

# Capacity-Building in Adult Education for Gender Equality



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR  
THE EDUCATION OF ADULTS



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# Table of contents:

Introduction	4
From Transformative Learning to Gender Equality	5
Grundtvig Award: Highlighting EAEA's Gender Equality Innovators	6
Inclusion, Empowerment, and Social Justice	8
From gender equality practices to capacity-building in ALE organisations	9
Good practice: Gender Equality Task Force for Lifelong Learning	11
Recommendations for Capacity-building in ALE institutions for gender equality	12

# Introduction

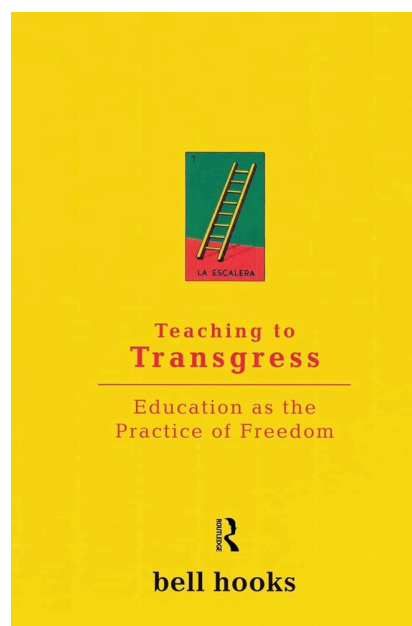
Why do we talk about Gender Equality in Adult Education and Learning? In the past decade Europe has seen changes in gender equity and politics on multiple levels, be it in civil society, legislative changes, projects, or key strategies such as the EU Gender Equality Strategy (2020-2025) to achieving a Union of Equality<sup>1</sup> or others. We have seen open support for adopting multilingual guidelines on gender-neutral language - the European Parliament was one of the first institutions to adopt it in 2008<sup>2</sup> - however, the uprise in the *manosphere*<sup>3</sup> and rising antagonisms has led to a civic space that is less favourable to women and other non-conforming gender identities.

Adult education and learning should empower individuals and communities. By building literacy and critical thinking skills, we can understand our biases, perspectives, and living contexts. The roots of these assertions come from theoretical thinkers such as Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and Malcolm Knowles.

<sup>1</sup>[Gender Equality Strategy](#)

<sup>2</sup>[Gender - neutral language guidelines](#)

<sup>3</sup>[Cambridge dictionary](#) defines *manosphere* as: websites and internet discussion groups that are concerned with men's interests and rights as opposed to women's, often connected with opposition to feminism or dislike of women.



As bell hooks asserted - in progressive, holistic education, “engaged pedagogy” emphasises well-being. It means that teachers must be committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students<sup>4</sup>.

If we are to have teachers and adult educators taking care of their well-being, and empowering spaces for learners to thrive, we have to look at the contexts in which learning occurs.

In this background paper, we will present perspectives from the European level and from local and regional contexts where we find good practices that address gender inequalities through their practices, and how they can be replicated in ALE settings to develop the skills of adult educators.

<sup>4</sup>[bell hooks on education](#)

# From Transformative Learning to Gender Equality

At EAEA, in line with our annual theme in 2024 "Adult Learning Transforming Lives, Communities, and Society"<sup>5</sup>, we see the transformative potential of adult learning as part of the solution to gender inequalities. When an individual's work is recognized, it becomes a foundation for building confidence and discovering new opportunities. This not only empowers the individual but also inspires those around them<sup>6</sup>.

In our previous background paper on gender and ALE<sup>7</sup> from 2020, Agatha Devlin concluded, "In some (or many) areas, this probably also means that adult education must transform itself to be *transformative*, especially when it comes to questions of identity that are closely related to gender".

As Prof. Ólafur Páll Jónsson of the University of Iceland's School of Education, states, "For real change to happen, adult education is needed – but again, this must be critical, even radical, adult education based on inclusive and democratic values, and it must reach diverse groups of people."<sup>8</sup>

In this way, **transformative adult education goes hand in hand with inclusivity, including gender equality.**

<sup>5</sup> [EAEA Annual Theme 2024: Transforming Lives, Communities and Society](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Gender Equity: Reducing poverty through gender equality and adult education](#) (M. Sakač Hadžić)

<sup>7</sup> [ALE and Gender EAEA background paper 2020](#) (A. Devlin)

<sup>8</sup> [ELM - Nordic view: Peace as a prerequisite to gender equality and human rights](#) (W. Stenger)



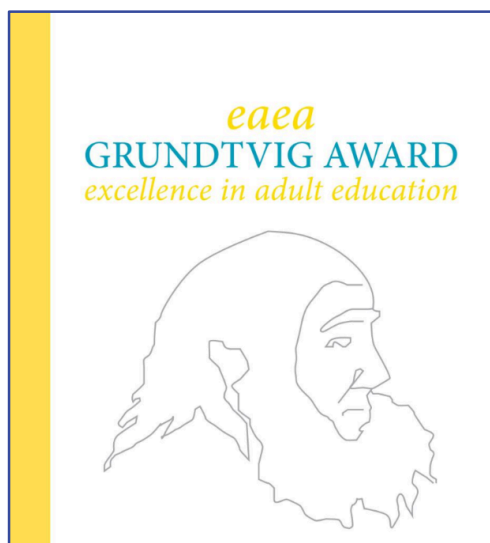
**Transformative adult education plays a crucial role in advancing gender equality** by addressing the **systemic barriers** that women and gender minorities face and fostering critical awareness of social and cultural norms. Women and non-binary people have a lack of access to economic power, where this exclusion is in part due to unchecked biases and an overarching conservative political discourse which is affecting young men and boys.

Furthermore, data from Eurostat reveals that women are more likely to be employed in lower-paid sectors and face higher risks of poverty and social exclusion. Transformative adult education can break these cycles by empowering individuals to question and challenge stereotypes, enabling them to actively participate in political, social, and economic spheres.

As emphasized by the EU's Strategy for Gender Equality 2020- 2025, education is key to achieving long-term, sustainable gender equality and adult learning programs must be designed to specifically address and dismantle gender-based inequalities.

Through such education, we can create a more equitable society, where gender norms are reshaped, and all individuals, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities to succeed.

# Grundtvig Award: Highlighting EAEA's Gender Equality Innovators



Every year, the EAEA celebrates innovation and excellence in non-formal adult education. The annual EAEA Grundtvig Award collects examples of good practices and brings creative and out-of-the-box results that create change, new partnerships and connections, new methodologies and an understanding of how we can work in adult learning.

From the winners in the last two years, two examples highlight the possibility for innovative adult education projects and practices to combat gender inequalities and empower learners.

In 2023 Green Lane's project **Women's Economic Empowerment in Shirak and Gegharunik Marzes** in Armenia won the Grundtvig Award in the local/regional/national category. This initiative developed the agricultural and economic knowledge necessary for women's emancipation in this region.

Nune Sarukhanyan stated that "winning this award means that we are in the right direction, and we really are justifying the expectations of both our partners and our beneficiaries. Receiving this honour will increase our role and reputation in our country. As a result, more women will be involved in our projects."<sup>9</sup> The project is an important example of the empowerment of economically vulnerable groups, and especially in this region of Armenia, many women have had difficulties obtaining economic independence.

For the 2024 edition of the Grundtvig Award, the **Men2Men** project from Estonia received an honourable mention. The project dealt with Russian-speaking adults 35+ (men) in lifelong learning in Estonia. "The project addressed challenges faced by this group, such as health issues, low qualifications, and limited social interaction, through a holistic approach that includes diverse learning activities."<sup>10</sup> This is a good example of holistic adult education that takes into consideration the intersecting identities of learners and their well-being.

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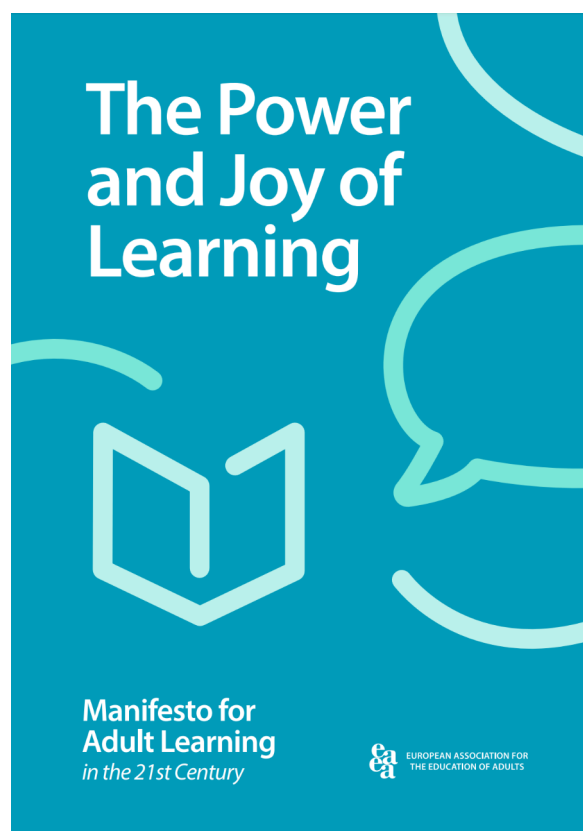
<sup>9</sup> [Grundtvig Award Publication 2023](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Grundtvig Award Publication 2024](#)

As stated in EAEA’s Manifesto “ALE courses bring people together around a common interest and help develop a sense of community (in-person or digitally), contributing to better social inclusion and, in turn, a greater sense of well-being and resilience.”<sup>11</sup>

systematic oppression, and cultural norms which produce these differences.

To bridge these concerns we believe that adult education must play a key role in unlearning biases, but also expanding empathy and understanding all perspectives.



We want to emphasize these projects, as examples of good practices that we see in our members, and other initiatives across Europe, where adult learning can address societal exclusions of specific gender groups. We chose these examples to cover different geographic scopes and cultural responses to the exclusion of specific groups from economic independence. This is why it is so important to understand the complex

<sup>11</sup> [The Power and Joy of Learning: Well-being and resilience](#)



# Inclusion, Empowerment, and Social Justice

The fifth chapter of our Manifesto is entitled **Inclusion, empowerment, and social justice**. We believe that adult learning and education play a fundamental role in fostering social justice, embracing diversity, and promoting inclusion. Research evidence shows that ALE offers individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds a chance to enhance their education, increase their job prospects, and improve the quality of their life.

Oleksandra's journey is an inspiring example of how embracing learning can catalyze personal transformation and challenge traditional gender roles. When her son resisted going to school, she sought to lead by example, enrolling in a confectionery course herself. This decision not only reignited her love of learning but also empowered her to pursue a new career as a vocational trainer. In a context where women's roles are often confined to the domestic sphere, Oleksandra's story demonstrates how lifelong learning can serve as a pathway to validation, independence, and self-fulfilment. By investing in her education, she not only modelled resilience and curiosity for her son but also challenged the norms that limit women's professional and personal growth.

Another example of good practice in fostering inclusion is the recently completed international project Education and Art for Social Inclusion (EASI)<sup>12</sup>, led by one of EAEA's members, sTOP<sup>13</sup>. The project utilized art therapy methodologies to promote the social inclusion of young people, focusing on personal and interpersonal development. By enhancing participants' self-awareness, self-esteem, resilience,

<sup>12</sup> [sTOP EASI Erasmus+ Project](#)

<sup>13</sup> [EAEA member: sTOP](#)



and social skills, the project provided tools for overcoming barriers to participation.

This approach is particularly relevant in addressing gender disparities. For young women and girls, who often face greater societal pressures and reduced opportunities for self-expression, art therapy offers a platform for empowerment and validation. Studies<sup>14</sup> show that women are more likely to internalize stress and self-doubt, and initiatives like EASI can play a critical role in breaking these patterns. Similarly, the project's focus on building relationships and social skills is vital for challenging gendered stereotypes that confine both young men and women into rigid roles.

By equipping participants with these tools, EASI demonstrates how art-based education can not only promote inclusion broadly but also foster gender equality by addressing the unique challenges faced by young people of all genders.

<sup>14</sup> [Factors associated with gender and sex differences in anxiety prevalence and comorbidity: A systematic review](#)



# From gender equality practices to capacity-building in ALE organisations

In the context of adult learning and education (ALE), capacity building is aimed at strengthening the systems, structures, and capabilities of institutions that offer educational programs for adult learners. This includes improving teaching methods, creating supportive learning environments, and ensuring the effective use of resources to empower learners. This can involve various aspects such as professional development for educators, improving curriculum design, enhancing administrative systems, and fostering partnerships with local communities and stakeholders. This process is essential for equipping institutions with the tools needed to provide high-quality education that meets the diverse needs of adult learners, many of whom may face barriers such as limited access to education, financial constraints, or lack of basic literacy skills.

## **Capacity building plays a crucial role in promoting gender equality within adult learning environments.**

One key reason capacity building is essential for gender equality in adult education is that it helps to **eliminate gender biases in educational content and delivery. By training educators to be more aware of gender stereotypes and inclusive teaching practices**, capacity building

ensures that all learners, regardless of their gender, feel valued and supported. For example, offering gender-sensitive curricula and creating safe, inclusive learning spaces where adult learners can freely express themselves can significantly enhance participation among marginalized groups, especially women and girls.

Ultimately, capacity building in adult learning institutions helps create an environment where gender equality can thrive, enabling individuals to overcome the obstacles that prevent them from fully participating in society and the workforce. By strengthening the capacity of adult education systems, societies can create more equitable opportunities for all genders, contributing to broader social and economic development.

## **Creating and Maintaining Safe Spaces in Adult Learning**<sup>15</sup> - EAEA's

training on Safe Spaces offered in a blended format, was created to explore the power dynamics and decolonial approaches in adult learning and education, public pedagogy and the relationship between safety and space. We look at practical ways of co-creating a safe space together with learners.

<sup>15</sup> [Creating and Maintaining Safe Spaces in Adult Learning - Training 2024](#)

## Group Discussion 2 | Room 233

Gender equality in the adult learning sector:  
are we there yet?



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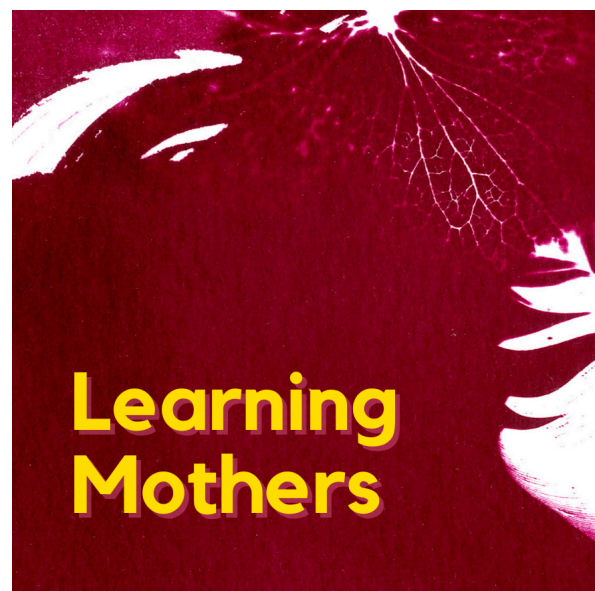


### Gender equality in the adult learning sector: are we there yet?<sup>16</sup>

- EAEA's workshop at the Annual Conference 2024 in Helsinki was organised in the framework of the Gender Equality Task Force to reflect on gender disparities in adult learning organisations and the existing barriers in the profession: from teaching to management positions. Our members and participants brought their perspectives and cultural specific contexts to the discussion. The complexity and comprehensive examples from Turkey, Austria, Germany, Australia and other countries illustrated the necessary work ahead of us to achieve gender equality and equity in ALE, and the affects that these dialogues can have on collaboration.

<sup>16</sup> [Gender Equality in the adult learning sector: are we there yet?](#) (Facilitated by Angeliki Giannakopoulou)

In the **Beyond Learning 2: Identities**<sup>17</sup> podcast series, the EAEA featured an episode on **Learning Mothers**. One of the key insights shared by the mothers in academia was their desire to inspire their children, particularly their daughters, to understand that they can pursue successful careers while also having a family. They emphasized the importance of being a positive role model as a woman in balancing these aspects of life.



<sup>17</sup> [Beyond Learning 2: Identities - Episode 7: Learning Mothers](#)

# Good practice: Gender Equality Task Force for Lifelong Learning

In 2023, The European Association for Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong Learning (EARLALL), the European Forum for Vocational Education and Training (EfVET) and the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) are jointly set up a dynamic Task Force that aims to support gender-balanced participation in lifelong learning and to ensure equal access and rights for everyone.



## Activities carried out in the Gender Equality Task Force:

- Webinar on Guidance from a Gendered Perspective, March 2023
- The European Week of Cities and Regions 2023: Micro-credentials as a regional ALE Strategy: ensuring equality in the green transition?
- Webinar on Safe Spaces and Gender in Adult Education, November 2023
- Webinar on Gender Equality in Education and Employment from a Regional Perspective, January 2024
- Online campaigns for International Day of Women and Girls in Science, International Women's Day
- Seminar on Gender Equality as a Driver of Wellbeing in Educational Spaces, December 2024

# Recommendations for Capacity-building in ALE institutions for gender equality

The following are recommendations for Adult Learning and Education (ALE) institutions to improve their capacity in promoting gender equality:

## 1. Gender-Sensitive Curriculum Development:

- Design curricula that incorporate gender equality themes, addressing topics such as women's rights, gender roles, and social justice.
- Ensure that learning materials are free from gender biases and stereotypes, reflecting the experiences and perspectives of all genders.
- Include case studies, real-life examples, and success stories of gender equality to inspire and motivate learners.
- Good practice: [EASI/Erasmus+](#)

## 2. Gender Training for Educators and Staff:

- Provide regular gender sensitivity training for educators and administrative staff to help them understand gender dynamics and the importance of creating an inclusive learning environment.
- Offer workshops on recognizing and challenging unconscious biases, fostering an understanding of the unique barriers that different genders may face in accessing education.
- Encourage staff to become advocates for gender equality, promoting respectful and supportive environments for all learners.
- Good practice: [DVV international Gender in ALE Toolkit](#)

## 3. Flexible Learning Pathways:

- Develop flexible learning schedules to accommodate the needs of learners with caregiving responsibilities, particularly women, who may face challenges balancing education with household duties.
- Offer evening, weekend, or online learning opportunities to ensure that adult learners from all genders can participate in education without significant time constraints.
- Provide childcare support for learners with children, enabling them to attend classes without the burden of caregiving duties.
- Good practice: [MOVE UP/Partner projects/Erasmus+/Forwardlooking/Ongoing](#)





#### 4. Safe and Inclusive Learning Environments:

- Create a learning environment that is physically and psychologically safe for all learners, ensuring that gender-based discrimination, harassment, and violence are not tolerated.
- Establish clear policies on gender harassment and provide support systems, such as counselling or reporting mechanisms, for students who experience gender-related issues.
- Design classrooms, both physical and virtual, that promote inclusion and respect for diverse gender identities.
- Good practice: [Safe Spaces for Learning \(SAFE\)](#)/Partner projects/Erasmus+ KA2/Ongoing

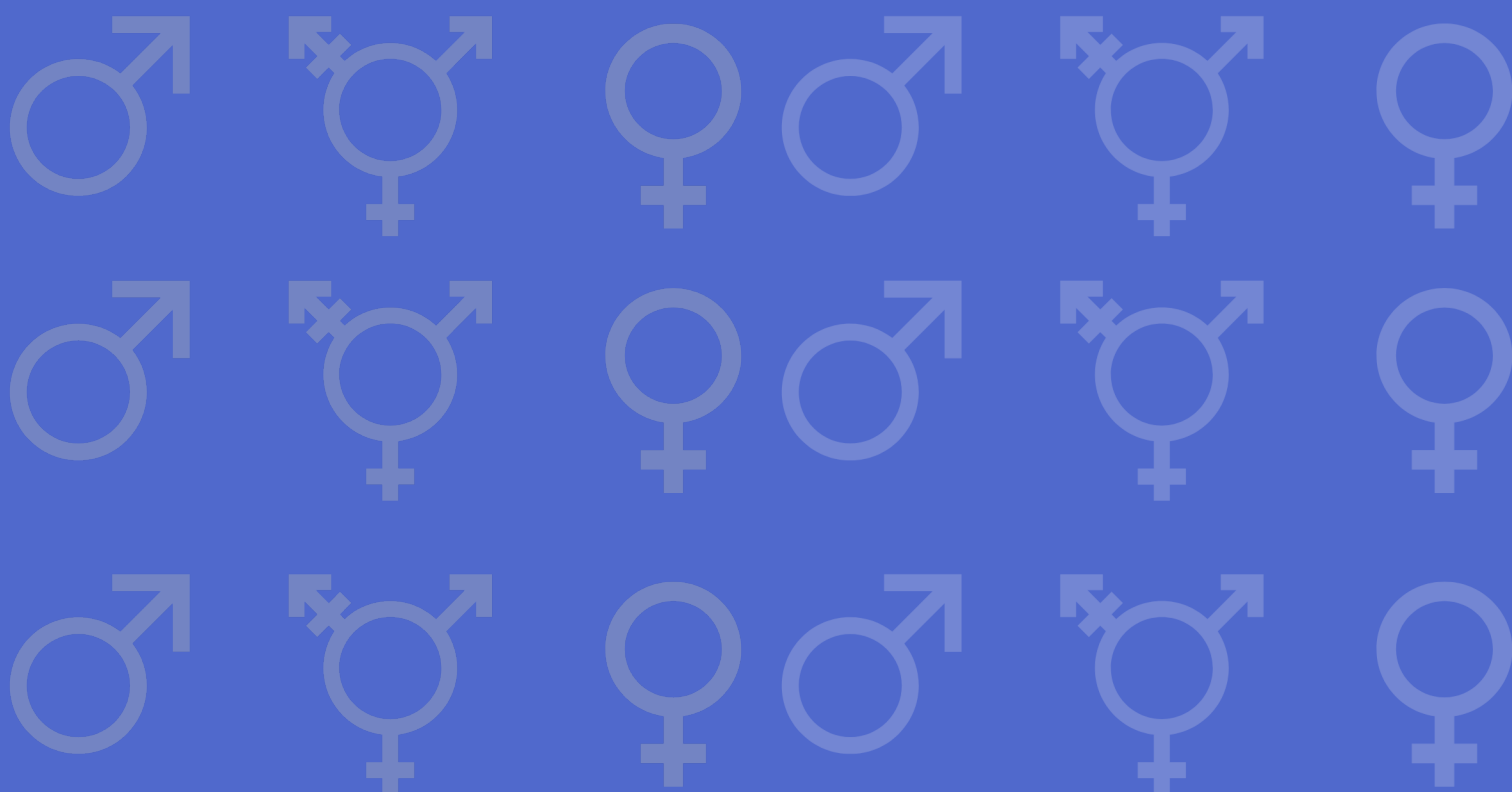
#### 5. Address Socio-Economic Barriers:

- Provide financial support such as scholarships, grants, or subsidized learning materials to ensure that gender disparities in economic access to education are minimized.
- Offer transportation stipends, childcare allowances, or meal programs to help learners who may face economic or logistical barriers to attending classes.
- Build partnerships with local communities, NGOs, and government agencies to provide additional support for low-income and marginalized learners.

#### 6. Monitor and Evaluate Gender Equality Progress:

- Regularly assess gender representation and equality within the institution, collecting data on enrollment, participation, completion rates, and career outcomes by gender.
- Use this data to identify gender disparities and develop targeted strategies to address gaps in access to and success in education.
- Ensure transparency in reporting progress on gender equality initiatives and use feedback from learners to continuously improve practices.

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