

POLICY *Analysis*

Center for Family and Human Rights

Problems with Education Cannot Wait Policy and Programming

Education Cannot Wait is a global education initiative hosted by the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and funded by governments, private industry, and multilateral institutions. It was established in 2016 to finance education programs for children affected by emergencies and protracted crises. According to Education Cannot Wait, its programming reached 30 million children in response to COVID-19 and approximately 5 million children and adolescents around the world are educated through its programs. To date the United States has contributed more than \$92 million to Education Cannot Wait. Although providing education to children in crisis settings is a worthy endeavor, there are provisions in the Education Cannot Wait programming that appear more concerned with changing social norms than ensuring access to quality education.

Education Cannot Wait programs promote access to contraception and abortion. In its [2018- 2021 Gender Strategy document](#), Education Cannot Wait asserted that “sexual and reproductive health interventions” [includes contraception and abortion] are indispensable for ensuring continued education and preventing pregnancy. Grant recipients were encouraged to link “sexual and reproductive health services to education and learning opportunities.”

In addition to advancing abortion as a sexual and reproductive health care right, Education Cannot Wait partners are required to promote “[comprehensive sexuality education](#),” which is internationally defined in UN policy manuals as including the promotion of masturbation and the normalization of homosexuality to young school children, and controversial theories about “gender identity” pursuant to Education Cannot Wait’s “[Gender Equality 2019-2021 Policy and Accountability Framework](#).”

This new “framework” asserts many debatable ideas, claiming they reflect social norms. However, to date these new ideas and policies have not been accepted by consensus at the UN. Our concerns regarding Education Cannot Wait’s Gender Equality Framework are outlined below:

The policy places family, tradition, and gender roles in a negative context.

- The association between behavioral social norms and/or roles in society, on the one hand, and biological sex, on the other hand, is framed in a strongly negative context in this policy. In addition, although the policy states that “equality does not mean that women and men are the same,” it insists on gender parity within schools and among ECW personnel at all levels.
- The policy defines gender as “socially constructed identities, attributes, and roles for women and men, girls and boys.” This definition acknowledges the biological binary and its impact upon these “socially constructed identities.” However, the policy asserts that unlike men, women are negatively impacted by their biology, stating, “society’s social and cultural meaning for these biological differences resulting in hierarchical relationships between women and men, girls and boys and in the distribution of power and rights favoring men and disadvantaging women.” The policy implicitly rejects the contention that some gender norms may be intrinsic to women’s biology or beneficial to women and girls in any way.

- The family and parents are rarely mentioned in the document. When the family is mentioned, it is framed negatively as a potential source of violence or discriminatory norms and expectations. References to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ assertion that the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to support, or the fact that parents are the primary educators of their children and those who bear the first and greatest responsibility for their well-being are notably excluded.

The policy incorporates controversial themes through “intersectionality.”

- It repeatedly asserts that gender-based discrimination is “inextricably linked” to factors including sexual orientation and gender identity and pledges that “ECW will ensure its investments do not reinforce or perpetuate any form of gender-based discrimination, including towards LGBTI communities.” While this is phrased as seeking to avoid unintentional harm, undoubtedly this policy will result in programming that mainstreams controversial ideas about sexual orientation and gender identity throughout ECW’s work. The policy also refers to the need for “gender-sensitive latrines” to be built or rehabilitated “where relevant,” but does not specify what is meant by this—specifically, whether they would be sex-segregated for the protection and privacy of girls.

Concerns about violence or kidnapping of children, especially girls, are not addressed

- The policy points out that “girls may be kept out of school due to fears of kidnapping, perceptions of increased and greater vulnerability to school-related gender-based violence than boys.” While this is treated as a “perception” and a fear that drives further harm by keeping girls at home and depriving them of an education, the question of whether those fears are grounded is not addressed in that section, and later sections about the threat of violence within schools could be seen to lend credence to parental concerns in some cases. If children, particularly girls, are subject to kidnapping or violence in school settings, it is a need for increased security and an end to impunity that is needed, not the deconstruction of gender norms at the family level.

The policy lists several problematic standards and resources “to be used in implementing ECW.”

- The list includes UNESCO’s [technical guidance](#) on comprehensive sexuality education, which is highly controversial and includes many themes and concepts that have never received global consensus. It also references handbooks from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which incorporate themes of sexual and reproductive health, which are also controversial. The IASC also endorsed a [guidance](#) on working with youth in protracted crisis situations that stated: “International humanitarian law and refugee law enshrine the right to access to life-saving services for sexual and reproductive health (including access to safe abortion services and post-abortion care) and the right to access to prevention and response services for GBV.”

Conclusion: the policy makes clear that ECW is more about using education as a way to alter societal gender norms than it is about ensuring access to safe, high-quality education for girls and boys alike.

- This new policy document begins with the claim that “All ECW investments will therefore require a target of school enrolment parity for girls and boys at all levels,” but it then goes on to insist that “each ECW investment will clearly articulate how the grant will respond to [...] the crucial role the education system – educators, pedagogy, curriculum and programmes – plays in transforming gender norms.”

Recommendation

- To date the United States has contributed more than \$92 million to Education Cannot Wait. In addition, Congress appropriated \$25 million in the 2019 State and Foreign Operations bill. There are concurrent

resolutions in the [House](#) and [Senate](#) proposing the codification of the U.S.'s relationship with Education Cannot Wait. Congress should mandate annual public reporting from UNICEF and/or Education Cannot Wait, to include funding to all prime and sub-prime recipients which will increase transparency and ensure that U.S. funds are not used to sexualize children or to promote abortion overseas.



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