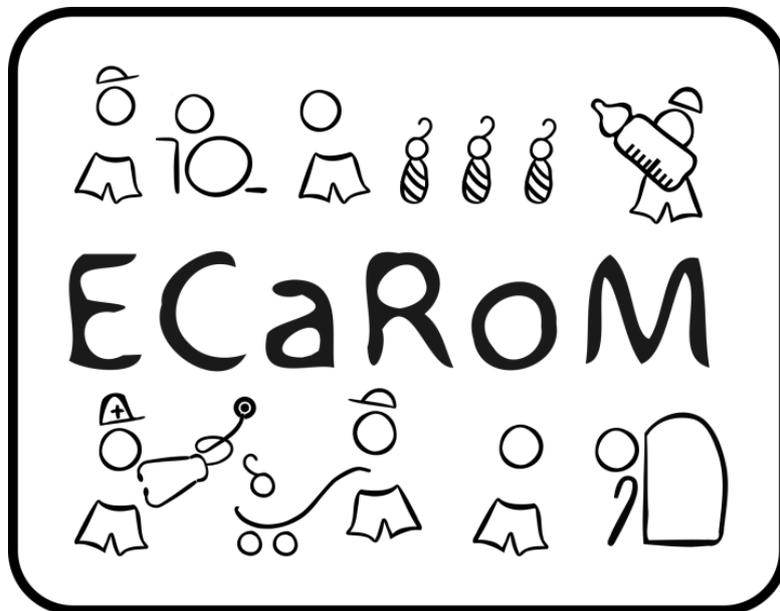


Early Care and the Role of Men (ECaRoM)

NATIONAL REPORT

NEEDS ASSESMENT ON GENDER SENSITIVE EARLY EDUCATION IN
BULGARIA

Research report in the framework of the project ECaRoM "Early care and the role of men" on the current state of gender-reflective pedagogy in relation to masculinities and care.



Impressum

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Contents

1.Introduction	4
1.1. Aims and scope of the report.....	5
2.State of art in gender equality in Bulgaria.....	5
2.1. Overview	5
2.2. Policy context on gender equality.....	6
2.3. Gender equality and education	7
2.4. Gender equality and care	7
2.5. Occupational segregation.....	8
2.6. Professional orientation of students.....	9
2.7. Early childhood education in Bulgaria	10
2.8. Legal and policy context of early childhood education system.....	11
2.9. ECEC teachers.....	12
2.10. Education and training of children in kindergartens.....	13
2.11. Caring Masculinity and the Role of fathers	17
3. Qualitative data analysis.....	20
3.1. Methodology.....	20
3.1.1. Individual and group interviews with ECEC professionals and primary school teachers ..	20
3.1.2. Focus groups with ECEC psychologists, children and parents' association and networks, educational experts and Roma community educators and mediators	22
3.2. Results and discussion	25
3.2.1. Gender equality in the educational curriculum.....	25
3.2.2. Daily life in kindergarten – participation of boys and girls in care activities.....	25
3.2.3. Main gender stereotypes in kindergarten, toys and plays.....	26
3.2.4. Care and care professions in educational content and in practice	28
3.2.5. Fathers in caring role	28
3.2.6. Parents-teachers communication	29
3.2.7. Projects, initiatives, and practices with potential for overcoming gender stereotypes	30
3.2.8. Education and trainings for teachers, materials which are of interest	31
3.2.9. Men in teaching profession.....	31
4. Conclusions and Recomendations	32
5. Literature	37
6. Annexes.....	40
Annex 1 – ECAROM INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES (ECECS).....	40
Annex 2 – QUESTIONNAIRE INTERVIEWS.....	42
Annex 3 - QUESTIONNAIRE FOR FOCUS GROUPS	43
Annex 4 - FIELD DIARY	44

1.Introduction

Traditionally care work is undervalued around the world, and usually talks about it are narrowed on its unfair unpaid part which is done by women. Thus, it is mainly considered as an issue of women's empowerment and gender equality.

In a broaden sense care work refers to the sector of economic activities, both paid and unpaid, related to the provision of social and material care and includes care for children, the elderly, and the disabled, health care, education, and as well, leisure and other personal services, all of which contribute to nurturing and supporting present and future generations.

According to EIGE definition 'care economy' is "*Part of human activity, both material and social, that is concerned with the process of caring for the present and future labour force, and the human population as a whole, including the domestic provisioning of food, clothing and shelter*". With more working women today, what is used to be done unpaid, such as childcare, early-childhood education, cleaning, cooking, gardening, etc. families are either sharing in household or outsourcing. Thus, the development of care economy is a way to contribute to achieve gender equality.

The service sector is a fundamental component of many national economies and the care economy is the fastest expanding part of it in terms of the generated GDP and of the created jobs and employment. In a recent research of the International Labour Organization where Bulgaria was included, it is estimated that the global employment in care jobs is expected to grow from 206 million to 358 million by 2030 simply based on sociodemographic changes. The figure will be even more dramatic to 475 million if governments invest resources to meet the UN sustainable development goal targets on education, health, long-term care, and gender equality (ILO, 2019).

In nowadays world the value of care work is more and more recognized by societies. In the last two years it became vital in the circumstances of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Data from surveys and public opinion in many countries acknowledge the fact that due to the occupational segregation in caring professions - in education, health care and social work - women are at the forefront against the pandemic. The public attention to care professions had increased and lead to raising their prestige, importance for the society, brought to the public issues of betterment of the working conditions, salaries, etc. in this sector of economy.

Growing care economy provides a wide range of occupations and is beneficial both for women and men. This means that care work must be understood as a domain not just of women. Its expansion can draw more men into care work, reduce gender imbalance among care workers, and raise value of care. Both men and women are encouraged to take up work in this sector, and society has the role not only to promote care work but also to provide these workers decent wages and working conditions. Better quality care jobs would help to tackle gender inequalities in the labour market. Change in occupational choices and attitudes, specific encouraging measures and incentives may attract more men to this sector of economy. A key finding of another recent research works up that "*the persistence of gender job segregation is a strong signal that more dynamic education and training systems and other incentives will be required to encourage young men and women (15–29 years) to engage in occupations dominated by the other gender*" (Eurofund, 2021, p. 2).

1.1. Aims and scope of the report

This report is aiming to contribute to take a step forward in understanding the concept of *caring masculinity* and how to make it to be better understood and applied in the Bulgarian society. This will support activities to overcoming existing gender stereotypes, to promoting gender equality in the country, to encouraging boys and young men to be free and happy with their career choices in care economy and will encourage female and male teaching staff to support them in this from very early age.

The first part of the report is presenting the current situation of gender equality policy in the country as it is developed by the state, the circumstances in these developments, the current situation of gender division of care work in the households and in the occupations. As gender sensitive education from early age is the target of our research, the preschool education and its institutions are presented, as well as relevant to the topic research, good practices, etc., especially those focused on involving more men in the preschool education and care. That's why a specific attention is given to the changing stereotypes and involvement of fathers in the life of children.

The second part of the report is focused on the findings of focus groups and individual and group interviews with kindergarten teachers and other educators, with a specific focus on Roma community educators and teachers who work in the ethnically mixed environment. In this we follow the methodology developed under the EcaRoM project which is fine tuned to the Bulgarian cultural environment. The goal is to understand what the most favourable way for the children, parents, teachers is to implement gender equality approach through involvement of more men in early childhood development and through presenting gender-neutral occupations to children.

2.State of art in gender equality in Bulgaria

2.1. Overview

The 2020 Human Development Report's Gender Inequality Index (GII)—a measure of women's empowerment in health, education, and economic status—shows that overall progress in gender inequality has been slowing in recent years (UNDP, p. 1).

Despite the fact, that Bulgaria is in the group of countries which are considered as of very high human development, its rank is dropping down, to two places below the rank it had in 2018. The same trend of very slow progress and even backlash in some areas shows for Bulgaria the EIGE Gender Equality Index (EIGE, 2020). This is just a little evidence of the very complicated situation in the country where issues of gender equality became very sensitive for the society in last couple of years.

Since the end of 2017 and up to now, the issue of ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, better known as the Istanbul Convention, has been at the centre of societal and political debates. The legally recognized concepts of equality like sex, gender, gender equality, sexual orientation, gender-based violence, transgender, etc. were replaced by the unclear notion of so-called gender ideology. These basic standards and concepts remain unclear to the broaden public, so many strategic documents, programmes, projects, etc. which tackled gender or children's issues, were rejected due to the strong opposition of political, civic, and religious

leaders and organisations. The non-governmental organisations which supported ratification of the Convention were strongly attacked as well. The concept of gender equality has been compromised also by the Constitutional Court. In its ruling on the Istanbul Convention (Judgment No. 13 from 2018) the Court deemed it anti-constitutional, and in its binding interpretative decision to resolve the issue of the concept of terms “sex” and “gender” it considered that the term “sex (пол)” in the Constitution should be understood only in its biological sense (Judgement No. 15 from 2021).

These decisions contribute to maintaining and reproducing gender stereotyping and damaging for any gender equality issue in Bulgaria, and their impact goes beyond the concrete legal issue. The recent international media project “Europe talks”, which engages people with different views in cross-border debates on political topics, shows that most Europeans (85%) accept same-sex marriage, while most Bulgarians (62%) categorically reject it even more critically than the Hungarians and the Greeks, who have been opposed it in the past (Europe talks, 2021).

The protection of human rights and the work for improvement the status of equality in the country is weakened by the created atmosphere of underestimation of gender equality. As a result, the activities of NGOs with children and youth were drastically limited by the institutions, because the opponents of the Convention, of the draft Strategy for the Child (2019-2030), of the amendments of the Child Protection Act demanded that NGOs work in kindergartens and schools on the topics of health, gender and sexual education be banned by law, except in the context of teaching biology in the upper grades. The implementation of the already adopted standards on gender equality remains the main challenge in this complex situation, on one hand; on the other, according to experts: *“As a result, the country does not currently have any strategic policies for children”* (Bulgaria grows).

2.2. Policy context on gender equality

The above-mentioned situation did not contribute the state to carry out overall and complete gender equality policy. The Law on Equality between Women and Men (2016) affirms the duties of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy as the person that manages, coordinates and controls gender equality policy. Having in mind the limited staff and other resources allocated, on one hand, and all the functions required by the EU directives, on the other, is hardly to expect reliable monitoring of the gender equality situation. Identification of areas where to adopt positive measures for ensuring equality is compromised also due to the lack or limited accurate, regular, affordable to the public sex disaggregated statistical data to measure gender inequality, as well as of reliable and accurate set of gender-based indicators to monitor progress of the implemented policy measures.

The observation of the NGOs activists and experts is that *“over the last couple of years there have not been any substantial developments at the national level in the field of policy on gender equality; the functions of the governmental bodies were implemented formally and mainly just technically, which also created the conditions for the backlash of these issues conceptually and in practice in the country”* (Tisheva, p. 7).

By Decision of the Council of Ministers from 30 December 2020, a new National Strategy for promoting equality between women and men for the period 2021-2030 was adopted. The Strategy does not differ substantially from the previous one and does not contain more advanced targets and benchmarks in terms of education and care except vague conclusion that *“...more attention should be paid to overcoming stereotypes in the choice of education and profession and promoting professional realization and career, especially in the field of STEM”*.

2.3. Gender equality and education

Protection against Discrimination Act (2005) in Art. 35 stipulates provisions for the integration of gender equality content in the curricula and syllabi in the whole system of education:

“(1) Persons providing training and education, as well as the compilers of textbooks and learning materials, shall be obliged to give in formation and to apply methods of training and education in a way focused on overcoming stereotypes about the role of women and men in all spheres of social and family life.

(2) Kindergartens, schools, and higher schools shall include in their educational curricula and syllabi training in problems of the equality of women and men”.

There is no evidence that the execution of these provisions is regularly monitored by the state. The last comprehensive research establishing whether there are discriminatory practices in the content of textbooks and teaching aids, whether they provide civic education, non-discrimination, equal opportunities, human rights, knowledge of cultural diversity, and whether they meet the requirements of Art. 35 of the above-mentioned Act, as well as the established relevant standards by the Council of Europe on the grounds of sex, disability, race and ethnic origin, religion, sexual orientation, was done in 2011 by an independent team of experts assigned by the Commission for Protection against Discrimination. The object of the study were mainly textbooks and teaching materials for preschool, primary and low secondary school education. The conclusion is that *“concerning "gender" direct discrimination is not revealed, but there is indirect discrimination based on the construction and affirmation of the principle of repetition of certain stereotypes that assign different roles and representation of men and women in the social world. In this way, the stereotype is transformed into a discriminatory category, insofar as it imposes certain and unequal spheres of activity of female and male subjects, respectively boys and girls”* (Study, 2011, p. 8).

The National Strategy for the Development of Pedagogical Staff (2014 – 2020) concluded that the feminization of the profession is in raise but did not provide measures to overcome it (see p. 8, p. 22).

The Strategic Framework for Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021 - 2030) does not consist any provisions on gender equality for any level of education.

2.4. Gender equality and care

Traditionally care for children, the elderly, and the disabled, early-childhood education, household and domestic care like cleaning, cooking, etc. is place of women in Bulgaria.

Gender inequalities in the country are most pronounced in the domain of time and, having fallen three places since 2010, Bulgaria ranks last in this domain in 2020 EIGE Gender Equality Index. Percentage of women who are caring for children, grandchildren, older people, or people with disabilities is 39% versus 26% of men (18+, 2016) and is almost the same as is the EU average (38% women versus 25%). However, situation looks different if comparing everyday cooking and/or other housework, which in Bulgaria is done by 73% of women versus 13% of Bulgarian men (18+, 2016). The average percentage of men in the EU who are doing the same is almost three times higher - 34%.

2.5. Occupational segregation

The concentration of women and men in the various sectors of the labour market is uneven. About 18% of women work in education, health, and social work, compared to 4% of men, according to EIGE. At the same time the share of women working in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) is 11%, compared to 28% of men (MLSP, Strategy, p. 10).

Women in Bulgaria consist almost 38% of employed in STEM professions, and this is the second-best result in the EU in this area, with EU average of 25% women in STEM, while men employed in teaching professions are about 18% in Bulgaria, which is below EU average of 31% of men teaching professionals (see EIGE, 2017).

According to the National Statistical Institute (NSI) data for 2019, the economic activities with the highest share of women are: education (79.6%), human health and social work (78.3%) and financial and insurance activities (69.5 %), and the lowest in construction (6%). In 2019 only 17% or just over 10,000 of the teachers in the classrooms are men. Majority of them are in general education schools, predominantly teaching students from 5th to 7th grade, and the least are male primary teachers - 1263. Males are nearly 1/4 of the teachers in vocational high schools. Recent research suggests that the status of the teaching profession in Bulgaria is low, and the teacher workforce is ageing: *“While generally unpopular with young Bulgarians, the teaching profession is particularly unappealing to men, who make up only 17% of schoolteachers (EU average: 28%)”* (ETMonitor, 2019).

As a 'helping profession', social work, associated with care, as well is often referred to or seen as a predominant field for women. About 75-85% of social workers are women, fewer men enter the profession. The share of male social practitioners in rural areas is lower than in large settlements. *“The reasons for the lower number of men in the social sphere have not been studied in detail, although it seems clear that the social stigma around men in social work plays a significant role, as do economic factors. Men usually consider social work as a suitable profession for women”* (Budeva, 2021, p. 3-4).

Employed by economic activity grouping and sex for the third quarter of 2021 in education are 82% female, 18 % male, and in human health and social work – respectively 81% female, 19% male (NSI, 2021). Numbers clearly show that feminization of occupations in care professions in general is raising.

A priority issue for the Ministry of Education and Science in last couple of years was the increase of remuneration for teaching staff in the preschool and school education and attracting and retaining young specialists to the profession. As the sector is being highly feminized, all improvements are also pertinent to the problem of equal pay and the GPG. Salaries were increased to boost the attractiveness of the profession and since 1 September 2017 the remuneration of the pedagogical staff became by 15 % higher as part of the political commitment of the government and was doubled by the end of its mandate in 2021. Other incentives and additional payments were provided for those working in small towns, such as transport costs, housing rent, payments for clothes, etc. The new government, which is in service from December 2021, is also planning to raise the teachers' salaries with additional 13,5% in 2022.

Political commitment to increase of wages in caring professions and compensation measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic brought a substantial growth of income in sector of care: in

education - 69% higher wages than at the beginning of 2017, and health and social work - by 67% (Bogdanov, 2021). This impact also the salaries of the newcomers in these professions. Compared to the previous year, the largest increase in the average insurance income is observed among the healthcare and education graduates. The average insurance income of the graduates in Medicine rose by 35%, in Health Care - by 30%, and in pedagogical and educational professional fields the increase is between 17% and 20% (BURS, 2021).

Further research on factors which influence gender occupational segregation are needed to fine tune the policy towards Education, Health and Welfare (EHW) sector. A recent research provides interesting conclusion on this issue underlying the role of the state in this process. As a major employer in the care sector the state has had an important role to play in boosting well-paid employment. Health, education and public administration, which *tends to be biased towards higher skills and tends to be biased towards women's employment*, "combined account for around 60% of net recent (2011–2019) employment growth in mid- to high-paying jobs for women, but these sectors account for the same growth for men only very modestly (<10%). Men's employment growth has been mainly in other private service sectors" (Eurofund, 2021).

2.6. Professional orientation of students

Financial boost for caring professions in Bulgaria, together with some additional protective measures might be among the reasons which contribute to the rise of interest of school graduates to receive higher education in Education, Health and Welfare (EHW) sector. The largest increase in the number of current students in 2021 is observed in the professional fields of Pedagogy of ... (1510 students, representing an increase of 24%), Pedagogy (1329, equal to an increase of 9%) and Medicine (752, equivalent to 6%). The professional fields with the highest number of students in 2021 are Economics with 29,321 current students, Pedagogy (16,719) and Medicine (13,186) (BURS, 2021). Students in so-called "protected fields and specialties" like Pedagogy receive additional incentives, such as second stipend, exempt from semester fee, etc.

There is some evidence that more males are interested studying pedagogical specialties (Interview with the Dean of Faculty of Pedagogy, Sofia University, 2021).

Ministry of Education and Science have taken steps to increase the labour market relevance of vocational education and training (VET). With the changes (2018) in Law on Vocational Education and Training were introduced so-called protected occupations. "Protected specialty by profession" is a specialty that is unique in its content, for the training of which there is a stated need of ministries and employers' organizations, but no declared interest of students in training or interest is low, and at the national or regional level there is a need for trained qualified specialists in it. The definition of "a specialty of a profession in which there is an expected shortage of specialists in the labour market" is a specialty that is important for the economic development of the country or region and for which a future shortage of qualified personnel at the labour market can be predicted, compared to the number of trainees. The list of protected occupations is elaborated by the Ministry and approved annually. In 2021 in the list were several care occupations – social assistant for children, social assistant for elderly, social worker for children with disabilities, social worker for elderly with disabilities, social worker for children and families in risk, educator, etc.

However, there are no specific measures envisaged to attract more men to enter the Education, Health and Welfare (EHW) field. As EIGE suggests, another issue in the EHW field might be

that men have a somewhat harder time than women finding a first job that matches their qualifications (EIGE, 2017).

One of the reasons for lack of specific encouraging measures for men might be the widespread understanding of gender equality as formal equality, without any exception (Tisheva, p. 23). Equal standards/gender neutral are applied both for women and men, based on the understanding that different treatment violates the principle of equality, which leads against the concept that specific encouraging measures might be needed either for men, or for women to reach gender equality.

2.7. Early childhood education in Bulgaria

2.7.1. System of ECEC in Bulgaria

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Bulgaria is provided in nurseries, kindergartens, and primary schools, which ensure conditions for early child development and preparation of children for school.

Nurseries are organizationally separate institutions. They provide upbringing, education, and training of children from three months to three years of age. They are under the responsibility of the Ministry of Health.

Kindergartens are institutions within the preschool and school education system for raising, education, and socialization of children from age of 3 up to the age of 7 (entering primary school) in line with the State Preschool Education Standard and are on the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Science. In Bulgaria, like in some other EU countries educational guidelines apply only to settings for children aged three and over, as the split between 'childcare-type' provision and 'pre-primary education' remains (Eurydice Report, 2019, p. 10), and for children under three years of age there are no educational guidelines (Eurydice Report, 2019, p. 93).

In kindergarten, nursery groups may also be opened for raising children from the age of ten months to three years of age under the joint responsibility of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education and Science.

In case of lack of nursery groups in the relevant municipality and if there are available free places, the children may enter the kindergarten also at two years of age.

The institutions within the preschool and school education system are legal entities and are managed by local authorities. Kindergartens are municipal or private. Public kindergartens can be opened as an exception to the Ministry of Defence aimed to raising, education and socialization of children of military and civil personnel of the Ministry.

Central kindergarten is a municipal kindergarten, which is situated in the closest settlement of the municipality or a neighbouring municipality, where children from the settlements with no kindergarten or a school providing mandatory preschool education are raised, educated, and socialized.

2.7.2. Overview of the system

As of December 31, 2020, there are 838 independent nurseries and nursery groups as part of kindergartens in the country with a total of 32575 places in them. Compared to the previous

year, the number of places in nurseries decreased by 3.5%. At the end of the year, 29238 children were raised and educated in nurseries, of which about 52% were boys and 48% were girls. Compared to 2019, the number of children in nurseries decreased with 9.2% due to complicated epidemic situation in the country, and parents are postponing the admission of children to nurseries. At the end of 2020, the coverage of children raised in nurseries for the country was 15.9% (NSI, 2021).

As of December 31, 2020, in the country were functioning 1823 independent kindergartens with director. In pre-primary education, conducted in kindergartens and preparatory groups at schools were enrolled 215.7 thousand children, of which 111.6 thousand or 51.8% were boys. In comparison with the previous year the number of children decreased by 1.0%. The coverage of children in this educational level estimated by the group net enrolment rate for the 2020/2021 school year was 78.1% and compared to the previous school year decreased by 0.6 %. The average number of children in a kindergarten in the country was 118 as in the urban areas was significantly larger (152) than in the rural areas (61). A group was formed by 23 children on average, 25 in urban and 19 in rural areas, respectively. Average number of children per teacher is 10.7.

In 2020/2021 school year in the country were functioning 110 licensed private kindergartens or with 4 more than in the previous year. There were enrolled 4 874 children or 2.3% of the total number of children in kindergartens (NSI, 2021).

2.8. Legal and policy context of early childhood education system

Nurseries are established in accordance with the Health Act (2004) and Ordinance № 26 (2008) of the Ministry of Health to support families in raising children up to the age of three and to ensure their normal physical and mental development.

The Preschool and School Education Act (2016) regulates public relations related to the provision of the right to preschool and school education as well as the structure, functions, organization, management, and financing of the system of preschool and school education. It applies to school vocational education and training, unless otherwise regulated by the Vocational Education and Training Act.

The Act regulates the state educational standards in preschool and in school education, which are a set of mandatory requirements for the results in the system of preschool and school education, as well as the conditions and processes for their achievement. It also deals with the validation and recognition of learning outcomes in the preschool and school education system. The Act determines the relationships with parents as well, providing that parents have a right to receive information, support and counselling at the kindergarten or school on issues related to the education, school guidance and personal development of their child at least once a year.

Ordinance on Inclusive Education (2017) issued by the Council of Ministers (government) determines the State Educational Standard on Inclusive Education as well as terms and conditions for providing general support for personal development of children and students.

Ordinance No. 5 (2016) issued by the Minister of Education and Science determines the content and the scope of the State Educational Standard for Preschool Education.

Ordinance No. 13 (2016) on the Civic, Health, Environmental and Intercultural Education issued by the Minister of Education and Science defines the state educational standard for civic, health, environmental and intercultural education in school and in the preschool education as well. In it, for preschool children, for example, it is set to build an attitude towards their body, to have an idea of their gender and a basic concept of the differences between men and women. Civic education also included education in human rights, conflict resolution, anti-violence, but there is nothing about gender equality or women's human rights.

Ordinance № 10 (2017) on the reference books, textbooks, and teaching aids determines the state educational requirements in the area and as well as procedure of their approval for use in the system of ECEC. The Minister of Education and Science approve the list of these resources for teachers in the preschool education.

The last two years of preschool education (between the ages 5 and 7), are preparatory for school and are compulsory since 2010. The Act on Amendment to the Preschool and School Education Act (2020) implemented compulsory preschool education for children at age 4 which will apply to all 4-year-olds from 2023/24. The compulsory preschool education is carried out either in the kindergartens or in the school only if the municipality does not have a kindergarten. Since the Amendment is adopted many municipalities applied and received state financial support to prepare and organise education and care for 4-years old children and have already enrolled them in the compulsory preschool classes. Bulgaria manages to provide enough ECEC places in all areas of the country at the last two years of ECEC, during which a place is guaranteed.

The compulsory preschool education in the state and municipal kindergartens is free of charge. The private kindergartens may receive state subsidy for the compulsory preschool education if they offer it.

2.9. ECEC teachers

The position of 'teacher' or 'educator' in ECEC requires a completed higher education and an education qualification degree 'master', 'bachelor' or 'specialist' in a major from a professional direction in accordance with the Classifier of higher education and professional direction - the 'teacher' or 'pedagogue' professional qualification area.

Even though the educational guidelines are not available in institutions for younger children, core practitioners must be highly qualified across the entire ECEC phase (Eurydice Report, 2019). Each group of children under three years of age – be it in nurseries or in nursery groups within kindergartens – must be managed by two core practitioners who have at least a bachelor's degree. However, only one of them must be a 'pedagogical specialist' (qualified in ECEC); the other is a nurse (Eurydice Report, 2019, p. 72). The pedagogues in the nurseries organize and conduct educative work, games, and educational activities with the children.

The minimum qualification level for heads/directors of ECEC institutions is at master's level (Eurydice Report, 2019, p 74), and in addition to the minimum qualification level they are required the completion of a specific training course for headship and previous experience in ECEC or in education (Eurydice Report, 2019, p 76).

As of December 31, 2020, there are 7,681 medical and other specialists working in nurseries under the main employment contract, who raise, educate, and train children. There are 3,668 (about 48%) health care professionals, 93.6% of whom are nurses (NSI).

In 2020/2021 school year the teaching staff employed in the kindergartens is in total 20.1 thousand (including directors with no teaching activities, music instructors, methodologists, and educators), of which 18.8 thousand are kindergarten teachers (about 93,5%).

In Bulgaria there was no category of assistant, who supports the core practitioner.

In 2020 was adopted Ordinance No. 5 of the Minister of Education and Science on the acquisition of qualification in the profession "Teacher's assistant". It determines the state educational standard for the acquisition of a qualification in this profession after secondary or in the scope of secondary education from the professional field "Social work and counseling". This profession has specific tasks in children's education.

According to Eurostat, 2018 there is no data available for Bulgaria for men engaged in ECEC. However according to the same source in 2018 in the pre-primary education there were 18 thousand female, and 0,1 thousand male teachers.

There are no recent national statistics about the overall composition of the ECEC workforce in Bulgaria that show the proportion of qualifications, gender, or ethnicity (Workforce, 2017, p. 6). On the opinion of experts in preschool pedagogy *“Even though each year several men graduate as Pre-primary Teachers with Foreign Language or as Pre-primary and Primary School Teachers, most of them do not take up work in this job mainly because of the low remuneration. However, during recent years there have been several men working in kindergartens, mainly in private ones. There are also at least two male Music teachers in Sofia kindergartens”* (Workforce, 2017, p. 5).

With the entry into force of the Preschool and School Education Act, and especially of the Ordinance on Inclusive Education, the need to raise issues about helping professions in education and the need to place teaching in the context of the helping process has become much stronger. Currently in Bulgarian preschool entities and schools the most recognizable are resource teachers, psychologists, pedagogical advisors, and speech therapists, but there are others who are not yet well-situated, but are more than necessary such as social workers, occupational advisors, teaching assistants and others (Damyanov).

2.10. Education and training of children in kindergartens

Education and training of children in kindergartens is organized and provided in line with the State Educational Standard for Preschool Education, related to various elements of educational environment including educational contents, textbooks and school aids, teachers' licensing and qualification, the assessment system, inspecting, etc. It determines the levels of necessary general and vocational preparation as the preschool education is included in the National Qualifications Framework. School readiness is assessed at the end of preschool education stage by comparing acquired learning outcomes with the learning outcomes described in the standards. School readiness certificate is issued.

Self-assessment is adopted for pre-primary classes. This method of assessment considers and prioritises the child's own experiences and views. It also encourages children to take an active part in learning: they become aware of what they have learned and achieved, and they come to understand the difficulties they have and what could be done to overcome them. This helps children to construct a positive idea of themselves as learners (Eurydice Report, 2019, p. 102).

Quality assurance in early childhood and school education is carried out at national, regional, and school level. All three methods of evaluation are compulsory and are used both for evaluation of educational institutions and individual teacher evaluation.

2.10.1. The State Educational Standard for Preschool Education defines the **educational fields** in which preschool education is carried out as well as their objectives, content and learning outcomes for different age groups. The main educational directions are Bulgarian language and literature; Mathematics; Surrounding World; Arts; Music; Design, and Technology; and Physical Culture.

The process of preschool education is realized through the application of a program system, which is adopted by a decision of the pedagogical council of the ECEC setting. Bulgarian kindergartens use program systems like: “Hand by Hand” (2003); “Molivko (Pencil)” (2003), “I am in the kindergarten” (2007); “Friends” (2008), “Fairy Tale Footpaths” (2008), “ABC games”, (2013); “Vikkie and Nikkie” (2014), “Golden key”, etc. These program systems usually consist of teacher’s books, children’s books, and various educational materials (cardboards, posters, stickers, multimedia, and on-line electronic resources, etc.), developed according mainly to the age specifics in the four preschool age groups and often aimed separately at each of the defined educational fields. These systems have been developed by groups of authors (university lecturers, kindergarten teachers and experts) and approved by the Ministry of Education and Science. They suggest specific schemes of pedagogical ideas for practice, planned on a weekly and monthly basis.

The program system is a complete concept for the development of the child with approaches and forms of pedagogical interaction, subordinated to a common goal. The basic forms of the pedagogic interaction are realized in a whole day, half day or hour organization upon choice of the parent. Each ECEC institution must draw up its own pedagogical plan to set own programme or curriculum based on the state educational requirements for the preschool education. They can apply innovative or author’s programmes.

2.10.2. Through the **educational direction “Surrounding World”** is realized pedagogical interaction aimed at socializing processes - building an adequate image of the surrounding social environment, acquiring a culture of behavior, social communication skills and independent children's play activities as prerequisites for school readiness. The goals of the direction are related to various ways to successfully connect with others.

2.10.3. State Educational Standard for Preschool Education includes obligatory requirement for **inclusive education**. Thus, empathy as the ability to see a situation from a different perspective, is part of the pedagogical interactions. It is the basis of caring relationships and allows children to connect and understand those who may be different from them. Empathy is an integral part of education and is among its goals. Teachers structure the educational space, where empathy is a strong foundation of children's interactions.

According to the Educational Standard at 4-5 years of age (second group in the kindergarten) the child “*has objective ideas about children with differences and assists others in the process of self-affirmation*”. At age 5-6 (third group) the child “*has ideas of showing trust and tolerance to the other*”, and at age 6-7 (fourth group) “*shows tolerance for children and adults with differences*”.

Developing inclusive education is considered also as a tool for prevention against violence and aggression in interpersonal relationships. Specific tools to help the teachers and parents in terms of pedagogical interaction on empathy and care are developed by the pedagogical community.

2.10.4. **Gender-sensitive education** is not a subject of public debate nor of the debate in the professional community. There are quite a lot research and pedagogical materials on gender education considered as a way how children build understanding of their own sex and how they understand that there are children with the same sex as them, or other sex.

Brief review of the existing curriculum for future preschool teachers, pedagogues, and educators in different universities in Bulgaria shows that there are no required courses on gender sensitive pedagogy, rather on sexual pedagogy as a component of the theory of education. In Bulgaria a term *pedagogical sexology* (T. Bostandjiev, 2004) is introduced instead, as a border area between pedagogy and sexology. Some authors make distinction between the gender education (полово възпитание) and sexual education (сексуално възпитание), considering the first as a broader one, while for others they are synonymous. However, the understanding among specialists is that its role as a pedagogical interaction is to form *“adequate gender identity and acquisition of basic knowledge, skills and habits and natural relationship between genders, in a spirit of tolerance and understanding of the opposite sex and in compliance with social norms and needs”* (Georgieva, 2010). The term “gender” should be understood in its biological and binary dimensions, as in Bulgarian language for both “gender” and “sex” is used only one word “пол”. Thus, the so-called gender education of preschool children is considered as successful *“if they have an idea of the requirements for their behavior depending on their gender and have an elementary ideal of “femininity” and “masculinity””* (Staykova, 2009).

According to the Educational Standard at 3-4 years of age (first group in the kindergarten) the child *“recognizes itself/ image of self and names its gender”*; at 4-5 years of age (second group) - *“determines the gender roles of the family members and of their kin”*. However, researchers admit that to the difficulties of early gender/sex education are added the traditional notions of gender relations which exist in the society and in the families (Staykova, 2009).

Due to the lack of research at preschool level of education, we should refer to research on the topic, with respondents from primary and secondary school students, as well as secondary school teachers. The role of the family as a source of role models can be seen from the results of the survey on equality of women and men among primary and secondary students aged 9 to 17: *“the majority of young students believe that men and women are not equal, and the fact that they understand equality mainly through equal rights and responsibilities in the family, leads us again to the assumption that precisely in the family environment inequalities in the relationships between men and women are most visible, and perhaps this contributes a lot to reproducing them in other spheres of society”* (GERT, 2012, p.3).

A survey, conducted among over 270 female and male schoolteachers in 7 towns of the country in the scope of the *Career Rocket* Project (<http://career-rocket.eu/>), implemented in 2017-2019, has shown that over 50% of interviewees of both sexes declared that during their university education they did not receive (or if they did, it was insufficient) training on the issue of gender equality. Over 70% of the participants have not participated in a specialized training on the topic in the last 3 years. More than half of the respondents reported that the issue of equality was not included in the qualification trainings in which they have participated. 79% of men said that they are willing to take part in a specialized training on the subject, as well as 66% of women. However, 22% are not sure whether they would join such a training. 50% of men and 44.5% of women would like to increase their knowledge and skills for teaching topics related to gender equality that are relevant to their subject. 33.3% of men and 39% of women would like to get acquainted with methods and tools for gender mainstreaming in their own subject area and the same share of men and women would like to learn methods and tools to encourage boys and girls to be equally interested in the subject they teach (Career Rocket, 2017). In 2018 Varna Free University in cooperation with the Institute for the State and the Law of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences announced two master’s programs in *Gender policies in pedagogical activities* for school and for kindergarten teachers, but soon after announcement they were renounced.

2.10.5. In recent years there are fragmentary attempts in Bulgarian schools to work on the topic of equal opportunities of women and men, mainly in spheres such as career orientation or violence.

As a good practice must be mentioned *The Fairy Tales* Project (<https://www.fairy-tales.eu/en/>), implemented in 2018-2020 by NGOs in Bulgaria, Greece and Italy at kindergartens and schools with the idea to introduce the topic of gender equality among children aged 5-7, as well as among their parents and teachers, to challenge existing gender stereotypes: “*Fairy tales are used as a tool to promote healthy and fair relationships between girls and boys at an early age*”. In the scope of the project are developed: an online training platform for teachers and professionals working with children aged 5 to 7; a Guide for teachers and childcare professionals and training modules on gender equality for 5-7-year-old children.

The Guide reflects the pedagogical experience and psycho-social approach practiced in three European countries (Bulgaria, Greece, and Italy) and is meant to support teachers and other professionals in their work with children at preschool and primary school age. It provides theoretical and practical guidance for introducing the topic of gender equality by using classic children's tales.

The Training Modules reflect again the pedagogical experience and the psycho-social approach in delivering training modules at kindergartens and primary schools in the three participating countries. The modules and practical activities were designed in such a way to support teachers and experts who work with 5-7-year-old children in each country: “*Classic children's tales, popular among children of this age, and instrumental to shaping their life views and beliefs, were used to introduce the topic of equal opportunities for men and women in preschool and primary school education*”.

The project partners shared the opinion that: “*The Kindergarten, as a body of socialization of the child, can contribute to its socialization in terms of the role of gender in various ways and practices, such as:*

- *assigning different activities to boys and girls according to their interests and abilities and not based on gender,*
- *equal participation of all in the classroom, whether it is role-playing games, yard games, computer use, or engaging in routine activities such as cleaning and tidying up the classroom,*
- *the grouping of children in the educational process not on the basis of gender but on the basis of the cooperation of children with similar abilities and other times with different ones, depending on the goal of the group,*
- *the interaction of the peer group on an equal footing,*
- *the use of books free of racial or other standards,*
- *the use of pedagogical material based on the common interests of boys and girls,*
- *its staffing with teachers of both sexes.*

Another example of good practice is implementation in 2017 – 2020 of the **ERASMUS+ DEE** project *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion in pre-primary Education and Care: a Gender Perspective* (<https://deeplus.wixsite.com/deep>). The project aims at promoting diversity, gender equality and inclusion at preschool education as well as the work of pedagogues and their interaction with parents on these themes. The goal was to promote equal opportunities and to overcome gender stereotypes. The participants and experts from Austria, Bulgaria and Italy elaborated several resource materials for pre-primary schoolteachers and educators such as:

- A Training Course Handbook for pre – primary school educators_and toolkit_to be used in everyday activity of educators,
- Activity toolkit for work with parents and guardians,
- A Handbook for Professionals Working in Pre-Primary Education and Care.

The important achievement of the project is the development of model tools and their testing with the three target audiences - teachers/educators, parents, and children. The selected tools and materials give the possibility to the educators to adjust them to the educational context and to the individual needs of the trainees and groups they are intended to work with to achieve the best wanted result. The project also gives as a resource instrument the idea that the deconstruction of social norms, which are taken for granted, is a long and complicated process of overcoming our own prejudices and attitudes, and it might be inconvenient and difficult. Another interesting insight is the awareness that in the process of overcoming stereotypes we might strengthen them. All these experiences make the outputs of this project very powerful tools to further develop efforts to introduce and strengthen the work on promotion of gender equality at the level of pre-primary education.

2.10.6. One of the educational cores in the **educational direction “Surrounding World”** is “Social and health environment” where the issue of professions is presented. According to the Educational Standard at 2-4 years of age (first group in the kindergarten) the child “*recognizes professions related to childcare in kindergarten*”; at 3-4 years of age (second group) - “*has an idea of its parents' professions and that they work to be useful to others and to take care of their families*”; at 4-5 years “*has an idea of professions from its immediate environment - education, medicine, services, etc.*”, and at 5-6 years of age “*recognizes professions from different fields and their importance for people's lives – e.g. construction, security, public transport, etc.*”.

Kindergartens organise different activities for the different age groups to make them acquainted with the world of professions. During the school year there are Days, Weeks, or Months of Profession. Children from senior groups visit different workplaces and meet people who exercise their professions there. Another form of presentation of professions is invitation to parents to introduce to children their field of occupation. The kindergartens usually communicate these events on their web sites and make other parents aware of them. In these cases, might be presented female professionals who work in occupational fields associated with male professions like policewoman, female judge, female military officer, female driver, while men in caring professions is rather rare – like male music teacher, etc. In these pedagogical interactions are also used different didactical materials, including role games, etc. to contribute to the early career orientation of children.

2.11. Caring Masculinity and the Role of fathers

The traditional concept of care as inherent in women continues to be prevalent in Bulgarian society and this is one of possible reasons of lack of men in caring professions and specifically in early childhood education and care. According to EIGE definition of caring masculinity it is *based on men taking care-giving roles (as involved fathers) instead of provider roles (as breadwinners)* (EIGE, terms).

Legislative measures undertaken in recent years provide incentives for fathers to take leave for birth of child and for childcare. If in 2012 15.3% of those who received benefits at childbirth were men, their share increased to 21.2% in 2020. There are many ideas how to encourage more fathers to take parental leave, however majority of respondents in a recent survey were skeptical about the state's ability to regulate the father's role through policies (ECD, 2018, p.206). The

opinion of parents is that the proactive fatherly role cannot be stimulated "top down" through state policies only but can be the result of changed attitudes of the parents themselves. As possible solutions they point financial incentives, but rather conducting information campaigns, and awareness campaigns to change attitudes towards social the accepted roles of men and women and promoting the benefits of active fatherhood for development of the child (ECD, 2018, p.164). Most respondents are in favor of the equal participation of both parents in childcare - 75%. The more conditional option but retaining the egalitarian model of sharing family care depending on the professional workload of the parent, is supported by 21% of parents, and the traditional division of roles - the woman caring for children and the father breadwinner, adhere to only 3% of respondents (ECD, 2018, p.165).

The shifting norms about care at home are moving towards more gender equal division of unpaid family care, specifically towards childcare, which is accepted by children as a normal family shape as well. The results of the survey on equality of women and men among primary and secondary students aged 9 to 17 show evidence of modernization of the traditional concept in raising children in the family. Over 80% of respondents believe that the responsibility for raising the offspring falls equally on both parents. Although slightly more boys than girls (16.1% to 9.8%) believe that this is more of a woman's concern, most children see the role of men and women in parenting on an equal footing. There are no significant differences in this regard depending on the age of the children or whether they live in a big city or rural area (GERT, 2012).

In last two years it was observed that the pandemic created *opportunities for more equal participation of both parents, for contribution to a better work-life balance and for gender equality* (Tischeva, p. 53).

Obviously, the socio-cultural context in which motherhood and fatherhood are placed in relation to professional realization changes over time. Thus, among the main types of masculinity, a new one stands out - most often of young, educated men working in the field of services and the liberal professions, who are active in their role towards children and the family. In recent years there are many popular literature – books, articles, newly established entities of psychologists, and other experts, who provide information and advice to parents and families with children, especially fathers, including training in ways and tools to improve their parenting approaches, attitudes, and skills. Very active in providing such knowledge are the school psychologists, as well as other professionals (see for example the special edition on Fatherhood of the scientific magazine “Practical Pediatrics”, 2020).

Professionals in ECEC see opportunities for effective relationships and potential for the development of dialogic communication between them and parents, especially cooperation with fathers in the context of changing attitudes towards the role of the father. Educators from nurseries and kindergartens unanimously stated that in recent years fathers have become increasingly active and involved in raising children. They are leading and taking children from kindergarten, actively participating in caring for them, know their toys and clothes, sometimes better than mothers. According to observations of educators (especially in big cities), children feel more attached to the fathers. Educators acknowledged that it was easier to communicate with fathers because they were more likely not to challenge teachers' opinions and seek solutions to a problem, unlike mothers, who are most often set to blame the teachers. The commitment and support of the fathers is also commented by the medical doctors, as well as by the social workers, specifically those who work with the future adopters. The breaking of the parenting model in which the father became increasingly involved is observed even in Roma communities. Experts believe that the opening of kindergartens and child hospitals should also

happen through the active role of the father. They share a trend of proactive behavior of fathers, which is mainly observed among the younger generations of parents and is prevalent in the capital and major cities. According to them, proactive fatherhood can happen only when the social environment changes and the positive example of the active father is established. They also are confident that the de-stigmatization of the father's role and the imposition of the model of shared childcare can and should happen with the active support of professionals who involve fathers in the activities of the nursery and kindergarten and who break the stereotype that it is not "male" work for the father to be interested in and to communicate with his child's teachers (ECD, 2018, p.110).

Proactive parenting support for fatherhood is in the scope of activities of a number NGOs as well. The ***Being a Father*** project (<http://mencare.bg/>) is based on the idea that a good and strong bond between children and their fathers leads to more confident, calm, and successful children, and to more stable and secure men, e.g. it has a positive effect on the whole family. A child who has a good relationship with its father is much less likely to suffer violence. Therefore, since 2013, eight Bulgarian NGOs, coordinated by the Parents Association, have been working to support the father-child relationship organizing everlasting campaign. The consortium is part of the international father care campaign MenCare, which covers over 45 countries on 5 continents. In Bulgaria, the MenCare campaign's work in the education sector has revealed that fathers are historically absent when it comes to involvement at school. To change this reality, the campaign created school events targeting fathers, fostering their active collaboration with teachers and their positive relationships with their children. So far, over 320 different organizations from more than 90 settlements in Bulgaria have participated in ***Being a Father*** activities and initiatives. "To be a Dad" film is part of its award-winning campaign supporting positive parenting and active fatherhood. "To be a Dad" aims to focus public attention on the importance of fathers' roles in child development in nonviolent family environments.

Special attention is given to the activities in and with nurseries and kindergartens in which are organized different actions and activities, guided by the understanding that the fathers are equal partners in the educational process. There are special guides and resources developed for teachers (<http://mencare.bg/ресурси-за-учители/>) to organize for example so-called "Father's week" (see also guides for kindergartens at <https://roditeli.org/resources>). The aim of all these activities is to change the perception which often restricts mothers to being the primary caregivers at home, that father is the same responsible and loving caregiver for his child. In Bulgaria, the MenCare campaign is challenging these inequitable norms and stereotypes in order to better engage men as equal caregivers at school and at home.



The kindergarten invites the father.

Guide with practices for pupils/professionals from child facilities



Father too goes to school.

Guide for teachers for first grade

3. Qualitative data analysis

3.1. Methodology

Qualitative data was collected to explore the attitudes and actions taking place in ECEC's settings as well as in primary schools. The aim of the focus groups and interviews was to understand the current situation, related to gender stereotypes, care and masculinities by exploring opinions of experts – psychologists working with kindergartens, parents' and children's rights associations and organisations, educational experts, developing gender sensitive materials for ECEC; primary school teachers, heads, and teachers in ECECs and educators and educational mediators in Roma community.

The analysis was done, based on 2 individual interviews (1 teacher in private kindergarten, 1 teacher in primary school) and 1 group interview with 24 teachers and 2 heads of 2 public kindergartens; 2 focus groups – one with educational experts, psychologists, and NGOs and one with Roma community educational mediators and primary school and ECEC teachers working in Roma communities.

In our interviews and focus groups were included also special pedagogues and psychologists, working with children with special needs. The total number of respondents was 37, among which 2 men.

The informants' selection process for interviews and focus groups was guided by the principles of convenient sampling and snowball sampling. The members of Center of Women's Studies and Policies reached out experts from NGOs, Roma educators, Teach for Bulgaria Program and UNICEF Bulgaria, who recommended experts and ECECs/primary schools they have previously worked with (heads of ECECs referred the researchers to 22 of the informants).

However, we did set out some primary criteria that had to be met by our sample: at least one male informant, both private and state institutions represented, variety of level of experience in ECEC work and specific experience with Roma community and children with special needs, ECEC professionals and primary school teachers from villages, small and medium sized towns, and the capital.

3.1.1. Individual and group interviews with ECEC professionals and primary school teachers

Our sample for the interviews met all these criteria. Most of our informants work in pre-primary education, one of them, in primary. Informants from small and medium sized town are respectively from two municipal kindergartens, which was a chance not only to explore their individual opinions, but to see the dynamic of discussions in the teams with regards to gender stereotypes in the ECEC's. Both kindergartens participated in the DEE project¹ and informants were aware of the topic of gender stereotypes in pre-primary education and willing to continue their involvement in further similar trainings and activities.

While the sample size and diversity does not allow for generalisation, these qualitative interviews are intended as an explorative technique designed to get in-depth information on an under-researched topic in Bulgaria.

Demographic data on the informants is presented in Table 1 (participant names were coded to retain anonymity).

¹ DEE – Diversity, Equality and inclusion in pre-primary Education and care: a gender perspective, Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of European Union, 2019-2020

<i>Code</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Years of experience</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>ECEC institution</i>	<i>Location</i>
A1	Teacher in ECEC	20	Female	45	Private	Sofia
A2	ECEC head	10	Female	43	State/municipal	Small town
A3	Teacher in ECEC	5	Female	29	State/municipal	Small town
A4	Teacher in ECEC	2	Female	30	State/municipal	Small town
A5	Teacher in ECEC	1	Female	20	State/municipal	Small town
A 6	Teacher in ECEC	3	Female	33	State/municipal	Small town
A7	Teacher in ECEC	5	Female	47	State/municipal	Small town
A 8	Teacher in ECEC	34	Female	58	State/municipal	Small town
A 9	Teacher in ECEC	10	Female	33	State/municipal	Small town
A 10	ECEC Head	26	Female	57	State/municipal	Medium town
A 11	Teacher in ECEC	2	Female	32	State/municipal	Medium town
A 12	Teacher in ECEC	1	Female	31	State/municipal	Medium town
A 13	Teacher in ECEC	1	Female	39	State/municipal	Medium town
A 14	Teacher in ECEC	7	Female	30	State/municipal	Medium town
A 15	Teacher in ECEC	26	Female	52	State/municipal	Medium town
A 16	Teacher in ECEC	9	Female	47	State/municipal	Medium town
A 17	Teacher in ECEC	1,5	Female	41	State/municipal	Medium town
A 18	Teacher in ECEC	8	Female	41	State/municipal	Medium town
A 19	Teacher in ECEC	31	Female	55	State/municipal	Medium town

A 20	Teacher in ECEC	7	Female	54	State/municipal	Medium town
A 21	Teacher in ECEC	7	Female	45	State/municipal	Medium town
A 22	Teacher in ECEC	19	Female	51	State/municipal	Medium town
A 23	Teacher in ECEC	24	Female	45	State/municipal	Medium town
A 24	Teacher in ECEC	16	Female	45	State/municipal	Medium town
A 25	Primary school teacher	3	Male	42	State/municipal in Roma Community	Sofia

Table 1. Interview participants.

All the interviews were conducted online and lasted from about 1 hour. A recording of the interviews was made, to which the informants gave consent. Researchers filled the diaries of interviews (Annex 4)

We used the short version for the interview questionnaire (Annex 2), having in mind that it is more appropriate for the national context and open more possibilities for smooth conversation and retrieving of necessary information. The main topics of the interview were **daily routine in ECEC and in primary school and participation of boys and girls in care activities, use of teaching materials, gender roles, role play, gender mixing in organising activities, care, occupations and professions and discussion of care professions, involvement of fathers in care and in everyday life of ECEC and primary school, role models, gender stereotypes and finally relevant training**. The focus of the interview with the primary school teacher was opportunities and barriers for a man in the highly feminised teaching profession, gender stereotypes, gender mixing in school activities, discussion of care and care professions. The idea to involve a teacher from primary school at the end of all interviews with ECEC's staff was to reflect on the gap between kindergarten and primary school and discuss the questions *when, why and how gender stereotypes are deepened in the transition between kindergarten and primary school*. The detailed interview guide is provided in Annex 1.

3.1.2. Focus groups with ECEC psychologists, children and parents' association and networks, educational experts and Roma community educators and mediators

Additional qualitative data was obtained in 2 focus groups. We used the questionnaire for focus groups in Annex 3. The participants of the first focus group were experts with professional experience in non-violent communication, former teachers now working in the NGO sector, experts in developing, applying, and assessing teaching materials for ECEC, and providing consultative psychological support to parents and children with special needs in ECECs. The first focus group was composed only of women, 2 of them were mothers of sons in pre-primary and primary school, which allowed them to reflect on the topic not only from professional, but also from personal perspective. Informants were reached through contacts with parents'

associations and children's rights networks, but also through participants in the Boys in Care project².

The second focus group was with teachers, experts, educators, and mediators, working in ECECs and in primary school in Roma community.

Due to the epidemiological situation (COVID -19), the groups were conducted only online. The duration of both focus group discussions was about 1 hour. All participants consented to an audio recording of the focus groups. The researchers filled the diary for both focus groups. Descriptive data on focus group participants can be found in Table 2 below.

<i>Code</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Years of experience</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Location</i>
FG1.1	Parents' association member, consultant and trainer on non-violent communication and empathy of teachers, pupils and parents, mother of son in primary school	20	Female	45	Sofia
FG1.2	Psychologist, professional sit in psychological support of children with special needs, family psychotherapist, part of the team of the Regional Center for Inclusive Education to the Ministry of Education, mother of son in pre-primary school	11	Female	33	Sofia
FG1.3	Head of NGO working on gender equality in pre-primary education, Coordinator of the DEE project, developer of tested	20	Female	46	Sofia

² The project "BOYS IN CARE – Strengthening Boys to pursue Care Occupations (BiC)" - JUST/2015/RGEN/AG/ROLE/9249, which is under implementation from April 2017 to September 2019 in Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Italy, Lithuania and Slovenia, <https://www.boys-in-care.eu/>

	materials in ECEC on gender equality				
FG 1.4.	Former teacher, Head of NGO and of a community centre, working on gender equality, fatherhood and care, trainer of teachers on gender stereotypes in school and in life, participant in the BiC project	22 – 5 of which as a teacher	Female	46	Small town
FG 1.5.	Former teacher, Program coordinator in national network of NGOs working in the field of children's rights, coordinator of activities in education	11 – 5 of which as a teacher	Female	34	Sofia
FG2.1	Primary school teacher in Roma community	2	Female	35	Small town
FG2.2	Educational mediator in primary school (Roma community)	7	Female	57	Village
FG2.3	Pedagogue of children with special needs in ECEC in small villages	1	Female	54	Municipality of 44 villages
FG2.4	Educational mediator in ECEC and in school (Roma community)	5	Female	45	Village
FG 2.5	Educational mediator in primary school (Roma community)	2	Female	34	Small town
FG 2.6	Primary school teacher	33	Female	56	Village

FG 2.7	Primary school teacher	30	Male	60	Village
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Table 2. Focus groups participants.

The main topics discussed during FG1 were the **current state of ECEC in relation to gender equality, participants’ experiences with the topic, ways in which educators and/or curriculum contribute to the reproduction of gender stereotypes about boys, masculinities and care, ways to avoid this reproduction, training and education related to gender sensitivity and diversity that is available to future ECEC educators as well as what is needed to properly address the topic of boys and care in ECEC.**

All qualitative data was analysed together using thematic analysis. The main themes that emerged from the data are presented and discussed in the following section.

3.2. Results and discussion

3.2.1. Gender equality in the educational curriculum

According to informants’ observations in FG 1, the topic of gender equality appears for the first time in the educational curriculum as part of the topic of human rights, which is introduced in secondary school. Educational materials for pre-primary and primary school are still full of gender stereotypical examples for professions. Many textbooks include typical exercises for associating tools with professions, where suggested correct answers are professions and activities related to care to be linked with women and tools from construction, agriculture and engineering - with men. FG2 added that in their opinion stereotypes are formed in families, but it is very important families and ECECEs/schools to have good communication and to work together towards overcoming them, which is not always the case. According to both FGs there a lot to be done for improving parents – teachers communication in general. This is even more needed after Covid-19, because of restrictive measures for meetings in person and celebrations, which were the main channels for creation of ECEC/school community involving the parents.

3.2.2. Daily life in kindergarten – participation of boys and girls in care activities

Informants from the interviews shared that daily life in ECECs has changed a lot in the past two years. Children of different age groups come to kindergarten in defined timeslots, to escape gathering from different groups in one place, because of the Covid measures. Children meet the nurse, and then enter directly to their groups. Parents are not allowed to enter the building and do not have the opportunity to communicate with teachers. Children of different groups are not allowed to meet, to participate together in common classes and celebrations. Due to this change, adaptation to the life in kindergarten is much longer and more difficult. Children spend longer time at home and when they come back to their groups, they need to adapt again. Boys experience more difficulties with adaptation and socialization, especially in early age groups 3-4 years old and later in first year in school (A25).

In general boys and girls participate together in all daily activities. Informant A1 shared the practice from the kindergarten she works in about the organisation of daily life. Every day, there

are children on duty to set the tables, tidy the toys, arrange the tables for learning, and playing activities. All children are rotating to be on duty. There are special days for cleaning, arranging the books, caring for plants and all children are included.

Teachers in the group interview confirmed that girls are those who are much more active in serving the meals and tidying the toys. Boys are not so enthusiastic to participate, but it depends on the family model that children see at home. In general, it happens more often boys to be resistant to participating in daily care activities, especially if the duty regime is not applied. Boys are more hyperactive, full of energy and obsessed by electronic games, which they play at home and it is sometimes difficult for teachers to encourage them to help the others.

However, teachers' task is to give all the children a chance to participate. When someone is shier or not so active, or too active teachers keep the balance. All children - boys and girls respond equally when teachers ask them for help - for example to give the materials and pencils to other children, to prepare the room for the next activity etc. In all cases, it is obvious that children copy the model of distribution of care duties between women and men in families. The informants in the group interview added they observe that girls are more accurate and attentive when it comes to care work. Girls very often even correct boys' attempts to arrange the tables by rearranging napkins, forks, and spoons as they think they know how to do it better, because they are girls. Teachers suppose girls copy the model, seen at home by their mothers.

3.2.3. Main gender stereotypes in kindergarten, toys and plays

A common stereotype at the age of 3-5, mentioned by the informants in FG1 and interviews are the colours of the clothes and shoes – blue for boys and pink for girls. On the question of when it probably starts, respondents in the group interview with teachers and heads of ECECs agreed that it most probably starts in families – with the choice of the colours and design of children's rooms and their first cloths and toys, but for sure it is reinforced through socialization of children in the kindergarten. The colour stereotype is even transferred to other objects – toys, tools, pencils and even food (macaroni with pink packaging are not for boys). In ECECs the environment is not following nor stimulating this stereotype. Teachers' opinion is that it is reinforced mainly in children's communication. Some of the parents in FG 1 observed that even children from families where this stereotype does not exist, accept, and internalise it very easily when socializing. Teachers did not shared what their role as adults might be, how they can discuss it with children and whether they need to intervene.

Some examples of existing practices that contribute to reinforcing gender stereotypes in ECECs were shared in FG 1: for example, boys and girls to be divided during the free play time in different rooms – girls in the room with dolls, kitchen sets, strollers and boys in the other room, where there is parking, cars, trucks, airplanes, Lego constructors etc. The reason for this practice was explained by informants as a method for teachers to prevent conflicts between children for the toys. Toys for boys seem to be much more interactive and interesting for some of the girls, than dolls, houses, and kitchen sets. Also, some of the boys showed interest towards playing in the kitchen corner for a while, but that mixing of children in different rooms/corners provoked quarrels. The easiest way for teachers in such situations, according to informants in FG 1 is just to divide children in two different rooms, and do not let boys to go to the girls' territory and vice - versa.

FG 1 added that in primary schools, boys and girls are also often divided to play “masculine” and “feminine” sports – football/basketball for boys, respectively gymnastics/aerobics for girls to escape conflicts about unusual mixing of girls and boys for example in playing football. The same situation may appear in ECECs too. Informants in FG 1 suppose that teachers are not

willing, nor prepared in some situations to explain to children why this is not so unusual, and it is even good to let everybody to choose a sport of their own interest. Therefore, teachers prefer to escape such situations and divide the groups in predefined options in advance. This statement, however, represents opinion of informants, who are not teachers themselves, so that might be just an assumption.

The FG and the group interview showed that there is a communication gap between parents and teachers. Our observation is that the topic of gender stereotypes is never discussed between parents and teachers, although both sides see the need to do it, but a catalyst for starting the dialogue is still missing.

The group interview with teachers and heads of ECECs showed that teachers are aware that in recent years more boys show interest to play in the kitchen corner and in some kindergartens, this, is well accepted. Teachers in the group interview think that more active participation of fathers in care duties contribute a lot for a change to the stereotype. The pandemic situation closed more men at home, and they are getting more involved in care activities, but this is not the only reason. There is a tendency of greater inclusion of men from younger generations in care duties, which is very evident.

In some ECECs the corners are not organised only for the free play time, but are arranged according to learning activities – math, language, drawing corner etc. The practice show that this way is far more inclusive for both boys and girls and prevent gender division – all children are encouraged to participate in each corner, where toys also are part of the arrangements, but have totally different purpose – they are used in the learning process.

Toys: Children play with toys they are familiar with from home. Informant A1 observed that some boys like to play with dolls, because in the kindergarten in her opinion, no one forbids them. Some fathers forbid to boys to do that at home, also some mothers forbid boys explicitly to behave or to do things, which they consider not to be *male behaviour* or *men's job*. Mothers are much more the active part to put these limits in presence or in absence of fathers.

Informant A1 thinks that doll play is a natural play for children, including for boys, because this play is the model of care that children see at home – parents who are taking care of babies for example. Children at 1-3 y/o imitate that model.

Playing and learning and gender groups: Children at early age usually form groups by friendships or by interests and level of development of skills, not consciously by gender, according to opinions of informant A 1 and A 25. For example, in some groups there are girls that play football well and are welcomed to play with boys. Informant A 25 added that in his class are formed groups of boys that are good in mathematics but cannot read and group of girls – good at reading, but not good at calculating. He decided to give equal chance to everyone to develop math and reading skills and invented the mixed classes – mathematics and reading in one lesson. Exercises in maths were presented with words, not with numbers. This encouraged boys to read before starting to calculate and girls to calculate by reading, which they are familiar with. This combination narrowed the gap between boys' and girls' skills, as their interests became closer and their overall calculating and reading skills improved. Teachers observe that girls and boys start to form girlish and boyish groups more consciously in pre-primary school. In the first years of primary school, this tendency continues until the 3rd grade, when again the “ice between girls and boys starts to melt” and groups start to mix again. This very interesting tendency deserve attention as it is essential for experts who develop materials for children to be aware of and offer materials with potential to discuss stereotypes in the right moment and in the appropriate to the level of children development way.

Role play is used very often in ECECs. Teachers (A4 -A9) observed that children always choose the good and the brave character. No one wants to play the bad and the ugly personages,

no matter of gender. Typically, girls choose to play the female characters, boys want to play the males if they have a choice. Teachers may offer a change and sometimes they do so, it depends what the task of the role play is. In both kindergartens in our group interview teachers confirmed that they have freedom to choose how to proceed and sometimes encourage children to change and choose atypical for their gender personages. Role play is used in primary school too for example before discussions on emotions and as an instrument for developing empathy or to discuss violence and bullying. A25 gave an example for such role play that he used to discuss with the class, violent behaviour of a boy against a girl. In summary informants in individual interviews suggested that change of roles in primary school is more accepted than in pre-primary as children understand well that this is a theatre and are more ready to participate and as an instrument it has greater impact.

3.2.4. Care and care professions in educational content and in practice

The informants from the group interview shared that presentation of professions of parents in kindergarten is already a practice including gender atypical professions. Both ECECs had the chance to invite mothers with not typical for their gender professions as military servant, policewoman, firefighter, but all fathers that they invited were with very typical professions - driver, carpenter, because there were not men with atypical professions among fathers of children.

Professions and those related to care as well, are included in the educational content for children 3 to 6 years old. Smaller children learn first about professions of people who are taking care for them – nurse, cook, cleaner, teachers, technician in the kindergarten etc.

Teachers in ECECs are free to decide how to present the topic of professions, what examples to give. In primary school professions are also discussed and teachers are also free to decide how to organise the lessons and what professions to present. In primary school are planned 4-6 lessons per year. The term care is not in focus in the classes, dedicated to professions, but there are lessons dedicated to self-care and roles in the families. Informant A 25 gave example with a discussion on who is cooking better – mom or dad, which was a way to discuss family roles. It is quite embarrassing for teachers that in feminised professions like theirs, teachers cannot give any examples for men teachers as they rarely exist in everyday life. Examples for other caring professions, where men are employed also are rarely presented in lessons.

Informants discussed also how children understand and show care for others on a natural way. As very clear example one of the informants (A 10) shared her experience how children naturally show empathy and care for children with special needs. This is something that children need to do and do naturally in early age. Other informants from the same kindergarten added that children that are caring for others are seen by others as role models, all children involve in support of children with special needs – girls, as well as boys.

3.2.5. Fathers in caring role

Informants in FG 1 mentioned the national widespread initiative Men in Care (<http://mencare.bg/>), dedicated to overcoming gender stereotypes about men and care in early education. It is discussed as the first and major example for a long-term and sustainable campaign having a snowball effect, which started in 2013 and is still ongoing. The initiative is implemented in ECECs and primary schools all over the country every year through organisation of special fathers' weeks in ECECs and schools, where fathers are invited to take

part in organisation of exhibitions, open lessons, sport events and many others. The aim is to raise awareness on the role of men in childcare and education. Fathers are also invited to present their professions and it happens that some of them present care professions. Fathers' days and weeks according to informant A 1 are an excellent demonstration of attitudes of fathers towards family and their participation affects in a very positive way the well-being of children, as children are really proud to see their fathers in school or in kindergarten.

The participants in the group interview added that in recent years fathers are also coming to parents' meetings and this is not unusual at all. They are well informed about important issues related to children's lives and are very active in discussions, which is a very positive change. ECECs teams, especially those who participated in the Men Care campaign have been very creative on how to involve fathers in an interesting way. One example was shared by the informant (A 10) about a video, shot for the day of the Christian family by parents in the kindergarten that she is working in. Teachers gave an idea to families to produce home videos about how fathers are taking care in families. The result was a video compilation of many fathers – in different homes that read stories for their children. The informant (head of the ECEC) shared that for her 25 years of practice in early care and education she never saw so sweet and influential video that shows fathers' love and care.

Another example from FG 1 and a very important question related to fathers in caring roles, was the organisation of events, dedicated, however, only to mothers – the Mothers' day which by tradition from the socialist period relates to the 8th of March the International Women's Day for example. These celebrations may be embarrassing for children raised by a single father, because normally they are organised to celebrate the traditional family roles. In the past twenty years families changed a lot and maybe it is time for early care and educational institutions to rethink how to organise celebrations related to families in a more adequate way.

These examples are very good starting point to discuss the stereotypes about men and masculinities and fathers in caring roles. Organizers of the Men Care campaign in Bulgaria shared in the FG 1 that often main barriers fathers to support boys to be more open and emotional are mainly still vivid stereotypes about masculinities. So crucial role for the topic is the fathers' role model, a man who is expressing emotions and is caring for the family. As this campaign showed to be very successful and understandable everywhere in the country, participants in FG1 agreed that the topic is very strong entry point and introductory topic for discussions and materials, dedicated to stereotypes about masculinities and men in care professions in ECaRoM project.

3.2.6. Parents-teachers communication

The discussion about parents-teachers communication began in FG 1 with an example for a very interesting small study (done in the DEE project) on parents' behaviour when they are taking to and from kindergarten their children. It turned out that mothers are those, who are coming in the mornings, they are in a hurry, not to be late for work and help children to prepare fast. Very often they are over caring and continue to help children even in pre-primary school at the age of 5-6. On the contrary, fathers are coming more often in the evenings and are much more relaxed and more letting and demanding the children to dress and undress by themselves without any help. This behaviour of parents is also observed by teachers in other ECECs, and it seems is the prevalent practice, which might reinforce the stereotypical assumption that the mother is the more reliable carer, even though in some cases it is obvious her over caring is not necessary and may slow down development of self- caring skills of children. This is definitely a point to be considered in the parents-teachers communication and cooperation on development of children's self-caring skills with participation of both parents.

In the last two years communication between parents and teachers as mentioned above was affected a lot by the pandemic situation. FG 1 mentioned that comparing to the time before Covid-19, opportunities for meetings in person, celebrations and everyday open communication between teachers and parents changed. Nowadays in the capital it happens that parents do not know well the teachers of their children, have not spoken with them and feel embarrassed by this anonymity of care. This influences a lot the opportunities the ECEC to be a place for building a community and a place where parents and teachers may discuss openly questions for the children's life, including topics as gender stereotypes.

The other aspect of this communication is with whom teachers communicate most often and what kind of information they share with mothers and with fathers. According to informants in FG 1, group, and individual interviews, it seems that the model is still mothers to be the main persons with whom teachers communicate on acute issues. This is visible for children as well and most probably reinforce the stereotype about women being the more important and more reliable carer.

The informant A1 agreed that she really behaves differently when communicating with mothers and fathers. Although her opinion is that mothers are more impatient as parents, she continues to share and discuss the important information and organizational issues predominantly with them. For our study this is very important topic, which should be addressed in the project and in the trainings for teachers.

3.2.7. Projects, initiatives, and practices with potential for overcoming gender stereotypes

Informants did not shared information about targeted initiatives for boys or girls in ECECs, but shared examples for small projects on psychological support and development of social emotional skills of children to help their adaptation in kindergarten. The project was open to boys and girls, but it turned out that parents of boys are those who needed more the assistance. Mainly boys had problems with adaptation in kindergarten and expression of emotions, aggressive behaviour etc. The psychological support was beneficial for boys to understand and work on their emotions and to better adapt.

Informants shared the examples from private small kindergartens, run as a family business, where the presence of the owners – the man and the woman in the everyday life of the children helped a lot for naturally overcoming stereotypes about what is *male* or *female* job. Boys and girls participate together in all the ECEC's activities – serving the meals, cleaning and tidying the toys, painting of the fence etc. They are also often encouraged to help each other and help the smaller children. Children from different age groups are gathered very often in one group and they have the chance to enter naturally in different caring roles. Similar example from a private school and parent cooperatives were mentioned – gathering of children of different age in common activities, where all children are encouraged to help and care for each other. This is a good stimulus for involving naturally all children in care activities and should be also discussed in trainings in ECaRoM projects for teachers.

On the contrary in big kindergartens (mainly in the capital), gathering of groups of children of different age is not a practice anymore, especially during Covid-19 pandemic, and children do not have a chance to enter in the role of supporters and helpers of the smaller children, when boys and girls were naturally encouraged to participate before, and they liked to engage. However, informant A 1 added that within the groups, children are also encouraged delicately to help their mates - for example to explain each other the learning activities, to arrange together the room, to distribute and collect materials, notebooks, textbooks etc. Such activities which teachers are familiar with are also natural way for encouraging children to care for each other

in the groups and should be promoted in pandemic situation. We suppose that teachers do that in their everyday practice, but we need more knowledge how it works in different groups size and in small/medium sized town and the capital and weather it really engages boys or girls dominate in such activities how gender stereotypes are tackled.

In the groups where there are children from other nationalities, teachers observe that they care a lot one for another, because they are in a foreign language environment. Other children also show empathy and help them to understand the learning activities and they are very proud that can help for their inclusion. We also need to understand better how it happens in practice and we need to include this topic in the trainings where it is necessary.

3.2.8. Education and trainings for teachers, materials which are of interest

FG 1 discussed the education and training of teachers and commented that there are some small improvements in the past 10 years in the main curriculum for teachers 'education like introduction of practicums on intercultural education and inclusive education, but topics like gender equality and gender stereotypes are not yet included. Teachers may participate in trainings only through projects of NGOs or they can choose such a training as a course, offered by other licensed educational centers, but informants' observation is that teachers very rarely do so. Teachers prefer topics like digital competences and overcoming burn out, which is more acute for the moment.

On the question what kind of materials might be useful for trainings of teachers FG 2 added that teachers would be interested to see visual materials - experiences from other countries – short movies, interviews with people in the profession, who have worked on the topic and can share practical example of their work, and also, they will need interactive and colourful materials for work with children.

Teachers need materials for self-education mainly in the field of early child psychology and individual approach to children. On our observation also materials on gender stereotypes would be useful as still there are lack of knowledge on the practical and systematic work on overcoming them.

3.2.9. Men in teaching profession

The FG1 and the group interview raised the question about men teachers in ECECs and in the primary schools. Examples were given mainly from private institutions, where informants know that some men teachers are hired. Common opinion was that this is very beneficial for children – boys and girls. According to their observations, which was reconfirmed in FG2 and the interview with the primary school teacher, men primary school teachers are mainly entering the profession through special programs like Teach for Bulgaria and one more, described below. The presence of men teachers in primary school is so rare that the man informant (A 25) confirmed children were used to turn to him with Madame in the first months after he came to school. Children had not the habit to say Sir to a teacher. At the beginning children are not immediately convinced that it is normal the teacher to be a man, especially in communities where strong stereotypes predominate about this profession. Later, children adapted, but it took time. The class of informant (A 25) even betted on how long he will stay, but after they saw him again after the Christmas holidays, they were convinced he will stay and created a special song for him as a daily welcome greeting to express their joy.

Common observation in group interview and FG 2 is that men teachers are much more respected and more stably gain the confidence of children and parents. Even when they work with difficult groups – children from 2 to 6 in a mixed - groups in remote area, or with a class with bad discipline in Roma school (composed 2/3 of boys) - men can do it perfectly. It is even better if a man and a woman can work together with a group of children, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. Such example was shared as a successful practice by the informant (A10) in a middle -sized town where a collage to the University of Pedagogic operates and more men graduate and practice as teachers in ECECs for couple of years. Unfortunately, after a while they leave or become heads of the ECECs.

The fact that there are not many men in the profession give them a strong advantage, according to informant A 10. They are very welcomed by the teams of women teachers, but most probably the low salaries are main reason men not to enter and stay in the profession. FG 2 shared information about a Program for education of Young Roma Teachers, financed by the Trust for Social Achievement.³ The program aims to employing Roma students-teachers in local kindergartens, thus creating role models for the small children, and providing opportunities for professional development of community youth. Through the Program young men are involved in the teaching profession. Another interesting example shared, on how men are entering the profession is the role models in the community (Roma), as for example men that already graduated and practice the profession and/or the professional choice of fathers - sons of teachers, choose to become teachers too. There are some examples in small villages and in one middle sized town (where the Program for Young Roma Teachers operates) for a growing interest of young men to become primary school teachers, but the process is very slow, stereotypes about the profession are strong, and even bigger barrier than the salary, because salaries are not so low in comparison with income from other professions and businesses in the same area.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the desk and fields research, we identified some of the most acute needs with regards to implementation of the project and in general with regards to the national context.

As the research scope was limited, but clearly identified possibilities the project to contribute for better understanding and development of the topic of overcoming gender stereotypes in education, we used the findings of the research to fine tune our project goals and adapt the project to actual national needs and national context.

1. Research and policy

Gender stereotypes in education is a topic that is quite under researched in Bulgaria, especially in the last ten years. Gender equality policy has slow progress and even backlash in some areas as a consequence of the very complicated situation in the country where issues of gender equality became very sensitive for the society.

As a result, the basic standards and concepts of gender equality remain unclear to the broaden public. Many strategic documents, programmes, projects, etc. which tackled gender or children's issues, were rejected due to the strong opposition of political, civic, and religious leaders and organisations. All these developments influenced a lot the overall monitoring of

³ TSA is a grant-making, nongovernmental organization dedicated to reducing poverty and decreasing achievement gaps, which supports activities in four program areas: First Foundations, Early Learning and Care, Educational Achievement and Family Economic Success in disadvantaged areas. More about it: <https://socialachievement.org/en/>

gender equality policies implementation, data collection and research work in all spheres, including in education.

Recommendation - national context:

The topic of gender stereotypes in education, needs to be researched on a national level again, as it was researched long time ago and because rigid stereotypes are aftereffects of the postponed and underestimated gender equality agenda in the last five years. The scope of the project does not envisage an in-dept analysis of educational materials, but the interviews and focus groups clearly confirmed that strong gender stereotypes still exist in educational materials and in practice and underestimating of that topic, lead only to more rigid stereotypes.

Recommendation - project:

Training materials for teachers, educators in Roma communities and students of pedagogy, to be developed in the project, need to include exercises on identifying gender stereotypes in educational materials.

2. Education and trainings for teachers

Gender-sensitive education is not a subject of public debate nor of the debate in the professional community.

Brief review of the existing curriculum for future preschool teachers, pedagogues, and educators in different universities in Bulgaria shows that there are no required courses on gender sensitive pedagogy, rather on sexual pedagogy as a component of the theory of education.

Teachers interviewed, confirmed that they have not received any training on gender equality, neither the role of men in gender equality and gender stereotypes, related to masculinities.

Recommendation – national level:

Courses on gender sensitive pedagogy need to be developed and included in curriculums for future preschool teachers, also included in education for preparation of Roma educators and mediators.

Recommendation – project:

Students on pedagogy to be included in the trainings under the project.

The Curriculum of trainings on national level needs to start from basic knowledge on gender equality, gender stereotypes and stereotypes related to masculinities and femininities. It might include further topics as stereotypes and division of care work in families – models for children, involving of fathers in daily life of kindergarten.

3. Guidelines for gender sensitive approach in early care and education

In interviewed ECECs the environment in general is not stimulating gender stereotypes. Colours of furniture, textile and equipment are various. ECECs have thematic corners by learning subjects, where all children participate.

However, some informants in the study shared that they know or have observed in their professional experience not rare practices children to be divided in gender specific corners – with toys “for girls” and “for boys”, or children to be encouraged to participate in sports activities that “are suitable” for boys or for girls.

The focus groups and interviews showed that teachers are to some extent aware of gender stereotypes, but the topic is not in their focus and they have no practical experience, neither materials to work on it. On the other hand, they have an interest to see and learn from other countries. This might be explained by the fact that there are no specific guidelines for pre-primary and primary education for gender sensitive approach and the process depends mainly on the ECECs teams' own understanding and will.

Recommendation – national level:

Based on future large-scaled national research on prevailing gender stereotypes in educational materials and teaching practices/approaches, guidelines for practical gender sensitive approach in ECECs and primary school need to be developed and tested on a national level.

Recommendation – project:

The project might collect experiences from other countries and contribute for a proposal for gender sensitive approach practical guidelines for ECECs.

Materials for work with children are needed, as well as methodological instructions how teachers might use them. Therefore, in Bulgarian context a team of gender and pedagogical experts will work on test lesson on how to present care professions in pre-primary school and how to discuss with children stereotypes about “male” and “female” professions.

4. Teachers – Parents Communication on Gender Stereotypes

The FGs and interviews showed that there is a communication gap between parents and teachers. That topic is not researched enough on national level, but our observation from the fields work is that the topic of gender stereotypes was never discussed between parents and teachers, although both sides sometimes see the need to do it. For now, the topic is escaped and real catalyst for starting the conversation between teachers and parents are still missing. This observation is important for forthcoming trainings for teachers on ECaRoM project on one hand, but on the other it is crucial question to be addressed also on national level.

The study clearly identified that ECECs and also parents prefer natural ways to encourage boys and girls in caring activities without confronting directly gender stereotypes about care roles as this conversation might provoke conflicts and tension in teachers-parents communication, which is anyway difficult in pandemic situation.

Fathers in caring roles will be very good introduction to the topic of caring masculinities, as many kindergarten already participated in the Being a Father (Men Care) campaign in Bulgaria and their teams feel familiar with it.

Recommendation – national level:

The topic is unresearched nationally, although some indications that the topic might provoke tensions between teachers and parents exist. We recommend that a national research for identifying the needs and assumptions on parents-teachers communication on topic of gender stereotypes is urgent to be undertaken.

Recommendation – project:

Materials and practical trainings on how teachers might initiate the conversation and how to handle resistance or tense situations, need to be developed in the project.

5. Care professions

The study identified that in some ECECs care professions were presented via examples which children can see around them – teachers, nurses, parents of children with care professions. We did not identified examples when men in care professions were presented, except for the two male teachers, we interviewed.

In general, the term care is not in focus in the classes, dedicated to professions, however there are lessons, dedicated to self-care and roles in the families. So, we identified the need to include in the trainings under the project special modules on care professions and how they can be presented to children, including with examples for men in care professions.

Recommendation – national level:

Care professions need to be included in the national educational content and classes, dedicated to professions. Examples for men and women in these professions need to be included in the teachers' books, guidelines, materials, and methods for class work.

Recommendation – project:

The developed and tested materials for work with children should be oriented towards care professions and the role of men and women in them.

6. Men teachers in ECECs and in primary schools

Social stigma around men in social work and economic factors play a significant role for not having much men teachers in pre-primary and primary school.

The interviews confirmed that men primary school teachers are mainly entering and stay in the profession trough special programs, which are also rare in the country and are dedicated to attracting young teachers in marginalised and minority groups. There are no recent national statistics about the overall composition of the ECEC workforce in Bulgaria that show the proportion of qualifications, gender, or ethnicity. Even though each year several men graduate as Pre-primary Teachers, the observations are that most of them do not take up work in this job mainly because of the low remuneration. Although few in numbers men teachers are very welcomed, however, by children and colleagues and by parents.

In Bulgaria the experience of men in teaching profession are not researched, neither discussed. The study identified an interest from men teachers to know more about what is to be a man in a feminised profession, what are the benefits and barriers they overcome, how they can support each other.

Recommendation – national level:

National statistics on composition of ECEC work force need to be collected. More programs and measures for attracting men in teaching profession are needed and they need to start from efforts for overcoming gender stereotypes about the profession.

Recommendation – project:

The project is wonderful opportunity to show the experience of men teachers in pre-primary and primary schools and to discuss their career path, barriers, and opportunities and to develop good practices and lessons learned material (videos, interviews, stories) for encouraging other young men who are interested to enter and stay in the teaching profession. The materials might include experiences from other countries in the project, consulted and adapted by men – teachers in pre-primary and primary school in Bulgaria.

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6. Annexes

Annex 1 – ECAROM INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES (ECECS)

CONTEXT

ECaRoM project is a European funded project (*include website*) which strengthens the connection between boys, masculinities and care in order to support egalitarian socialisation environment in ECECs and primary schools, which could inspire boys to caring practices and attitudes in private life and in society in general, potentially also in their further educational choices. As we all know, it is very common that we all reproduce gender stereotypes in our daily interactions, also in working with children. Gender stereotypes about boys and care are reproduced through images/practices/narratives in which caring activities are mostly related to women and in which attributes such as empathy, emotionality, dependence, affectivity, sensitivity, intimacy are presented as feminine/girlish. On the other hand, men/boys are stereotypically attributed opposite qualities of rationality, instrumentality, violence, autonomy, independence, public sphere etc. Besides families/parents and peers, ECEC/primary school teachers have an important role in reproducing or in unfolding and diminishing gender stereotypes.

ECaRoM project includes the following partners: Dissens Institut für Bildung und Forschung e.V. – Germany as project coordinator, Verein für Männer- und Geschlechterthemen Steiermark – Austria, The Peace Institute – Slovenia, Istituto degli Innocenti – Italy, Center of Women's Studies and Policies – Bulgaria, Center for Equality Advancement – Lithuania.

AIMS AND SCOPE OF INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

Interviews and focus groups with teachers and experts should provide insights in the everyday practices and existing pedagogical strategies/tools in ECECs/schools with regards to gender stereotypes related to boys/men/masculinities and private/professional care. Positive and negative practices as well as expressed and observed needs will be relevant for developing ECAROM innovative didactical tools and educational contents which will facilitate teachers to address gender stereotypes related to boys/men/masculinities and to encourage the perception of care work as gender neutral and socially important area.

The aim of the guidelines is to collect educators/teachers' views on:

1. Gendered/non-gendered areas of everyday life in ECECs: playing, meals, making up, rest, communication, disciplining, dressing, toileting, cleaning, exercising, performing, social skills – do teachers perceive these areas of activities as gendered or gender neutral, how does gender appear?
2. Existing pedagogical practices/strategies: how teachers address gender stereotypes, (gender) diversity, equality in different aspects of their work? In particular, how are boys perceived and treated as gendered beings?
3. How is care in broad sense, like self-care, mutual care, family care, solidarity, professional care embedded in everyday life in ECEC? Are caring people seen as role models? Are caring men observed?
4. How do teachers address different professions? Do they talk about caring professions? Do they pay attention to men in caring occupations?

5. Which tools (books, toys, rituals, games, videos) do they use?
6. What kind of tools, games, videos, toys, books do they miss?
7. Positive/negative practices in terms of **caring masculinities and** de-stereotyping of care –

Use of the term care

In ECAROM project we use **the term care** in a broad sense:

1. Individual aspect: as self-care: maintaining personal health and wellbeing.
2. Family/social networks aspect: as work that is needed to ensure the everyday physical, social and emotional well-being of family members (also friends, neighbours, relatives and other close persons) and in particular dependants (children, the elderly and the disabled, sick), including household maintenance (cleaning, shopping, cooking).
3. Professional/occupational aspect: as care professions (EHW): occupations in the field of education, health and social welfare (ECEC and primary school teachers, nurses, care workers, social workers).
4. Societal aspect: as care for the community and society in general (voluntary work; social movements; empathy and solidarity towards excluded and marginalised social groups).
5. Equality aspect: men caring for gender equality in everyday life
6. Ecological aspect: as care for the nature and the planet we live on.
7. Attitudinal aspect: Rejection of violence and rejection of men's privilege in societies

How can caring practices of children look like?

1. Tidying up toys
2. Preparing for lunch/meals
3. Tidying up after meals
4. Consolation of a friend
5. Gardening
6. Taking care of pets
7. Supporting in settling disputes in a nonviolent way
8. Taking in account the opinion of others and not only their own
9. Including children who are "outsiders"
10. Supporting another child in practical things for example in lacing up shoes

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended to explore a number of areas related to gender stereotypes, care and masculinities in kindergartners. It provides a detailed list of questions for each area to be investigated. The suggestion is to introduce at the beginning an introductory question on the topic and then ask more specific questions if the interviewee does not go into sufficient details.

Annex 2 – QUESTIONNAIRE INTERVIEWS

1. TOOLS: USE OF MATERIAL

- What kind of plays, games, toys, fairy tales, activities do you offer to children? Do you offer boys and girls different activities, books, toys?
- If you sometimes offer boys and girls different activities, please explain in which situations, which activities and the reason for it.
- If boys play with dolls or do other activities, which are traditionally feminised, how do others react? (children, parents, colleagues)? How do you react in such situations?

2. GENDER ROLES AND GENDER MIX IN ORGANISING ACTIVITIES

- If you have to allocate roles to children, in which way does gender have an influence? Do you sometimes deliberately exchange gender roles in such games?
- Do you encourage boys/girls in gender atypical activities? Can you name some examples? How do you react when children perform gender atypical activities or have gender atypical reactions? If people can't think of anything, let them think about the children's costumes on Halloween/ carnival.
- Do some children (according to gender) engage always in the same activities? Is there any efforts on your part to engage children in different activities? What strategies do you use?
- Are there places or activities where only boys or girls are engaged? Which? Do you intervene in such cases? Why? How?

3. CARE

- How do you distribute tasks and assignments among children? Reflect on gender distribution
- Which care activities do you practice with children on an everyday basis (i.e. tidying up toys or tables after meals, meals' preparation, consolation of a friend, gardening, taking care of pets)? How do you engage boys?
- Do you discuss with children about family members (e.g. parents, siblings, grandparents) and roles in the family? Do you sometimes discuss share of household chores and gender roles within the family with the children?
- How do you encourage development of social skills like empathy, listening, helping, solidarity, equality? Reflect on gender differences.
- Which specific pedagogical activities are related to self-care and care for each other? Are there any differences in carrying out these activities with boys and girls?

4. OCCUPATIONS AND PROFESSIONS

- Are different occupations the topic of conversations or games sometimes? In what way? At which occasion?

- Do you pay some attention to caring professions: ECEC teachers, primary school teachers, nurses, social workers, care for the elderly, cleaners, cooks? Do you provide with examples of men involved in care professions? (caring masculinities)

5. ROLE MODELS

- Do you pay attention and praise caring attitude/practice/relation of a boy in a particular situation as a positive example for others?
- Do you sometimes use a male role model who performs care: a teacher, a nurse, male ECEC teacher, caring father?

6. GENDER STEREOTYPES

- Do you sometimes talk with children about stereotypical ascriptions for girls/boys?

7. TRAINING

- Did you receive any training about gender stereotypes in education in your official training or in any additional courses?
- What kind of knowledge/tools/equipment/didactical resources do you miss in addressing gender stereotypes in your work with children and parents?

Annex 3 - QUESTIONNAIRE FOR FOCUS GROUPS

1. What's your name? Where do you work?
2. In your opinion, what is the state of the art in kindergartens/primary schools in relation to gender equality? (curricula? targeting girls, boys, gender diversity?) Is there a special focus on boys, masculinities and care? What are the topics (fatherhood, men in care occupation, etc.)? What is the target (violence prevention, widening perspectives and competences of boys, gender equality)?
3. What are your experiences with this topic? Please describe actions which you or your organisation have/has conducted related to boys and care. What were the reactions from teachers/parents/children? What were the experiences: what was good, what went wrong? Please also describe actions related to gender equality in your institution.
4. How (by which practices, discourses, habits, educational mechanisms/tools, organisational atmosphere) do you think teachers (curriculum?) contribute to the reproduction of gender stereotypes about boys, masculinities and care?
5. How can the reproduction of gender stereotypes about boys, masculinities and care be avoided? Ask first for general principles, and then for concrete examples of practices.
6. Which training related to gender sensitivity and diversity do professional pedagogues receive in their education (basic education, further education, obligatory or free of choice)? Have there been significant changes in relation to this topic during the last years?

Annex 4 - FIELD DIARY

Date of the interview:

Time:

Place:

Name of Interviewer:

Number of Participants:

How did you reach the respondents?

Were there peculiarities in the semi-structured-interview / focus groups?

Were there any important observations or information while conducting the interviews?
