

Foreword

The presence of a significant proportion of women teachers - particularly in the early childhood and primary levels - is a long-standing phenomenon that characterises the education systems of many countries: Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom are examples of countries often referred to as having 'feminised' teaching professions, denoting that women represent a significant majority of the teaching workforce. An increased number of females in the teaching profession is often associated with education systems that have achieved or nearly achieved universal basic education. On the other hand, those countries that continue to strive towards Education for All (EFA) and the education Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are more frequently associated with having a deficit of women teachers.

The debate surrounding women, the teaching profession and feminisation is wide-ranging. Issues have ranged from the reasons why the teaching profession became gender-imbalanced in favour of women in certain countries in the first place, to what the impact of this might have on learning processes and educational outcomes. There have been multiple explorations around the definition of the term itself - such as whether it refers only to numbers and percentages or to deeper gendered assumptions regarding the nature of teaching. Further analysis that explores the feminisation of teaching as it relates to education provision, the profession itself and women's equality in employment have naturally followed. But until now, this has largely focused on countries in the global North.

Globally, more children are in school than ever before, and gender equity in education continues to be a priority area for policy-makers and education programmers. Despite this, teacher shortages remain a key challenge in both achieving the MDGs and maintaining EFA in the majority of developing countries and particularly in the Commonwealth.

To further explore the issue of feminisation as it relates to the practice of education the Commonwealth Secretariat and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, with support from the Commonwealth of Learning, embarked on a study encompassing five countries.

The study presents findings from Dominica, Lesotho, India, Samoa and Sri Lanka. It explores the feminisation debate from a variety of perspectives that have dominated much of the discourse on the role of women teachers within expanding education systems, particularly within primary education provision. Four of the countries - Dominica, Lesotho, Samoa and Sri Lanka - have a majority of women teachers in their teaching workforce. In the case of India, the study focuses on the contrasting state-level experiences of Kerala and Rajasthan; Kerala is known for the high percentage of female teachers in its workforce, whereas, in Rajasthan, female teachers are few and far between. The study analyses issues through a broader lens on gender equity as it pertains not just to education, but also to employment and women's rights and empowerment more generally.

This multi-country analysis explores core similarities and differences among the five countries. In Sri Lanka and the Indian state of Kerala, high female teacher numbers have existed since independence, while in other countries the phenomenon is more recent. Similarly, while all have a relatively large female majority at the primary education level, at the secondary level the experiences start to diverge; countries such as Samoa and Lesotho have relative gender balance within the teaching workforce at secondary level, while in Dominica the proportion of females remain a noticeable majority.