and science. The data also shows that **a significant gender gap exists in compulsory education in Luxembourg**, with trends which follow the overall pattern at EU level. While girls outperform boys in reading (a trend which has remained constant over time), girls have started to catch up with boys in science and mathematics, two subjects in which boys have traditionally outperformed girls. The gender gap in mathematics was just 7 points in 2018 (down from 25 points in 2012), and in science, girls outperformed boys for the first time. In both subjects, boys' performance has significantly decreased over time, while girls' performance has slightly increased. National data from the *Épreuves Standardisées* (EpStan) also shows that the gender gap in Luxembourg starts very early. As early as primary school, boys are under-represented among high achievers in all subjects, except for mathematics and sport.[866] Likewise, there is evidence that, in each of the three cycles of primary education, more boys than girls repeat grades[867], a trend which increases with age and is an important predictor of ELET. According to the latest national report on ELET in Luxembourg[868], 60% of early leavers in Luxembourg in 2015/2016 were boys, with students being most likely to drop out when they have two (29.3%) or three years (20.6%) years of school delay.[869] The underperformance of boys in primary education translates into boys being more likely to choose less 'academic' and more vocationally oriented tracks when they enter secondary school. In 2018, girls accounted for 55.1% of 'classic' secondary education students (*enseignement secondaire classique*) and 48.6% of general secondary education students (*enseignement secondaure general*).[870] There is also a 5.8% gender gap in vocational education and training (VET), with 58.7% of secondary female students being enrolled in VET courses, as opposed to 64.5% of their male counterparts.

Despite a significant gender gap in compulsory education, **Luxembourg has managed to reduce the gender gap in some areas of tertiary education and employment**. Eurostat data, for instance, shows that between 2010 and 2019, the gender gap in tertiary education attainment narrowed from 10.9% to just 3.4% in favour of women. Luxembourg also has the smallest gender pay gap in the EU-27, standing at just 1.3% of average male gross hourly earnings in 2019, as opposed to

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[866] Ministry of Education, Children and Youth (2020), *Enseignement fondamental: Statistiques globales et analyse des résultats scolaires 2018–2019*. Available at: https://men.public.lu/fr/publications/statistiques-etudes/fondamental/2011-ef-statistiques-globales-2018-2019.html, p.54.

[867] Cycle 1: 6–7 years old; Cycle 2: 8 –9 years old; Cycle 3: 10–11 years old.

[868] Ministry of Education, Children and Youth (2018), *LE DÉCROCHAGE SCOLAIRE: ANNÉE SCOLAIRE 2015/2016*. Available at: https://men.public.lu/content/dam/men/catalogue-publications/statistiques-etudes/statistiques-globales/decrochage-15-16-fr.pdf.

[869] ELET was also found to be most common in grades 9 to 11, in the 16–18 years old age range, and to disproportionately affect students with a migrant background.

[870] Ministry of Education, Children and Youth (2020), *Enseignement fondamental: Statistiques globales et analyse des résultats scolaires 2018–2019*. Available at: https://men.public.lu/fr/publications/statistiques-etudes/fondamental/2011-ef-statistiques-globales-2018-2019.html, p.10.

the EU-27 average of 14.1%. As a result, Luxembourg scores quite well on the EU Gender Equality Index. With 70.3 points out of 100 points, Luxembourg ranks tenth out of all EU-27 countries. Its score is 2.4 points above the EU average, and, after Italy, it has also been progressing faster than any other European country, improving its score by 9.1 points since 2010 and by 1.1 points since 2017.[871] Despite these positive figures, several interviewees, including the Ministry, said that **Luxembourg remains a 'very hierarchical country', with men retaining a favourable position in society**. Tackling occupational segregation remains a big priority for Luxembourg. While men account for only 10% of workers in the education, health and social work sectors, they account for 83% of ICT specialists and 87% of engineers and scientists in high-technology sectors. Men also remain more likely to hold important positions within private firms. In 2020, only 22% of company boards had female members.[872] A recent study also shows that gender stereotypes remain prevalent among young people aged 14–30 years old, especially among young men and regarding their role in the labour market.[873]

Given this situation, **tackling gender equality is a key priority for Luxembourg**. Established in 1995, Luxembourg is currently the only EU Member State with a dedicated Ministry for Gender Equality between Women and Men (MEGA). It has also had National Action Plans in place specifically aimed at promoting gender equality since the early 2000s, with the latest one adopted in July 2020.[874] The Action Plan includes seven political priorities, with actions covering all layers of society, from the highest political level to the family and individual level, including youth and education. The Ministry also has a dedicated web page on men and equality[875], where it highlights the importance of recognising the many inequalities facing boys and men in order to achieve gender equality. Among several issues listed (e.g. lack of men taking up caring responsibilities at home, men being at higher risk of depression and suicide), school failure among boys is recognised as a key issue to address.

Despite the high level of political commitment towards tackling gender equality, and the recognition that boys are underperforming in education and that boys/men should be involved in the gender equality debate, **targeted actions to tackle the key challenges facing boys in education are lacking**. Instead, Luxembourg adopts a more 'egalitarian approach to school and vocational education and guidance, for all pupils, regardless of their gender'.[876] Most education-related actions focus on either collectively tackling issues facing both men/boys and women/girls (with a specific focus on breaking down gender stereotypes), or on specifically addressing key issues

[871] European Institute for Gender Equality, *Gender Equality Index 2020: Luxembourg*. Available at: https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-luxembourg.
[872] Ibid.
[873] Study published (in German): https://mega.public.lu/dam-assets/fr/societe/letzstereotype18/Letzstereotype18-Abschlussbericht.pdf.
[874] MEGA (2020), *National Action Plan on Equality between Women and Men*, Luxembourg, MEGA. Available at: https://gouvernement.lu/dam-assets/documents/actualites/2020/07-juillet/Plan-d-action-national-Egalite.pdf
[875] MEGA (2020), Hommes et Egalité. Available at: https://mega.public.lu/fr/societe/Hommes-et-egalite.html.
[876] In Luxembourgish: *Déi verschidde Moossname viséiere generell, fir ail d'Schülerinnen a Schüler, eng egalitar Schoulausbildung a Beruffsorientéierung, onofhangeg vun hirem Geschlecht*.

(still) facing women/girls (e.g. Actions 3.1 and 4.6, which focus on increasing the number of girls in ICT and mathematics at school and in the labour market through initiatives such as the 'Girls in Tech'[877] or 'Girls Exploring Maths'[878] days). The limited number of actions identified in Luxembourg which do have a male focus address adult men instead. These initiatives are 'Men Who Care' (a video aimed at raising awareness on the importance of fathers' involvement in the education of their children), 'MADAK' (a project aimed at increasing the number of males in non-formal education and care), and 'infoMann' (an NGO offering counselling services for men facing difficulties).

The lack of specific focus on issues facing boys – and gender equality more broadly – in education and training institutions is also linked to Luxembourg's very particular situation of 'super diversity', as one interviewee described it. Luxembourg's education system is characterised by a high share of non-native students. In 2018, 44.9% of students enrolled in cycles one to four of primary education (4–11 years old) had a nationality other than Luxembourgish, the most common one being Portuguese (19.8%).[879] As a result, **the main focus among schools and teachers is on tackling underachievement among underperforming students in general**, especially among students with a migrant or disadvantaged socio-economic background. One interviewee even went as far as saying that 'as far as I'm concerned, gender equality is the least of our problems'.

3.2   Recommendations

In addition to increasing awareness and commitment among education stakeholders on gender equality, there are also structural issues which interviewees recommended the Luxembourgish education system should take into account:

- **Moving away from a 'deficit' approach towards an approach that focuses on students' individual strengths and interests**: Several interviewees pointed out that one of the key mechanisms used by the Luxembourgish education system to tackle underperformance in education is grade retention. Not only does evidence show that this primarily affects boys, but it is also mainly related to insufficient language skills[880], quickly turning a 'specific deficit' into a 'generic deficit'. Instead of focusing on students' weaknesses, stakeholders argued that it is important for schools and teachers to adapt the system in such a way that it encourages students to develop their individual strengths and interests.

[877] WIDE (2016), Press release, *WIDE, a new name for Girls in Tech Luxembourg*. Available at: https://wide.lu/2016/10/13/wide-a-new-name-for-girls-in-tech-luxembourg/#:~:text=Girls%20in%20Tech%20Luxembourg%20changed,already%20close%20to%203%20years.
[878] University of Luxembourg (2019), *GEM Day: Girls Exploring Math*. Available at: https://wwwfr.uni.lu/fstm/actualites/gem_day_girls_exploring_math.
[879] Ministry of Education, Children and Youth (2020), *Enseignement fondamental: Statistiques globales et analyse des résultats scolaires 2018–2019*. Available at: https://men.public.lu/fr/publications/statistiques-etudes/fondamental/2011-ef-statistiques-globales-2018-2019.html.
[880] Ministry of Education, Children and Youth (2020), *Enseignement fondamental: Statistiques globales et analyse des résultats scolaires 2018–2019*. Available at: https://men.public.lu/fr/publications/statistiques-etudes/fondamental/2011-ef-statistiques-globales-2018-2019.html.

- **Tackling educational segregation by moving towards a stronger 'common core' lower secondary education**: A second key characteristic of Luxembourg's education system is its high level of differentiation, both in terms of the educational choices students have within the education system (especially at secondary level), as well as the support offered to students with special educational needs outside of the education system. Although, in theory, this allows the education system to cater to students' individual needs and interests, and there is strong study and career guidance in place, in reality such a system forces students to make early choices, and fosters educational segregation, not only between boys and girls (e.g. boys are over-represented in special needs classes and traditionally more 'low performance' tracks, such as VET), but also between students with and without a migration background or those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

In addition to these two more general recommendations on Luxembourg's education system, several interviewees also provided some more specific recommendations for action at EU level. Stakeholders said they would welcome additional EU funding, policy dialogue, evidence, and best practices to support national level action on:

- **Increasing gender awareness and pedagogical quality among teachers**: As the main focus in Luxembourg is on tackling educational inequality among students with a migrant or low socio-economic background, fostering gender equality is not seen as a priority by schools and teachers in Luxembourg. Several interviewees also said that many teachers (especially older teachers) hold gender-biased views on boys' and girls' behaviour and performance at school, and that the gender of teachers does not have an impact on these perceptions. This means that Luxembourg should seek to strengthen its ongoing actions around improving teacher quality in general, with a view to promoting more personalised approaches, raising gender awareness among teachers (specifically through ITE and CPD programmes), and fostering the development of gender-neutral teaching materials.

- **Providing targeted support to help boys stay on track**: Some interviewees recommended that schools and teachers should be made aware of and encouraged to provide support to boys as a specific subgroup of underachievers in education.

- **Teaching children to be 'human'**: Finally, some stakeholders underlined the importance of 'teaching children to be human'. This can only happen in educational settings where gender stereotypes are absent, and where children are encouraged to discover their individual strengths and weaknesses, independently of their gender or sexual orientation.

6.3.7   Portugal

1.   Key trends and implications

1.1   Contextualisation

Portugal has undergone considerable changes regarding the educational make-up of its population in the past 20 years. Starting from an average of 18% of its population not having any kind of formal educational level in 2000, Portugal managed to reduce this rate to only 5.4% in 2020 through a series of policy reforms and investments.[881] The number of adults with ISCED 1–3 doubled over the same period (from 11.2% in 2000 to 23.9% in 2020) and the number of adults with ISCED 4+ almost quadruple (6.1% in 2000 to 21.2% in 2020).[882] While Portugal continues to perform below the EU average in terms of the share of its population with ISCED 3–4 and ISCED 5–8 educational levels, evidence points towards the enormous progress made by the country in recent decades to catch up with other EU Member States in terms of literacy levels and educational attainment, and move away from the poor educational legacy of the *Estado Novo* Dictatorship (1933–1974); particularly by considerably improving access to education for girls and young women.[883]

When analysing available data on the educational performance of boys in Portugal, at first glance, no significant differences between the PISA 2018 performance of girls and boys in ISCED 1–3 exists. Nevertheless, data on early school leaving (ESL), failure rates, and ISCED 5–8 educational levels for Portugal highlight that:

- **Boys are twice as likely** than girls to leave school early and not complete ISCED 1–4 (12.6%, compared to 5.1% for girls, in 2020).[884]

- **Boys have a failure rate higher than girls at all stages of ISCED 2-4 education.** According to data from the Department of Statistics for Education and Science (DGEEC)[885], boys are more likely to fail a year (starting from ISCED 2) than girls. This difference is particularly visible looking at the last year of secondary school education (*12º ano*) in which boys are 7–9 percentage points more likely than girls to fail to graduate and have to re-do the year.[886]

- **Young men are much more likely to be enrolled in alternative paths to education**, such as the CEF (*Cursos de Educação e Formação* – an alternative to finishing compulsory education after school dropout) or the *Percursos*

[881] INE, PORDATA, *Resident population aged 15 and over by highest completed level of education (%)*. Available at:
https://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Popula%c3%a7%c3%a3o+residente+com+15+e+mais+anos+por+n%c3%advel+de+escolaridade+completo+mais+elevado+(percentagem)-884.
[882] Ibid.
[883] Eurostat (2020), Educational attainment statistics. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Educational_attainment_statistics#Level_of_educational_attainment_by_age.
[884] INE, PORDATA, *Taxa de abandono precoce de educação e formação: total e por sexo*. Availbale at:https://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Taxa+de+abandono+precoce+de+educa%c3%a7%c3%a3o+e+forma%c3%a7%c3%a3o+total+e+por+sexo-433-4679.
[885] https://www.dgeec.mec.pt/np4/248/
[886] DGEEC, *Taxa de retenção e desistência* (%), por sexo, nível de ensino, ciclo de estudos, ano de escolaridade, NUTS II, NUTS III de 2013 e município*, accessible through
https://www.dgeec.mec.pt/np4/248/

Curriculares Alternativos ('Alternative Curricular Paths', aimed at supporting the social inclusion and success of pupils at school).[887] In 2019, 65% of the students who enrolled in CEF, and 61% of those who enrolled in Alternative Curricular Paths, were male.

- **Women are much more likely than men to hold a tertiary education diploma** (42% of women vs. 29.7% of men in 2019), a gap that has increased in recent years. Eurostat data also show that Portuguese young men are consistently below the EU average regarding tertiary attainment. In 2019, 29.7% of men were enrolled in tertiary education, compared to 36.6% of men in the EU as a whole.

- If we look at educational choices, we can see that many areas of study in Portugal present a **higher degree of female participation than the EU average for women, even in areas traditionally dominated by men**. Mathematics and statistics, for example, is a largely feminised area in particular, with women making up 60.9% of the sector, while on average in the EU, 64.5% of graduates in this area are men and only about 35% are women. In 'manufacturing and processing', most graduates in Europe are men (64.7%), but in Portugal there is no significant gender difference (49.3% are men and 50.7% are women). The areas of 'computing', 'mechanical and industrial engineering', 'architecture and construction', and 'physical sciences' remain essentially male-dominated in the EU-27. In all of these areas, however, Portugal reports higher numbers of women compared to the EU-27 average.[888]

- Looking at data referring to the performance of men of foreign origin and women of foreign origin in Portugal, **this overall trend remains the same**, with foreign-born women having a consistently higher level of education than their male peers. It was not possible to find disaggregated data by gender for children belonging to the Roma community, but early findings from interviews show that children from this community face higher rates of educational underachievement compared to the rest of the population.

From our analysis of the data collected from the desk research and interviews, it is clear that the family plays a central role in determining the educational success and choices of children, particularly boys. The educational level of parents themselves is, according to interviewees, one of the major factors that determines the success of boys and girls in school, particularly in cases where a pupil's parents have not achieved a high level of education. Portugal emerged recently from a long period of dictatorship in which most of the population did not finish school and university was only available to the upper classes. While many programmes and campaigns have been put into place in recent decades to improve the general level of education in Portugal, the educational legacy of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship is still very present in

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[887] DGEEC, *Diversos*. Available at:
https://www.dgeec.mec.pt/np4/97/%7B$clientServletPath%7D/?newsId=147&fileName=DGEEC_DSEE_2020_PERFIL_DO_ALUNO_1819.pdf.
[888] Fundaçao Francisco Manuel dos Santos (2018), *IGUALDADE DE GÉNERO AO LONGO DA VIDA - Portugal no contexto europeu*. Avaliable at
http://cite.gov.pt/pt/destaques/complementosDestqs2/igualdade-de-genero-e-idades-da-vida.pdf.

many families in the country. This means that for several parents with low qualifications, success in school, while important, is still seen as a non-essential condition for success in life or/and finding work, particularly for parents working in professions that require low to no academic qualifications (especially in rural areas).[889]

According to analysis of the latest PISA 2018 results, socio-economic status was a strong predictor of performance in reading, mathematics, and science in Portugal, with students from advantaged backgrounds performing better than disadvantaged students in the latest round.[890] Interviewees for this case study also highlighted the importance of socio-economic background, in terms of the educational performance of children (boys in particular), highlighting that children who are not able to benefit from additional educational resources at home, or from extra-curricular activities such as sports, music, or other similar activities, faced much greater difficulties in performing well at school than those who do benefit from these opportunities. Since these activities are often an added expense for parents if not provided by the public school system, often children from low socio-economic backgrounds find themselves at a disadvantage compared to their peers. Interviewees also highlighted the widely variable quality of ISCED 0-level education in Portugal, which leads to many children having different levels of literacy and educational development at the start of ISCED 1–4-level education. If not addressed quickly by schools or parents, this can lead to educational underachievement. All these factors lead to many disadvantaged students, including those who are high-performing, holding lower ambitions than would otherwise be expected given their academic achievement. According to the OECD, in Portugal, only three in four high-achieving disadvantaged students – but almost all high-achieving advantaged students – expect to complete tertiary education.[891] This is often due to the added costs of tertiary education, which can be prohibitive for many families to undertake, pressuring many children (particularly boys) to stop their education and join the labour market as early as possible.

As mentioned above, the school (both as a conceptual space of learning and a physical space) also has great influence in determining the educational success of students, particularly boys and young men. All interviewees noted that schools in Portugal, despite tremendous investment to renovate and update existing infrastructure, are not well prepared to provide all students across the country with the necessary sports facilities and extra-curricular activity spaces, which are key for their positive educational development. The lack of space for active pedagogy and practical learning in schools was pointed out by some interviewees as a particular issue for boys and young men, who, according to them, respond better to methodologies that involve an active or practical component. Data from enrolment in technical and professional education in Portugal seem to support this claim, with young men being far more likely to enrol in these courses than young women. Overall, the Portuguese educational system seems unprepared to handle children who

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[889] Costa (2018), Desempenho dos pais versus sucesso dos filhos: uma leitura também geográfica, avaliable at: https://repositorio-aberto.up.pt/bitstream/10216/117617/2/303325.pdf

[891] OECD (2018), Results from PISA 2018 – Country Note for Portugal. Avaliable at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/PISA2018_CN_PRT.pdf.

are more active in their approach to learning and play, who are more often boys. This lack of adapted spaces ends up creating frustration, misunderstandings, and 'bad' behaviour that negatively affect the educational performance of active girls and boys and lead them to associate school with an obligation, as a space of boredom and frustration. This is why some interviewees recommend that the Portuguese educational system adapts an educational well-being approach to the issue, focused on making school a fun and welcoming space for all children.

Interviewees also mentioned that in Portuguese society, there is a general idea that girls and young women are more naturally predisposed to be studious and good at school than boys and young men, leading them to be more successful in academia, particularly in terms of enrolling for tertiary education. This is often perceived as a normal (and almost biological) difference in how young girls and young boys grow in our societies, with young women seeming to mature and become responsible earlier than young men while undergoing secondary education, and not as a direct consequence of the difference in expectations and societal pressures on boys and girls. Nevertheless, several interviewees also mentioned that boys are usually less pressured by families to succeed in school than girls. For women and girls in Portugal, educational success is valued very highly, particularly in order to obtain success and personal independence, and as a defence against discrimination in the labour market and in society in general. For men and young boys, it is much more important that they find proper employment as soon as they are able to and become independent adults, regardless of the path they take to achieve this goal, educational or not. According to interviewees, this is particularly common in families in which the father has a lower educational level than the mother. The fact that it is still easier for men than women in Portugal to find employment regardless of their educational level also contributes to the general sense that a high level of education is not really needed for boys and young men to become independent adults. This point will be further explored in Section 1.3 of this case study.

Interviewees also pointed out that the 'macho' view of the male role as someone who is physically strong, attractive to women, sexually active (and promiscuous), imposes his will on others, hides his emotions, and prefers action over reflection and study is still very much the norm in Portuguese society, and that this behaviour is replicated through male peer groups, schools, and the media that they consume. While some interviewees mentioned that, due to the success of video game streamers and Silicon Valley millionaires, the image of the male 'studious nerd genius' is slowly being accepted as a valid path to masculinity, the 'macho' model continues to predominate in school, leading many boys to see school as boring, useless and not a way to fame and fortune. Role models such as footballers, sportsmen, and streamers also promote the idea that school is not needed for boys to be successful in society (and that instead, hard work is). The fact that young men are more likely to graduate later than women from ISCED 3–4 (49% of men graduate at 18 or older vs. only 40% of women[892]), often due to failing to graduate from the current or previous year, is, according to interviewees, one of the main reasons why young men decide to quit

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[892] DGEEC, *Estudantes à saída do Secundário em 2018/2019*. Available at:
https://www.dgeec.mec.pt/np4/47/%7B$clientServletPath%7D/?newsId=256&fileName=DGEEC_Estudante s_a_saida_do_secundario_2.pdf.

education and find work as soon as possible. The additional time that they took to graduate from school is perceived as 'lost adulthood time' and, without pressure from family or peers, can lead them to prefer the shortest path to their independence, i.e. the labour market.

It is very important not to generalise the above findings to boys and young men from families of Roma, migrant, or ethnic background. Collected data from reports and interviews highlights a much more complex attitude towards school and education among these groups, related to systemic discrimination that leads them to have different views about educational achievement and how to be as successful in Portuguese society as their male peers. The researchers did not find enough evidence of how these findings translate for children with non-cis-normative families (ie. families that do not follow/do not have a female mother and male father model), so caution regarding the findings above is advised on this matter. These differences will be explored in more detail in Section 1.2 of this case study.

1.2   Vulnerable sub-groups

The Portuguese constitution does not allow for the collection and analysis of statistical data on the basis of faith, private life, race, ethnicity, or skin colour, which greatly limits the availability of precise data on discrimination in the country.[893] However, through reports of complaints of discrimination in several areas such as work, education, and health collected by the Commission for Equality and Against Racial Discrimination (CICDR), academic research, and reports from civil society organisations, it is possible to create a picture of how boys and young men in Portugal from vulnerable backgrounds perform compared to their peers.

For migrant students, from analysis of the PISA 2018 results, the average difference in reading performance between immigrant and non-immigrant students in Portugal after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic profile was 26 points in favour of non-immigrant students. Migrant young women outperformed young men in this category.[894] Similar findings were noted for performance in mathematics and science. According to data collected from interviews and academic research, two main factors account for the difference in performance between immigrant and non-immigrant students; familiarity with the Portuguese language, and socio-economic background.

The socio-economic background of a migrant student's family, particularly the level of education of their parents, has a great impact in determining their success, with learners from families with low educational achievement (especially mothers) performing worse than their non-immigrant peers.[895] Similar to non-immigrant children, children from less privileged backgrounds have fewer opportunities to access extra-curricular activities or additional educational support, and their families can see

[893] Constitution of the Portuguese Republic, avaliable at:
https://www.parlamento.pt/Legislacao/Paginas/ConstituicaoRepublicaPortuguesa.aspx#art13.
[894] OECD (2018), Results from PISA 2018 – Country Note for Portugal. Avaliable at:
https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/PISA2018_CN_PRT.pdf
[895] Teresa Seabra, Desigualdades de desempenho escolar: etnicidade, género e condição social em escolas básicas da Área *Metropolitana de Lisboa*. Available at: https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/302954345.pdf.

educational success, particularly for boys, as a non-essential elemental for finding work and achieving independence. Nonetheless, it is more common for parents from a migrant background (particularly from India and countries whose official language is Portuguese (PALOP – *Paises Africanos de Lingua Official Portuguesa*)) to incentivise their children to remain in school and perform well in their education as a way to protect them against racism and discrimination in the labour market than parents from non-immigrant backgrounds.[896] It was common for interviewed learners from PALOP to be considered as 'dumb or expected to fail at school' by their teachers, due to the colour of their skin. In some cases, this abuse led students to think that they were not capable of performing well at school. Without the support of their parents, they would probably not have progressed to ISCED 4–8. The PISA 2018 results highlight the same phenomenon in the Portuguese report, stating that 'many students, especially disadvantaged students, hold lower ambitions than would be expected given their academic achievement. In Portugal, one in four high-achieving disadvantaged students – but about 1 in 30 high-achieving advantaged students – do not expect to complete tertiary education'.[897]

Familiarity with the Portuguese language is another significant barrier to good educational performance, even among students from the PALOP. Differences between the language used at home (Portuguese or other) and the Portuguese spoken at school mean students have difficulty expressing themselves at school and making themselves understood which, coupled with low or non-existent ISCED 0 educational opportunities, can lead to sustained disadvantage for this group. Interviewees also mentioned that students from families whose parents are migrant seasonal workers also face the additional barrier of moving regularly from school to school, reducing their chances of creating a lasting relationship with teachers and school, and creating a distant relationship with education that can lead to dropout, particularly among young men.

Another vulnerable group that faces discrimination in Portugal are those from Roma backgrounds who, according to the latest CICDR report[898], covered 19% of received complaints for discrimination in 2019, and are one of the groups that have increasingly become the target of far right and hate groups in Portugal according to the latest report from the HopeNotHate organisation.[899] The discrimination faced by the Roma community in Portugal shares many similarities with that faced by other migrant communities, with limited access to proper housing[900], educational

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[896] Ibid;
Caminhos Escolares de Jovens Africanos (PALOP) que Acedem ao Ensino Superior (2017), *Educação, integração e equidade. Trajetos de jovens afrodescendentes no ensino superior*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320471071_Educacao_integracao_e_equidade_Trajetos_de_jovens_afrodescendentes_no_ensino_superior.
[897] OECD (2018), *Results from PISA 2018 – Country Note for Portugal*. Avaliable at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/PISA2018_CN_PRT.pdf.
[898] Comissão para a Igualdade e Contra a Discriminação Racial (CICDR), *Relatório Annual 2019*. Available at: https://www.cicdr.pt/documents/57891/0/Relat%C3%B3rio+Anual+2019+-+CICDR/4cce326c-2913-40c1-8104-5280d2a24281.
[899] Mulhall, J. and Kahn-Ruf, S., *State of hate: Far-right extremism in Europe.* Available at: https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ESOH-LOCKED-FINAL.pdf.
[900] SciELO, *"Para eles, nós não somos humanos!": habitação, território e a monitorização de violências racializadas em Portugal*. Available at: https://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2179-

opportunities and employment opportunities in the country. The high level of school dropout and school underachievement among Roma children (particularly among girls and young women) is of particular concern for the Portuguese Government, with a National Strategy for Integration of the Roma Communities for 2018–2022 stating that the promotion of educational achievement and access to education is one of its main pillars. [901]

Lastly, for LGBTI+ youth in Portugal, while the conuntry has made great strides regarding the protection of LGBTI+ rights and the promotion of gender diversity in Portuguese society, homophobic behaviour and language are still common in Portuguese schools. Homophobic bullying against boys, especially those who choose to express themselves with perceived 'feminine' traits, is still tolerated and practised by other boys.[902] According to the latest report of the *rede exaequo*, a LGBTI+ youth rights organisation which runs regular surveys in schools on the topic, almost 79% of interviewed students from 162 schools across the country said that they had witnessed discrimination and bullying (verbal and, more rarely, physical) against LGBTI+ peers in their schools in 2018–2019.[903] 55.5% of interviewed students also said that the issue of homophobia and homophobic bullying is rarely addressed in schools in Portugal. The majority of surveyed teachers felt that the educational model is not inclusive enough for LGBTI+ youth, leading many of these learners to feel unsafe safe at school and excluded from their peer groups. This can negatively impact their educational performance[904].

Very little data was found during this research on the impact of disabilities on the educational performance of boys and young men in Portugal. Further study would be required to fully analyse this dimension.

1.3 Key implications

This section looks at the key consequences of the gender disparity, and boys' underperformance, regarding access to the labour market, health, and other social consequences.

Labour market implications

89662019000302068&tlng=pt;
Sociologia (2020), *Ciganos portugueses: escola e mudança social*. Available at:
https://journals.openedition.org/spp/7754.

[901] EndES, Manuela, e outros Estudo nacional sobre as comunidades ciganas / Manuela Mendes, olga Magano, pedro Candeias*Estudo Nacional sobre as Comunidades Ciganas*. Available at:
https://www.obcig.acm.gov.pt/documents/58622/201011/estudonacionalsobreascomunidadesciganas.pdf/89b05f10-9d1f-447b-af72-dac9419df91b;
https://www.acm.gov.pt/pt/-/estrategia-nacional-para-as-comunidades-ciganas-enicc-concig

[902] SANTOS, H (2017), Para uma visão completa do bullying homofóbico: desocultando o quotidiano da homofobia nas escolas, avaliable at https://exaequo.apem-estudos.org/files/2017-12/07-hugo-m.-santos-sofia-marques-da-silva-isabel-menezes.pdf

[903] ACM, *Estratégia Nacional para a Integração das Comunidades Ciganas (ENICC)*. Available at:
https://www.rea.pt/arquivo/relatorio-pe-2019.pdf.

[904] António, R. et. al., *Bullying homofóbico no contexto escolar em Portugal*. Available at
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262739178_Bullying_homofobico_no_contexto_escolar_em_Portugal.

Looking at the unemployment rate in Portugal for the past 12 years, we see that men are consistently less likely than women to be unemployed, and that the unemployment rate for men is always below the national average, even at the height of the financial crisis (2008–2012), as shown in Figure 6-9.

Figure 6-9   **Unemployment rate, total and by gender (%)**

Years	Total	Men	Women
2008	7.6	6.5	8.7
2009	9.4	8.8	10.1
2010	10.8	9.8	11.9
2011	⊥ 12.7	⊥ 12.3	⊥ 13.0
2012	15.5	15.6	15.5
2013	16.2	16	16.4
2014	13.9	13.5	14.3
2015	12.4	12.2	12.7
2016	11.1	11	11.2
2017	8.9	8.4	9.4
2018	7	6.6	7.4
2019	6.5	5.8	7.1

Source: PORDATA. Available at: https://www.pordata.pt/

All interviewees agreed that the workplace in Portugal remains what they call 'a man's world', with men having easier access to employment and leadership opportunities than their female peers. The participation rate of women in the Portuguese labour market has been rising steadily since the end of the dictatorship, but it seems that their higher level of qualification compared to their male peers does not necessarily translate into a higher level of employment than that of their male peers. The total unemployment rates in Portugal are very similar for both genders (6.5% for men, 7.1% for women) and, if we look at the level of employment per educational level, we also see that men are consistently more likely to be employed than women, as shown in Figure 6-10.

Figure 6-10   **Employment rate, by gender and attained ISCED level (%)**

	ISCED 0-2		ISCED 3-4		ISCED 5-8	
Years	**1992**	**2019**	**1992**	**2019**	**1992**	**2019**
Men	76.4%	67.4%	72.4%	76%	92.9%	86.6%
Women	51.8%	54.4%	55.5%	70.7%	89.9%	84.8%

Source: PORDATA. Available at: https://www.pordata.pt/

If we look at the main economic sectors, men continue to predominantly work in primary (agriculture) and secondary sectors (industry), with 67%–70% of jobs in these sectors occupied by men. The service sector is equally divided between men and

women in Portugal.[905] Regarding earnings, the wage gap in Portugal continues to persist, with women earning 16.2% less than men in 2018, above the EU average of 14.8%, and men continuing to be over-represented on company boards and decision-making bodies, despite policies aiming at reducing this gap.[906] The risk of in-work poverty and exclusion in Portugal is also slightly higher for men than for women in Portugal, but not in a statistically relevant manner (11% for men and 10.4% for women).

Lastly, men in Portugal are twice as likely as women to emigrate permanently to another country. While the number of women emigrating to another country has been steadily rising in recent years, men have historically been emigrating at a ratio of 2:1 for the past 20 years.[907] While there are numerous factors that lead to the decision to leave Portugal for good, the search for better wages and working conditions is the main reason for leaving the country, according to the latest report of the *Observatório das Migracoes*.[908] The same report also mentions that even if lower-qualified individuals are still the majority of this group, Portugal has also been suffering from 'brain drain' for the past decade, meaning that qualifications are not a major factor in deciding whether or not to leave the country.

Health implications

Portuguese men have a lower life expectancy than women, with a 6.2-year gap between genders in 2019. While the OMS established a link between lower educational level and lower life expectancy for men and women, it was not possible to find concrete data on this matter for Portugal. Regarding substance abuse and other risk behaviours, men in Portugal are considerably more likely than women to use alcohol or illicit drugs, or engage in pathological gambling.[909] According to interviewees, this is a direct consequence of the 'macho' ideal of masculinity that is still common in Portugal, i.e. someone who is strong, does not take care of himself, engages in risky behaviour to prove his virility to his peers, never complains, and never seeks medical help (unless it is for a life-threatening condition).

According to Eurostat, men in Portugal are also more prone to accidents at work by a large margin in comparison with their female peers. In 2018, there were 90 work-related deaths in Portugal, of which 86 were men. This is probably linked to the higher likelihood for men in Portugal of working in the primary and secondary sectors, in which dangerous/hazardous jobs are more common.[910]

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[905] CIG (2017), *Igualdade de Genero em Portugal – Boletim Estatistico*. Avaliable at: https://www.cig.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Boletim-estatistico-2017.pdf.
[906] Ibid.
[907] PORDATA (2020), *Emigrantes: total e por tipo e sexo*, 'Quantos homens ou mulheres saíram do país para viver no estrangeiro, por mais ou menos de um ano?'. Available at: https://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Emigrantes+total+e+por+tipo+e+sexo-23.
[908] University Institute of Lisbon, *Emigração Portuguesa 2020*. Available at: https://repositorio.iscte-iul.pt/handle/10071/21972.
[909] SICAD (2019). For more information, please visit: http://www.sicad.pt/PT/EstatisticaInvestigacao/Paginas/default.aspx.
[910] CIG (2017*), Igualdade de Genero em Portugal – Boletim Estatistico*. Avaliable at: https://www.cig.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Boletim-estatistico-2017.pdf.

Regarding mental health, Eurostat data show that women are more likely than men to report depressive and other similar symptoms. While this could potentially indicate that men are less depressed than women, studies and interviewees point out that this gender difference in reporting rates may be linked to differences in how Portuguese men and women deal with mental and sexual health issues (specifically, that women are more open than men to talking about these issues and seeking professional help).[911] Again, the general ideal of being male in Portugal leads boys and young men to not openly discuss their emotions with their peers and/or family for fear of being perceived as weak or unmanly, and stops them seeking professional help. A consequence of this unhealthy behaviour is a higher suicide rate for men in Portugal. Men in Portugal commit suicide at a 3:1 rate compared to women and, while suicide is more common among elderly people from rural and low educational outcome backgrounds, it also affects boys and young men.[912]

Wider societal implications

Gender roles in Portugal have been rapidly changing since the fall of the dictatorship in 1974. While during the dictatorship traditional gender roles (of the male breadwinner with absolute authority over his wife and family) were strictly enforced through laws, and religious and societal pressure, gender equality has made great strides towards equality in the country since then. Many discriminatory laws against women were lifted, and considerable efforts were made to promote gender equality in the home, workplace, and society as a whole. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, Portugal is 16th place in the EU in terms of gender equality, but is the country that has been progressing the fastest in Europe in this regard.[913]

Regarding the role of men and what is expected of them, this perception has also changed considerably since the dictatorship, with more and more men adopting what the Portuguese Institute for Gender Equality calls a 'caring approach to masculinity'.[914] Increasingly, men are taking more responsibility for domestic and care work at home, with a better balance between men and women in bringing income to the household and decision-making within the family. There are still many hurdles to overcome in accepting some changes, particularly among older men, and with regard to childcare, housework, and some professions (such as teaching or nursing) persisting as being considered 'mainly female'.[915] Portugal has also made great strides in the protection of

[911] Lucas Jorge (2018), *Saúde Mental e Género: As diferenças de género em torno da depressão*. Avaliable at https://ubibliorum.ubi.pt/bitstream/10400.6/9760/1/6725_14095.pdf.
[912] SciELO, *Suicídio em Portugal: um retrato do país*. Available at: https://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0047-20852018000100025&lng=pt&tlng=pt.
[913] EIGE (2020), *Gender Equality Index Portugal*. Available at: https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-portugal.
[914] CIG (2016), *Livro Branco – Homens e Igualdade de Genero em Portugal*. Avaliable at: http://cite.gov.pt/asstscite/images/papelhomens/Livro_Branco_Homens_Igualdade_G.pdf.
[915] Santos (2017), *Género E (In)Sucesso Escolar: Perspetivas De Professoras/Es Do Ensino Básico Sobre Possíveis Consequências Da Feminização Do Ensino*. Available at: https://exaequo.apem-estudos.org/files/2017-12/02-maria-helena-santos.pdf.

LGBTI+ rights, and promotion of gender diversity and gender expression in Portuguese society.[916]

Nevertheless, as some interviewees pointed out, these strides were also met with resistance from the most conservative elements of Portuguese society, particularly from some men who feel that the gains made by women in recent decades are a threat to their position in society and to their perception of what a 'man' should be. One aspect of such reactionary attitudes is violence against women in Portugal, which has increased in recent years, with 8,720 women being assisted by the Portuguese Association for Supporting Victims in 2020.[917] Another persistent issue in Portugal is domestic violence, which is seen as a major societal issue that remains difficult to overcome, particularly regarding awareness and prevention of the problem. In 2019, there were 26,573 reports of domestic violence in Portugal, with 83% of the perpetuators of violence being men.[918]

Another consequence of this resistance is the growth of reactionary and violent political movements in Portugal. Far-right extremist movements in Portugal have seen exponential growth in recent years. According to the latest report from the HopeNotHate organisation[919], hate speech (anti-gypsy, anti LGBTI+, anti-feminist, anti-immigrant, and anti-left) has been normalised to levels never seen before in the Portuguese democratic system, creating an environment prone to racist and far-right violence in the 45 years since the end of the dictatorship. This change was mostly led by the electoral success of the *Chega!* ('Enough!') political party, who managed to elect one MP in the 2019 election and gained third place in the 2021 presidential election, and whose leader has greatly contributed to normalising hate speech over traditional and social media.

One of the core elements of the political message of this party is framing the social changes that Portugal has made in recent years as abnormal and against the traditional values of the nation, family, and religion. This kind of identitarian speech has been quite successful among young white people who feel threatened by changes to the concept of masculinity that has been instilled in them from a young age by their families, school, their peers, and the media. As is the case in other EU countries, the savvy use of social media and the internet was key to recruiting many young men to these movements, including the *Chega!* Party. Closer analysis of the base of this political party shows that this group is not the main force behind the recent success of the party, however.[920] According to a poll organised by the Lisbon University Institute in February 2020, between the ages of 18 and 24, support for the party is almost non-

[916] CIG (2020), *Portugal é o 2º país da OCDE com maior progresso e conquistas legislativas para as pessoas LGBTI, nas duas últimas décadas*. See: https://www.cig.gov.pt/2020/06/portugal-2o-pais-da-ocde-maior-progresso-conquistas-legislativas-as-pessoas-lgbti-nas-duas-ultimas-decadas/.
[917] APAV, Estatísticas, *APAV Relatório Annual 2020*. Available at: https://apav.pt/apav_v3/images/pdf/Estatisticas_APAV_Relatorio_Anual_2020.pdf.
[918] See Statistics Portugal (2016-2020): https://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_indicadores&contecto=pi&indOcorrCod=0008154&selTab=tab0.
[919] Mulhall, J. and Kahn-Ruf, S.*, State of hate: Far-right extremism in Europe*. Available at: https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ESOH-LOCKED-FINAL.pdf.
[920] Ibid.

existent, and it is only between the ages of 25 and 44 that there is disproportionate support for it. Half of *Chega!* voters are women, one in five have a university degree, and more than a third have completed secondary education (above the average education of Portuguese adults). Moreover, the same survey points out that it is among these, and not among the less-educated, that party performance is better.[921] The HopeNotHate report also points out that far-right movements are very successfully infiltrating Portuguese security forces (police and the army), which is still a very male-dominated profession in Portugal (less than 8% of women are present in this sector[922]) and a profession that requires candidates to have concluded at least secondary education.

All the above elements lead the researchers to conclude that there are no conclusive links between being male and/or low educational outcomes and voting/being active in extremist movements, at least in the case of Portugal. The researchers believe that systemic causes (institutional racism, an under-analysed colonial past, and the strength of religious convictions) and individual factors (the overall perception of status/place in the societal hierarchy, and attitude towards ongoing social changes) are a stronger determinant of membership of these movements.

Finally, low educational achievement can lead young men to make decisions that lead them to break the law and find themselves in prison. According to the latest statistics, men in Portugal are very much more likely than women to be incarcerated. In 2019, there were 12,793 prison inmates in Portugal and 11,934 (93%) of these were men.[923]

2. Policy attention and actions

2.1 Policy attention and attitudes

Drawing on the data collected from desk research and interviews, the gender gap in education is not perceived by stakeholders and policymakers as a major issue at national level. As mentioned above, differences in terms of educational performance between genders are mostly framed as 'normal' and not a major cause for immediate policy action, particularly compared to other priorities in the Portuguese educational system. A cursory analysis of the media discourse around educational underperformance of boys also supports the view that the topic is not seen as a priority or a problem by society or the government. A search among the main Portuguese media outlets (*Publico, Diario de Noticias, Observador*, *Expresso* and *RTP*) reveals that the last story about boys' academic underperformance was in 2018, just

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[921] Expresso (2020), *Quem quer votar no Chega? Quem vota na direita radical? No resto da Europa foi-se formando ao longo do tempo uma espécie de "retrato-robô" dos seus eleitores. O do Chega não é igual.* Available at: https://expresso.pt/opiniao/2020-02-15-Quem-quer-votar-no-Chega-.

[922] República Portuguesa, *Administração Interna promove igualdade de género*. Available at: https://www.portugal.gov.pt/pt/gc22/comunicacao/noticia?i=administracao-interna-promove-igualdade-de-genero.

[923] PORDATA (2019), *Reclusos: total e por sexo: Quantos homens ou mulheres estão presos?* Available at: https://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Reclusos+total+e+por+sexo-271.

after the publication of the most recent PISA results.[924] Moreover, these results were framed as a sign of the success of policies implemented to promote the academic success of girls and young women and to promote gender equality in the country, rather than as an issue to be corrected. This is even more understandable in the context of the post-dictatorship years, in which the success of women was seen as a powerful symbol for the dismantling of the repressive and misogynist legacy of the *Estado Novo* regime.

According to interviewed stakeholders, the major issue that the Portuguese educational system is currently facing is the impact of low socio-economic backgrounds on the educational performance of children and their future. Despite the tremendous changes that Portugal has undergone as a country since 1974, the economic situation of many families in Portugal remains quite fragile, and many families do not possess the means to provide the educational support that their children would require to perform well in school. As mentioned before in this report, the socio-economic background of the family is a very important indicator of potential educational success in Portugal and, in the view of some interviewees, far more important than gender. This does not mean that gender and gender equality are not seen as an issue but, in the context of education policy, the focus is clearly more on removing socio-economic barriers to educational success.

There are several policies currently in place in Portugal that tackle the issue of underperformance of children that operate at all levels of compulsory education. One of the most important of these currently addressing this issue at national level is the ***Programa Nacional de Promoção do Sucesso Escolar* (National Programme for Promotion of Success at School), whch aims to promote and support educational outcomes of children from poorer backgrounds, particularly at ISCED 1–2 level.**

Other important policy initiatives recently implemented by the Portuguese government on this topic include the the Law on Inclusive Education, and changes to legislation on the curriculum for primary and secondary education, both of which were adopted in July 2018 and entered into force in the 2018–2019 academic year.[925] At the heart of the new laws is a determination to shift the Portuguese public education system away from any form of segregating students with specific needs, to a system that allows every student to feel included and cared for in the public education system. Some key principles for the Portuguese inclusive system of education, which apply to all students in pre-schools, elementary schools, secondary schools and vocational schools, are:

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[924]Observador (2017), *Os meninos e as meninas não são iguais na escola. E isso importa*. Available at: https://observador.pt/especiais/os-meninos-e-as-meninas-nao-sao-iguais-na-escola-e-isso-importa/;
Publico (2018), *Aumenta o fosso entre rapazes e raparigas no sucesso escolar*. Available at: https://www.publico.pt/2018/01/12/sociedade/noticia/no-sucesso-escolar-o-fosso-entre-rapazes-e-raparigas-esta-a-acentuarse-1799026.
[925] DRE (2018), Decreto-Lei n.º 55/2018. Available at: https://dre.pt/web/guest/pesquisa/-/search/115652962/details/maximized?filterAction=TRUE&q=ensino+basico+e+secundario&perPage=25&fqs=ensino+basico+e+secundario&fq=201;
DRE (2018), Decreto-Lei n.º 54/2018. Available at: https://dre.pt/web/guest/pesquisa/-/search/115652961/details/maximized?p_p_auth=MSX7XrzD.

- **The right to education:** At compulsory school age (until 18), education for children and adolescents with any need, no matter how complex, should be provided within the mainstream education system.

- **The right to equality:** The inalienable right of all learners to equal opportunities in gaining access to and achieving success in education, without any type of discrimination, and with educational resources and support adequate to each one's individual needs.

- **The right to be part of society:** A principle that gives children and adolescents the right to attend mainstream forms of education which, from the perspective of a school for all, find the right solutions for the needs of each individual.

The 2018 laws established a new set of principles, in terms of the meaning of 'inclusion', for the entire public education system in Portugal. Importantly, the new laws ended the previous system of categorising students, including the category of 'Student with Special Educational Needs', and put into place a system that aims to provide students with global and tailored educational solutions within the regular public education system. Starting from the 2018–2019 academic year, all schools were required to create lines of action for inclusion and set indicators to measure their effectiveness in fostering positive and inclusive learning opportunities for all students, in order to enable them to reach their full potential by the 12th grade. The Ministry of Education provided a comprehensive guide to support education professionals, as well as parents/guardians, in implementing the new focus and ensuring it informs their participation in the educational process of children.[926] Schools must establish multidisciplinary teams to support inclusive education that include different school professionals, parents, legal guardians, and other professionals or support services responsible for the child or student. These measures should be implemented by the different subject teachers, special education teachers, and/or other skilled professionals.

Lastly, in 2018, a National Strategy on Gender Equality was launched, and this will remain in force until 2030.[927] The key aspects of this policy are to promote equality between women and men; fight violence against women and domestic violence; and combat discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity or sexual characteristics. The strategy includes recommendations for creating and promoting the optimum conditions for an education system free of gender stereotypes, covering all levels of education in the country. In this regard, the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG) created a series of pedagogical toolkits to help teachers introduce learners to the concepts of gender equality, gender stereotypes, and how to deconstruct these concepts in our society at all ISCED 1–4 levels.[928] The concepts of masculinity and maleness are discussed and deconstructed in depth in these toolkits,

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[926] Ministério da Educação/Direção-Geral da Educação (DGE), *PARA UMA EDUCAÇÃO INCLUSIVA MANUAL DE APOIO À PRÁTICA.* Available at:
https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EEspecial/manual_de_apoio_a_pratica.pdf.
[927] DRE (2018), Resolução do Conselho de Ministros n.º 61/2018. Available at:
https://dre.pt/web/guest/home/-/dre/115360036/details/maximized.
[928] CIG (2017) *Conhecimento, Género e Cidadania no Ensino Secundário*. Available at:
https://www.cig.gov.pt/area-igualdade-entre-mulheres-e-homens/documentacao/guioes-de-educacao-genero-e-cidadania/.

allowing teachers to introduce this topic to their male and female students and discuss it with them in an open and respectful way.

2.2 Key success factors and barriers

From our analysis of the data collected about Portugal, we can identify two areas in which the country has been successful in tackling the underperformance of boys and young men in compulsory education.

The first area is clear investment in recent years in reforming the school system to make it more supportive of learners, their needs, and those of their communities. National programmes such as the *Programa Nacional de Promoção do Sucesso Escolar* **clearly have a positive impact in** addressing the needs of learners who are at risk of failing at school, particularly by providing them with educational support and alternative learning opportunities that they could not normally access due to the economic situation of their families. Providing children and adolescents with equal access to extra-curricular activities, school trips, and other educational experiences mitigates the impact that a low socio-economic background has on their educational performance, and allows them to flourish at the same pace as other students. The focus is on allowing more space in curricula and schools for more active pedagogies. This greatly benefits boys and young men who, as mentioned several times by interviewees, respond better to practical learning and learning-by-doing. All these initiatives are critical to turning schools into more welcoming spaces which are more open to learners with different learning styles and needs.

The second area of success is to invest in national programmes that **actively go to schools to deconstruct the 'macho' view of masculinity and promote a society free of gender stereotypes and discrimination.** The work of governmental bodies, such as the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality, of organisations such as *rede exaequo*, and of EU projects such as EQUI-X are some examples of the importance of fighting against the harmful perception of masculinity that is still present in most of Portuguese society. While it is clear from the data collected that men (particularly white men) still greatly benefit from patriarchy in Portugal, the patriarchal system is actively harming boys and young men in their educational outcomes and in their personal lives. Fighting stereotypes about boyhood and manhood in Portugal and providing teachers and parents with tools to engage with boys and young men (such as the CIG toolkits) on these topics is key to changing mentalities and promoting a more caring and healthy approach to masculinity in Portugal. The role of families will be key in this transition, and more support and initiative from parents to support boys' educational achievement is recommended; perhaps through awareness-raising campaigns on the topic of positive attitudes to masculinity and promotion of positive male role models among boys and young men.

Nevertheless, it is clear that a **continuing focus on fighting discrimination, and on fostering equal access to education for all, is still needed**. From analysis of the available data, boys and young men from vulnerable backgrounds, such as Roma or migrants or LGBTI+ individuals, are severely impacted by the discrimination that they face in school settings and in society. It is clear that this discrimination has a

negative impact on the educational outcomes of children, particularly young men, who see school as a hostile environment. Without making schools a welcoming and supportive space for children of all backgrounds, many will be unable to fully benefit from their education, and will suffer as a result of the impacts of such discrimination for the rest of their lives. In the context of an emerging far-right movement in Portugal that promotes and normalises hate speech against women, Roma, migrant, and LGBTI+ communities, this continuous work in fighting racism and discrimination of all sorts is more important than ever. Awareness training for teaching staff, the involvement and support of civil society anti-racism projects, and the creation of specific policies to support and promote the educational achievement of vulnerable groups (such as the National Strategy for Integration of the Roma Communities) are essential elements to achieving this goal. Better access to ISCED 0 and language support for migrant communities would also create better conditions for the educational success of boys from migrant communities.

2.3   Overview of key initiatives and measures

In this section, we give an overview of the general key initiatives and measures in Portugal that have been put into place to combat the underachievement of boys in education. The *Programa Nacional de Promoção do Sucesso Escolar* (National Programme for Promotion of Success at School) is aimed at promoting and supporting the educational outcomes of children from poorer backgrounds, particularly at ISCED 1-2 level. The programme does not contain a gender dimension as such, but acknowledges that schools are not prepared to adapt their educational offerings to the different learning profiles of their students (including boys), and works with school directors, teachers and local communities to promote a more active approach to education, focused on the well-being of children.

> **National Programme for the Promotion of Success at School (*Programa Nacional de Promoção do Sucesso Escolar*)**
>
> The *Programa Nacional de Promoção do Sucesso Escolar* ran from 2016 to 2020, and its main focus was to promote an education for well-being approach in all schools, in order to transform them into fulfilling spaces for all children.
>
> Building on research carried out on the underlying causes of underachievement in Portugal, which identified low socio-economic background as one of the driving forces, the PNPSE programme aimed to change educational approaches in schools, taking teachers out of the 'need to grade' mentality and promoting alternative methods for learning based on alternative learning methodologies, active pedagogy, and learning through arts and technology. The programme hoped to achieve this through:
>
> - The introduction of active pedagogy in schools, mainly through teacher training and the creation of spaces in the curricula for active methods;
> - The creation of free sports/music/extra-curricular activities in schools;
> - The involvement of the local community and parents in the learning process

> of children and the promotion of out-of-school learning activities as a method of engaging learners with the curricula.
>
> The programme currently operates in 663 schools across the country and, according to the latest reports (available here), has contributed to reducing underachievement in ISCED 1–2 by 25% since its start in 2016. Videos and testimonies of students, parents, and teachers involved in the programme are available here (in PT only).
>
> More information: https://pnpse.min-educ.pt/programa

This programme is supported at the local level by initiatives such as *Academia do Johnson*, which provide the same services to children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The main goal of this is to work to support the educational and positive life choices of young people from a variety of neighbourhoods in the areas of Amadora, Cova da Moura, Buraca and Boavista, in Lisbon, which have a high concentration of low-income and vulnerable families.

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> ### *Associação Academia do Johnson Semedo*
>
> This academy works with young people from the age of 6 to 18 by promoting free socio-cultural, educational, sports, and recreational activities and initiatives that enable learning and their development as citizens and human beings. It provides tutoring and study support, stimulating school success and social inclusion through extra-curricular activities such as music, sports, games, and art. Participation in these activities is conditional on attendants' school performance.
>
> It also promotes active participation and the exercise of shared and responsible citizenship, with a strong orientation towards community development, encouraging voluntary work, favouring networking, and valuing the establishment of local partnerships with schools (as well as national and international partnerships with other similar organisations). The academy also holds weekly reflection sessions involving children and young people where feedback from schools, families and the academy itself is shared and discussed, together with related feelings, difficulties, and lessons learned.
>
> The academy is also working towards the social inclusion of young prisoners and former prisoners, thus combating all forms of social exclusion. It also undertakes extensive work with the families of young people and children, providing them support and involving them in the process of understanding and preventing risk behaviours and juvenile delinquency, as well as all forms of violence.

> The academy works with 184 children in 4 different neighbourhoods of Lisbon, and has increased the number of children staying in school and continuing to be involved in its activities. A report on activities is available here (in PT).
>
> More information: https://www.academiadojohnson.com/

There are also some examples of EU-funded projects that focus on the importance of fighting against the harmful perception of masculinity that is still present in most of Portuguese society. EQUI-X is the most significant of these in Portugal.

> **EQUI-X**
>
> This EU-funded project, which ran from 2018 to 2019, aimed to bring new approaches to prevent gender-based violence among girls/women and boys/men of different ages and backgrounds to the EU. It also aimed to promote innovative strategies that empowered girls/women and boys/men by addressing gender construction and promoting non-violent models of masculinity. Finally, EQUI-X aimed to strengthen relations between academia and NGOs for gender-based violence awareness and prevention programmes. EQUI-X involved researchers and schools from five different EU countries (Belgium, Portugal, Germany, Spain, and Croatia).
>
> The CES/Portugal EQUI-X's national campaigns involved an average of 50 young people and were carried out in two waves. Activities were held in two schools (Infanta D. Maria Secondary School and Pombal Secondary School) and were entirely carried out by students. The EQUI-X actions in both schools consisted of promotion of and engagement on the concepts of gender equality among students, such as:
>
> • Posters spread all over the school;
>
> • Videos on gender equality/inequality;
>
> • Boxes with the following message written on the cover: 'Do you want to get out of the box? Open me', containing postcards/cards with messages about equality;
>
> • Origami and colourful paper with equality messages written on them;
>
> • A picture with drawings, where the students wrote 'gender equality';
>
> • Designing an online game, where gender equality questions would appear and the audience would answer through their mobile phones to earn points for the right answers, until the final winner was found.
>
> Similar actions were carried out in other partner counties, and these led to the development of toolkits of actions to promote positive and non-violent approaches to masculinity at the national and European level.
>
> More information: http://equixproject.eu/

3. **Overall assessment**

3.1 Key findings

In spite of the huge strides Portugal has made regarding gender equality since the end of the dictatorship, **the 'macho' view of boyhood and masculinity remains the norm in Portugal for the most part, and is the main factor responsible for boys' underperformance in education.** This view of masculinity restricts boys and young men into specific stereotypical ways of expressing their masculinity that are not conducive to educational success or a healthy attitude towards women, vulnerable minorities, and themselves. This image is continuously promoted through family settings, school settings, and by the media they consume. Nonetheless, they still actively benefit from a patriarchal society that provides them with privileged access to employment, higher income, and career opportunities in comparison with their female peers.

Social background has a huge impact on educational success in Portugal. Low household income, low qualification levels of parents and a deprived social background are risk factors that make educational success unlikely. This affects boys and girls in the same severe way, and is particularly felt by children from vulnerable backgrounds, who also suffer from persistent racist and discriminatory attitudes in school from peers and teacher staff and from society, in terms of issues such as access to higher education, work, and housing.

The school environment and infrastructure in Portugal are not **well prepared to provide all students across the country with the necessary sports facilities and extracurricular activities that are key for their positive educational development**. Overall, the Portuguese educational system seems unprepared to handle children who are more active in their approach to learning and play, which are more often boys. This lack of adapted spaces ends up creating frustration, misunderstandings, and 'bad' behaviour that negatively affect the educational performance of active girls and boys, and lead them to associate school with an obligation, a space of boredom and frustration.

Lack of quality ISCED 0 for all children in Portugal seems to give some children an early disadvantage in relation to their peers, particularly when it comes to literacy and command of the Portuguese language.

3.2 Recommendations

In light of this research, the following recommendations are made for achieving gender equality in the Portuguese education system:

- **Continuous work in tackling traditional gender stereotypes, particularly in schools and families:** Gender education should start early and teachers should be prepared to discuss these topics with their students and their families. The sooner children are exposed to gender diversity and positive models of masculinity, the better.

- **Work against the impact of social disadvantages in education:** This should be reinforced and continuous. The provision of free extracurricular activities and active learning opportunities in all schools and communities plays a huge role in

promoting the education success of children, and should be a priority for national policymakers. The provision of universal and high-quality ISCED 0-level education for all children should also be considered.

- **Rethinking the school as a space for active learning in which the well-being of the learner is key:** Education policy and teacher training should move away from the 'teach to grade' mentality that still permeates much of the educational system, and focus instead on making sure that schools are spaces in which students can learn at their own pace and according to their needs, in spaces in which they want to spend time. This requires more funding to rehabilitate school infrastructure and changes to teacher training curricula to focus more on active pedagogies and quality mentoring.

- **More research and transfer of best practices among EU Member States:** More EU funding opportunities for projects tackling the gender dimension in education, as well as more networking, and EU-wide and international exchange on thE topic.

6.3.8   Sweden

1.   Key trends and implications

1.1   Contextualisation

In Sweden, boys have been achieving poorer school results on average than girls in primary and lower secondary education for a long time. This is not a new phenomenon, even though differences between girls and boys in school results have fluctuated over time and varied across different school subjects. Various measures of school performance, such as school grades, national tests and various international surveys (e.g. PISA), provide a **consistent picture of a continued gender gap in primary and lower secondary education in favour of girls**. Furthermore, the gap in school performance is consistent for all subgroups of girls and boys, regardless of their parents' educational background, socio-economic status or migration background.

The PISA[929] and PIRLS[930] international surveys show that on average boys achieve significantly lower results in reading literacy than girls. In the latest PISA survey, however, **boys significantly improved their average reading comprehension results, with girls' results remaining roughly the same and higher than boys'**. Notably the high-performing boys (90th percentile) improved their results. One hypothesis for their improvement could be that this group of boys has started to increasingly use computers. This group has performed better since PISA tests began to be administered over computers.[931] The PISA 2018 results also show a **minor difference between boys and girls in mathematics performance**. This has not changed relative to results of 2009, 2012 and 2015. TIMSS 2015 data shows small differences between girls and boys. In year 4, the difference is not significant, and in year 8 boys do slightly better.[932] Finally, **girls scored an average of 8 points better than boys on the PISA science test 2018**. PISA 2015 results did not indicate and significant differences between girls and boys.

In addition to this, PISA results show that Swedish 15 year-olds perform above average on indicators related to the ability to work together to solve problems, performing 10 points above the OECD average. The results also show that **girls are significantly better than boys at joint problem solving**, with Sweden being one of the countries where the differences between boys and girls is greatest. Sweden is also one of the countries where the students' socio-economic background is a strong factor influencing their results in joint problem solving.[933]

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[929] National Agency for Education (2018), *PISA 2018 15-åringars kunskaper i läsförståelse, matematik och naturvetenskap*, Stockholm.
[930] National Agency for Education (2017), *PIRLS 2016 Läsförmågan hos svenska elever i årskurs 4 i ett internationellt perspektiv*, Stockholm.
[931] Rasmusson, M. & Fredriksson, U. (2018), *Northern Lights on TIMSS and PISA 2018*: *PISA, reading literacy, and computer-based assessment in*. (pp 123-160), The Nordic Council of Ministers, Copenhagen.
[932] National Agency for Education (2016), *TIMSS 2015 Svenska grundskoleelevers kunskaper i matematik och naturvetenskap i ett internationellt perspektiv*, Stockholm.
[933] National Agency for Education (2017), *Girls better at joint problem solving than boys.* Available at: https://www.skolverket.se/om-oss/press/pressmeddelanden/pressmeddelanden/2017-11-07-flickor-battre-

National school-grade statistics show that on average girls obtain higher grades in year 9 in all subjects, including in subjects in which boys have traditionally performed better in the past, such as technology and sports and health. **Girls as a group achieve about a 10% higher grade point average across all school subjects than boys**. This trend has remained relatively constant over time. Most prominent are the differences in school grades in the subjects of Swedish, household and consumer knowledge and art, in which boys on average achieve only around 80% of girls' grade points. The differences are minor in English, mathematics and sports and health.[934] **The spread in grades *among* boys is large and more pronounced than among girls**. The majority of students at the lower end of all grade levels are boys, and the majority among those who achieve the highest grades in all subjects are girls. It should be noted, though, that there are variations in the gender gap in school results between different municipalities, school organisers and schools. There are schools without a gender gap in school results and there are examples of schools where boys perform better on average than girls. Variations over time also occur, even in the short term in one case and in the same school.

Looking at boys' and girls' performance in secondary school, more boys than girls leave **lower secondary school** without meeting learning outcomes required for all compulsory school subjects. In 2018, 27% of boys did not meet required learning outcomes. For girls, the corresponding figure was 21%.[935] Likewise, a higher proportion of boys do not achieve eligibility for national programmes[936] in upper secondary school. In 2020, 15.7% of boys finished compulsory school without eligibility for national programmes in upper secondary school. The corresponding figure for girls was 13.7%[937]. In **upper secondary school**, girls go on to achieve better grade point averages across all school subjects than boys. Here too, the difference is about 10% in favour of girls. The gender gap has increased over time, albeit at a slow pace. Among the graduating students in 2019, 92.8% of women graduated from upper secondary school, compared to 89.3% of men. The data also showed that more men than women repeat years or courses in upper secondary school or leave without graduating and that more women also qualify for higher education than men. In 2019, 80.8% of women achieved university eligibility compared to 66.4% of men.

pa-gemensam-problemlosning-an-pojkar; OECD (2017), *PISA 2015 Results (Volume V): Collaborative problem solving,* PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris. Available at: https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2015-results-volume-v_9789264285521-en#page4

[934] National Agency for Education (2021), statistics retrieved from the agency's website. Available at: http://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/statistik/

[935] Ernestam, A. (2019), *Se, förstå och förändra. Att motverka könsskillnader i skolresultat,* Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, Stockholm.

[936] There are 18 different national programmes in upper secondary school. Six of these programmes are preparatory for higher education and require students to have met learning outcomes in a set of core subjects as well as in at least 12 out of 16 subjects in compulsory school. The other 12 programmes are vocational and require students to have met learning outcomes in at least 8 subjects in compulsory school. If students are not eligible for national programmes, they may enter preparatory programmes that either prepare them for a national programme or directly for a vocation.

[937] National Agency for Education (2021), statistics retrieved from the agency's website. Available at: http://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/statistik/

There is also a clear **gender pattern in educational choices in upper secondary education programmes**. Boys make up 60% of the student body in vocational national programmes. Here, boys are in the clear majority in construction and technology-related programmes (80–97%) and girls are the majority in service and care-related programmes (65–75%). In national programmes leading to higher education, girls and boys each make up about 50% of the student body on average. Here too, boys predominantly choose STEM programmes (80% of students are boys) and girls dominate in aesthetic programmes, social sciences, humanities (ranging from 60% to 80% of all students). Boys are also the majority (61%) in preparatory programmes, i.e. programmes for students who do not qualify to enter national programmes. In programmes that prepare for vocational national programmes, boys make up 70% of the student body.[938]

In addition to grades and educational choices, there are also differences between boys and girls in terms of their individual attitudes and behaviour. According to national evaluations and reviews, **girls tend to be more positive when it comes to democratic principles than boys**. Students' grade levels and parents' levels of education also play a role in how democracy is seen. High grades and having parents with high levels of education covariate positively with a good understanding of the basic principles of democracy. Girls are less likely to accept people with extreme political views than boys. Girls also adhere to a much greater extent than boys to the school curriculum's values on human rights, equality and democracy. This is especially pronounced when comparing the attitudes of students whose parents have post-secondary education and the attitudes of students whose parents have pre-secondary education. Furthermore, girls tend to have deeper knowledge of politics and democracy than boys.[939;940]

Multiple studies show **a gender pattern in the forms of offensive behaviour and violence at school**. While international comparisons show that levels of bullying in Swedish schools are relatively low (but lately increasing), boys commit physical violence in school more often than girls and are more often subjected to physical violence than girls. Girls are, on the other hand, more often subjected to sexual harassment or violence, with the most common perpetrator being a boy. Girls more commonly commit psychological violence against other girls[941] and consistently report having more stress and psychosomatic problems than boys in both primary and secondary school.[942] Teacher unions have also noted an increase in reports of violence from pupils towards teachers over the last few years.

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[938] Swedish National Agency for Education (2021), *Elever på program med ojämnkönsfördelning på gymnasieskolan och svensk och utländsk bakgrund läsåret 2019/20*, Statistics Sweden. Available at: https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/temaomraden/jamstalldhet/jamstalld-utbildning/gymnasieskolan/#129810
[939] Oscarsson, V. (2005), *Elevers demokratiska kompetens. Rapport från den nationella utvärderingen av grundskolan 2003 (NU03) – samhällsorienterande ämnen,* University of Gothenburg.
[940] Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2012), Report 2012:9: *Skolornas arbete med demokrati och värdegrund*, Stockholm.
[941] The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (2017), *Skolundersökning om brott*, Stockholm.
[942] Swedish Government Official Report SOU 2010:99 (2010), *Flickor, pojkar, individer – om betydelsen av jämställdhet för kunskap och utveckling i skolan,* Stockholm.

The Swedish academic discussion about **explanations of the systematic gender gap in school performance covers a range of factors**. These have been compiled in a recent report on counter-acting the gender gap in education by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR).[943] The following information is based on the SALAR report and, when explicitly stated so, on interviews with stakeholders.

Looking at the **influence of biology versus social norms on boys' and girls' school performance**, biological differences between the sexes are often brought up as at least a partial explanation. It has, however, not been possible to verify any differences in, for example, cognitive abilities or talent between the sexes that could explain the differences in school performance. Differences with regards to boys' later average maturation that could be caused by biological differences – and which, in turn, could affect when skills such as concentration and self-discipline develop – are highlighted by some stakeholders as a possible partial explanation, but the majority believe that social factors are the dominating factors behind the gender gap in school performance. Where biological differences *do* exist, social factors serve to reinforce or accentuate them. The social factors explaining the gender gap in education are discussed as effects from gender norms, i.e. girls and boys being described and treated differently as a result of societal norms and notions of gender based on what is regarded as socially and culturally appropriate or desirable for girls and boys respectively. A fundament in these notions is that masculinity and femininity are defined in relation to each other being seen as different or even opposites, that is: that boys and girls are and should be expected to be and act differently in a number of ways. In gender inequitable societies, notions are furthermore that men and masculinity are superior to women and femininity. As a result, girls and boys at group level are exposed to different experiences and develop different behavioural patterns and skills throughout childhood. These patterns are, in turn, influenced by other factors and power relations based on, for instance, social class. This results in structural patterns in how girls and boys react to other factors and conditions that may contribute to the differences in school results, such as different family, peer, school and teaching-related factors.

Research in Sweden shows that many younger girls relative to many younger boys – as a consequence of gender norms – tend to develop socio-emotional and cognitive skill sets at an earlier age that support success in education later on.[944;945] In other words, due to prevailing norms of masculinity, **young boys on average do not experience interactions which are common for girls that support the development of skills that, in turn, support better school performance**. These skill sets include the following: (1) independence and self-management, such as taking responsibility for oneself and one's belongings, which is helpful when managing

[943] Ernestam, A. (2019), *Se, förstå och förändra. Att motverka könsskillnader i skolresultat,* Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, Stockholm:.
[944] Zimmerman, F. (2018), *Det tillåtande och det begränsande – En studie om pojkars syn på studier och ungdomars normer kring maskulinitet, Om könsspecifika förväntningar och konsekvenser.* Diss., University of Gothenburg.
[945] Eidevald, C. (2009), *Det finns inga tjejbestämmare – Att förstå kön som position i förskolans vardagsrutiner och lek.* Diss., Högskolan för lärande och kommunikation i Jönköping.

and taking responsibility for schoolwork; (2) language development: studies show that adults tend to use more complex language in interactions with young girls[946] and this leads to earlier language development which, in turn, stimulates logical thinking and reasoning; (3) interpreting and understanding others: through gendered interactions with adults many girls also develop skills in interpreting and understanding others early on, which are useful later on in school when interpreting teachers' instructions and expectations; (4) self-discipline: girls are expected to develop self-discipline and patience earlier on which are important skills in schoolwork that is not immediately rewarding.

Furthermore, gender expectations lead to **lower levels of motivation and engagement in schoolwork from many boys,**[947] driven by: (1) notions of studying being feminine; (2) school staff developing lower expectations of boys; and (3) lower levels of ambition among boys who aim for more vocationally oriented programmes early on in secondary education. In addition to this, a pattern of fear of failure can arise among boys.[948] Prevailing masculinity norms require boys to publicly display control, knowledge and assertiveness, which creates obstacles for some boys in trying their best, not wanting to lose face. This causes some boys to distance themselves from schoolwork early on: 'you can't lose a competition you've never entered'.

Two **different school cultures can be identified which negatively affect boys' relationships with schoolwork.**[949] The first is non-study cultures, in which studying and schoolwork are regarded as feminine. Hence, boys distance themselves from schoolwork. When schools are dominated by students with parents with low levels of education, there is a higher risk of non-study school culture. Feelings of low academic self-esteem among boys may spread into school culture, building a general sense of hopelessness in relation to schoolwork. The second is non-effort study cultures, in which it is accepted for boys to perform well but they should appear to do so without effort. The underlying idea is that school performance for boys is based on talent. Working hard and trying in school is seen as feminine. This leads to a lack in developing learning and study techniques over time.

Another perspective brought up by interviewees is that **girls, as a consequence of gender inequality in society (i.e. the subordination of women), put in more effort and devote more time to schoolwork than boys**. Being well-behaved at school is part of 'what it means to be a girl' according to gender norms. The pressure to be high performing is cited by some stakeholders as a reason for girls' higher reporting of stress and other psychosomatic problems. Boys' apparent lower levels of effort can be understood in a similar way: the privileges of men in the gender unequal

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[946] Eidevald, C. (2009), *Det finns inga tjejbestämmare – Att förstå kön som position iförskolans vardagsrutiner och lek.* Diss., Högskolan för lärande och kommunikation i Jönköping.
[947] Håkansson, J. & Sundberg, D. (2012), *Utmärkt undervisning – Framgångsfaktorer i svensk och internationell belysning,* Natur & Kultur Akademiska, Stockholm.
[948] Öhrn, E. & Holm, A. (2014), *Att lyckas i skolan. Om skolprestationer och kön i olika undervisningspraktiker*. Göteborg, Göteborgs universitet.
[949] Zimmerman, F. (2018), *Det tillåtande och det begränsande – En studie om pojkars syn på studier och ungdomars normer kring maskulinitet, Om könsspecifika förväntningar och konsekvenser.* Diss., University of Gothenburg.

society lead to a perception among boys that they do not need to make an effort in the same way that girls do. For them, things will 'work out anyway'.

School culture and its gender norms also affect peer cultures. If traditional masculinity norms are dominant in the school culture, **boys tend to organise in hierarchies and are forced to negotiate social status through school performance.**[950] This is particularly present in non-study and non-effort study school cultures where studying in different ways is associated with femininity. The hierarchies may be upheld through different degrees of offensive and abusive behaviour, teasing, bullying and violence, including sexism and homophobia – which both serve to uphold power relations based on traditional gender norms – within groups of boys and towards girls. Homophobic expressions target all children although they are especially harsh on children and youth that identify as LGBTQ persons. Within gender studies, these mechanisms are sometimes referred to as 'gender policing' which serves to uphold traditional gender norms. Such school cultures may also include obstructive behaviour against teachers and in class, as a way of posturing power positions connected to masculinity norms.[951] In fact, this becomes a form of self-sabotage but also sabotage against learning in the whole class, leading to a negative spiral effect on the relations between boys acting this way and teachers. Furthermore, some stakeholders have suggested that obstructive behaviour in class can be triggered by boys not being able to interpret instructions from teachers – the obstructive behaviour becomes a means of achieving an alternative form of social status.

As a consequence of gender norms and their effects, **different working methods in schools may affect girls and boys differently**. Many boys do not cope well with schoolwork requiring a high degree of independent and solitary work. Furthermore, boys benefit from clear instructions and concrete examples and methods based on a high degree of teacher involvement.[952] Additionally, interviewees suggested that boys perform better in group work in mixed groups, and that boys may also benefit from a variation in ways of presenting knowledge (such as written/oral, group/individual).

Stakeholders also mention that national curricula emphasise methods and forms of work that reward pupils that already have skills supporting school success, such as being capable of interpreting implicit instructions and expectations or handling solitary schoolwork employing skills of self-discipline. As discussed earlier, boys have developed these skills less due to the effects of gender norms.

1.2 Vulnerable sub-groups

School result statistics clearly indicate that boys with a recent history of immigration as well as boys in families with lower socio-economic status are more vulnerable in

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[950] Asp-Onsjö, L. (2014), *Parallella positioneringar bland pojkar. Om sociala hierarkier och skolprestationer;* i Öhrn, E. & Holm, A. (2014), *Att lyckas i skolan. Om skolprestationer och kön i olika undervisningspraktiker*, Göteborgs universitet (pages 103–126), Göteborg.
[951] Zimmerman, F. (2018), *Det tillåtande och det begränsande – En studie om pojkars syn på studier och ungdomars normer kring maskulinitet, Om könsspecifika förväntningar och konsekvenser,* Diss., University of Gothenburg.
[952] ibid

terms of the risk of not succeeding in school. A background with immigration history often correlates with low socio-economic status. Boys in rural areas and in towns where the labour market is dominated by blue-collar work in, for instance, manufacturing, forestry, paper mills, mining, etc. are also at risk of poorer school results. Shy and quiet boys are also mentioned by one interviewee as a potentially vulnerable group since this group of boys runs the risk of going unnoticed by both teachers and peers.

Research suggests that **boys' school performance is more negatively affected than girls by poor socio-economic conditions, lower educational backgrounds of parents and shortcomings in school and teaching quality.**[953]

School segregation along the lines of socio-economic status is also mentioned by some stakeholders as a factor that affects the school performance of boys more negatively. This has to do with a loss of positive peer effects in more heterogeneous classes and the fact that there is often a lack of accredited teachers in schools in areas with low socio-economic status, which speaks to the previously mentioned factor of low school quality.

1.3 Key implications

The gender patterns in education have implications for society and for the lives of individual women and men (as well as boys and girls) in range of manners. Completing secondary education is seen as an important protective factor in general in the discussion in Sweden. Poor school performance is indeed an important factor for many negative implications, but it is not the only factor behind implications in areas such as health, criminality and extremism, or for incidences of suicide and violence etc.

Looking firstly at the educational implications, the gender gap in school performance in primary and secondary education and in educational choices translates directly into **a larger proportion of women in Sweden obtaining degrees in tertiary education**. In 2018, 58% of women with employment had a post-secondary education while the corresponding figure for men was 44%. Currently, 64% of all degrees in higher education at the undergraduate and advanced levels are achieved by women.[954] This development has been fueled further by the academicisation of traditionally female-dominated professions in the health and care sectors in Sweden. However, the gender composition in higher education has changed, as the proportion of women into a number of traditionally male-dominated study fields is increasing. For instance, data shows that the proportion of women who graduated in the field of technology doubled between 1980 and 2005. The proportion of women has also increased substantially in medicine, law, social sciences, humanities, theology, agriculture and forestry.[955] In 2019, 35% of students graduating with a master of

[953] SNS, Center for Business and Policy Studies (2017), *SNS Analys nummer 42 Könsskillnader i skolresultat*, Stockholm.
[954] Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (2020), *Fakta om löner och arbetstider 2020*, Stockholm.
[955] National Agency for Education (2006), *Könsskillnader i måluppfyllelse och utbildningsval,* Stockholm.

science degree were women, an increase of 7% compared with 2009, according to statistics from the Swedish Authority of Higher Education.[956] A corresponding change among men has not taken place. The care, teaching and services sectors in higher education are still heavily dominated by women. Employers within the Swedish public sector regard this as problematic: a serious lack of employees is foreseen within welfare-related jobs in regions and municipalities due to an ageing population. Attracting more men to traditionally female occupations is therefore seen as one of the potential solutions.[957]

Next, looking at the labour market implications, we can see a positive trend in terms of women in managerial positions, including in the private sector. The proportion of women who are managers within the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise's member companies is increasing rapidly and has more than doubled over a 17-year period. In 1998, 17% of managers were women and in 2017 the figure was 37%. At the same time, the proportion of women in business and industry is relatively unchanged, at around 38%. This means that women in the business world are advancing and more than every third manager is a woman.[958]

The imbalance in higher education has given rise to a discussion about **a growing group of men that risk becoming marginalised in several ways**. This issue was first brought up in a report from a government commission in 2013 identifying future societal challenges.[959] In part, the discussion is based on the observation that women often form intimate relationships and family with a partner with the same or higher level of education. Hence, due to the growing gender imbalances in education, there is a growing group of young men with 'incomplete' or lower education that risk being excluded as potential partners, losing prospects of forming intimate relationships and family. The same group of young men experiences difficulties in establishing themselves in the labour market since the demand of low-skilled workers has decreased substantially in Sweden. There is evidence that persons who do not complete their upper-secondary education within four years are at greater risk of becoming unemployed, becoming unemployed multiple times and ending up in longer periods of unemployment. The risk is especially high for men, because women to a much greater extent supplement their studies with adult learning.[960] Furthermore, being unemployed or having a weak position in the labour market and being single creates additional risks for exclusion from different forms of trust-creating social networks that bring about positive life conditions. To summarise: a growing group of men are at risk of marginalisation in three ways: (1) from forming intimate relationships and family; (2) from material and financial security; and (3) from

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[956] Swedish Authority of Higher Education (2020), *Statistisk analys. Allt fler kvinnor tar civilingenjörsexamen*, Stockholm.
[957] Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (2021), Jämställd skola, retrieved from the SALAR website. Available at:
https://skr.se/skr/skolakulturfritid/forskolagrundochgymnasieskola/jamstalldskola.14638.html
[958] Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (2020), *Fakta om löner och arbetstider 2020*, Stockholm.
[959] Swedish Government Offices DS 2013:19 (2013), *Svenska framtidsutmaningar. Slutrapport från regeringens Framtidskommission,* Stockholm.
[960] Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (2018), *Maskulinitet och jämställd skola. Arbete för ökad trygghet och bättre skolresultat,* Stockholm.

positive trust-creating social networks.[961] This, in turn, increases the risks of a growing group of men at risk of ill health and/or crime and violent extremism with a high cost for the individuals themselves as well as society as a whole.

Next, looking at health and well-being implications, there is generally a positive trend in the Nordic countries in terms of health for all groups, but socially induced inequality in health has increased in recent decades. Even though the socio-economically strong groups have had better development than the others, all groups have fared better. However, this trend does not apply to young men. In Sweden, **development towards better health has stagnated for young men aged 15–29, with unequal health increasing**. Depression, drug problems, neck and back pain, suicide and self-inflicted injuries, and interpersonal violence are the main causes of young men's increased ill health. An underlying factor may be increased demands on the labour market combined with an education system that is not adapted to the changes. Demand for less skilled jobs has decreased markedly in the Nordic region, while demand for highly educated workers has increased which, in turn, is related to increased global competition.[962] Several studies also show that men with low or incomplete grades from year 9 are at higher risk of ill health, suicide and crime, although it should be noted that these problems are not caused by one single factor.[963] Those who finished ninth grade with the lowest average grades are about three times as likely to commit suicide at a young age compared with those who leave primary school with a top grade or just below. The same pattern was seen among boys and girls, although the risks were generally higher for boys.[964] Those with a lower education also rate their health worse. Among men with only lower secondary education, the mortality rate is 48% up to 80 years of age, compared with 22% among women with post-secondary education.[965]

Further research conducted by the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society shows that **most pro-violence and right-wing extremist movements direct their recruitment efforts towards men** although several factors are involved in young people's decisions to join right-wing and pro-violence extremist movements. The right-wing ideological fundament also places men and hyper-masculine and hyper-conservative unequal gender ideals at the centre of their narrative. Even though the paths into the right-wing extremist environments may differ, the 'ideal of hyper-masculinity' underlies all factors attracting young people to the environment. Commitment to the right-wing extremist environment is thus transformed into a masculine 'rite of passage'. One out of several risk factors identified for young men deciding to join right-wing extremism is not having been able to develop a positive relationship with school, work or to other social contexts. By joining they feel that they

[961] Rothstein, B. (2013), *Utmaning: De som inte har, inte älskar och inte är*. I Strömbäck, Jesper (red.), Framtidsutmaningar: det nya Sverige (sid. 57–68), Stockholm.
[962] Bremberg, S. (2018), *Unga mäns hälsa i de nordiska länderna*, Nordic Welfare Center, Stockholm.
[963] National Board of Health and Welfare (2010), *Social rapport 2010*, Socialstyrelsen, Stockholm.
[964] Björkenstam, C. & Ringbäck Weitoft, G. & Hjern, A. & Nordström, P. & Hallqvist, J. & Ljung, R. (2011), *School grades, parental education and suicide – a national register-based cohort study*, J Epidemiol Community Health 2011 65 993-998.
[965] Swedish Government Official Report SOU 2016:55 (2016), *Det handlar om jämlik hälsa*, Stockholm.

achieve higher status and respect based on instilling fear in others.[966] These findings do not, however, only apply to right-wing extremist movements. The Islamist pro-violence extremist environment has similar traits in that it attempts to recruit young men by propagating a hyper-masculine ideal promising control over oneself and power over others by using violence. Young men deciding to join this environment are generally not established in the labour market and have experienced some sort of conflict with the state. Many of these young men feel hatred towards school and have had antagonistic and, at times, violent interactions with teachers. The left-wing extremist environment in Sweden has also fostered hyper-masculine and pro-violence ideals historically but militant and violent actions have been challenged internally within these environments.

2. **Policy attention and actions**

2.1 **Policy attention and attitudes**

Boys' lower performance in school is an issue that is reported on regularly in Sweden. School grade statistics aggregated at national level and broken down by gender are presented annually. However, **the issue of boys' underperformance in education has not and does not cause any significant political debate or draw attention in Sweden**, nor are there any divisive positions on the issue among the political parties in parliament. The media, including the education press, also cover the issue with some regularity without it receiving or creating much attention. The teacher unions and student organisations interviewed in connection with this report do not pay any significant attention to the issue. Other factors have been and are seen as more prominent when it comes to school performance such as low socio-economic status, school segregation and migration backgrounds. Gender stereotypical educational choices among boys and young men receive even less attention in political debates and in the media. A shining exception when it comes to shedding light on the issue is journalist Emma Leijnse's book *Fördel kvinna – Den tysta utbildningsrevolutionen* (Advantage Woman – The Silent Revolution in Education) published in 2017. The author describes the gender gap in school performance and in education in general as a growing imbalance in women's favour and points to the risks created by a growing group of men with fewer opportunities when it comes to forming families, obtaining work and taking part of positive social networks, which was originally highlighted in the previously mentioned government commission report of 2013. The book raised considerable public attention.

Despite the lack of attention in politics, **the gender gap in school performance has been highlighted on several occasions over the years** by both left-wing and right-wing governments and school authorities, for example in reports from school authorities in 2005[967] and 2006,[968] in reports from the Delegation for Gender Equality

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[966] The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (2016), *Ung och extrem – högerextremism*, Stockholm.
[967] Björnsson, M. (2005), *Kön och skolframgång. Tolkningar och perspektiv*, The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, Stockholm.
[968] National Agency for Education (2006), *Könsskillnader i måluppfyllelse och utbildningsval,* Stockholm.

in School 2008–2010[969] and in a report from the government commission on future challenges in 2012.[970] The Government Committee on Men and Gender Equality also addressed boys' lower school performance in its report in 2014.[971] Throughout the report, a picture emerges of the issue being complex and lacking unambiguous explanations or solutions.

Although there is **no explicit strategy on closing the gender gap in education**, there is national policy in place that provides strong support for the issue. In the national gender equality policy framework, a new goal was added in 2016 on gender equality in education, stating that women and men, and girls and boys shall have the same opportunities and conditions when it comes to education, educational choices and personal development. Furthermore, women and men, and girls and boys should have the same opportunities and conditions to develop interests and ambitions and to reach their full potential without being hindered by structures, prejudices and stereotypes based on gender. The policy stresses that the school system holds a special responsibility to promote personal development.

The Delegation for Gender Equality in School 2008–2010, appointed by the Ministry of Education, submitted a report including **proposals for a policy action package on gender equality in primary and secondary education**, including a number of measures intended to counteract the underperformance of boys.

In general, the Commission suggested **a gender mainstreaming strategy** and to focus on the relational aspects of gender and gender equality rather than on strategies that focus either of the sexes singularly to address different sex-specific problems. Sex-specific measures were considered a risk since they could lead to further gender stereotyping not taking into account the spread and diversity within the sexes.

Given the central role of reading and writing skills in more-or-less all school subjects, investing in **a general programme to strengthen language development and reading and writing skills was put forward**, acknowledging that although the majority of pupils with weak reading and writing skills are boys, there are also girls in need of a programme like this. In any case, this measure was regarded as a measure with the potential to reduce the gender gap in school performance since it was thought to impact the school performance of many boys. The importance of applying a gender perspective in work to improve language development was stressed but no details or further guidelines were provided. Furthermore, **measures to improve early detection of children and youth in need of extra support at different ages** and stages were suggested, acknowledging that there is a group of boys already behind in their education when they begin school and that there is a group of girls that suffer from stress and poor mental health in adolescence, again stressing the importance of not stereotyping girls and boys.

[969] Swedish Government Official Report SOU 2010:99 (2010), *Flickor, pojkar, individer – om betydelsen av jämställdhet för kunskap och utveckling i skolan,* Stockholm.
[970] Löfström, Å. (2012), *Betygsgapet mellan flickor och pojkar – konsekvenser för framtidens arbetsmarknad. Underlagsrapport 11 till Framtidskommissionen,* UMEA University, Stockholm.
[971] Swedish Government Official Report SOU 2014:6 (2014), *Män och jämställdhet*, Stockholm.

The delegation also discussed the gendered nature of offensive behaviour, bullying and violence in school and stated that there is a need to **strengthen prevention work, including strengthening sex education**, as well as a need for more research in Sweden on these matters. Also, a need for research regarding the effects of gender on different teaching methods was declared. Additionally, **a list of more general actions was made**, including strengthening principal and teacher training on gender equality in subject content and didactics as well as on gender and child development. The Commission emphasised that the underperformance of boys in education should be taken seriously regardless of the lack of consensus on how to understand the problem.[972]

In recent years, the Swedish school debate and school policy have been dominated by a focus on generally declining school performance and on growing inequalities between different areas and schools. A large number of measures at national level have been put in place to address these issues. These measures are centered around efforts to strengthen the teaching profession, improve the quality of teaching and to allocate resources so that schools with greater needs receive more resources per pupil. A small number of schools with consistently lower results receive direct support to improve their work from the National Agency for Education. Additionally, several of the proposals from the Delegation for Gender Equality in Schools in 2008–2010 described above can be found among the **policy measures in place today**. The most important programmes include **'The Reading Effort'** (*Läslyftet*),[973] the government's general programme to strengthen language development and reading and writing skills, and **'The Reading, Writing and Calculating Guarantee'** (*Läsa, skriva, räkna – garantin*),[974] aimed at better detecting students who do not meet basic knowledge requirements at an early age. In 2020, the government also decided to make **teacher training in sex education** compulsory for all teachers, and the government is currently preparing a **national plan on strengthening safety and a beneficial studying environment** in schools.

There are also clear formulations that provide support for measures to counteract gender gaps in education. The **curriculum for compulsory school** contains the following wording: '*The school also has a responsibility to counteract gender patterns that limit students' learning, choices and development. How the school organises the education, how the students are treated and what demands and expectations are placed on them, contribute to shaping their perceptions of what is feminine and masculine. The school must therefore organise the education so that the students meet and work together, and test and develop their abilities and interests, with the same opportunities and on equal terms regardless of gender'.* Similar wording is used in **the curriculum for preschool**. Several of the school system's course and subject

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[972] Swedish Government Official Report SOU 2010:99 (2010), *Flickor, pojkar, individer – om betydelsen av jämställdhet för kunskap och utveckling i skolan,* Stockholm.
[973] National Agency for Education (2021), *Läslyftet i skolan*. Retrieved from the website of the National Agency of Education. Available at: https://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/kurser-och-utbildningar/laslyftet-i-skolan
[974] National Agency for Education (2021), *Läsa, skriva, räkna – en garanti för tidiga stödinsatser*. Retrieved from the website of the National Agency of Education. Available at: https://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/leda-och-organisera-skolan/organisera-tidigt-stod-och-extra-anpassningar/lasa-skriva-rakna---garanti-for-tidiga-insatser

plans further describe how gender equality should be included in teaching. The National Agency for Education also provides some supporting material on how to work with gender equality in school, including how to make gender norms visible and further problematise them. However, the support is not part of any special initiative and is not associated with any funding.

With regards to local level, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), an employer and interest organisation for all of Sweden's regions and municipalities (the municipalities being the school organisers of public school) has published **an important report compiling current research on gender differences in school results** in the publication 'To See, Understand and to Change – Counteracting Gender Differences in School Results' (*Se, förstå och förändra – Att motverka könsskillnader i skolresultat*).[975] The report was published in 2019 and presents current research from several academics. One of these, Dr. Zimmerman, finished his dissertation in 2018 on boys, masculinity norms and school performance, greatly contributing to a better understanding of how gender norms affect and create patterns in boys' relationships with schools and schoolwork in more concrete ways.[976]

The SALAR publication also presents a list of **recommendations on how to close the gender gap**, with measures targeting organisational, school and classroom levels, based on Zimmerman's and others' research. Along with basing the work on sustained systematic quality work with links to school governance and school leadership, setting and following up on goals on gender and school performance, and employing knowledge from research and facts about the effect of gender norms, the following recommendations were made:

- **Promote school and peer culture with a focus on effort, safety and well-being:** This includes measures to counteract hierarchies among students, preventing teasing and offensive behaviour and creating an atmosphere where it is accepted for students to openly make mistakes.

- **Broaden gender norms:** Make visible and acknowledge the diversities among girls and boys, and encourage the different ways of enacting masculinity and femininity in order to broaden gender norms.

- **Develop work in preschools to support the development of basic skills for school success**: Highlight and develop preschools' opportunities to influence future school results by also strengthening boys' basic abilities that enable school success, such as language development, personal responsibility and social interaction.

- **Reform teaching methods**: Better adapt to students' different backgrounds and conditions by creating inclusive learning environments, working with compensatory measures to develop key abilities such as language development,

[975] Ernestam, A. (2019), *Se, förstå och förändra. Att motverka könsskillnader i skolresultat,* Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, Stockholm.
[976] Zimmerman, F. (2018), *Det tillåtande och det begränsande – En studie om pojkars syn på studier och ungdomars normer kring maskulinitet, Om könsspecifika förväntningar och konsekvenser,* Diss., University of Gothenburg.

actively teaching study techniques, using clearer guidance and instructions, and offering students multiple ways to present and account for their knowledge.

- **Actively promote motivation**: Work actively with motivation to help students develop the drive needed to achieve good school results.

Finally, **several schools in Sweden have managed to reduce gender differences in school results**, which has attracted attention from the media and education press. Some of these schools have employed an approach with a direct focus on reforming masculinity norms, which can be understood as efforts to reform school and peer culture. Other schools have chosen a more indirect approach, which focuses more on changes in teaching practices addressing challenges that boys face, such as an increased focus on teaching study techniques and more rigorous individual follow-up as well as introducing specific methods that enhance language development and learning. A number of initiatives relating to these different approaches are described in Section 2.3.

2.2   Key success factors and barriers

Gender equality policy in Sweden is well-developed and clearly visible in national steering documents and curricula at all levels of education. The National Agency for Education provides a set of supporting guidelines regarding the reformation of traditional gender norms in preschools, primary and secondary schools. A National Agency for Gender Equality has been instituted supporting and following up on gender equality mainstreaming with other government agencies.

However, as mentioned earlier, the gender gap in education has received relatively limited attention. According to several interviewees, **a barrier in dealing with the gender gap in education has been that problematic implications have not been very apparent or well understood**. Regardless of boys' underperformance in education, young men in general continue to able to establish themselves in the labour market, earning higher average salaries than women. Men also continue to dominate higher positions in most sectors in society. As stated earlier, this situation is now beginning to change in Sweden, in part due to the advances of women in education and in the labour market in general, as well as due to a decreasing demand for low-skilled and manual labour. Sweden and some of the other Nordic countries may well be at the forefront of this trend, which may serve to increase the attention given to the gender gap in education.

Another barrier, according to interviewees, has been the general understanding of boys and young men as a privileged group relative to girls and young women. This has made it a politically controversial and complex issue to understand and communicate – how can a privileged group motivate supportive measures and resources? Gender equality and gender issues have been firmly established and framed around the idea of the need to empower women and girls. Furthermore, the large variation within the group of boys in terms of school performance makes the issue even more complex, alongside the fact that there is also a fair number of girls that do not perform well in school. Other factors such as social class and migration backgrounds have been seen as more prominent in understanding

poor school performance. In general, an essentialist understanding of masculinity, in which existing masculinity ideologies and norms are seen not as social constructs but as natural and taken for granted, may also lie behind the fact that the issue has not been met by more specific reform. Critical studies of masculinities is a fairly young discipline, and its insights are not yet widely spread or generally accepted, even within gender equality policy itself.

The complexity of how gender norms influence social interactions in education and in school and peer cultures makes it difficult to communicate policy from national level that can be operationalised at local level. As mentioned earlier, sex-specific measures have been seen as creating a risk of further gender stereotyping. In Sweden, it is only quite recently that more concrete research results have been produced that suggest how effects of gender norms that create obstacles for boys can be dealt with and compensated for in teaching practice.[977] This new knowledge does make it possible to potentially introduce national-level competence development measures for school staff on teaching practice to close the gender gap, a strategic measure which was also suggested by several interviewees. This could include concrete measures and methods at school level on how to achieve a so-called *study and effort* school culture: a school culture that openly defines school success as a result of effort rather than of talent and in which it is okay for both girls and boys to be open about effort in schoolwork and to perform well. Interestingly, examples of schools that have accomplished such school cultures do exist.

Interviewees also mentioned **the importance of not using language or promoting attitudes that place blame or responsibility for poorer performance in school on boys themselves**. Ideas and attitudes that do so may well be part of the problem itself. Instead of discussing the underperformance of boys, we should perhaps instead talk about the underperformance of the school system in relation to boys. Individual boys are of course agents when it comes to shaping school and peer culture but first and foremost boys should be regarded as children, and problematic behavioural patterns should be seen as a response to their experiences and living conditions, including societal gender norms that are propagated through and reproduced by the school system itself.

2.3   Overview of key initiatives and measures

Here follows a description of the system-wide policy measure 'The Reading Effort' mentioned above, as well as descriptions of four other initiatives employed at school organiser and school levels.

The Reading Effort (*Läslyftet*)

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[977] Apart from the SALAR report mentioned earlier, Fredrik Zimmerman published a book in 2019, *Pojkar i skolan: vad lärare och andra vuxna behöver veta för att fler pojkar ska lyckas i skolan* (Boys in school: what teachers and other adults need to know for more boys to succeed in school). Kunskapsskolan, a private school group, published a brief in 2020, *Ten reasons why boys perform worse in school - and what we can do about it!* also by Fredrik Zimmerman.

Läslyftet is a national competence development programme for teachers run by the National Agency for Education with an objective to improve teaching practice in reading and writing skills in preschool, primary school and secondary school. The programme targets teachers in all subjects as well as school librarians and has been in place since 2015. Up until 2020, the programme had reached approximately 25% of all teachers in the country.

The programme was initiated following an assessment showing that teachers needed more knowledge and methods to better support the development of students' reading and writing. The Swedish results in the international surveys PISA and PIRLS showed that students' reading abilities deteriorated during the 2000s; almost a fifth of students did not reach the basic level of reading comprehension. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate also carried out reviews, finding that teachers do not help students enough in processing, analysing and understanding texts used in teaching. When launching the programme, the government emphasised the importance of literacy to reach the knowledge requirements in all subjects.

The main purpose of Läslyftet is to provide preschool teachers, teachers and school librarians scientifically well-founded methods and proven working methods with the aim of developing children's language and communication skills and improving students' reading comprehension and writing abilities. To fulfill this purpose, Läslyftet aims to develop teaching practices through collegial learning to contribute to a reformed teaching development culture in participating preschool and school units. The objectives of Läslyftet include ensuring that, after the programme, participants should be able to continuously develop their knowledge in language, reading and writing didactics and their ability to apply this knowledge in teaching practices.

To partake in the programme, school organisers apply for funding from the government to finance designated school staff who – after receiving training (eight days) – serve as supervisors for their colleagues in a structured competence development process. The training of supervisors is performed by collaborating universities. A web-based training portal with supporting training materials is provided. This portal is public and available to all schools. The training material consists of a number of modules, some of which are general and others are specific to certain subjects, ages, special needs etc. Typically, a module requires 30–40 work hours, and participating teachers work through two modules in a year. The programme also includes support to principals, in part through conferences and written material.

As mentioned earlier, Läslyftet is a general programme without a specific focus on gender or on boys. The training material does however include some material on boys and reading, for instance an article on how teachers may identify and help boys who are most at risk of having problems with reading abilities.

Läslyftet has been evaluated externally and results show that the programme, in general, has been appreciated by school organisers and school staff. However, positive effects on students' reading ability and school results are yet to be seen. Further impact evaluations are currently being undertaken. Evaluation reports do include

comments from school staff about new insights regarding boys and reading, but also a few comments indicating a demand for new modules on how to better support boys with poor reading abilities.

More information:

https://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/kurser-och-utbildningar/laslyftet-i-skolan

Write to Learn (*Skriva sig till lärande*)

Since 2011, the primary schools in the Sollentuna municipality, just north of Stockholm, have been working with the pedagogical method *Skriva sig till lärande* (Write to Learn). The method was developed by school staff in the municipality itself as a part of a comprehensive ICT[978] strategy for compulsory school. It is based on *Integrated Write to Learn*, a method originally developed by Norwegian researcher Arne Trageton.

The aim of *Skriva sig till lärande* is to improve teaching and learning in reading and writing and to develop ICT skills in early ages. The model is based on combining success factors for learning with ICT, allowing technology to act as a lever for learning. It lets children from first grade use several ICT tools to write texts and subsequently discuss and refine them together with classmates and teachers using digital real-time formative feedback and assessment. The central learning factor addressed, in mathematics as well as in literacy, is the written communication allowing the learners to interact with peers and teachers. *Skriva sig till lärande* draws on methods from socio-cultural theory, using continuous social interaction to create social meaning and increased learning. It functions as a structured process which teachers fill with content depending on the subject, year, group and explicit goals of the task. Students develop their reading and writing abilities and their digital skills, all at the same time. It is about a metacognitive way of working, where students constantly, based on clearly defined goals, analyse and reflect on their own and their classmates' learning. The method is also inclusive as speech synthesis and spell checking are available in the tools used when students write and give feedback to each other.

According to comparative studies, WTL yields higher average scores both in literacy and mathematics, a smaller gender gap with considerable improvements among boys, and significantly better results for underachievers. The spread between students' results decreases.[979]

Since 2016, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) provides support for arranging training on the method to other municipalities. The

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[978] Information and communication technologies
[979] Agélii Genlott, A. & Grönlund, Å. (2016), *Closing the gaps – Improving literacy and mathematics by ict-enhanced collaboration*, Computers & Education, Volume 99 (pages 68–80), Orebro University, Sweden.

training is funded by participant fees. To date, school staff from more than 50 municipalities have participated in the training. The training process takes one year to complete and is based on three physical conferences, online classes and homework.

More information: https://pedagog.stockholm/undervisning-och-larande/avslutade-pedagogbloggar/

Endure (*Stå ut-ett läsprojekt*)

Stå ut (Endure) is a reading project in lower secondary school in the municipality of Piteå in northern Sweden. The aim of the project is to stimulate reading among students by engaging male role models in the family. The project is named after one of the books that is used in the project.

The project started in 2015 and began from the observation that many students objected to reading assignments in school, declaring that reading is not fun or interesting. Reading a whole book was seen as something extraordinary. Teachers noted that the interest in reading was especially low among boys. Boys did not see the point in reading and discussing books. They felt they could not read. There was also some resistance among girls but in general girls were more positive about reading. Reading tests also showed that many boys had poorer reading comprehension.

Ideas to develop the project stemmed from teachers realising that many students rarely witnessed their parents reading and even fewer witnessed their fathers doing so. They also took note of research on reading and reading comprehension surveys that show that there is no difference between boys' and girls' reading comprehension when they start school but that something changes later on – reading becomes an activity for girls since boys have too few reading role models. Therefore, the teacher group at Hortlax school decided to focus the reading project on fathers reading with their children, alternatively reading together with male relatives or male teachers.

The project involves students in grades 7–9 reading a book at home with their father and then discussing the book together with the teacher in the class. The teachers have deliberately chosen not to control the conversations in class about the books: the discussion should not be about whether the students have read the book or not but rather about creating a desire to read. Choosing books that students find interesting and with language that is appealing to many has been central to the success of the project. The teachers also provided the book as audio files to support reading for fathers with poor reading abilities. At the end of the school year, the teachers organise a book party with cake and coffee for students and their families to celebrate when they finish the book. The students also get a letter from the author of the book they have read.

The reactions to the project have largely been positive – both from parents and children. The students have expressed that they like to sit down with their father

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and have exclusive time together. They have also appreciated the opportunity to be able to talk about different themes and subjects from the book with their fathers that do not directly involve themselves, and by doing so dealing with topics that are important and also play a role in their own lives. The teachers also note that they are now experiencing minor protests against reading from students, and that there has been a change in attitude towards reading in general. Better results for the students in reading comprehension tests have also been achieved.[980]

More information:

https://www.pitea.se/Invanare/Skola/Grundskola-och-grundsarskola/Hitta-grundskolor/Hortlaxomradet/Hortlax-skola/Amnen/Svenska/sta-ut---ett-lasprojekt/

The Macho Factory (*Machofabriken*)

*Machofabriken (*The Macho Factory*)* is a structured educational programme and material for mixed-sex groups, aged 13–25, on gender norms focusing on masculinity, power relations and different forms of abusive and violent behaviours. Its objectives are to promote gender equality and well-being, and to reduce abusive and violent behaviour. The programme was developed in 2010 by non-profit organisations MÄN and Unizon, primarily for use in schools. Since then, the material has been widely disseminated to lower and upper secondary schools across the country.

The material is based on short films and interactive exercises that aim to create reflection regarding gendered expectations, attitudes and behaviours including different forms of limitations for boys that arise from common masculinity norms. The programme is based on 15 sessions led by a teacher or other school staff, with sessions ranging from 20 to 60 minutes. Topics covered include friendship, relationships, consent, sexual harassment, violence and online culture.

Schools purchase the material and can then use it independently. It is possible to implement the programme using the material itself as a manual, but training is also offered for an additional fee. The programme was tested extensively with youth when it was developed and revised. An updated edition of the material was released in 2019. In general, it is well-received by school staff and students, but it has not been formally impact evaluated. A few of the schools that have received attention for their work on gender equality, including work to improve the school results of boys, have used the material as a way of introducing the concept of masculinity norms.

More information: https://machofabriken.se/

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[980] The Municipality of Piteå (2021), *Stå ut – ett läsprojekt*. Retrieved from the website of the Municipality of Piteå. Available at: https://www.pitea.se/Invanare/Skola/grund--och-grundsarskola-fritidshem/Hitta-grundskolor/Hortlaxomradet/Hortlax-skola/Amnen/Svenska/sta-ut---ett-lasprojekt/

> **Mentors in Violence Prevention (*Mentorer i våldsprevention*)**
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> Originally developed in the US, *Mentorer i våldsprevention* (Mentors in Violence Prevention) is an impact-evaluated violence prevention programme for lower and upper secondary schools. The programme is based on knowledge about gender norms and violence. It was imported and adapted to a Swedish context by the not-for-profit organisation MÄN. Implementation in Sweden started in 2014 and the programme is now used in schools in more than 20 municipalities in Sweden, including Stockholm.
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> The programme is universal, i.e. it is intended for all students in a school. In its Swedish version it consists of 14 lessons over the course of half a school year. The lessons are led by teachers or other school staff that have received training in the programme. In a version developed by the municipality of Botkyrka, older students lead lessons with younger students with support from school staff. The programme is manual-based and is run, for the most part, in mixed-sex groups. It discusses and problematises gender norms, including discussions of masculinity norms explicitly, violence and bystander behaviours, i.e. behaviours and reactions from third parties (bystanders) witnessing abusive or violent behaviour. It encourages dialogue and reflection using scenarios and exercises that are tailored according to feedback from participants in order to create authenticity and a high level of engagement.
>
> The programme requires considerable effort when implemented in schools in terms of planning and training staff as well continuous effort in sustaining programme implementation. The organisation MÄN provides training and implementation support to schools which is funded by fees from participating municipalities.
>
> Impact evaluations in the US have shown positive effects in terms of decreasing incidences of violent behaviour. Evaluations in Sweden show promising results, although studies indicate that schools have challenges implementing the programme as intended. One study indicates improvements in school performance as a result of violence prevention work.[981] The method is transferable but requires extensive adaptation and development work to produce country-specific material.
>
> More information: https://mvpsverige.se/

3. Overall assessment

3.1 Key findings

Awareness of boys' underperformance in education has existed for a long time in Sweden. However, the issue has not been at the centre of school policy when it comes to improving school performance, even if gender equality is firmly established

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[981] The Municipality of Botkyrka (2021), *Skolresultat i Botkyrka ökar mer än länsgenomsnittet*, Retrieved from the website of the Municipality of Botkyrka. Available at: https://www.botkyrka.se/nyhetsarkiv/nyhetsarkiv/2021-02-16-skolresultat-i-botkyrka-okar-mer-an-lansgenomsnittet

and high on the agenda in Swedish policy in general as well as in school policy, school legislation, curricula and lesson plans. Several interviewees suggest that this is the result of gender equality policy being focused on and generally understood as the empowerment of girls. Also, there has been a lack of knowledge, understanding and consensus on the obstacles facing boys in education and the causes of boys' underperformance. An explanation based on gender norms and different expectations of girls and boys has been widely accepted among policymakers and other stakeholders, but this general explanation has been difficult to translate into system-wide concrete measures to address the gender gap.

National school policy in recent years has been dominated by a focus on generally declining results for Swedish students in compulsory school in international comparisons and on growing inequalities. Poor socio-economic conditions, migration backgrounds and segregation are seen as the main risk factors for poor school performance. A large number of measures at national level have therefore been put in place over the last few years to address this issue. These measures are generic and based on efforts to strengthen the teaching profession in general, improve the quality of teaching and to allocate resources so that schools with greater needs receive more resources per pupil. From 2015, there has been a positive upward trend for Swedish students in PISA surveys among both girls and boys. Although it may seem close at hand to draw the conclusion that this is an effect of the measures in place, such connections have yet to be established.

Generic measures to improve the quality of teaching are seen by several interviewees as a way to improve boys' school performance based on the idea that **teaching practices that benefit boys' school results and commitment to schoolwork are more or less the same teaching practices found in high-quality teaching in general**. This can be seen as an indirect approach to closing the gender gap – it does not explicitly address gender norms as such but rather attempts to adapt teaching practice to overcome learning obstacles that boys face as a consequence of gender norms. The advantage of such an approach is that teaching methods, being at the centre of the teaching profession and teacher training, are fairly easy to communicate throughout the school system. Another advantage is that this approach is not sex-specific and is expected to work well for girls with poor school results too. One interviewee stressed that when it comes to national policy and system-wide measures, such as the Reading Effort, a key success factor is creating measures that are robust and sustainable over time and that can be communicated in a way that receivers of the measures – such as school principals, teachers and other school officials at local level – can comprehend and translate them into actual change in teaching practice. System-wide measures that are funded by the government also stand a greater chance of being implemented. Other suggestions from interviewees to improve boys' school results include further generic measures such as creating smaller class sizes, increasing resources and support measures for schools with poor results and offering summer school.

Since 2005, **boys' underperformance in education has been highlighted in several government reports and government agency reports but these have not raised any considerable attention**. However, recent journalistic literature, such

as the work by Emma Leijnse, has raised more interest and recent research as well as SALAR's research compilation have produced more concrete explanations and recommendations for how school culture, peer culture and teaching can be adapted to better support boys' learning. Some of these recommendations take an indirect approach in relation to gender norms by being rooted in high-quality teaching in general, whereas others represent a more direct approach in that they seek to reform and broaden gender norms through measures taken at school and classroom level.

Since the gender gap in school performance in Sweden is most prominent in reading and Swedish, and given the central role played by reading comprehension and language proficiency in general for performance across all school subjects, measures to improve **literacy and language development are seen as key in closing the gender gap**. Measures such as the Reading Effort, Write to Learn and Endure all seek to improve pedagogical approaches to strengthen students' skills in these areas. Notably, the Write to Learn approach is proven to have contributed to reducing the gender gap in school performance, and the practices propagated through the Endure project are also proven to have yielded better reading comprehension results for students.

3.2   Recommendations

In addition to raising awareness on the issue of boys' underperformance in education by **creating forums for exchanging knowledge, practices and experiences at EU level**, the interviewees made the following recommendations at national, school organiser and school levels to tackle the gender gap in education (and the underperformance of boys in education more specifically).

- **Strengthen the work in preschools was recommended to enable boys to develop skills that support school success.** As discussed earlier, research has shown that girls on average get at head start in school by having more complex verbal interactions with adults and by having developed skills in self-management, self-discipline and in interpreting others. Preschools have an important role in supporting young boys in developing such skills too.

- **Introduce systematic early detection of low achieving boys and girls** that are behind in learning is critical to improve school performance, according to the interviewees. Children that are behind from the start and that remain undetected and without support risk falling behind more and more as time goes by.

- **Strengthen reading and writing abilities as well as language development**. This was highlighted as an area that needs work**.** Measures and methods such as 'The Reading Effort, Write to Learn and Endure' are key in improving boys' school performance. Preschools also play an important role in developing reading abilities and language development. **Strengthening the quality of teaching** was also mentioned. Some of the recommendations from

research on methods that benefit boys' learning as well all students include using clearer guidance and instructions; offering students multiple ways to present and account for their knowledge; teaching study techniques and promoting the idea that school success is based on effort, employing methods with a high degree of teacher involvement.

- **Strengthen teachers' knowledge of masculinity and femininity norms**. This can support a better understanding of gender norms and gendered behaviours. This knowledge would, in turn, help teachers to support both boys and girls in dealing deal with the obstacles that they face. It is important that teachers themselves do not reinforce gender norms that create obstacles for students.

- **Strengthen prevention work in schools against teasing, bullying and violence**. Prevention work against teasing, bullying and violence in school is a fundamental measure to promote school and peer cultures that allow for broader gender norms and multiple ways of enacting masculinity and femininity.

6.3.9   Approach for case study selection

Our selection of countries for the eight case studies drew on key findings emerging from the desk research (WP 2), as well as the **mapping of a carefully selected set of structural, performance and policy factors across all EU Member States**. Figure 6-11 below provides and overview of the different factors and indicators used for this mapping exercise.

Figure 6-11   **Case study selection criteria**

Factors	Indicators
A. Structural factors	• **Geographical coverage**: this factor has been included to ensure there is a balance between Northern, Southern/Mediterranean, Western European and Central/Eastern European countries, and to align the regional partition as closely as possible with broader political, cultural and linguistic similarities.
	• **Type of education system:** differences in how education provision is structured and funded across the continuum from ISCED levels 0-4 can influence the gender gap between boys and girls, according to whether or not levels are split by primary and lower secondary phase, and the age at which learners choose between academic and vocational tracks.[982] The 2019 Eurydice report[983] groups European countries according to three 'most representative' types of systems on this basis.[984] This classification has therefore been used to help take system-level factors into account when selecting our case study sample.
	• **Level of standardisation:** the 'level of standardisation' refers to the extent to which governmental regulations determine school curricula and learning materials. In this sense, it represents the level of freedom teachers have to tailor their approaches, e.g. by using their own textbooks and teaching material. Research looking across 23 of the

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[982] Van Hek, M., C. Buchmann and G. Kraaykamp (2019). "Education Systems and Gender Differences in Reading: A Comparative Multilevel Analysis". In European Sociological Review 35 (2): 169-186. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcy054

[983] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019. The Structure of the European Education Systems 2019/20: Schematic Diagrams. Eurydice Facts and Figures. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

[984] The three categories include: a) Single structure: education is provided from the beginning to the end of compulsory schooling, with no transition between primary and lower secondary education, and with general education for all pupils (IS, NO, SE, DK, FI, EE, BG, RS, BA, HR, SI, CZ, LV, HU, and SK); b) Common core curriculum: after successful completion of primary education, all students progress to the lower secondary level, where they follow the same general curriculum (IE, PT, ES, FR, BE, IT, CY, EL, TR, PL, RO, and MT); and c) Differentiated lower secondary education: after successful completion of primary education, students are required to follow distinct educational pathways or specific types of schooling, either at the beginning or during lower secondary education (DE, NL, AT, LT, LU, and LI).

Factors	Indicators
	EU-27 Member States found a statistical correlation between the levels of 'standardisation' in curriculum design and the performance of boys. The results show that, where countries practice higher levels of standardisation of school curricula and learning materials, gender gaps in reading scores are even more to the advantage of girls.[985] Based on an overview of country standardisation rates across the EU-27,[986] we have classified Member States by those that have below average curriculum standardisation (which decreases the gender gap), and those which have average or above average standardised curriculums (the latter favouring the performance of girls).[987]
B. Performance factors	• **Gender Equality Index (EIGE):** this composite indicator refers to a Member State's progress in gender equality on a scale from 1-100 of which 100 is the highest score. Core domains measured encompass work, money, knowledge, time, power and health. Additional domains include violence against women and intersecting inequalities.[988] • **Gender gap in reading attainment (PISA):** this indicator refers to performance score point differences between boys and girls in the core PISA subject of reading. It identifies the countries where gender disparities shrank over the past decade. It also specifically looks at the percentage change for boys, to determine whether shrinking disparities can be attributed specifically to boys' improved performance. • **Gender gap in ELET (Eurostat):** this indicator refers to the gender gap between male and female early leavers from education and training aged 18 to 24, having completed at most lower secondary education and not in further education or training. • **Gender gap in tertiary education attainment (Eurostat):** this indicator refers to the gender gap between men and women aged 30-34 that have attained a tertiary education.

[985] Van Hek, M., C. Buchmann and G. Kraaykamp (2019). "Education Systems and Gender Differences in Reading: A Comparative Multilevel Analysis". In *European Sociological Review 35* (2): 169-186. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcy054
[986] Ibid. Appendix A: *Descriptive Statistics.*
[987] As the EU-27 standardisation average is currently at 0.37, standardisation rates from 0.30-0.39 will be classified as ''average'', while rates below (0.01 – 0.29) will be considered ''below average'' and rates above (0.40- 0.99) will be considered ''above average''.
[988] See https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020

Factors	Indicators
C. Policy factors	• **National Action Plan on Gender Equality in place:** to understand how different countries approach gender issues, a useful starting point is to explore the high-level frameworks in place across Member States that are designed to ensure that gender equality is mainstreamed across the system. This provides an indication of the extent to which overcoming gender disparities forms part of individual Member States' overarching policy framework. Based on the mapping conducted during our desk research, this indicator maps whether a country has an active national action plan on gender equality in place. • **Evidence of educational strategies or initiatives tackling gender differences:** beyond wide strategic frameworks and commitments, several Member States have made concerted efforts to overcoming gender differences in education specifically. This includes specific initiatives to tackle underperformance in boys' reading, gender stereotypes, gender-based violence, or issues of sexual identity and early school leaving. Based on the existence of such country-specific initiatives, this indicator provides an overview of Member States in which gender-conscious educational strategies have been identified. • **Evidence of initiatives related to tackling the underperformance of boys:** this final indicator captures whether the country mapping revealed specific initiatives in the Member States related to tackling the underperformance of boys and young men in education more specifically. This overview encompasses specific policy initiatives or measures aimed at addressing the causes and/or implications of the underperformance of boys and young men in education, and could be local, regional or national.

Based on our analysis of the indicators listed above across all EU Member States, we made a **balanced selection of eight countries for in-depth case study research**, prioritising Member States focusing more strongly on tackling gender disparities in compulsory education. In addition to ensuring geographical balance, our selection of case study countries made a distinction between countries with 'strong track records' in tackling gender stereotypes and boys' underperformance (i.e. countries which have a low gender gap in compulsory education, or where a high number of inspiring examples exist to tackle gender stereotypes or underperformance among boys), 'moderate track records' (i.e. countries where the gender gap is slightly larger, but where some evidence of targeted policies was identified) and countries where

significant gender gaps exist. Figure 6-12 below show how the eight case study countries selected map across the different selection criteria.

Figure 6-12   List of 8 case study countries

A. Structural factors	
Geography	• Northern European countries: FI, SE • Western European countries: DE, IE, LU • Southern/Mediterranean country: PT • Central and Eastern European countries: BG, CZ
Type of education system	• Single structure: BG, CZ, FI, SE • Common core: IE, PT • Differentiated: DE, LU
Curriculum standardisation	• Above average (0.40-0.99): BG, LU, PT • Average (0.30-0.39): DE • Below average (0.01-0.29): CZ, FI, IE, SE
B. Performance factors	
Gender Equality Index score in 2020	• Above average (70 or above): FI, IE, LU, SE • Average (between 60 and 70): DE, PT • Below average (below 60): BG, CZ
% change in boys' reading attainment (PISA, 2012-2018)	• Increase: FI, PT, SE • Stable: CZ, DE • Decrease: BG, IE, LU
% change in ELET gender gap (Eurostat, 2015-2019)	• Increase: BG, DE, FI, IE, LU, SE • Decrease: CZ, FI
% change in gender gap in tertiary education attainment (Eurostat, 2015-2019)	• Increase: BG, CZ, DE, FI, SE • Decrease: IE, LU, PT
C. Policy factors	
Countries with strong track records and inspiring practices	• Finland (Northern) • Germany (Western European) • Ireland (Western European) • Luxembourg (Western European) • Sweden (Northern)
Countries moderate track records	• Portugal (Southern/Mediterranean) • Czechia (Central and Eastern European)