

Introduction

'...education is not just an arrangement for training to develop skills (important as that is), it is also a recognition of the nature of the world, with its diversity and richness, and an appreciation of the importance of freedom and reasoning as well as friendship. The need for that understanding – that vision – has never been stronger'. AMARTYA SEN, SPEECH TO THE COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION CONFERENCE, EDINBURGH, 2003

What is a gender-responsive school? It is a school that is aware of existing gender inequalities and equips its students with appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes to deal with these and to make changes that lead to greater equality and respect for diversity.

The issue of gender equality occupies a central place in global policy discourse on education and human and social development. Gender equality in education not only implies that both girls and boys have equal access to schooling; it also means that the process of education is empowering and geared towards changing stereotypical expectations of girls and boys, and thus in turn towards transforming gender relations and the relative unequal positioning of the sexes in society.

This raises certain important questions regarding the role of school and everything that happens there. For example, are schooling processes geared towards questioning prevalent stereotypes? Are teachers well equipped to organise teaching and learning processes in a manner that helps a school become a gender-responsive institution? There cannot be just one answer to these questions, as the situation in every single school will be different, but in general the situation in most countries does not appear to be encouraging.

A Commonwealth Secretariat study on 'Gender Analysis of Classroom and Other Schooling Processes in Secondary Schools', carried out in seven countries in 2007–2008, found that schools in most cases reinforced the existing gender ideology, stereotypes, norms and expectations. These seven countries – representing a wide spectrum of economic, geographical, social, cultural and educational contexts – were India, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Samoa, Seychelles and Trinidad and Tobago (see APPENDIX I). The fact that this feedback came from diverse countries reflects the need for intervention at the level of schools and teachers. That is where this Action Guide comes in.

Aims

The purpose of the Action Guide is to provide effective tools for teachers, principals and school administrators and managers to help them make schools effective change institutions. It aims to provide ideas and mechanisms to make classrooms and other schooling activities more gender-responsive so that established norms are questioned and students become capable of fostering a new kind of gender relations. This will ultimately be reflected in fuller development of their personalities and learning levels. Gender-responsive schools are important in all kinds of situations: where girls continue to remain behind boys as well as where boys are relatively underachieving in education; and in countries that are yet to achieve gender parity and those that already have. The guide is based on research, pilot projects and trialling in secondary schools and is therefore largely valid for that level, but many of its ideas can equally be tried at primary level as well.

Audience

The main intended users of the Action Guide are classroom teachers, principals, school administrators and managers from all Commonwealth countries. Other audiences include people from the school community, including children themselves and parents, trainers who may wish to use the guide as a training resource, and others involved in similar work such as researchers or ministry representatives.

Developing the Action Guide

The guide is mainly based on the seven-country study on gender analysis of classroom and other processes mentioned above and on a pilot action project titled 'Action Gender in School' undertaken in a selected number of schools in four of these countries: India, Malaysia, Seychelles and Trinidad and Tobago. We organised a series of workshops to facilitate sharing and the exchange of ideas among country teams. In addition, a trialling workshop was organised with four southern African countries (Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique and South Africa) to test activities and collect further material (see APPENDIX II). Two Mozambique schools also carried out selected activities and shared their experiences. In addition, the Action Guide draws from some other examples and experiences – for example, implementation of the Social Learning Package in India (see APPENDIX III).

The very purpose of starting the 'Action Gender in School' projects was to gather evidence of different ways of turning a school into a gender-responsive institution. The guide is the result of collaboration among several players, particularly the team leaders and other researchers, teachers and other staff of the schools participating in the pilot projects, and participants at the workshops. From their reports and personal accounts, and through feedback in the workshops, those involved have contributed their ideas about what should go into the guide, what works,

what doesn't work, what the problems are and what the successes are. Thus rather than being just an information manual, the guide's focus is on action and changing things.

There are many books about gender in education but little available that offers practical and tested solutions for action at different levels, especially in schools. What makes this guide distinct is that it is based on real experiences and not merely ideas. It draws on the wealth of practical, well-documented experience in a variety of styles – reflection and analysis, workshop materials, action checklists, summaries of findings and experiences – to provide lively and engaging content with real life examples and voices.

Gender: conceptual frame

The guide focuses on making schooling processes gender-responsive. By 'schooling processes' we mean all that happens in a school: how teachers treat their children; the language that is used; the methods of teaching that are practised; how responsibilities are distributed in classrooms and outside classrooms; and how sports and other outside-classroom activities are organised. In sum, we mean all the practices that lead to knowledge and learning of skills and that shape attitudes and beliefs among the learners.

If schooling processes and opportunities within education are not geared to question unequal gender relations and established notions of femininity and masculinity, inequalities will continue to exist. Even when both girls and boys have equal access to education, there is no guarantee of equality in treatment (though of course unequal treatment is likely to be more prevalent in situations where there is disparity in access).

Gender is not only a women's issue; it is a people's issue. Femininity does not exist in isolation from masculinity. The construction and power of one determines the construction and power of the other. Gender relations are neither 'natural' nor given. They are constructed to make unequal relations seem 'natural'. There is undue pressure on both boys and girls to live up to the established norms of masculinity and femininity. Girls and women are not only primarily responsible for all the major care responsibilities at home, they are also over-represented in care-related professions the world over. While girls face social control, discrimination and domination in most societies, boys too suffer from the stereotyping that exists in a patriarchal culture. Discouraged from being emotional, gentle or fearful, they are thrust into the role of breadwinners, protectors and warriors. The notion of masculinity takes extreme forms when education itself is seen as being feminine or anti-masculine and therefore undesirable for boys and men. Unequal gender relations, therefore, stunt the freedom of both girls and boys to develop their human capacities to their fullest. The guide seeks to question the norms and practices that reflect and reinforce such notions.

Gender inequality cannot be viewed in isolation from other forms of inequalities that exist in various societies and systems. It is often embedded, for example, in inequalities of caste, class, race, religion or location. The impact of gender differentiated norms and practices are often sharper and more complex for groups that also face other forms of marginalisation and vulnerability. It is important to understand and acknowledge this phenomenon and to appreciate the linkages and implications in the context of education.

Approach

In its general approach, the guide:

- Aims to capture the core issues of gender, while recognising that there are national and regional issues and differences
- Covers issues relating to both boys and girls, masculine and feminine identities, and addresses both men and women
- Includes case studies and examples from a number of Commonwealth Secretariat studies and pilot action projects to emphasise successes and challenges and how solutions have been found to address those challenges
- Draws on users' own experiences and situations and encourages reflection
- Includes a range of activities for different users, allowing them to work through the guide in different ways to meet particular needs
- Illustrates changes in teachers' thinking and how such changes can take place
- Adopts an active-learning, enjoyable, self-study approach that leads users towards practical action and change

Overview

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Using the Action Guide
Action plan

UNIT 1 The basics

- 1.1 Gender concepts
- 1.2 Stereotypes
- 1.3 Gender and education

UNIT 2 The wider context

- 2.1 The big picture
- 2.2 The national education context

UNIT 3 A whole school approach

- 3.1 School ethos
- 3.2 Across the school
- 3.3 Staff development
- 3.4 Involving the wider community
- 3.5 School gender policy

UNIT 4 Teaching and learning

- 4.1 Entry points
- 4.2 Curriculum
- 4.3 Classroom dynamics
- 4.4 Underachievement
- 4.5 Teaching and learning for change
- 4.6 Making changes last

UNIT 5 Approaches and methods

- 5.1 Action research
- 5.2 Gender analysis
- 5.3 Change management
- 5.4 Evaluation

Action plan
and reflection

Using the Action Guide

This part of the Introduction explains how the Action Guide is organised and includes learning advice. We recommend that you read through it before you start in order to get the most out of the guide.

What's in the Action Guide

As the overview on the facing page shows, the Action Guide is made up of five units. Each unit consists of several topics.

At the start of each unit there is an overview that introduces the unit and its topics and also highlights the links to the other units.

The topics follow a similar pattern. They include:

- A short introduction setting out the learning outcomes – what you can expect to know, understand or do by the end of each topic
- Examples drawn from the initial research studies and/or the action projects
- Activities to apply learning to your own context or experience
- Explanations, definitions and some short readings
- A final review to check what you have learnt

We suggest you spend a few minutes now looking at the overview opposite and the unit overviews. Note the units and topics that seem of most interest to you. Given the range of countries and regions and the diversity of users and roles, everyone will have different needs and interests and you will need to interpret and apply the examples and activities.

You will find you can work through the units in any order. The way units and topics are sequenced and structured makes the Action Guide flexible and practical for users. To give some examples, you could:

- Start with Unit 1 and work through to the end
- Start with the unit that seems most professionally relevant to you and come back to others later (for example, a headteacher might start with Unit 3 A whole school approach and a teacher with Unit 4 Teaching and learning)
- Jump straight into a topic of special interest to you at the moment (for example, Topic 4.4 Underachievement if that is a problem currently facing you, or Topic 5.1 Action research if you are planning an action research project)
- Use activities and ideas as a stimulus for talking to other people and learning from them
- Dip into particular topics and then follow up links to other units
- Skim through the whole guide first and then decide what to focus on

The guide is also flexible in terms of learning style, with its mix of activities, examples and explanations. For example, if you are an active and practical learner you might start on an activity and read the background and examples later. If you are more reflective and theoretical you might like to study examples and draw your conclusions before trying the activities.

And finally the guide is also flexible in terms of users. It can be used for self-study, for studying on your own combined sometimes with discussion and consultation with others, for group learning or as a staff development resource for trainers.

We suggest you now spend a couple of minutes thinking about how you might turn the flexibility to your advantage in terms of the order that would best suit you, your learning style and whether you will work through the units alone or with others. The main point is: there isn't a right or a wrong way to use the guide, just the right way for you.

A note of explanation about the source material: The Action Guide is based on real experiences from schools. As explained earlier, it draws on research studies, action projects and workshops. Almost all the examples come from a range of secondary schools – large, small, rural, urban, single-sex, co-ed. Where this is relevant, some information is given about the kind of school. All secondary school names and names of pupils and teachers have been changed in the text.

Many examples are from the seven initial research studies. If these examples (referred to as [COUNTRY GENDER ANALYSIS STUDY]) sometimes seem rather negative, remember that the research phase was about identifying problems and highlighting where intervention was needed. Nigeria, Pakistan and Samoa did not take part in the action projects so these countries have not provided examples of action and solutions. Other examples are drawn from the four action projects that tackled solutions to the problems (referred to as [COUNTRY ACTION PROJECT]). They offer documented experiences of practical action – challenges and successes, models and tools. These projects are still ongoing, so often the examples are in the present tense or describe work in hand. Responses of participants to activities during the developmental workshop are another source of experience (referred to as [SOUTHERN AFRICA TRIALLING WORKSHOP]).

When you read the examples and activities, you may sometimes feel at first that a particular one is not relevant to you as it is from a quite different context. But if you look more closely, you will probably realise that even examples from dissimilar or unfamiliar contexts can have relevance and can be adapted and applied in varied situations. Therefore, we suggest that you read, and in some cases re-read, and you may find your own responses changing.

In addition, examples often illustrate more than one theme. For example, an account that seems to be about parental attitudes and involving the wider community probably also throws light on stereotypes, career choices and classroom dynamics. So look out for all these other themes – and again constantly compare and contrast with your own experience.

Throughout the Action Guide the user or reader is addressed as ‘you’. Whether you are a teacher, a headteacher, a ministry of education official or someone else, ‘you’ are treated as someone actively involved in learning, not just a passive reader. And who are ‘we’? ‘We’ stands for everyone who has been involved in the research, the action projects, the workshops, and writing the Action Guide. It means not just the authors, but also everyone who took part in what we have enjoyed as a collaborative project. We want to pass on what we have learned to you.

Before you start

One first recommendation: get a notebook you can use as a learning journal. Then, before starting work on the Action Guide, think about these five points.

1 Learning

As explained earlier in the Introduction, you don’t have to start at the beginning of the guide and work through each unit in order. You can adapt materials and activities to suit yourself. How do you like to learn? Do you tend to be more practical or more theoretical? Follow the approach that you will find most effective.

If you have your own copy of the Action Guide, write your responses to the activities in the spaces provided so that you keep all your work together. If you are sharing a copy or using a library copy, keep your written activities together in a learning journal so that you have a complete record of your learning, not just separate scraps of paper.

2 Reflecting

Get into the habit of reflecting as you work through the Action Guide. Think how you can apply what you learn to your work, or what you might do differently in future in the light of what you learn. Use the review at the end of each topic to help you reflect. Try to keep a learning journal to record what you learn and your reflections. Look back at your entries and at your initial action plan from time to time to see how your ideas are changing and log your progress.

3 Timing

It is impossible to say exactly how long each topic will take. Some topics cover more ground than others. And it will depend on you. Do you aim to get a quick overview? Or to study in more depth, doing all the activities and

following them up? In planning your route through the Action Guide, think about how much time you have and plan accordingly. For example, if you are working on your own, you might decide to set aside three hours a week over several weeks. Or you might decide to work more intensively over a short period. If you are working with colleagues, you will probably need to plan in your diaries the times to meet and what work to do in between meetings.



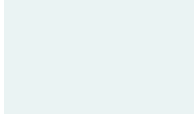

4 Collecting material

Start building up a collection of materials – activities, ideas, experiences – that will be of use in your work. Share them with colleagues.

5 Getting support

Who can you draw on for support as you work through the Action Guide? Possibilities include colleagues, managers, friends and family. Maybe you can network with other schools doing similar work. Take time to get interest and support from management and colleagues.

Key

	Activity
	Example
	Reading
	Links

Finally, here is an activity to bring together the questions you have thought about in this introduction and give you a plan for working through the Action Guide.

ACTIVITY Initial action plan

What do you hope to achieve by working through this Action Guide?

Your three main objectives.

1

2

3

Learning In what order do you plan to work through the guide?
What is the most effective learning approach for you?

Timing How much time will you spend working through the guide?

How many weeks?

How much time each week?

Support What resources/ people will you draw on for support?

At the end, how will you know you have succeeded in your objectives?

ACTIVITY INTRODUCTION

Now you have completed this action plan, you should have a clearer idea of how you are going to use the Action Guide and where you are going to start. At the end of the guide, you will have a chance to review what you have achieved. **We wish you every success!**