



Gender Equality and Antidiscrimination for Roma

MODULE 1

**Fight forms of discrimination against girls
in education skills, development,
training, health and nutrition**

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Introduction

The fight against discrimination toward girls is a global effort to ensure that girls and boys could be equally treated and enjoy the same rights in all fields (education, development, training, health, and nutrition). Unfortunately, regardless the efforts made, particularly under the legislative point of view, the situation is still very far to be considered as an accomplished goal.

There is the need for a collective and coordinated commitment on behalf of institutions but, most of all, parents, and people's organization. Some perceptions are deeply ingrained in the collective representation, and the habits and common behaviours on this issue have deeply ingrained cultural roots. Such attitudes are not the prerogative of this or that human group but are recorded as being part of common lore at almost every latitude. Possibly, as anthropological studies and research shows, small human group of gatherers and hunters are the only groups where a substantial equality could exist this is due to the living style of these groups, where the ability to hunt and catch preys is not always tied to the male sex. However, even in the simplest of society, the division of tasks has almost invariably reflected the reproductive roles, so that women were almost invariably assigned duties such as childrearing and the care of the family households 'needs (cooking food, herding small animals, tidying, sewing etc.). As much as this is a "natural" job division.

Moreover, even in this time of global diffusion of information, the tendency to portray women and girls in a stereotypical way is still very strong and is often reinforced by traditional cultural stereotypes which are in many cases so strong and rooted, that they end up in creating a double standard which makes the issue to address even more complex.

The language itself is one of the most evident indicators of how this discrimination works in a pervasive way; in English, the expression "Man up" is an exhortation that should encourage boys and men to behave in a "manly" way, as opposed to a "feminine" one considered as weak and puny; the same expression exists also in the Italian language. Although these forms of expression are strongly disapproved and sanctioned in educated milieu, they are still very common among street talk and working classes, where there is less awareness of the stigma that these expressions contain, and the message they deliver.

Gender appears to be a "natural issue", because the way in which we interact with each other appears to be "normal", but to discuss about gender is instead very important because it helps us to understand and challenge several things, we take for granted. Gender defines people's sense of themselves, and it relates to people's social interactions and to how do we look at ourselves and others.

WOMEN IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING: A SHORT TIMELINE

The earliest testimony of women access to education go back to a very early time in history, the first record goes back to the ancient Egypt, where sources records that women had been also educated as scribes; but we must wait until the XVIIth century to have more significant evidence and records of women entering formal education and training pathways, through the establishment of the first schools and colleges for women in Sweden, France and Italy¹. Later, for the whole XVIIIth and XIXth century there is a continuous and progressive growth of colleges and school institutions and boarding schools. Also, a larger number of female individuals. Maria Agnesi, the marquise du Châtelet, Sophie Germain, and Caroline Hershel were all important mathematicians, although without formal education or degree. In literature in particular in England appear the figure of the "blue stocking lady", a woman who held literary conversations among intellectual circles including men, but in order to have full access to university and higher studies we have to wait the mid XVIIIth and XIXth century.

¹ Grendler, Paul F. (1988). O'Malley, John W. (ed.). *Schools, Seminaries, and Catechetical Instruction, in Catholicism in Early Modern History 1500–1700: A Guide to Research*. Center for Information Research. p. 328.

WOMEN IN HEALTH AND NUTRITION

The contribution of women in health and nutrition is also important. Several women such as Ellen Swallow Richard, Agnes Fay Morgan, Elsie Widdowson and Doris Howes Calloway have brought key contribution to dietetics and to healthy and proper intake of protein and vitamins. It is the second half of 1800's and the following century that witness the largest participation, often in connection with the ongoing wars which required applied sciences to reinforce their contribution with practical and empirical solutions.

HOW TO FIGHT FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION TOWARD GIRLS?

Gender awareness is a key element in the building of a healthier, more democratic society, and it is a progressive, ongoing process. The aim of this work is to promote a deeper acknowledgement on gender both at conscious and unconscious level. Gender mechanisms and stereotypes are so very ingrained that it requires an active effort to understand and tackle the way in which we interact and interpret the reality around us. Gender affects all life aspects, particularly in terms of power dynamics, and for all social workers and teachers working with youngster is of paramount importance to understand this and find viable and efficient ways to address this. It must be understood that images, values and normative standards that we automatically assign to others are the product of culturally and socially determined factors, and the consequent privileges and possibilities that some have, and some have not, have an important effect on the progress toward equality in our societies. Clearly it is difficult to counteract and contrast ingrained habits and ways of thinking, but it is necessary to develop new mechanisms for conceptualizing this issue and act accordingly, in a constant learning on the job process dedicated to questioning common beliefs and habits.

Gender is the way we define ourselves as being part of the women or men group. The WHO (World Health Organization) defines sex and gender according to the following definitions: "sex" refers to biological characteristics which differentiates men from women, while "gender" refers to the "socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that society considers appropriate for men and women": gender is not biological and describes a number of qualities and behaviours expected from men and women in our society. We must also keep in mind that the idea of gender can change in the course of time and from one socio geographical context to the other: it is a social construct.

While it is evident that sex characteristics are ascribed at birth and are peculiar to each sex (men have larger bones; women have breasts that can produce milk; men are generally stronger; etc.) there are characteristics inherent to gender (not to sex) that are stereotypically assigned almost without questioning (women are more sensitive).

To fight discrimination against women and girls, many countries and international bodies have agreed and shared several recommendations, some of which legally binding. Among the most important of these documents, we must quote:

The Universal declaration of Human Rights (1948)

The European Convention on Human Rights (1953)

The Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination toward women (CEDAW) (1979)

Moreover, the gender equality aspect has been mainstreamed in many other documents and it is an integral part of school curricula and work legislation; however, to this legislative, formal aspect it has not corresponded an equal practical effect in society, and we witness everyday forms of discrimination against women. Legislation is important because it gives a strong legal framework and acknowledges ways to sanction and tackle the issue, but in real everyday life, it is persisting an attitude toward the use of double standard which in its various forms, still hinders equality and prevent from a critical approach to be implemented as part of the everyday's discourse.

ISSUE:

An interrupted career: family duties are almost invariably assigned to girls. Even if often in school and in training are the ones who brings better results, they are withdrawn earlier because they are expected to support the family (mothers) in their gender traditionally ascribed “women chores” like housekeeping and childcaring for younger siblings. This is reinforced by the gender ascribed roles and by the family and society’s expectations: men “defend” the honour of the family, but women are the “official bearer” of this honour. A woman is valued by her ability to satisfy what community requires, and it is not expected to build a life for herself autonomously.

WAYS TO COPE:

Teach males to share responsibilities in the family, make them understand that tasks are not gender originated, and that being positive and helpful in all family chores makes everyone happier. Explain and show through practical examples from everyday’s life that there is no reduction in masculinity if tasks are shared, and that recent (in Italy) and EU legislation have all found ways to protect the fatherhood by introducing laws and rights which also allow men to take active part in for example, childcare, allowing paid time out of work. Reinforce this message by showing real life examples demonstrating the usefulness, positivity, and convenience of this approach. For example, for what concern health issues, women are of paramount importance because they cannot allow for themselves the self destructivity of some behaviours which are commonly expected and often justified in men. In most cases, women must remain responsible, not being allowed to indulge in the self destructive, male affirming behaviour that is often publicly displayed by men; one example for all is that of drunkenness. While drinking (even drinking to excess) is considered a “prove of masculinity”, same behaviour is strongly sanctioned and disapproved in women. Recklessness in actions like car driving are condoned in man and seen like a behaviour that comes together with masculinity. Underline the difference in the evaluation of “bad” behaviours when concerning the two sexes and stimulate the trainees to find the logic of it (and the usefulness). Why is something encouraged and in other contexts is opposed and shamed? Underline and explain the concept of “what is adaptive”. Is this or that action constructive and healthy? Does it bring a successful outcome?

Underline the importance of the crèche/child school. Underline the importance of out group relation, and the ability to learn other and different forms of interaction between sexes.

Policies:

- **Health and Nutrition:**
- **Reproductive Health Education:** Implement comprehensive reproductive health education programs, providing girls with information about their bodies, health, and well-being.
- **Access to Healthcare:** Ensure access to quality healthcare services, with a focus on reproductive health, maternal care, and addressing malnutrition.
- **Menstrual Hygiene Management:** Promote menstrual hygiene management initiatives to eliminate stigma and ensure that girls have access to sanitary products.

Nutrition:

- **Nutrition Programs:** Implement nutrition programs that specifically address the nutritional needs of girls, particularly during critical stages of growth and development.
- **Awareness Campaigns:** Conduct awareness campaigns to educate communities about the importance of nutrition for girls' overall well-being and academic performance.
- **Community Gardens:** Promote community gardens and initiatives that enhance food security and provide nutritious food for girls and their families.

Empowerment Programs:

- **Leadership Development:** Establish leadership development programs for girls, fostering their confidence, skills, and abilities to take on leadership roles.
- **Mentorship Initiatives:** Create mentorship initiatives that connect girls with successful women who can provide guidance and support.

Education Equality:

- **Gender Sensitization Programs:** Implement gender sensitization programs in schools and communities to promote understanding and respect for gender diversity.
- **Parental Education:** Conduct programs to educate parents and caregivers about the importance of equal opportunities for girls.
- **Equal Access:** Ensure equal access to education for girls at all levels. Address barriers such as distance, safety concerns, and cultural norms that may hinder girls' enrolment and attendance.
- **Eliminate Gender Bias:** Develop and implement curricula and teaching materials that are free from gender bias and stereotypes, promoting equal opportunities for girls in all subjects.
- **Safe Learning Environments:** Create safe and inclusive learning environments that protect girls from harassment and discrimination.
- **Equal Access:** Advocate for policies and initiatives that ensure equal access to quality education for girls, addressing barriers such as distance, safety concerns, and cultural norms.
- **Gender-Inclusive Curricula:** Promote gender-inclusive curricula that challenge stereotypes and encourage girls to pursue a wide range of subjects, including science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

Practical exercises:

- Analyse and challenge the common stereotypes on gender. Group discussion.
- Indicate forms of discrimination (preferably the less evident): which forms are mainly practiced against girls? For each topic, indicate with examples.
- How is gender learnt? What influences and forms our common concept of different genders? Which values, norms, behaviours can we list in our culture that provide a stereotypical idea of gender? How “grounded” they are?
- Examine some newspapers and magazine articles. Analyse web personal pages: what strikes us as culturally conditioned views? How and through which means our habits and traditions concur to orient us in each situation? Produce a post or other publishing material that does not reinforce prejudices.
- Different cultures, different values, similar outcomes: how to eliminate discrimination in every day's situations? What forms of work and other practices have seen a change in times in how they have been gendered?
- What is the gender identity in your nation and in your in group?
- Inform about the help offered by social services in terms of economic help, orientation, and access to NIDO crèche.
- Illustrate, with practical examples, how to access the services and the advantages in it.
- Advice about the possibility of having time freed to invest in jobs, development, education, and personal growth.

For Public Administrators:

- Design and produce a easy leaflet of information in regard to the access to crèche
- Open a front desk, active in designated day, to welcome and orient parents.
- Periodic but regular visits within the community with the aim of witness with their eye the actual situation and, if needed, being able to set up a coordinated intervention toward the family with a representative of the school or training or professional institute.

- Activate efficient and timely bureaucratic and administrative strategy to provide economic support to the child enrolled. The resources should be appropriate to satisfy all needs (thus eliminating possible excuses arising)
- Investigate about the possibility of using forms of public and private partnership to economically support the initiatives through forms of tutoring.