

The fight continues

There is still much more to be done to redress gender inequality, and it starts in the early years. By **Caroline Vollans**

Does anyone still think that stereotyping boys and girls is a problem when so many more opportunities are available to both sexes than ever before?

Girls can be in a football team, boys can attend a ballet class. Girls can wear trousers and have a short haircut, boys can paint their nails and grow their hair. Women can work as engineers and mechanics, men can work as nurses and care workers. We may even be seeing the breakdown of our traditional understandings of gender: increasing numbers of people no longer identify themselves as only male or female, with some identifying as both, or neither. Are we seeing the end of gender, gender roles and gender prejudice?

There are very good reasons to argue that things are not quite so promising as they first might seem. Take, for example, the 'me too' movement, highlighting the huge problem of sexual harassment and assaults; violence against women is still a critical, worldwide issue.

A vast pay gap between women and men persists. The caring professions, including working with young children, remain dominated by women and abhorrently low-paid. Women remain vastly under-represented in the most well-paid and visible professions. Has that much really changed since women working for Ford had to fight for equal pay 50 years ago?

For practitioners working in the early years, this raises an urgent question: are the foundations of inequality laid in early childhood?

And if they are, what changes should we be making in our practice to build a more equal future for men and women?

TYPICAL EXAMPLE?

Nadia was not overly concerned about gender stereotyping until her daughter Jasmine, aged two, started making such comments as 'I'm not pretty yet' – before putting on her dress and having her hair brushed – and 'Girls can't do that'. These views were not being expressed within the home, and to counter Jasmine's comments, Nadia started saying things like, 'Girls can do...' and 'You don't need a pretty dress to feel good'. Over time, Jasmine's views began to change.

'I'm not pretty'

Jasmine's understanding of gender difference was open to changing over time. We do not have to accept that things will always be the same. Yet it seems to be an age-old truth that growing up as a girl means having one's appearance freely remarked upon. This starts very young – how pretty she is, how beautiful her hair is and what lovely clothes she is wearing.

Assumptions about appearance seem to shape people's responses to young children, even more than assumptions about activity. For example, a friend's son, the keenest football player I know, and generally fully kitted out as such, is commonly mistaken for a girl because he has long hair.

This obsession with women's looks continues throughout their lives. So, it is newsworthy if wrinkles or other signs of ageing are spotted on female celebrities – the

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Daily Mail, for example, exclaimed of the Duchess of Cambridge, 'Oh Kate, are you really showing grey roots at 33?' Meanwhile, with the advancing years, men become distinguished, silver foxes: ageing, it seems, is to their advantage.

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'Girls can't do that'

Given the many female doctors, engineers, lawyers, plumbers and high-profile sports players, it would be understandable to think we have come a long way in opening up to women traditionally male pathways. We are even onto our second female prime minister.

Journalist Anne Robinson recently questioned the extent of women's progress in her television programme *The Trouble with Women*. A telling incident was when she asked some primary-aged children to draw and name a firefighter, a mechanic and a surgeon. Members of each profession then entered the room and removed their headgear to reveal they were all women; the people in the children's drawings were, without exception, men.

Similarly, a friend's four-year-old daughter, though she has a woman GP, takes on the role of a nurse when playing 'hospitals' with a



Both men and women are doing jobs traditionally dominated by one gender, but stereotypical perceptions persist

mixed group; the boys are the doctors. Again, whether feminist or not, surely this cannot be a good thing for girls and women in the 21st century?

EARLY YEARS PRACTICE

Anyone who works in the early years gets to know that young children are very astute at picking up messages. They then use these as something on which to build their own thoughts and attitudes.

For many years it has been common practice for practitioners, and many parents, to work on being as inclusive as possible regarding gender, and to show positive discrimination to girls if necessary to avoid them being sidelined. This is often done through:

- selecting books that foreground girls and women in major roles – for example, Princess Pearl in Julia Donaldson's Zog books. She is not interested in frilly dresses and wants to be a doctor
- including both sexes in whatever activity is going on, highlighting and discussing with the children any discrimination that may occur
- having women visit from a range of previously exclusively male professions
- increasing our own awareness and prejudices around gender issues through INSET and staff discussions

- highlighting to parents how we combat gender stereotyping by encouraging boys and girls to take part in activities on offer
- encouraging girls to speak out, stand up for themselves, occupy space and take up their place in the world – they can use the big physical apparatus, get wet and muddy, lead a conversation, and so on.

Despite these examples, we still live in a world where male dominance prevails. There is clearly further work to be done.

Everyday gender issues

A little girl went to visit her new primary school from nursery and came back saying, 'The boys were so noisy.' The experience had been one dominated by the male voice.

Children often go to the local playground to find the main concourse occupied by boys playing football, the girls being allocated to the periphery. In our adult world, regular TV programmes are put on hold so that the (male) football can take precedence. Women's football remains peripheral despite having been played seriously for decades.

Laura Bates in her now famous work 'Everyday sexism' points out that there is a £2.20 difference between boys' and girls' pocket money. It is the boys who hold the purse strings. In our adult world, women are far less likely than men

to ask for a pay increase when doing the same work as male colleagues. It is the men who hold the purse strings.

What next?

We face many testing and complex questions. Can we say that commenting on a girl's appearance is always detrimental, especially when receiving such a compliment can be a nice experience? And what about those girls who do not receive so many of these compliments – or any at all? Could this be to their advantage in the end?

When we use different words and language to girls and boys, and speak in different tones to each, do we communicate different attitudes and expectations? Do women, inadvertently, undermine themselves and in doing so pass this on to the next generation?

Anne Robinson's programme featured interviews with women who were marching for equality, yet were unprepared to ask for a pay rise, even though they were paid less than their male equivalents. This points to deep-rooted attitudes about self-worth. Many girls and women appear to have an underlying problem regarding entitlement, deservedness and self-assuredness about the place and space they occupy, or could occupy in the world. We need to find ways of addressing this question as much as we can.

Having equal choices in the world is a human right. Trying to find ways of making this possible for girls, the future women, remains a pressing need. While we may not know the answers to the many questions involved, we do know that complacency and a 'job done' outlook is not a useful response.

If we want things to change, it is vital that we continue to engage with and develop our own awareness and understanding of gender issues. Maybe, despite our efforts and striving, our own mindsets about gender are further entrenched than we think. Though women might be more enlightened and empowered these days, there is plenty of strong evidence to say that there is still much progress to be made.

Incidentally, why are the Gruffalo, the Very Hungry Caterpillar and every animal in *Dear Zoo* a 'he'? On the list could go... ■