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TECHNICAL NOTE

GENDER-RESPONSIVE PARENTING

BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

UNICEF's expanding work on parenting support was recently thrust to the foreground because of the COVID-19 crisis and its widespread socio-economic disruptions increasing stressors on families' daily lives and straining their ability to provide quality care for their children.

This note is aligned with the recently launched UNICEF Parenting Strategy which puts forth a common set of definitions, framing principles, approaches and suggested actions to support parents and parenting across the life cycle. The UNICEF Parenting Strategy[1] lays out an approach to guide UNICEF's efforts to ensure that countries receive coordinated, evidence-based technical guidance, and to support parents and caregivers in facilitating the holistic, gender-equitable development of children and adolescents, especially the most disadvantaged and vulnerable, including children living with disabilities.

The purpose of this technical note is the following:

- Consolidate the conceptual framework on positive gender socialization through parenting;[2]
- Clarify linkages with the new parenting strategy;
- Provide a preliminary approach for gender-responsive parenting, including tips and messages for parents that can be adapted to different contexts.

The target audience for this note is UNICEF programme colleagues at headquarters, regional and country levels who are currently working on or are interested in working in parenting, adolescent, and early childhood development interventions. Gender Specialists and Focal Points at all levels are an especially important audience.

1 UNICEF, 2021: A UNICEF for parents. Elevating parenting in existing UNICEF programmes.
2 'Positive gender socialization' is a flagship priority area in UNICEF's Gender Action Plan 2018-2021.

The term parent is not limited to biological parents but extends to any guardian or caregiver providing consistent care to children and adolescents. This includes adoptive or foster parents, siblings, grandparents, other relatives and young adolescents, who are also parents. Childcare providers also play a significant role in caring for infants and young children.

This note is closely aligned with other programmatic documents on parenting, family-friendly policies, violence prevention and gender socialization. It is a 'living' document which is expected to evolve over time.

KEY CONCEPTS OF GENDER NORMS AND SOCIALIZATION[3]

Gender norms are informal, deeply entrenched and widely held beliefs on gender roles and expectations that govern human behaviors and practices within a particular social context and at a particular point of time. For example, in many contexts, girls are expected to marry and raise a family, while boys are expected to earn an income and provide for their family. Girls may be considered more vulnerable and in need of protection, while boys are considered strong and independent.

Gender norms give expression to and reinforce the power dynamics inherent in a society's valuation of male and female gender roles, therefore, often amplifying male privilege and justifying discriminatory treatment of girls and women. For children who identify as gender diverse, gender norms may force them to conform in ways that conflict with and impair their self-development. Stereotypical and discriminatory beliefs lead to practices and behaviors that can have serious negative consequences for the future of the child and society.

> **Illustrative example showing a link between norms and socialization**
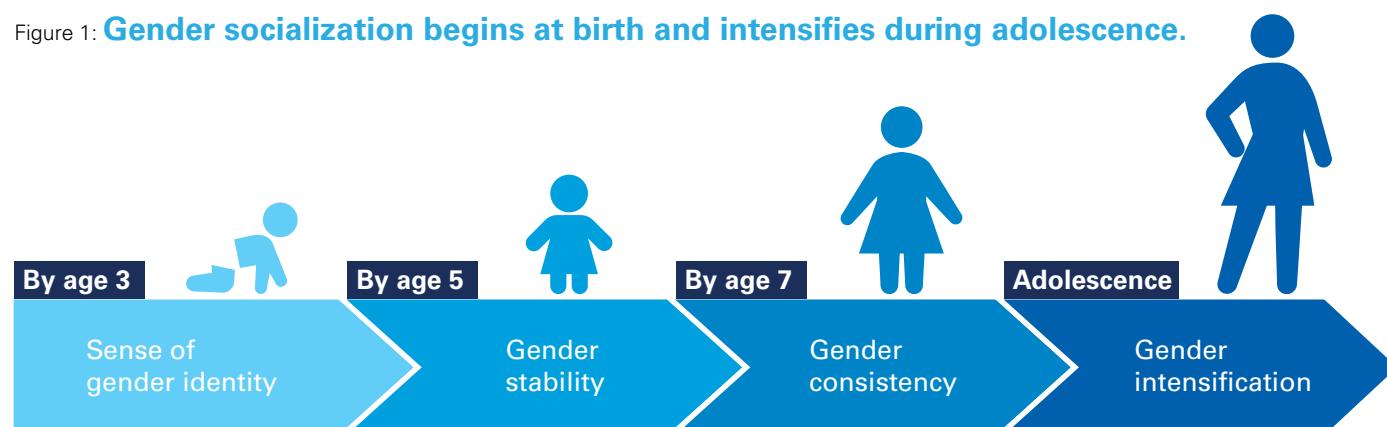>
> *In some communities, menstruating girls and women are restricted in movement and participation in social or household activities. For example, girls may not be allowed to go to school or play, women may not be allowed to prepare food or participate in community activities. The critical underlying barrier is the ensuing gender-based social norm that considers adolescent girls and women to be 'impure' during their menstrual cycles. Such norms are perpetuated by individuals, families and communities, resulting in targeted discrimination of adolescent girls and limiting their opportunities for learning and social development.*
>
> *Source: UNICEF, 2019. Technical note on definitions of gender norms, socialization and social and behavioral change*

Gender socialization refers to the processes through which individuals learn to behave according to gender norms. As shown in Figure 1, it is a multi-dimensional and complex process which begins at birth, continues through childhood, and intensifies during adolescence until individuals have internalized traditional gender identities and begun to impart them to future generations.

While gender socialization is not inherently negative, because it influences and shapes what girls and boys can and should do, it can create discriminatory stereotypes. These most often disadvantage girls and women, but also limit the possibilities for boys and men. For example, in many contexts, boys are expected to 'earn' rather than 'learn' and discouraged from participating in caregiving and household work. Girls may have to assume domestic responsibilities at the expense of education and paid employment. Address-

Figure 1: **Gender socialization begins at birth and intensifies during adolescence.**

By age 3	By age 5	By age 7	Adolescence
Sense of gender identity	Gender stability	Gender consistency	Gender intensification

3 See UNICEF, 2019. Technical note on definitions of gender norms, socialization and social and behavioral change.

ing gender socialization – by promoting inclusive, positive behaviours – can be an important means to reduce gender inequalities and remove limits on children's potential. This area of work that seeks to change discriminatory gender norms to achieve equitable outcomes for children is referred to as **'positive gender socialization'.**

Gender socialization begins from birth, and so gender norms are learned early in life. Evidence suggests that by age three, children already begin to develop a sense of gender identity.[4] Adolescence, characterized by an emerging sense of self-identity, sexuality, and exploration of personal beliefs and values, is a time when gender norms are often explored, considered and solidified. A second window of opportunity therefore exists during this time to promote positive gender socialization to tackle rigid and discriminatory gender norms.[5]

Role of parents and caregivers in gender socialization: There are multiple **'agents of socialization'** that influence children in varying degrees, including individuals such as caregivers – parents, siblings, grandparents, other relatives or non-related caregivers – peers, teachers, religious leaders, celebrities and institutions such as schools, clubs, places of worship and media. The main influences of gender socialization evolve and change throughout the life course of an individual. During early childhood when gender identity is initially formed, the primary agents of socialization are parents, other caregivers and immediate family members. The nature of the parent-child bond shifts during

adolescence with the onset of puberty and individuation of children from their parents, when young people increase their capacity for independent decision-making. However, even while the level of parental influence gradually declines as a child grows and the parent-child bond changes, parents continue to be the primary influence compared to school, peers, media, etc. – (see Figure 2)[6].

How do parents socialize their children? Parents and caregivers may consciously or unconsciously transfer discriminatory gender norms to the next generation through the following pathways[7,8]:

- **Active teaching** e.g. telling boys that they cannot cry; making girls (but not boys) take on caregiving and domestic tasks at home.

- **Speech, actions, behaviours, practices** (whether deliberate or otherwise) e.g. giving girls dolls and boys guns for play; praising girls for their looks and praising boys for their physical strength.

- **Modeling gendered behaviours** e.g. only female caregivers are engaged in unpaid care work, while male caregivers are engaged in paid employment.

- **Harmful gender-based practices at home** e.g. gender-based violence; restrictions on female mobility; stigmatizing of menstruation as 'impure' or 'taboo'.

Figure 2: **Conceptual model of main influences on gender socialization over the life course**
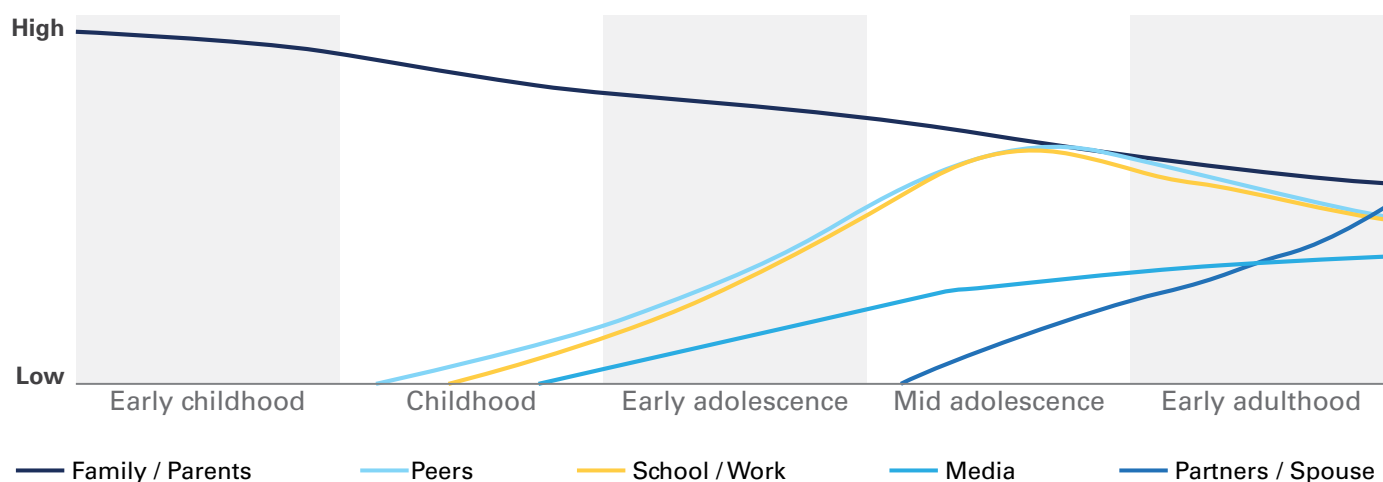
4 UNICEF, 2019. Summary note on promoting positive gender norms and socialization.
5 UNICEF, 2021: Parenting of adolescents guidance note.
6 UNICEF and ICRW, 2017. Gender socialization during adolescence in low and middle income countries: conceptualization, influences and outcomes, Innocenti Discussion Paper.
7 Ibid.
8 UNICEF, 2019. Global Mapping Report on Ongoing Gender Socialization program in UNICEF.

What is gender-responsive parenting? Parenting that applies key principles such as gender equality and inclusion, and that promotes positive gender norms and socialization, in order to transform imbalanced power structures in families (and future generations) is known as gender-responsive parenting. This means promoting and supporting the holistic development, well-being and positive gender socialization of the child throughout their life course, through parenting interactions, behaviours, emotions, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and practices.[9] As parents are the primary influencers of a child, creating an enabling environment for transformative change in gender norms, behaviours and practices will lead to more equitable outcomes for future generations.

Impact of COVID-19 on gender and parenting[10]
In the context of COVID-19, stay-at-home measures and other restrictions on mobility and physical interaction have intensified pressures around childcare and child development on parents. Worldwide, parents are struggling to balance professional work and economic disruptions with increased responsibilities for childcare, nourish-ment and development, while also dealing with a greater burden of domestic tasks. As seen in all emergencies, underlying gender biases and gender discrimination are being exacerbated. Evidence is showing that women and girls globally are bearing the brunt of increased caregiving and domestic responsibilities, forcing them to leave paid employment at higher rates than men. The economic shock and ramifications for caregiving are greater for women who are engaged in typically insecure informal sector work and who are often not covered by social safety nets. There is also evidence of growing incidence of violence against women and girls in the household and the workplace.

Some opportunities exist in the global response to COVID-19 to promote positive gender socialization at home to address gender inequality and discrimination, prevent gender-based violence and improve the well-being of children. Gender-responsive family-friendly policies, and social protection policies that treat both men and women equally as first responders in childcare and development, are important avenues. Flexible work arrangements, paid family and sick leave,

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9 Yale-ACEV, 2012. *https://medicine.yale.edu/childstudy/fcpb/research/projects/acev/*
10 See UNICEF Technical Note, 2020. *Five actions for gender equality in the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) response*; NPR, Oct 2 2020, "*Enough Already: Multiple Demands Causing Women to Abandon Workforce*".

childcare benefits, cash grants etc. can help alleviate stressors caused by the pandemic, while also encouraging balanced redistribution of caregiving and domestic responsibilities and transforming gender norms.

UNICEF PARENTING STRATEGY 2020

Basic definitions

Parent is not a term limited to biological parents but extends to any guardian or caregiver providing consistent care to children and adolescents. This includes adoptive or foster parents, siblings, grandparents, other relatives and young adolescents, who are also parents. Non-related caregivers such as childcare providers also play a significant role in caring for infants and young children.

Parenting refers to the interactions, behaviours, emotions, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and practices associated with the provision of nurturing care.[11] In this view, parenting is a process of promoting and supporting the development and wellbeing of the child, and it is the en-

trusted and abiding task of parents to prepare children, as they develop, for the physical, psychosocial, and economic conditions in which they live, work, play, learn and thrive. *Parenting support* is a set of (service and other) activities oriented to improving how parents' approach and execute their role as parents and to increasing parents' child-rearing resources (including information, knowledge, skills and social support) and competencies.

'A UNICEF for Parents: Elevating Parenting in Existing UNICEF Programmes 2020[12] identifies '**parenting' as a key accelerator** that can promote achievement of results for children across the five Goal Areas of UNICEF's Strategic Plan. The new strategy acknowledges that the seminal and critical influence of quality parenting on the child's health, wellbeing and development is clear from research and evidence. The strategy also integrates throughout the key principles of gender equality and disability-inclusion. Figure 3 provides a snapshot of the approaches defined under the parenting strategy, including on promoting positive gender norms and socialization.

Figure 3: **The main approaches of the new parenting strategy**

MAIN APPROACHES	KEY COMPONENTS	ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES
Approach 1. Strengthening enabling environments	Social, political, budgetary, normative and institutional determinants necessary to achieve results.	• Package of family-friendly policies are in place through high level advocacy. • Cross-sectoral data dashboards on parenting developed with National Statistical Commission. • Evaluations of existing parenting interventions commissioned, and results utilized.
Approach 2. Supporting strengthened workforce capacities and integrated services	Strengthening systems and skilling frontline Health, Education and Social Service workers, childcare workers, government and business to support parents and strengthen systems	• Pre-service and in-service capacity building of Health, Education and Social Service workers explicity includes content on parenting. • School management commitees include parents from pre-school through adolescence. • Parenting support is included in national implementation plans and budgets.
Approach 3. Raising levels of awareness	Bolstering outreach and social media through targeted campaigns and special events	• UNICEF parenting hub is used as an interactive platform to provide experientialknowledge and resources for parents. • The IOGT provides easily accessible material in multiple languages especially for low resource settings.
Approach 4. Promoting positive gender norms and socialization	Increasing awareness and upskilling of parents and caregivers, training of frontline workers and ensuring availability of adequate resources and opportunities for girls and boys to address discriminatory gender dynamics within households and gender-responsive, positive and nurturing households	• National parenting programmes include specific content developed with the ministry of gender or women. • Parenting interventions incorporate resources on male caregiving. • Parenting programmes promote shared caregiving. • Frontline worker training.
Approach 5. Empowering parents and communities	Enhancing agency and social and behavioral change through parent engagement and gender-transformative approaches	• Support for caregivers mental health and wellbeing is promoted through community platforms and health platforms. • Developing guidance on parenting of adolescents from a wellbeing perspective (ADAP).

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11 See WHO, UNICEF, World Bank, 2018: Nurturing care for early childhood development. *https://nurturing-care.org/*
12 UNICEF, 2020: A UNICEF for parents. Elevating parenting in existing UNICEF programmes.

STRATEGIES FOR GENDER-RESPONSIVE PARENTING

Programming on gender-responsive parenting aims to elevate parenting and family support to achieve greater results for children at all ages and stages. It also addresses caregiver health and emotional well-being which is key to promoting optimal child development. Interventions provide opportunities to promote positive gender socialization messages and behavior prior to adulthood and reduce exposure to gender-specific risk factors.

Through parenting programmes, parents can be made aware that gender stereotypes are harmful for child development, and of the importance of equity, respect, and the recognition of individual strengths. Parents, especially fathers or other male caregivers, can be engaged in activities that promote positive parenting – such as sharing household duties; engaging in learning through play; using positive discipline – to increase understanding of the impact of harmful gender socialization on children, and the value of modeling gender-equitable behaviours at home. Programmes can also include a specific focus on gender-related issues that are especially important for adolescents, and support strengthening their agency in making decisions. These include parent-child resources and dialogue around shared responsibility for prevention of pregnancy, HIV and STI infection, prevention of gender-based violence, and promotion of positive sexual and reproductive health behaviours and menstrual health.[13] In some contexts, specific issues such as child marriage and other harmful practices may need to be addressed through parenting programmes.

The following are key strategies that UNICEF employs to encourage gender-responsive parenting.

- **Training of parents and frontline workers:** Increasing awareness about quality, gender-equitable parenting methods, and upskilling parents and caregivers, e.g. for promoting early learning through gender-responsive play; improving parent-child communication and dialogue; improving parental understanding and ability to respectfully engage with adolescents on boundaries, health and safety risks, gender identity, sexuality, etc.
- **Caring for caregivers:** Training frontline workers to address gender dynamics in families (recognizing that there are different family structures), e.g. for promoting non-violent discipline; recognizing and reporting gender-based violence; supporting caregivers through well-being and stress-reduction interventions, etc. Especially in the context of COVID-19, caregivers may feel isolated and lonely due to disruptions to their support network. They might also be stressed by disruptions to services (e.g. school closures) and may fear a lack of access to resources. Speaking about support needs can be difficult. There are also significant stressors for women, due to increased unemployment, gender-based violence, and unequal distribution of care responsibilities. Routines and positive self-care strategies are important for caregiver wellbeing. Frontline workers can, for example practice simple breathing exercises with stressed caregivers to help them calm themselves when they feel overwhelmed. This is also an opportunity to challenge stereotypical gender roles and encourage balanced sharing of caregiving responsibilities.
- **Addressing gendered norms relating to childcare and encouraging fathers' engagement:** Encouraging male caregivers to be co-responsible alongside females for care work and household tasks, including through social and behavior change communication (SBCC) strategies such as national campaigns, community mobilization and dialogue, amplifying voices of male role models etc.
- **Equitable distribution of resources:** Ensuring equitable availability and distribution of resources and opportunities for children of all genders and abilities, for e.g. ensuring equal access to digital devices for remote learning at home during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Ending harmful practices at home:** Ending gender-related harmful practices at home such as gender-based violence, violent discipline, stigmatizing and shaming around puberty and emerging sexual identity of adolescents, etc.
- **Family-friendly policies and advocacy:** Strengthening partnerships with government and private sector to influence policies, social protection programmes, service delivery that are gender-responsive and family-friendly, e.g. parental leave policies, public childcare benefits and services, etc.

13 UNICEF, 2021: Parenting of adolescents guidance note.

Strategies are applied using **the life-cycle approach –** this recognizes that as a child grows, their needs change, their sense of gender identity evolves, and parents and other caregivers must both recognize and respond appropriately to these age-specific needs. Figure 4 depicts the first two decades of a child's development and provides some general guidance for gender-responsive parenting. An annex to this note provides more detailed tips and messages for parents on key aspects of gender-responsive parenting.

Home visiting nurses training in Kosovo: Government-accredited modules on gender equality were included as a training component for home visiting nurses in Kosovo – a primarily ECD service delivery mechanism. Modules focus on engaging fathers in caregiving, promoting gender equality in family dynamics, and detecting (and reporting) cases of domestic violence. The new training modules were conducted for 205 health professionals and 26 family doctors in 15 municipalities and reached 1,869 newborn children in 2019.[16]

Figure 4: **Gender-responsive parenting for the first two decades of child development**

Early childhood (0-5 years)	Middle childhood (6-10 years)	Adolescence (10-18 years)
By the age of three, children develop a sense of gender identity and begin to express it, by age five they develop a sense of gender stability	*By the age of ten, children express their gender identity more consistently; early experiences of gender discrimination may be recognized*	*Adolescence is an age of intensification of gender identity, exploration of sexual identities, increasing independence; children can experience multiple forms of gender discrimination*
• Parents should refrain from overtly assigning and asserting identities onto children; instead encourage children to develop their own sense of identity and agency. • Parents should promote positive gender norms and socialization by encouraging and modeling gender-equitable treatment of children and behaviour among household members. • Parents should actively promote gender-equitable learning through play, one of the most important ways for children to gain essential knowledge, skills and agency.[14] • Parents, especially fathers, should take advantage of national or employers' parental leave and other family-friendly policies. • Address the need for 'care for caregivers' to lower stress and prevent burnout, e.g. sharing childcare and household duties	• Parents should talk about feelings, promote gender-equitable norms, roles and expectations through words and actions, including sharing household tasks, modeling positive, inclusive gender portrayals and behaviors. • Parents should provide equal opportunities to children of all genders to become agile and adaptive learners and citizens, including to develop life-skills such as creativity, communication and problem-solving. • Parents should start providing holistic, accurate, practical information on sexual and reproductive health. • Parents should inform children about safety risks and protect them from violence (online, in public or private), promote positive discipline and ensure a violence-free home environment. • Address the need for 'care for caregivers' to lower stress and prevent burnout, e.g. sharing childcare and household duties	• Parent should provide holistic, accurate and practical information on gender and sexual identities, as well as sexual and reproductive health, while respecting agency and promoting positive, inclusive gender portrayals and behaviors. • Parents should continue to provide equal opportunities to encourage children of all genders to be agile and adaptive learners and citizens and encourage them to have independent voice, agency, with life skills such as communications, decision-making and problem-solving. • Parents should inform and protect children from violence (online, in public or private), promote positive discipline and a violence-free environment at home • Address the need for 'care for caregivers' to lower stress and prevent burnout, e.g. sharing childcare and household duties; support for mental health especially for teen parents

EXAMPLES FROM CURRENT UNICEF PROGRAMMES

UNICEF is promoting gender-responsive parenting as one of the key programmatic strategies for positive gender socialization. In 2019, 28 UNICEF country offices implemented programming and conducted advocacy on the area of gender-responsive parenting.[15] We provide below some examples from current UNICEF programmes.

Encouraging fathers' engagement in Nepal: To tackle the deep-rooted discriminatory gender norms that prevent fathers and male caregivers from participating in child care, UNICEF Nepal, in collaboration with the government and implementing partners, used a multi-pronged approach which included establishing 'fathers' groups' (28 of them), where fathers of all ages were trained on topics such as feeding practices, vaccination schedules, caring for pregnant women and new

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14 For more information, see *The Lego Foundation and UNICEF, 2018. Learning Through Play*.
15 *UNICEF Annual Results Report: Goal Area 5, 2019*
16 *UNICEF Annual Results Report: Gender Equality, 2019*

mothers, redistributing household chores etc., while creating a community and dialogue. An edutainment radio programme was also produced, reaching all 77 districts throughout the country, which covered topics on gender-responsive parenting. Monitoring of results is currently ongoing.

'Fathers from the Beginning' initiative in Cuba: This is a holistic communication strategy developed by UNICEF in partnership with the government, providing information for parents on the rights and benefits of shared child care and the value of fathers' involvement in their children's upbringing, through print and social media, televisions ads and dramatized soap operas. The campaign is expected to reach 460,000 children in Cuba. In 2019, a complementary parenting app was launched primarily for fathers, the first of its kind in the country, to share essential information on rights, responsibilities and benefits of fatherhood, and to facilitate community-building. The app was downloaded more than 2,000 times in 2019, with 90 per cent of downloads by fathers or male caregivers and received a score of 4.9 in CubaApk and Google Play Store.8

Adolescent mothers' support in Jamaica: UNICEF is working with Women's Centre of Jamaica Foun-

dation (WCJF), a government institute, on a group-based parenting programme tailored to the specific needs of adolescent mothers to improve protection and developmental outcomes. The programme is expected to reach 800 adolescent mothers with children aged 0-3.

Mothers@Work initiative in Bangladesh: The initiative is establishing mother- and baby-friendly workplaces in the garment industry, including private breastfeeding rooms on-site and counsellors. The programme is supporting 92 factories and has reached 160,000 working mothers and 2,865 of their young children with standardized infrastructure and services that enables a family-friendly workplace in the garment factories. In 2018, the exclusive breastfeeding rate among 150,000 mothers increased from 17 per cent to 72 per cent.[17]

Addressing gender-biased sex selection by parents in Armenia: In 2018-2019, UNICEF launched research on the root causes of parental attitudes and perceptions causing gender-biased sex selection by parents. The launch of the research was followed by advocacy with the government and partners from the international organizations, NGOs and academic institutes. UNICEF is currently developing a television-based edutainment programme to address and transform the underlying discriminatory gender norms and biases in the community.

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17 UNICEF Annual Results Report: Gender Equality, 2018