



GenderEd  
Combating gender stereotypes  
in education

This research was conducted within the framework of the European programme entitled GenderEd, which is coordinated by the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies and co-financed by the European Union. It was carried out in parallel in four European countries. This report presents and discusses the research results from Cyprus.

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## 1. Introduction

The Cyprus educational system in theory supports gender equality, as it is governed by the principle of treating students equally. In practice though, it would be unrealistic to say that Cypriot schools are institutions free from social stereotypes and gender inequality. As shown by several feminist studies on education, the school, as an institution, tends to mirror and reproduce gender stereotypes, gender inequality and hegemonic masculinity (Spender & Sarah, 1980; Delamont, 1990; Arnot & Mac an Ghail, 2006; Skelton & Francis in Heynes, 2009).

Schools, as primary agents of socialisation, convey values and behavioural models which can often reinforce gender stereotypes. As early as kindergarten, children are raised according to the boy-girl binary, steered towards different colours, games and interests, according to their gender. Further on in their education, students learn which gender is the more valuable and therefore more important in history, science, sports. Students are inundated with stories of great male politicians, historians, artists, scientists, poets, while women are mentioned less often, and usually as supporting characters in national struggles or occupying secondary roles in the public sphere. In this manner, the educational system supports the exclusion of half the population, while at the same time broadening the opportunities of the other half (Tsiakalos, 2002).

The impetus to conduct this research was a deeply rooted belief that education is an appropriate tool to challenge unequal gender-based power relationships. The challenge can be carried out through two linked dimensions: expertise, which provides insight into the status quo and methods to challenge the latter through effective intervention, as well as genuine political will, in order to be able to effect the interventions (Tsiakalos, 2002).

The purpose of this research paper is to obtain further insight into the reproduction of gender stereotypes in the school environment. It also aims to record good practices which, consciously or not, can lead to a resistance towards dominant gender-based stereotypes and strike a blow to

the phenomenon of entrenched gender inequality. Notably, the findings of this research have already been utilised to create an online game, as well as accompanying innovative pedagogical tools (under the category of non-formal learning), which can be used in schools to contribute to the elimination of gender stereotypes.

## 2. Theoretical background

The boys and girls are socialised differently, which heavily impacts their educational and vocational choices, which often reflect gender stereotypes (Legewie & Di Prete, 2014; Deligianni-Kouimtzi, 2010; Athanasiadou, 2002; Francis, 2002). So the long tradition of women's social role being attached to the care of the home and children might explain why more women choose studies and professions related to care, which are considered to be an extension of the role of women in the household, such as teaching young children or nursing (Kalantari, 2012). Accordingly, boys and men learn from a young age to be strong, aggressive and technically proficient, which might explain the overconcentration of men in technical professions. The divergence in these choices is based on the dominating stereotypes around which sectors are more "appropriate" for women or men respectively, as opposed to proven differences in performance (Deutsh, 2007).

The process through which we our taught our expected role in society is called the **socialisation process**. Socialisation begins at birth, perhaps even before birth, with the simple question "is it a boy or a girl?". Gender segregation is more distinct during the first stage of socialisation, which takes place between the ages of 3 to 11 (Hibbard & Buhrmester, 1998). We need only to take a look at a children's toy store, to realise the extent of gender segregation. Dolls, kitchenware, jewellery for girls – toy guns, aeroplanes and building blocks for boys. Parents are the first agents of socialisation and often, perhaps inadvertently, reinforce the limitations imposed on children through gender socialisation. In this way, they put great pressure on children who violate gender precepts to return to their predetermined roles (Gleitman & Reisberg, 2000). For example, a boy who plays with dolls and perhaps expresses in this way tendency towards care-giving, will probably be scolded by his parents. Apart from toys, parents and their attitude also affect their

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children's perceptions of gender roles; children can see who brings in the higher income and who takes care of the majority of household chores.<sup>1</sup>

Since the early 1970s, many theories have also shed light on the ways in which other core agents of socialisation, such as schools and the media, create different expectations from men and women regarding the roles they are asked to perform. Along the lines of a “self-fulfilling prophecy”, people tend to **internalise and reproduce these expectations** when making educational and occupational choices (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

It is a fact that boys and girls in Europe choose differing school subjects and professions (Francis & Skelton, 2005; Wessel, 2005). The disparity in their selections is the result of a long process of learning and socialisation through their exposure to role models and trends which they imitate and reproduce (Brief & Nords, 1990). The reason why we reproduce expectations and comply with predetermined standards is that it makes us more acceptable to our social environment, family, friends, school, etc. (Kalantari, 2012). For example, a male doctor or architect is likely to enjoy more elevated social status than a male ballet dancer, even when the latter is highly successful in his field. It has been shown that peer groups also greatly affect the choice in studies and vocation. At school, where the **first educational choices** are made, students operate as custodians of gender segregation, criticising anyone who does not comply with the social precepts of their gender (EIGE, 2016). Aware as they are of the control exercised by their social context, children end up making choices which are more or less predetermined. According to the Nesse Network of Experts (2009):

Young people wishing to affirm their gender identity at the formative stage of adolescence are expected by peers to choose subjects that reinforce their identity as males or females. Dominant gender norms regarding what constitutes male or female govern educational choices.

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<sup>1</sup>Research by the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies has indicated that, despite the ever-increasing involvement of men, women still take on the lion's share of responsibilities when it comes to child-rearing and household chores in Cyprus.

**Statistics** on educational options in Cyprus and Europe illustrate that girls and boys do in fact choose different education and occupation areas, creating the phenomenon of **horizontal gender segregation**. According to the most recent survey on academic choices in Cyprus, gender segregation is apparent within secondary education. The most important gender divergence can be found in courses such as Technology (only 3.7% girls compared to 16.5% boys) and History (21.4% girls compared to only 6% boys). Moreover, despite the fact that Mathematics is one of the most popular courses for girls, there is still a considerable gap between genders by 25 percentage points (Department of Labour Relations, Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance, 2013). Gender segregation in the selection of subjects at secondary education level is reflected in tertiary education, where women often limit their choice to the fields of Social and Human Sciences, while men choose Science and Technology. Gender segregation is prevalent across Europe and has led to an overconcentration of boys and men in fields related to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (European Commission, 2016; Capri et al., 2015).

Other than the concentration of women and men in differing subjects and fields of study, **vertical gender segregation** describes the phenomenon of male overrepresentation in management positions (European Commission, 2016). In Europe, only a third (33%) of executives are women (Eurostat, 2016). In Cyprus, the percentage of women in management positions is among the five lowest in Europe, at 26%.

**Gender segregation is a social problem**, as it reproduces gender-based inequality and limits the range of options for both men and women. Women in Cyprus and in Europe are concentrated in low-paid professions and at the lower levels of the workplace hierarchy. This leads to gender inequalities such as in the form of the **pay gap**, which has reached 14% in Cyprus and 16.4% in Europe (Eurostat, 2016). Furthermore, gender segregation confines the choices of children and adults to predetermined roles, often preventing them from exploring fields which do not mesh with the expectations set for their gender. Boys and girls find it challenging to dream of a career in a field where their gender is significantly underrepresented (Kalantari, 2012). This overconcentration of men in technical professions and women in the field of humanities has

therefore given rise to the concern that humanity is likely missing the opportunity to make use of women's talents in science and, correspondingly, men's talents in the humanities. Fighting against gender segregation and stereotyping would broaden the range of options for boys and girls, offering them the freedom and flexibility to navigate their options. At the same time, this is the key to eliminate the abovementioned gender inequality in the labour market.

**Education** is a fundamental tool for the elimination of gender stereotypes which result in horizontal and vertical gender segregation and gender inequality across all aspects of social life (EIGE, 2016).

### 3. Research methodology

The research followed **qualitative methods**, utilizing focus groups with students, professors and careers counsellors, as well as school observations. Semi-structured questionnaires were used in the course of conducting **focus groups**. The inclusion criteria per population group were the following: the two teachers' focus groups included practicing or past public school secondary education teachers and careers counsellors. The subjects they taught included both sciences and humanities. We chose groups of teachers and counsellors who were working or worked in Nicosia and the district of Famagusta, in order to cover a wide geographical sample. Participating students, a balanced selection of boys and girls, came from the age range of 13 to 16 years old. The sample included children from public and private schools from the city as well as the wider district of Nicosia, in order to ensure an adequate socio-economic range for the sample.

In parallel to the focus groups, we also effected **school observations**. This method was selected as an additional means of understanding gender issues, as it contributes to the monitoring of experiences and interactions among the relevant groups within the context of the school in particular (Thomas & Nelson, 2001). A variety of schools, both middle schools and high schools, were included from the cities and wider districts of Nicosia, Larnaca and Limassol in order to achieve the widest geographical sample. We performed sustained observations over a total of 32 teaching hours, 8 in each school. We observed classes in both sciences and humanities. We also



observed what was happening during break times. In order to validate the research and also respect the participants, the researcher followed a protocol, which stipulated silent observation at the back of the class, without interfering in the lesson, in order to minimise her impact on the natural flow of the lesson. Finally, we examined using a gender perspective the textbooks of two of the classes we observed, namely Technology and Greek Language.

#### 4. Research ethics and rules

All necessary measures have been taken in order to **inform the participants**. They were given information and consent forms for their voluntary participation in the research. They were also provided with the right to withdraw from the research at any time. Students who were minors were required to provide signed consent forms from parents/guardians.

Regarding **personal data protection**, we were guided strictly by the ethics protocol, and so we make no reference to participant names or schools. Participant quotes are attributed to pseudonyms and references which might make any person identifiable have been omitted. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Only the head of research had access to audio files, which were saved using a password to her personal computer and were deleted immediately upon transcription.

The appropriateness and safety of all research tools was certified through an access authorization to schools by the Directorate of Secondary Education, after the positive evaluation of the Centre of Educational Research and Evaluation (CERE). Moreover, due to the involvement of minors in the research, we requested an opinion by the Cyprus National Bioethics Committee.

The research **data was analysed** in a two-step process. First, the data yielded from the research, the transcripts of focus group discussions with teachers and students and the observation notes, was codified. We used inductive reasoning (i.e. looking at the research data in isolation, without drawing from related theories or previous research) to identify some basic analytical categories, 10 which emerged from concepts consistent throughout the data. In the second phase of

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analysis, the data was analysed through the lens of feminist theory, to see whether gender stereotypes were being confirmed or challenged in school.

The research revealed that one of the core belief that perpetuate stereotypes in school is the focus on biological differences between boys and girls. This focus feeds the stereotype that boys and girls tend to hold distinct skills and talents. While biological differences undoubtedly exist between genders, these should not lead to generalised beliefs, since the “boy” / “girl” classification does not accommodate the range of diversity among those who share a gender. As the renowned biologist, Richard Lewontin (2001), warns us in his book *Biology as Ideology*, we must be wary of those using biology to justify social stereotypes and inequalities. Below, we list a number of dominant beliefs regarding the differing skills between genders that emerged during our research, as well as practices through which these beliefs could be challenged.

i. ‘Boys are stronger’

One argument related to the biological differences between genders, specifically, that of physical strength, was consistently confirmed by behaviours and perceptions exhibited during both focus groups and school observations. The argument supports that girls should be excluded from subjects, activities and professions which require or are deemed to require a certain measure of physical strength. This belief is reinforced even through simple, everyday school practices. Angela, a student, describes her experience below.

If teacher, for example, asks a student to move a desk, they will no doubt ask a boy to do it, without even thinking that a girl would be able to.

Angela, private school student

During an observation at a middle school, one professor told a student: “Nicolas, you turn on the projector, you are the tallest in the class”. Four girls in the class began to laugh out loud, telling the teacher that Nicolas is indeed the tallest among the boys, but there were girls in the class

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taller than him. This incident proves the extent to which stereotypical images of female and male bodies limit observations and evaluations about their respective capabilities.

Physical strength can also be used as an excuse to exclude women from **technical subjects and occupations**. For example, some teachers who participated in the research attribute the fact that girls do not express much interest in Electrical Engineering to their beliefs around physical strength.

They might be thinking that “you have to be dextrous” to become an electrician or an engineer. Or that you have to be agile, to lift weights, to go up ladders.

Elpida, technical school teacher

The view that technical professions are not suitable for women and girls, due to a difference in physique, seems to be embraced by Stavros, technical school teacher, as indicated below:

Some professions need strength. When I would see her, a half pint, trying to hold a bolt. I mean, some things fit a certain body type. She will need to do manual labour which, if she doesn't have the strength, that body type, she will not be able to do. On the other hand, there are tasks that men might not be able to perform due to their body type, tasks that require a gentler touch, let's say...

Stavros, technical school teacher

It is interesting how the rest of the teachers refuted this argument, by claiming the following:

There are machines now for these tasks!

Konstantinos, technical school teacher

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Ok, now these stereotypes are being eliminated. See what's happening in the army. Women had better results in shooting than the men this year. We're seeing a reversal. Men are proving to be better cooks than you (the women – he laughs).

Andreas, technical school teacher

We also encountered the stereotypical belief that boys are stronger than girls in our observations during **Physical Education**. Physical Education teachers who participated in the research clearly argued for the maintenance of gender-segregated classes because, in their opinion, boys and girls perform differently.

Boys are stronger, it is difficult to put them together (with the girls).

Marina, Physical Education teacher

Boys and girls should always be separate, because the level of training is very different. Even in sporting events, don't men and women compete separately?

Michalis, Physical Education teacher

At this point, it is worth mentioning that the Cyprus Association of Physical Education Teachers is officially opposed to joining boys and girls into mixed groups to be taught Physical Education. The association protested this very topic outside the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) in 2016 ([Politis newspaper, 2016](#)).

Although the MoEC guidelines have not changed, this research illustrated that teachers remain flexible, with some adhering to gender-segregated teaching, while others accept mixed classes. Michalis, for example, a Physical Education teacher, keeps boys and girls apart, adapting his class according to gender. He instructs girls to run fewer laps around the track. On the other hand, Marina, who also teaches Physical Education, who also teaches Physical Education, allows both mixed and gender-segregated classes. Her view is that gender segregation helps Physical

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Education teachers reach their quota of working hours, but it is also useful in tailoring the subject to the genders' respective capabilities, which she agrees, differ.

As we observed her class, we saw how the above belief was challenged by the students themselves: in a mixed class of boys and girls, Marina demonstrated a floor exercise, which the students then completed. At some point, she gave two options of completing the exercise, one which was easier than the other, saying: "Girls can do this (the easier version)". Once she gave her instruction, some girls continued with the more difficult version of the exercise. At the same time, some boys, such as Phillipos, reacted along the lines of: "Miss, what about gender equality, why do they get to do the easier exercise?". Marina replied: "I did not say that they shouldn't do it, I said, if they can't do it, they can do this". It was observed that in the next instructions Marina avoided mentioning gender, opting instead for: "If somebody finds it difficult, they can do this". Although while observing her class no differences were detected in boys' or girls' interest and the energy levels, Marina, nevertheless noted: "Girls are less keen because of they are hormonal".

Some students who participated in the research did not share the views of their teachers regarding girls being physically weaker, having a limited interest or lower performance in Physical Education. They were rather critical of the teachers' tendency to have lower expectations of the girls' performance. The following was covered during a focus group with high school students:

- Anna: Generally speaking, education also promotes stereotypes, like segregating boys and girls in gym class.
- Afroditi: It depends, for example in gym class they did not have us take a particular exam because they thought we would not perform as well as boys.

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- Orestis: Yes, it's like they instruct girls to run four laps around the running track, while we do six. A girl could also run six laps. It's just that not everybody can do it, it's not gender-related.
  - Haris: Yes, this has to do with a person's physical condition, their stamina.
  - Researcher: Are there boys who can't run six laps?
  - Everybody: Yes, there are.

## ii. Gender violence as a mechanism for reassigning girls to predetermined roles

Although there was no student participating in the research that explicitly expressed an opinion in favour of gender inequality, school observations illustrated that there was often a discrepancy between what students would say and what they would do. This demonstrates that, despite the contemporary educational practice of promoting political correctness, there has been no radical change in practices which essentially reproduce unequal power relationships between the genders. Boys overwhelmingly dominated the school environment and even devised ways of maintaining it if said dominance was seen to be threatened, despite not openly admitting to any of the aforementioned.

The most distinctive example was observed during a free period, when the children were instructed to play football on the field. A mixed group of boys and girls went to the football field. Two boys appointed themselves team captains and began to build their teams by selecting players. During the selection, they left out five girls who were waiting along with the other children. One of them asked: "Hey, who are we with?", without receiving any answer. Out of the five girls who were initially interested in playing, only two stayed on the field, Artemis and Thekla. The two girls who stayed on were eventually included into the two teams, but only by their own initiative. Thekla assumed a less active role in the game, bringing the ball back when it went out of the field. Artemis seemed more combative. Christophoros, a boy sitting on a bench, called her at some point to leave the game and give him her notebook so he could copy an

exercise from her. She orders him to take the notebook himself and, five minutes later, he tells her: “I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but you have to come and tell me what you’ve written, because I can’t make out your letters”. Artemis did not leave the game, instead she tried to join in and complained when they didn’t pass her the ball, saying: “Why didn’t you pass me the ball, you guys, I was free, I could have scored”, and Aristos replied: “Oh please, girl, what would you have done, a bicycle kick?”. As the game went on, Artemis persisted, playing more dynamically and managing to steal the ball from Yannis and scoring a goal. Yannis then grabbed her by the waist, picked her up and put her in a different spot. When the bell rang, the children headed to the classroom for their next period. Yannis hugged Artemis, saying:

- Yannis: We’ll play again and you’ll see what you will get if you ever take the ball from me... Oh and by the way your little pink swimsuit is perfect.
- Artemis: Where did you see it? I don’t have any photos on Facebook wearing my swimsuit... (Thinks for a second and shouts to another boy). Andreas, I sent you that photo in confidence!

The aforementioned incident indicates some of the ways in which boys impose and preserve unequal power relations in schools. As noted by feminist theorist, Nancy Fraser (1990), exclusion and social status allow for discrimination against women and any other person considered inferior. In the example above, the boys clearly adopted both these practices, through excluding the girls when picking teams, and treated them as if they were invisible, and through minimising the social status of the girls who did get to play. Artemis, who fought to change her role within the team, became the target of violent behaviour, which had the sole purpose of weakening her and “putting her in her place”.

In the course of the same incident, Antonis, a petite student with a high-pitched voice, who would be often teased in class every time he spoke up, was seen to be given a higher status and acceptance by his peers when he played football well. Whenever he managed to score a goal or steal the ball, the boys encouraged and cheered him. It seems that boys have more areas in which they are afforded the opportunity to have a voice and gain social acceptance. One only

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needs to observe the most common spatial planning in schools. The soccer field, which is statistically dominated by boys, usually occupies the largest area of the schoolyard. Girls are frequently confined to the periphery of the field.

Nevertheless, boys who have no natural talent for sports are also an easy target, as they do not live up to the prerequisites of their gender. For example, in the course of observing a gym class, certain boys began to jeer one of their classmates who could not complete the laps, calling him “little girl”, “period pad” and “faggot”. The characterisations that make reference to women and homosexuals give boys a dual message: on the one hand, if he does not live up to the social rules regarding male power, he will not fit into the hegemonic category of being a “heterosexual man”; on the other hand, the message concurrently denigrates women by placing them in the weaker group. Similar incidents also emerged in discussion with students and teachers, for example:

I had a student who was kind of chubby, and they would make fun of him, he did not want to do come to gym class, whenever he had gym he wouldn't come to school, then his mum came, we told him that he was missing classes, etc. In the end, he said he didn't want to come to school when they had gym, because they were making fun of him when he was training and running. It got to the point where he had been absent so many times, that he was close to failing his grade, all because he didn't want to come to school.

Maria, counsellor

Although research based on the subject of Physical Education demonstrated that girls are vulnerable in mixed classes, the solution does not seem to lie in segregating classes by gender. Segregation might create a safer environment for girls, but it wouldn't protect weaker boys. Furthermore, some of the incidents we described above could evidence that mixed Physical Education classes are conducive to challenging dominant stereotypes regarding the potential of girls and boys, as corroborated by the classroom studies conducted by Koca (2009) and



McCaughy (2014). The binary discourse, as imposed by gender-segregated classes, encourages the view that boys and girls are more different than they are alike. This might risk strengthening the stereotype that boys are more capable in Physical Education. As we have seen, this stereotype is problematic both for boys and girls, since the distinction based on gender leaves no room for differing levels of performance and interest towards a subject. Therefore, the solution does not lie in segregation, but rather in sensitised scheduling and supervision, taking into account potentially emergent gender inequalities.

### iii. The use of sexist language in schools

The present research has indicated that Greek language use in schools reproduces power relations between genders in two ways: a. through the dominance of the masculine gender in grammar, e.g. adjectives, nouns and other parts of speech, and b. through the pejorative use of female adjectives. Through classroom observations, but also textbook examination, it was confirmed that the masculine gender is used predominantly as a generic term for both boys and girls, which is highly detrimental to the visibility of girls. Even in all-girl classes, teachers would use masculine pronouns and adjectives, such as: “If somebody knows this, he should tell us...”, “he who dares, can answer...”, “cooperate with he who sits next to you”. We also observed that the masculine noun “Headmaster” was used parking lot signs or outside the “Headmaster’s” office, even when the school had a Headmistress.

Participating schools also produced incidents where we observed that feminine adjectives were frequently applied to boys in a derogatory manner. This fact was observed mostly during Physical Education, as mentioned above, and during breaks. This observation was also mentioned by Yannis, a counsellor, during a focus group with counsellors:

Sometimes, when boys talk to each other, they say, you’re acting like a girl. Or don’t cry like a girl. Well, they segregate, so when boys want to insult another boy they use feminine gender... I have never however encountered an instance

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when boys are mentioned in a negative way ... don't act like a man, for example, for girls (they laugh).

Yannis, counsellor

As schools are a core arena of public discourse production, the use of language in the Cyprus education system requires further study. Feminist theory has highlighted the role of language in understanding the world and the role of gender within it. For example, Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell and Laakso (2011) have argued that equality indicators tend to be lower in countries where gender-discriminatory language is used. Language both reflects and has the simultaneous ability to influence social reality (Pavlidou, 2006; Boroditsky, 2009). In this way, the use of the generalised masculine gender in grammar affects us and strengthens the hegemonic role of the male human and the implicitly supplemental role of the female.

Although there have been sporadic efforts to diversify the Greek language<sup>2</sup>, there has been no unified effort in either the Cypriot nor the Greek education system to use non-sexist language. It must be stressed that guidance on this topic must take into consideration historical, social and linguistic contexts, as these will be relevant in incorporating and testing the non-sexist language. Proposals that are imposed come with the risk of creating backlash and achieving the diametrically opposite result, where radical change, which would fight against linguistic sexism and its consequences, is instead superseded by empty proclamations of political correctness (Pavlidou, 2006).

#### iv. Boys are less well-behaved

The stereotype that boys are less well-behaved than girls is prevalent in schools, as illustrated through this research. For example, during an observation conducted at a Nicosia district school, a pair of girls and a pair of boys were talking at the back of the class. The teacher only reprimanded the boys, whom he moved to the front, and encouraged to participate in class. The students who participated in the research, both from private and public schools, also observed that teachers tend to tell boys off for misbehaving more frequently than girls.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the [guidelines of non-sexist language in official documents](#) in Greece.

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Girls tend to be seen as more organized or quiet, uh, like boys and girls might both be talking in class, but it is only the boys' fault... for any reason.

Andriana, public high school student

In the classroom, it's like Kyriakos said, uh, the naughtier, those who talk more are assumed to be the boys... They are not so strict with girls.

Katerina, private school student

The research also revealed the pervasive rumour that technical schools are for badly-behaved boys. This, combined with the stereotype that girls tend to more demure, acts as a barrier to female attendance at these schools. As some teachers put it:

I worked in middle schools for many years, I was teaching the 3rd grade and I happened to talk with students. Who of you is intending to go to a technical school, who will go to a high school and which direction will you follow? For most girls, the attitude was: "I am not going to a technical school; all the losers are going there".

Elpida, technical school teacher

Apart from the stereotypes leading boys and girls to select different subjects and schools, technical schools have been burdened with the stereotype that they offer a lower level of education and thus are more suitable for unruly students and students who have performed badly in school. This stereotype further distances girls from selecting technical schools, increasing the gender gap in technical vocations. Additionally, it acts as a barrier to good students of either gender, who believe, due to a shortage of adequate information, that technical schools provide a lower level of education.

The technical field has a lot of issues. There are taboos saying those schools are attended by boys who are challenging, who are bad influences. As much as

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a girl might consider, the environment, even on open days, when we send them for a visit, does not make them want to end up there.

Eleni, counsellor

The stereotype about technical schools seems to affect the prestige not only of the students, but also of the teachers who work there, according to Konstantinos, a technical school teacher:

...among colleagues there is also this discrimination... “You are working in the technical field, I am in a high school, you are in a middle school”.

The stereotype that technical schools provide a lower level of teaching is unfounded, as explained by the teachers who participated in the research:

There is also the idea that: “Ah! Technical schools? Full of boys and slow learners”. I also had this notion. When asked: “Would you let your son or your daughter go to a technical school?”, I would answer emphatically “No!”. Now, after I have seen the work that goes into teaching theory in a technical school, I feel that we do good work, and due to the fact that our class sizes are small, I believe that we can easily be out on the same level as high schools.

Elpida, technical school teacher

Technical schools in Cyprus also offer the specialised knowledge and skills which are required for certain technical studies or jobs. Access to technical schools could be a good start in challenging gender-based occupational segregation, which results in technical professions and classes being dominated by men. Regrettably, entrenched beliefs continue to prevent girls from selecting technical schools, which may create additional difficulties in pursuing technical studies at university. Elena, a technical school teacher, explains:

At university I met fellow students from Greece... There were many courses that they passed with flying colours without even studying, because they had

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covered them in school, whereas we were completely ignorant, having attended high school (as opposed to a technical school). We ended up having a very tough time managing to pass those courses.

Eleni, technical school teacher

#### v. Girls in male-dominated schools

Girls are often vulnerable to gender violence in schools in Cyprus (Kaili & Pavlou, 2015). The present research, and especially the focus group with teachers, illustrated that girls in technical schools are particularly, being the minority, are vulnerable to exclusion and gender-based violence coming from their male peers.

The behaviour towards girls, especially by the boys, is not really appropriate.  
There is no respect...

Stavros, technical school teacher

If a girl walks by a group of boys, they will tease her, they will mock her, they will say something salacious and try make them cry.

Konstantinos, technical school teacher

Even female teachers are exposed to gender-based violence in male-dominated schools, except that they are better equipped to deal with the situation, as explained by Elpida, below.

I was appointed at a young age, so I dealt with pretty much the same things here as the female students. The difference was that I was shielded by my position. I had the power to inform the parents, to try to engage them in a pedagogical dialogue, even to refer the incident to an assistant, the principal, that is, to escalate it, so that the student felt that at some point he had to draw the line because you have power, something which female students don't have at school.

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Elpida, technical school teacher

Girls in technical schools are forced to adopt specific roles and survival mechanisms. According to technical school teachers, girls either assume passive and receptive roles or they try to join in boys' groups, adopting behaviour that is socially constructed as boyish, in an effort to feel safe and accepted.

There was once a girl who was the only one of her class. In order to survive, she had developed the same walk, the same vocabulary and male behaviour. The boys might simply comment that she was too much of a guy to be a woman, and while there was probably also a matter of sexuality there, but of course the girl never gave them any reason. On the contrary, most treated her like she was a boy.

Christina, technical school teacher

At that stage (when they are being verbally harassed), girls have two choices: 1. They can put their head down, pretend they didn't hear anything and move on; 2. They raise their head and talk back. When they raise their head and talk back, there is a very fine line that if crossed, can enrage boys and even lead to blows.

Andreas, technical school teacher

Based on the above, any attempt to attract girls and women to male-dominated fields of study and work should comprehensively take into account the social realities. Gendered issues, such as occupational gender segregation, are not distinct from gender-based violence and male hegemony. Additionally, the value of humanities subjects, as well as the cultivation of humanist and feminist principles are deemed to be essential to the smooth operation of schools and the minimising of transgressive behaviour. There is a risk in focusing on pushing girls into technical professions, without also trying to attract boys towards the humanities. Although the market

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offers more employment opportunities in technocratic sectors, should we allow this to diminish the humanities and other school subjects? Should the school just follow market trends and what consequences will this have on its smooth operation?

**vi. Linking care giving skills to women and girls**

Some teachers seem to espouse the common stereotype, which links care-giving professions to the status of motherhood, thus assessing women as being more suitable because of their “nature”. For example, Andreas, a technical school teacher, said:

Imagine a primary school with men. When a kid starts school and sees a female teacher, they’ll feel like they’re at home and the teacher is like their mum. Imagine the kid going and finding men. What would happen? The kid would be terrified.

The experience of one of the male teachers who participated in the discussion, who was a primary school teacher at the beginning of his career, contradicts the above stereotype, demonstrating the self-evident, in our opinion, ability of children to connect with any adult in their environment, regardless of the adult’s gender.

As a primary school teacher, I felt many times, I happened to have kids become close with me, like a mother, just like Andreas said. They would come in the morning and hug me round the legs, both boys and girls, they would leave their mum and come to me. They would see me as a substitute. I gained many things from primary schools and my experience has left me nothing but grateful.

Stavros, technical school teacher

Konstantinos adds that it is important to have both female and male role models in school.

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Between these two scenarios, I think they are both bad... If we had to choose a scenario, only men or only women, I think it would be disastrous.

Konstantinos, technical school teacher

The students who participated in the research felt in their majority that the teacher's gender doesn't determine care-giving skills. For example, Aris, a high school student, said:

Maybe a man would not be patient enough to withstand the sound of kids crying, maybe he'd yell at them... but that's not necessarily true. A woman might not be as patient as a man or vice versa.

Aris, public school student

The connection between maternity and the labour market is the basis of vertical gender segregation, as women are overwhelmingly concentrated in care-giving professions, for example in the fields of education and health (Cyprus Statistical Service, 2017).

#### vii. **Girls are associated with aesthetics, boys, with practicality**

As many teachers feel, the stereotype which links girls to aesthetics and boys to practicality can be witnessed from the way that students take care of their textbooks, all the way to their performance in the workplace. Some teachers seem to believe that girls' notebooks and handwriting are tidier.

If I had in my hands two papers without a name, I would be able to tell which one was written by a boy and which by a girl. Girls are tidier, they will get a second pen, they will underline, while boys are messy, they write as they please.

Andronikos, Mathematics teacher



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As regards job performance, two high school teachers expressed that women in technical professions emphasize the aesthetics of construction jobs, thus risking their functionality, while, on the contrary, men focus on functionality, thus risking aesthetics and detail. This stereotypical view was not backed up by any evidence, nor was it contested by the other participants to the discussion, quite unlike other stereotypes that were brought up.

We see it in construction offices. The purpose of men's sketches is functionality, while young women's sketches also strive for beauty.

Andreas, technical school teacher

It is true. Functionality is one thing and practicality is another (laughs). We (men) want practicality... We want to make something work and we don't care. A woman, on the other hand, will also observe the details.

Konstantinos, technical school teacher

The belief that boys think more practically has urged some teachers and students to believe that boys are, by nature, better in Mathematics.

The right side of boys' brains are, I think, more... more cultivated, let's say, when they are born and this gives them a natural, if you like, advantage that... they can, their mathematical side is a little better.

Kyriakos, private school student

Antonia, Mathematics teacher, initially argued that she sees no difference between genders in her classes. She then added, however, that when girls perform well, this is based on studying, whereas for boys this can be attributed to on-the-spot thinking:

Boys, even the weaker ones, can jump up and give you an answer that would surprise you... Ok, girls too, but they study, that's why.

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Antonia, Mathematics teacher

This opinion was refuted by Haralambos, a Mathematics teacher, who did not identify any biological differences in the performance and the interest level of his students. He did, however, detect peer pressure on boys to not want to seem particularly interested in his lesson, for fear of being regarded as nerds. The classroom observations illustrated that, although he treated his boys and girls equally, boys showed signs of higher self-confidence. There were lots of classroom incidents where boys tried to find alternative solutions to exercises, saying, for example: “Sir, my take on it was different”. Haralambos encouraged children to find alternatives, in an effort to cultivate their mathematical thinking, but this certainly required self-confidence, especially in a subject that seemed to attract more boys. Another observation was how boys would more frequently joke around in class and shout out answers without having raised their hand, all of which contributed to a feeling of the boys’ verbal dominance in the classroom.

It is a fact that boys are more self-confident in mathematics than girls, who believe they are better at reading (Rees & Salisbury & Gorard, 2001). The present research reveals that social perceptions around the performance of girls and boys in mathematics and practical courses are usually expressed very openly, but also, at times, in subtle ways. For example, boys being self-confident in mathematics is so “normalised”, that, in the course of the observation, it was necessary to count the classroom interruptions made by boys and girls respectively, in order to show who was dominating the discussion. The notion, whether directly or indirectly expressed, that practical thinking is inherent for boys, affects girls’ choices, who then become reluctant to select associated fields of study, even when their performance is excellent. Teachers should be aware of these cultural differences in the course of teaching their subject matter, so as to be able to adjust the lesson and reverse the classroom dynamics, in order to provide boys and girls with equal opportunities.

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viii. (Non) acknowledgement of the existence of gender segregation in student choices

The teachers who participated in the research showed that they were aware of the phenomenon of gender-based occupational segregation. Moreover, they were able to detect the causes of the phenomenon, by referring to the differing socialisation of boys and girls and the role played by key agents of socialisation, such as schools and families. For example:

We notice that boys gravitate towards more practical occupations while girls go towards the more theoretical ones. I think that this has to do with how children are raised. When the precedent is set at home: “Come on, girl, do this task”, for something that is more gentle. When it has to do with screwdrivers, and I say: “Come on, my son, do this”, I think we start to segregate at home.

Stavros, technical school teacher

I believe the issue of having a certain mindset around certain professions is a global phenomenon. That’s wrong, but I don’t know how easy it would be for a woman to dare to become, let's say, a miner. I don’t know how brave a man must be to become a nurse. I mean there are some occupations that are male-dominated or female-dominated, and there is a lot of prejudice when someone from the opposite gender tries to participate.

Elpida, technical school teacher

While acknowledging the existence of gender segregation, the career counsellors who participated in the research stated that the phenomenon does not have a strong presence in Cyprus. They argue that the financial crisis redirected the expectations regarding professional choices: they say choices have shifted from being gendered to focusing on which jobs will bring professional stability. This opinion seemed to prevail amongst counsellors. For example:

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The segregation is not strong, that is to say, it's been diminishing over the years. Especially due to the crisis, the crisis! It's really gone, the mentality has changed!

Maria, counsellor

Later on in the discussion, Athina, another counsellor, pointed out: "Maybe (the segregation) does not seem to be strong, because we don't believe in it, we don't have the awareness to see it". Athina's point of view seems to be true, since according to data from the Cyprus Statistical Service (2017) gender segregation well and truly prevalent in Cyprus. For example, the education sector had 7,157 men and 20,190 women, whereas the construction sector had only 3,262 women, but 27,821 men. Even if the educational choices being made by today's students are shifting, for which there are no recent available statistics, the gap is so large, that bridging it presents a real challenge.

#### ix. Gender-based approach to education

Neither the career counsellors nor the educators who participated made direct reference to policies and practices that had an integrated gender perspective. When plainly asked whether the teaching staff at their school are interested in gender issues, the teachers responded by noting that gender is rarely a concern, and usually arises in the context of rule-breaking.

It only comes up when rules are broken. Never anything particularly serious. Of course, whenever we notice something, we dole out punishment. We all follow this policy.

Christina, technical school teacher

Incidents are over quickly. So a boy says something to a girl, she turns around, talks back, and it's over. The incident doesn't tend to continue. Rarely would it continue.

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Konstantinos, technical school teacher

The counsellors argued that a lack of time is what prevents the integration of gender-based approach in counselling. Some also justified this lack of gender-based approach by saying such integration is something extra, which does not fall within the scope of their duties.

Look, you can't always keep thinking, that kid over there, let's say, s/he might not have questioned him/herself because of gender stereotypes, etc. What you do, is of course to inform objectively, we always do this based on the scenario, but you can't have it in mind from the beginning, ah, let's consider this and that, why not do it this way... It isn't in the core conditions of counselling.

Athina, counsellor

You respect their choice.

Maria, counsellor

In addition, gender is not the primary issue to emerge when talking about career orientation. The big issues are what this is, what I will do, will I find a job. It doesn't come up, the first issue is never: but this profession is practised more by girls or boys...

Yannis, counsellor

The counsellors also informed us that they no longer have any time to teach children, as, pursuant to a decision by the Ministry of Education, their teaching hours were eliminated. One-to-one meeting time is so limited, that counsellors have just enough time to provide students with some basic information about the latter's choices, without going through a proper counselling process.

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Sometimes they have already settled on a course. You're in a hurry to go on to the next one, so in such cases, you don't take the time. It's not right, of course, because naturally everybody needs proper professional orientation. Somebody says, I want to be a civil engineer and I'm set on it, tell me what to fill in and where, and at that point you're just providing information. You don't start asking how they chose this, are you sure.. You might mention something, but at that point, you'd be unlikely to bring up anything like gender stereotypes or anything else.

Yannis, counsellor

What Yannis is saying is that we should see individuals on a regular basis; seeing them once means anything you say, it will not be enough to make a difference.

Eleni, counsellor

Shortage of time and the belief that gender-based issues do not belong in the scope of the counselling process result in lost opportunities. A gender-based approach is not a separate or extra piece of counselling, but should be treated as a part of it, especially when questioning one's choices (Lesta, 2018; Deligianni-Kouimtzi, 2008).

## 5. Good practices for teachers

We have included below a list of good practices, which we encountered in Cypriot schools in the context of this research. This list is by no means exhaustive. It highlights the need for further research into good practices, which are already being applied in schools, albeit in a fragmented manner. The list also attempts to institutionalise and disseminate good practices in the context of mutual learning among teachers.

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i. Gender mainstreaming in the classroom and making use of teaching time

A good practice to challenge gender stereotypes is gender mainstreaming, which was observed in the Modern Greek Language class, as the students were taught the concept of freedom. Children were asked to indicate potential forms that freedom can take, such as political, social, ethnic, freedom of speech, religious, etc. The discussion moved on by making reference to the constraints of technology and the computer games which boys and girls tend to play, and a girl stressed that games which are aimed at boys tend to be more aggressive.

The teacher dug deeper, showing the children a video a female robot being made, saying:

This man bought a robot woman, to make her exactly as he wants... This is a blatant violation, an insult to women... Can free persons be manufactured?

Areti, Language and Literature teacher

Children then started giving more examples where technology is used in ways which promote sexism in society and gender-based violence, for example, using social media for grooming purposes. Despite it falling outside the scope of her formal tasks, the teacher, Areti, seized the opportunity to mention support hotlines to report such incidents. Areti continued to implement gender mainstreaming in her lesson regarding freedom, asking the children about potential factors that threaten the freedom of individuals in a society. Through the Socratic method, the children, made reference to racism and sexism. With regard to sexism, which they mentioned as “gender-based – between the two genders”, they discussed the following:

-Georgia: The patriarchal family is a threat to freedom.

-Pavlos: There is an erroneous opinion that it is inferior to be female.

-Loukia: Women are banned from some jobs. Why, sir, this is against my freedom!

-Areti (teacher): Yes, it happened to one of my colleagues, they asked her to sign a document promising she would not get pregnant and when she did, they fired her.

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During break time, the children played a song by Melina Mercouri on the classroom computer. The teacher, once again adapting to the situation, used the teachable moment to say:

What do you know about Melina Mercouri, which freedoms did she fight for?  
Melina came to Cyprus and helped the “Women return” movement, a struggle by Cypriot women for freedom.

Areti, Language and Literature teacher

The gender debate, which, as emerged via the classroom discussions, is one of the factors which is used to deprive individuals of their freedom, extended to cover factors that maintain the status quo. The students talked about gender stereotypes and also policies that need to be implemented on both the state and EU level, in order to remedy the situation.

The same teacher used gender mainstreaming during her History lesson, citing a passage from the Nuremberg Laws, according to which only the man was punished when couples broke the law regarding no relationships being allowed between Jews and non-Jews. This is because the woman was seen as a dependant to the man. At the same time, employers were not allowed to hire a woman under 45 years old, as it was considered that there was too high a risk of her getting raped. Areti, while fulfilling her duty to teach the set material, enriched her lesson with the use of photographs, encouraging her students to watch historical films, and also teaching them extra material.

The (set teaching) material will always be a springboard for me to do something else. You have to make connections to other sources. In this way students can understand better and you also build a relationship with them. They now listen to me talking about the historical rumours and gossipy stories (laughs).

Areti, Language and Literature teacher



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ii. **Encouraging girls to participate in Physical Education classes, discouraging boys from monopolising the lesson, expanding of the range of activities**

Michalis, a Physical Education teacher, has observed that girls are less self-confident during his lessons. In his opinion, teenage girls may feel uncomfortable with the changes in their bodies. Michalis said this might prevent them from trying out different activities in Physical Education: “It is impossible for a child not to be able to jump over the gap, it is a matter of self-confidence, the child does not feel comfortable with its body”. In order to cope with this phenomenon, Michalis specifically encourages girls in every attempt, in order to increase their enthusiasm for his lesson.

Marina on the other hand, chooses to discourage the boys in her lesson who seem to be dominating group activities. For example, when observing a game of volleyball between two teams consisting of boys and girls, Nikiforos does not pass the ball and tries to play single-handed with the opposing team. Marina notices and intervenes by saying: “There are other people in the team... You’re turning into a one man show, trying to be everywhere at once”.

Moreover, both Michalis and Marina have planned their classes so as to offer a wide range of sports activities. Their syllabus is flexible enough to accommodate this. After covering the set material though, the majority of the boys pressure them to be allowed to play football. Nevertheless, the teachers provide a range of choices, so as to be more inclusive to girls and boys who are not interested in football. Whenever the children play football, Michalis provides other activity options on the basketball court, for the children who do not want to play football. Marina tries to remain informed on current fitness trends so as to remain relevant to the students.

iii. **Participation of teachers for the encouragement of student activities**

In order to encourage the participation of students in the school’s theatrical troupe, the technical school teachers decided to themselves participate as amateur actors in the school plays. Elpida, a technical school teacher, described this interesting practice:

Boys stayed away from the troupe, because those who participated were usually bullied a lot by the others... So we, as a group of teachers, announced that our participation in this year's play. When 6-7 teachers said we would participate and held a casting call... suddenly around 50 students came...! And we did this for several years, having both students and teachers participate, so that the student would want to come, thinking: "Ah! I will play Ms A's friend" or "I will be playing Mr B's daughter", so it became a bit of fun and it turned into a good practice.

#### iv. Use of audiovisual material to get students interested

The use of audiovisual material was observed in almost every lesson we attended. The media we observed included short videos on biotic and abiotic factors in Biology and a video of the Wright brothers' first ever flight in Technology.

#### v. Career counsellors' use of role models

Career counsellors stated that promoting role models, namely professionals who are successful in a field where their gender forms the minority, is inspiring to students and reassuring to parents, when the latter show concern regarding the gender-appropriateness of the profession.

Success stories help. I'll say that I had, for example, a female student who studied chemical engineering and now she works in the field and enjoys it. Especially when you refer to your own students, from your own your experience... you can see it, at that moment the parent's and the student's faces start to shine. See, another girl also did it and everything went well.

Yannis, occupational education counsellor

## 6. Recommendations

Our research has indicated some good practices, which are nevertheless being applied in a fragmented manner, therefore their effectiveness isn't guaranteed, although they could set an

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example of gender-sensitive teaching. In order to substantively eradicate gender stereotypes in education, we suggest strategic planning and coordinated actions at the policy level by the Ministry of Education and Culture. More specifically, we have cited below some recommendations which emerged from the needs detected by the findings of this research:

**a. Vertical gender mainstreaming across disciplines.** Gender-related issues concern the lives of every student and are pertinent across school subjects. Vertical gender mainstreaming can make courses more attractive and comprehensible (Pinto, 2013). To achieve this, the syllabus and textbooks across lessons must aim to promote the principles of gender equality. We emphasize that we are not proposing to add material, but rather to readjust what already exists. For example, ensuring a balanced choice of female and male writers and poets in Modern Greek literature textbooks or integrating gender equality protocols in the Physical Education lesson.

**b. Ongoing teacher training.** Teacher training in gender-based issues is necessary, both during academic specialisation –or at least before the commencement of teaching– as well as in the course of teachers’ careers. Training needs to be ongoing, as gender-related issues and inequalities are so deeply rooted within us and “normalised” in society, that despite incidents occurring in our presence, we often have difficulty both in recognising them and intervening appropriately, as evidenced through this research.

**c. Systematic research. Primary research which is both** lengthy and in-depth is necessary for the design of interventions. Research contributes to understanding the reality of Cypriot schools and Cypriot society and may inform planned actions, which are based on and adapted to such data. In addition, the study of already-implemented good practices, as illustrated in this research, should be extended and utilised as a method of mutual learning among teachers.

**d. Strategic planning** to combat gender stereotypes in education, which must include a budget for specific measures and actions, and also incorporate success indicators, across all levels of education. We note that the effectiveness of actions must be tested in the context of the educational system and wider society; it should therefore be subject to ongoing assessment and

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readjustment, as required. The assessment should be performed both in the context of individual actions and strategic planning as a whole, so as to ascertain the degree to which the objectives have been achieved.

## Conclusion

The findings of this research have showed that the beliefs of teachers and students generate interactions in schools, which often reproduce gender-based stereotypes and inequalities. Gender stereotypes on the one hand constrain the educational and vocational choices of students and, on the other hand, render girls and children that do not fall into the stereotypical representation of their gender vulnerable to violence and school bullying.

At the same time, as part of the research, it was observed that teachers and students express beliefs and implement practices, which, albeit sporadically, might reverse unequal treatment in school and help eliminate gender inequality. The paradoxical coexistence of contradictory stances and perceptions –on the one hand some promote gender-based discrimination and on the other, some question it– is rather encouraging. This contradiction shows potential movement and a certain momentum in education, one of the core agents of socialisation, which is alive and constantly changing.

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the field of education regarding gender equality. This has created an excellent opportunity for material interventions and structural changes, which can then be reflected throughout society. As indicated by this research, this opportunity is accompanied by the threat of political correctness. Political correctness poses the risk of changing the vision for education's role in achieving substantive gender equality into empty declarations and fragmented interventions. Therefore, political will is necessary in order to use gender-related expertise and gender mainstreaming across school activities.

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