



Right to Education

Legal factsheet | Gender stereotypes and the right to education

Gender stereotypes and gender stereotyping underpin or exacerbate many of the obstacles faced by women and girls in enjoying their right to education. Ideally, education systems should be a focal point for action to combat gender stereotypes and gender stereotyping. However in some cases, the education system, and particularly the curriculum, [textbooks](#), and teachers, play a role in perpetuating gender stereotyping, which has wide ranging effects on girls throughout their lives, from the subjects they take, which influences their employment prospects, to their choice to marry and their reproductive health. In some cases gender stereotypes and gender stereotyping can be so harmful they lead to violations of human rights, including the right to education.



[According to Cook and Cusack](#) (2010, p. 9) a gender stereotype is a generalised view or preconception about attributes or characteristics that are or ought to be possessed by, or the roles that are or should be performed by women and men. According to a [OHCHR report](#) (2013, p. 18), a gender stereotype is *harmful* when it limits

women's and men's capacity to develop their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers and make choices about their lives and life plans.

Gender stereotyping is the *practice* of ascribing to an individual woman or man specific attributes, characteristics, or roles by reason only of her or his membership in the social group of women or men. Gender stereotyping is considered *wrongful* when it when it results in a violation or violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Harmful gender stereotypes and wrongful gender stereotyping can affect girls before they step into a classroom and may even prevent girls from going to school. For example, stereotypical views that girls are domestic, homemakers, and caregivers may lead families to question the point of sending their daughters to school if they are to become wives and mothers, whilst the stereotype that men should be breadwinners means that boys are prioritised when it comes to education. Even when girls do go to school, some are still expected to juggle their domestic duties, such as cleaning and cooking, on top of their school work.

Harmful gender stereotypes and wrongful gender stereotyping also affect girls in the school environment. For example, stereotypes about the different physical and cognitive abilities of girls and boys, leads to certain school subjects being gendered. Boys are considered better suited to maths, technology, the sciences, and sports whereas girls are considered better suited to the arts and humanities. This has the effect of excluding girls and boys from certain subjects, but also has a detrimental effect on girls' further educational and employment opportunities, as girls and boys go on to study different subjects at university, where 'male' subjects tend to lead to more lucrative and influential careers. Gender inequality is then perpetuated through [hiring practices that further disadvantage women](#).

What does international human rights law say about gender stereotypes?

International human rights law imposes specific obligations on states to eliminate harmful gender stereotypes and wrongful gender stereotyping.

UN human rights treaty bodies have interpreted the rights to non-discrimination and equality to include discrimination and inequality caused by harmful gender stereotypes and wrongful gender stereotyping. For instance, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, in [General Comment 13](#), interprets the right to education, in light of the Covenant's non-discrimination clause (Article 2 (2)), to impose the obligation: 'to remove gender and other stereotyping which impedes the educational access of girls, women and other disadvantaged groups' (1999, para. 55).

In relation to specific obligations on gender stereotypes, Article 5 of the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (1979, CEDAW) provides:

State Parties shall take all appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customs and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women.

Article 2(f) requires states to take 'all appropriate measures', including: 'legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women'.

CEDAW also recognises that harmful gender stereotypes are perpetuated in schools and throughout the education system. Article 10(c) requires states to eliminate, 'any stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education by encouraging coeducation and other types of education which will help to achieve this aim and, in particular, by the revision of textbooks and school programmes and the adaptation of teaching methods'. Article 10(g) requires states to give girls and boys the same opportunities to participate actively in sports and physical education.

The Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ('the Committee') which monitors compliance with CEDAW have urged states to eliminate gender stereotypes that exclude girls from certain subjects, for instance, [on reviewing Estonia](#), the Committee urged the government to: 'Strengthen its strategies to address discriminatory stereotypes and structural barriers that may deter girls from enrolling in traditionally male-dominated fields of study, such as information technology and architecture (2016, para. 27(a))'.

The only other international human rights treaty to explicitly deal with gender stereotypes is the [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (2006, CRPD). Article 8(1)(b) recognises that gender stereotypes can intersect with stereotypes about people with disabilities, and requires states to: 'adopt immediate, effective and appropriate measures to combat stereotypes, prejudices and harmful practices relating to persons with disabilities, including those based on sex and age, in all areas of life'. In addition, echoing CEDAW's Article 2(f), Article 4(1)(b) requires states to: 'take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices that constitute discrimination against persons with disabilities'.

Regional human rights law and gender stereotypes

Regional human rights law largely mirrors the provisions found in international law.

In Africa, the [Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa](#) (2003) requires states to: 'commit themselves to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of women and men through public education, information, education and communication strategies, with a view to achieving the elimination of harmful cultural and traditional practices and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes, or on stereotyped roles for women and men (Article 2 (2)).

The Protocol also requires states to: 'eliminate all stereotypes in textbooks, syllabuses and the media, that perpetuate such discrimination' (Article 12 (1) (b)) and to 'promote education and training for women at all levels and in all disciplines, particularly in the fields of science and technology' (Article 12 (2) (b)).

The [African Youth Charter](#) (2006) requires states to 'Establish and encourage participation of all young men and young women in sport, cultural and recreational activities as part of holistic development' (Article 13 (4) (m)).

In Europe, Article 14 of the Council of Europe [Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence](#) (2011, Istanbul Convention) on the right to education. States:

1. Parties shall take, where appropriate, the necessary steps to include teaching material on issues such as equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, gender-based violence against women and the right to personal integrity, adapted to the evolving capacity of learners, in formal curricula and at all levels of education.

2. Parties shall take the necessary steps to promote the principles referred to in paragraph 1 in informal educational facilities, as well as in sports, cultural and leisure facilities and the media.

In addition, the [Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on gender mainstreaming in education](#) (2007), which is soft law and is therefore not legally-binding, provides useful guidance on the steps states can take to eradicate gender stereotypes including:

- teachers should be encouraged to challenge sex-stereotyped attitudes and beliefs, which can inhibit boys' and girls' personal development and prevent them from realising their full potential (Article 21)
- making education for private life part of the school curriculum, in order to combat sexist role stereotyping (Article 27)
- teachers should be encouraged to analyse, challenge and so help to eliminate sexist stereotypes and distortions which these textbooks, materials and products may convey in their content, language and illustrations (Article 29)
- promote gender mainstreaming in sports and leisure activities, where gender-based stereotypes and expectations may affect girls' and boys' self-image, identity-building, health, skills acquisition, intellectual development, social integration and gender relations (Article 34)
- initiate and support research on innovative projects on gender stereotyping and pupil behaviour, representations of masculinity and femininity, new identities for girls, and relations between girls and boys, with special reference to aggressive and abusive behaviour (Article 56)

In the Americas, the [Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women](#) (1994, Convention of Belém do Pará) in Article 6(b) says that women have the right to be free from violence, which includes the right to be 'valued and educated free of stereotyped patterns of behavior and social and cultural practices based on concepts of inferiority or subordination.'

Right Education Initiative (2017) *Legal factsheet: Gender stereotypes and the right to education*. For further information on the right to education of women and girls, see: www.right-to-education.org/issue-page/marginalised-groups/girls-women