

# Combating gender stereotypes and sexism in and through education



Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy

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” A girl has the power to go forward in her life. She’s not only a mother, she’s not only a sister, she’s not only a wife. She should have an identity. She should be recognised and she has equal rights as a boy.

**Malala Yousafzai, Women’s Rights Activist,  
Children’s Activist, Nobel Peace Prize winner 2014**

### **Gender equality**

■ Gender equality means equal visibility, empowerment, responsibility and participation of both sexes in all spheres of public and private life. Achieving gender equality is central to the protection of human rights, the functioning of democracy, respect for the rule of law, and economic growth and competitiveness.

### **Gender stereotypes**

■ Gender stereotypes are generalised views or preconceived ideas, according to which individuals are categorised into particular gender groups, typically defined as “women” and “men” and are arbitrarily assigned characteristics and roles determined and limited by their sex. Stereotypes are both descriptive, in that members of a certain group are perceived to have the same attributes regardless of individual differences, and prescriptive as they set the parameters for what societies deem acceptable behaviour. Stereotyping becomes problematic when it is used as a vehicle to degrade and discriminate women. Abolishing negative gender stereotypes is essential to achieving gender equality, and educators are central to prompting this change.



## Gender inequalities

Gender inequalities are a persistent feature of the education system in Council of Europe member states. Gender stereotyping continues to influence the behaviour and practices of school personnel, despite equality legislation, policies, international commitments and initiatives on the part of national governments. Schools tend to educate in ways that conform to gender stereotypes, and the majority of school learning environments do not encourage pupils to choose subjects in ways that are gender neutral. Furthermore, studies show that many of the school textbooks used in European countries include stories and images that reflect a stereotyped portrayal of the role and activities of women and men, girls and boys. Men are still more often represented than women; vocabulary is in contradiction with the principle of gender equality; and the main characters are mostly males.

At the same time, **education has an enormous potential to promote social values and shape opinions – so why not use it for the benefit of gender equality?** The education system is in a privileged position to reverse the situation, to change the mind-set of girls and boys; women and men, and to play a crucial role to allow girls and boys to fulfil their true and full potential, by avoiding transmitting preconceived ideas about gender roles.

## Using Council of Europe standards to eradicate gender stereotypes in and through education means:

- ▶ promoting and encouraging measures aimed specifically at implementing gender mainstreaming at all levels of the education system and in teacher education;
- ▶ addressing gender stereotypes in school policies and practices;
- ▶ using informal education to combat gender stereotypes;
- ▶ promoting the role of education in addressing sexism, including new manifestations of sexism, cyberbullying, cyber-misogyny and sexting;
- ▶ preventing violence against women and girls.



As an organisation set up to protect and promote democracy, the rule of law and human rights, the Council of Europe promotes high-quality and non-stereotyped education at all levels of the education system. The following standards can be used by the member states as benchmarks to measure progress towards complying with standards for an education free from gender stereotypes:

- ▶ **The Committee of Ministers Recommendation on gender mainstreaming in education** (CM/Rec(2007)13) puts forward a set of comprehensive measures which the member states need to put in place to ensure effective gender mainstreaming in education. They cover legal frameworks, school governance and school organisation, initial and in-service education and training for teachers and trainers, course programmes, school curricula, subjects and examinations, teaching materials, teaching methods and practices, education for democratic citizenship and human rights, educational and career guidance, preventing and combating sexist violence, vulnerable groups, media, and research on gender and education issues. The recommendation also calls for regular monitoring of the implementation of the above measures.
- ▶ **The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence** (Istanbul Convention, CETS No. 210 (2011)), a legally binding treaty, contains several provisions related to gender stereotypes and sexism as factors which underpin inequality between women and men in all domains, including education. The convention requires the promotion of gender equality, mutual respect in interpersonal relationships and non-violence as early as possible. It highlights the important role of educational establishments in enhancing the promotion of these values. The convention extends the obligation to promote the principles of equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, and non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships in all informal educational facilities as well as in sports, cultural and leisure facilities, and in the media. The convention requires states parties to take the necessary steps to include teaching materials about issues such as non-stereotyped gender roles and gender-based violence against women in formal curricula and at all levels.

## Good practices

■ The Council of Europe has put together a compilation of examples of activities that the Council of Europe member states are implementing to encourage an education free from gender stereotypes. The compilation also identifies ways to implement the measures included in the Committee of Ministers Recommendation on gender mainstreaming in education. Some of these good practices include:

- ▶ STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) disciplines promotion among girls;
- ▶ campaigns to inform and motivate girls and women to choose non-stereotypical careers;
- ▶ gender equality training programmes for teachers;
- ▶ gender proofing of text books and teaching materials;
- ▶ the creation of a gender-aware school culture and a whole school approach to gender equality;
- ▶ initiatives aimed at increasing the gender awareness of parents;
- ▶ measures to increase the number of men in early childhood education and care;
- ▶ peer-to-peer education for gender equality;
- ▶ financial assistance for families to support girls' school attendance.



[www.coe.int/equality](http://www.coe.int/equality)  
[gender.equality@coe.int](mailto:gender.equality@coe.int)

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 47 member states, 28 of which are members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

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