

## **Boys are... Girls are... Addressing gender stereotypes in and through education**

From birth, society confines our behaviour within rigid gender lines – children are taught which colours, toys, games and books are for boys and which are for girls. Choices about what they play with and what to wear are made for children from a very young age and by the time they come to make their own choices, children have already learnt what is expected of them and will often behave accordingly.

Such gender stereotypes constrain people's lives and underpin prejudice and discrimination. Raising awareness on this topic is one of the main aims marking the International Day of the Girl Child that the United Nations has been marking on 11 October since 2012. This year the focus is on the power of the adolescent girl by reflecting on the achievements of the past 15 years whilst planning sustainable development goals for the next 15 years.

### **Addressing gender stereotypes**

Gender stereotypes in education are considered as an unceasing challenge. Research shows that gender stereotypes reproduced in schools include the perception that girls are caring, emotional, nurturing, helpful, dependent, considerate of others, and place others' needs before their own. On the other hand, boys tend to be viewed as rational, logical, unemotional, independent and strong and are also expected to be outgoing, smart, and naturally academically talented.

Research shows societal perceptions that academically able girls' achievements are attributed to their hard work, whereas successful boys are considered naturally gifted. In contrast, underachieving boy students are considered lazy, whereas underachieving girls are regarded as not capable.

Society still perceives mathematics, science and technology as "boys' subjects" which result in fewer girls opting for these study areas. This is also reflected in the educational paths followed by students as they grow up, such as in the courses taken in tertiary education. In fact, statistics from the University of Malta show that, for instance, there were 32 females and 52 men who graduated from the Faculty of Science; and 32 women and 83 men from the Faculty of Information and Communication Technology in 2013/2014. On the other hand, there were 290 females and 76 male graduates from the Faculty of Education during the same academic year.

Challenging and addressing such gender stereotypes can have wide beneficial effects that improve the educational and life outcomes of all students. In this regard, schools can be instrumental for positive change. Children's education should prepare them for a world in which such stereotypes need not govern their behaviour leaving them free to pursue their own lives they want without feeling that certain choices are expected of them.

Teachers can be change agents and challenge stereotypical representations of gender from a child's young age. They can also highlight and endorse non-stereotypical expressions of gender whenever they occur – be it in books or other resources, during classrooms interactions. Expressions of gender limiting children's behaviour or choices can also be challenged.

### **Raising awareness on gender stereotypes**

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) raises awareness through training sessions to students, educators and parents on the impact of gender stereotypes. Through this training, students are empowered to identify and overcome gender stereotyping. On the other hand, the sessions offered to educators and parents discuss the ways in which gender stereotyping can limit children's attainment and aspirations. Such training is thus an opportunity for participants to reflect on their own beliefs, attitudes and behaviours and uphold equal opportunities.

Progress in this regard is being registered. However, much more needs to be done in order to ensure that girls and boys enjoy equal opportunities to achieve their life aspirations.

NCPE can be contacted for further information on 2590 3850, [equality@gov.mt](mailto:equality@gov.mt) or on Facebook.

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