



# IMPROVING GENDER BALANCE SCOTLAND

## An action guide for secondary schools

Young people receive and absorb gender stereotyped messages about what they can and cannot do as a girl or as a boy from a very early age. TV, film and social media all tend to perpetuate the notion of distinct female and male behaviours and attributes. These stereotypes are unhelpful for both boys and girls.

Young people starting secondary school will have already developed gender based expectations of academic preferences, perceived abilities and behaviours. Many girls will have learned to be compliant, and are often praised for that compliance. However, those behaviours are not necessarily ones that will be useful in the workplace. Girls might well also be lacking belief in their capabilities, especially in maths and science. Boys tend to fall into two distinct groups: either very confident academically, or, have low expectations of themselves and choose to opt out and not compete at all. This academic underachievement amongst some boys is, in part, a gender issue and should be tackled as such.

In terms of academic preferences, by secondary school, boys tend to lag behind girls in literacy and language skills and girls are still largely under-represented in areas such as computing, engineering and physics. A narrowing of academic experiences at school too often evolves into a narrowing of choices and career pathways, and restrictions on potential income in the future.

More broadly, gender stereotypical views can shape young people's attitudes to relationships and may affect their mental wellbeing. Gender ideas permeate into issues of body image, sexual behaviours including issues of consent etc.

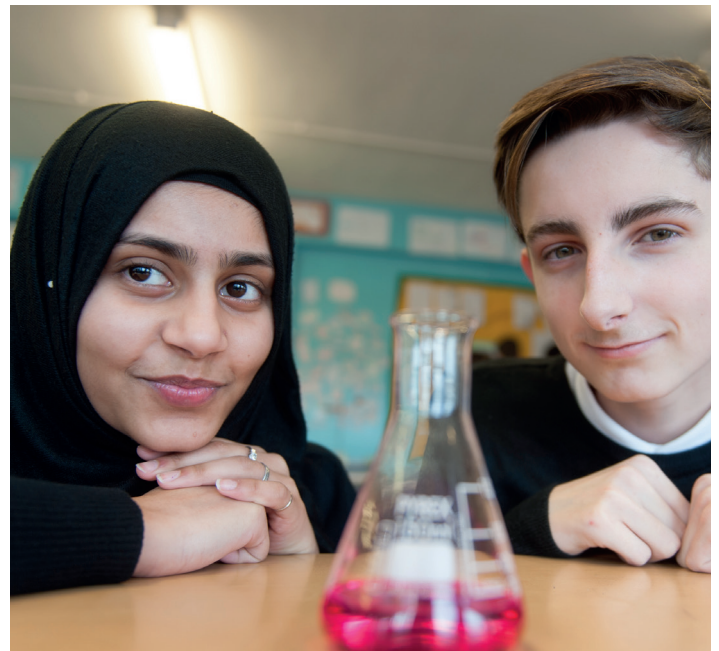
What can schools do? It is tempting to feel that by secondary school age it is too late – that behaviours and attitudes are ingrained. However, the impact of a school ethos should not be underestimated. Schools can be pro-active in recognising that there are inherent barriers to all young people accessing the same opportunities. Schools are also well placed to encourage young people to recognise the external influences that affect those seemingly independent choices. While young people should not be coerced into making any particular decisions, adopting the attitude that young people are able to choose whatever they want for themselves will not counteract the problem.

Establishing a whole school approach to gender balance in secondary schools is inevitably complicated. Students see several teachers in a day and as they move up the school they select different subjects. It is difficult to establish an overview of the individual student experience. School leadership teams will need to plan carefully to ensure all students are exposed to opportunities to identify and challenge gender stereotypes, and to reflect on how they impact on their own choices and opportunities. This action guide provides some ideas for how this can be achieved.

### A Tackling your own unconscious bias – self-reflective actions

We all have unconscious biases and it is important to be aware of these in our interactions with young people. They affect the ways we interact differently with girls and boys, the assumptions we make and the advice and directions we give them. Although admitting and dealing with your own biases can be challenging, it is essential to identify, reflect on, and discuss them openly with colleagues.

Having an unconscious gender bias does not automatically make a person sexist - everyone has biases to some degree as a result of years of exposure to gendered patterns. Once you become aware of your biases you can do something about them. By shifting thinking gradually over time, a person can adopt new habits and perspectives to help counteract any bias behaviour.



**Are you aware of your own unconscious biases? Take the Harvard Implicit Association test to discover your unconscious preferences here:**

### Reflective questions:

- Do you expect and/or accept different behaviour from boys and girls, for example, quieter behaviour from girls and more overtly confident behaviour from boys?
- What assumptions might you unconsciously make about which types of curricular areas and activities girls and boys prefer?
- Are you careful not to brand certain subjects as more difficult, or label certain individuals as naturally good at a subject? Research on growth mindset cautions against depicting achievement as innate.
- Are you aware of what you praise or criticise young people for? For example, are you more accepting of scruffy work from boys, or more likely to praise girls for the presentation of their work?

## B. Actions for engaging with students

There are a number of easy to implement ideas that can help young people learn to identify and counteract gender stereotypes.

### B.1. Dedicated curriculum time



**Raise awareness with students. Timetabling lessons that explicitly challenge gender stereotypes can allow safe, open discussions around the issues. PSE lessons for S1-S5 are available at:**

### B.2. Embed in the core curriculum



**Staff across the school might look for opportunities to include references to and discussion of gender stereotypes within their subject areas. For example, in standard texts in English or drama - which characters are upholding and reinforcing traditional stereotypes? Are there characters who behave counter to the traditionally expected behaviours for women and men?**



### Reflective questions:

- Do all year groups have regular opportunities to consider and gain an understanding of gender stereotypes, unconscious bias and their effects?
- Are students encouraged to identify and challenge gender stereotypes in an open, safe and constructive environment?
- Is addressing gender stereotypes regarded as a whole school issue, with all staff having a responsibility to reflect on opportunities to address through their subject? Responsibility should not rest solely with the guidance team.
- Are students able to identify and lead on projects in this area and to share their findings with others?

## C. In the classroom – actions for inclusive learning and teaching

The pattern of classroom interactions can unintentionally reinforce messages of expected and accepted behaviours. You could:

- Reflect on your seating plans. Consider whether these are designed for learning or behaviour management. What are the impacts on well behaved girls who are often inadvertently used as behaviour management tools?
- Consider using cooperative learning strategies. Explicit roles for discussions and group work will allow quieter, less confident individuals to contribute and the more exuberant class members to learn how not to dominate.
- Ask a peer to observe classroom interactions and monitor these by gender. High-achieving boys are more likely to put up their hands and dominate discussions. Low-achieving boys sometimes contribute least of all. Download a self-evaluation template at:
- Build confidence in less resilient individuals by encouraging a growth mindset. Concentrate on praising effort and processes rather than attainment.
- Download our top ten tips poster for more ideas:

### Reflective questions

- **Do you challenge belief in natural talent? Girls often attribute their success to hard work and therefore undervalue their own achievements. Boys may feel the need to hide the work they do.**
- **Do you regularly use inclusive teaching strategies and structure lessons to enable less confident individuals to participate?**
- **Are all subjects/topics presented as equally challenging/accessible? Is the perception of different subjects/topics monitored?**

## D. Department/faculty ethos – actions your department can take

At a department level, a good starting point is to ensure there is regular space for discussion around gender stereotypes and inclusive teaching strategies at department meetings.

### D.1. Teaching sets



**Monitor gender balance in teaching sets. Reducing imbalances can help reduce the issue of a minority group feeling like they do not belong. For example, if you have only a few boys in S4 taking French, could you put them all in the same set?**

In the informal curriculum, are creative approaches developed to encourage good gender balance in STEM clubs, sports teams and school trips etc?

### D.2. Subject choice



**Subject teachers are a powerful source of informal subject choice and career advice. You could:**

- Write subject choice booklets with students (and parents) in mind. Focus on what they really need to know and remove any unnecessary jargon. For example:
  - Avoid unnecessary descriptions of CfE, BGE etc., or phrases like “educational benefit” and “outcomes”.
  - Avoid repeating information. Phrases such as “N4 does not have an external exam” or “N5 can lead on to H” do not need to be repeated in the entry for every subject.
  - Do not concentrate solely on the course content. Explain the skills and knowledge that studying a particular subject develops and provide examples of possible next steps. Include examples of how studying the subject can contribute to wider society.
- As far as possible, allow free choice of subjects and then create a timetable to meet demand. This avoids inadvertently blocking desired subject combinations.
- Be aware that, in isolation, advising young people to “do what you are good at” will tend to exacerbate choice along gender stereotypical lines. Self-perceptions of what we are good at are heavily influenced by pervasive gender stereotypes. For example, boys may lack confidence in literacy subjects.

### Reflective questions:

- **How might subjects and activities be presented to encourage young people who might not otherwise engage with them? Are the contexts used monitored to ensure they are relevant and accessible to all students?**
- **Does the curriculum allow for regular and specific careers information? If not, how can this be encouraged? Could aspects of your subject curriculum be rebranded to highlight links to the world of work?**
- **Is gender balance of participation in the informal curriculum monitored? Where necessary might there be creative ways of engaging with a broader sample of the cohort?**
- **Do staff feel they have the careers knowledge necessary to offer advice? If not, are there opportunities for staff CLPL in this area?**
- **Are all staff aware of the benefits of work-based learning through foundation apprenticeships?**

### D.3. Careers awareness and employability



**As a department you could explore ways to include regular and specific links to careers information in the course of lessons and topics.**

Careers advice cannot solely be the responsibility of school careers advisors. All staff can play a vital role in raising awareness about the careers opportunities that are available through their subject areas. Consider the following:

- Are a range of careers presented and described? This should include specific examples, in addition to general ones and should ideally be woven into the curriculum, rather than being bolted on.
- Is the full range of pathways and choices evident? For example, not focused solely on routes through university, but also showcasing opportunities through modern apprenticeships, colleges etc.
- When describing jobs, do you use adjectives as well as verbs? Research suggests that girls are more likely to identify with adjectives at this age and boys more with verbs.
- Language used in job adverts: women often feel they need to meet 100% of the job criteria which may deter them from applying. Talk to students about this. It might help girls to become aware of this tendency and to apply for a greater number of roles.



## E. Whole school ethos – actions that your school can take

There are some steps you can take with colleagues to ensure a school-wide approach to tackling gender stereotypes.

### E.1. Leadership and peer support



**It is important that the whole staff, including support staff, feel able to tackle these issues. You could:**

- Develop a five year plan. It is too big an issue to tackle all at once.
- Establish a working group to research and develop an action plan. Embed actions in the school improvement plan.
- Gather data on attainment, participation and progression by gender. Are substantial differences between girls and boys identified and treated as gender issues?
- Plan staff CLPL on unconscious bias. Provide opportunities for teachers to observe each other and discuss patterns of classroom interaction in supportive ways.
- Work with the parent council, or a voluntary group of parents, to gain their insights.
- Consider a school cluster approach. For example, develop a cluster wide strategy for tackling boys' literacy skills or girls' confidence in maths.



### Reflective questions

- **Does a member of staff have the role of 'gender champion'? Having at least one person with gender balance on their remit can be useful in maintaining a whole school reflection on gender.**
- **Do staff feel able to challenge each other and young people constructively? Is there an ethos of open, safe and collaborative working to support this?**
- **Are all parents/carers aware of the ethos of the school in relation to counteracting stereotypes and is this well communicated through school policies and on the website?**
- **Do staff feel able to raise awareness among parents/carers on issues of gender stereotyping and present alternative viewpoints where appropriate?**

By tackling unconscious bias individually and through whole school discussions on gender stereotypes with children, colleagues and parents, we can create lifelong opportunities for young people that extend beyond traditional barriers.

### Useful links

- **Improving Gender Balance 3 – 18, Education Scotland**  
Links to research and resources,
- **Closing Doors, Institute of Physics**  
A statistical study exploring the links between gender and subject choice,
- **Career Education Standard**  
Education Scotland guidance on embedding employability skills in 3-18 learning (with a focus on equality and diversity)

### E.2. Language and behaviour



**There is still a surprising amount of sexist language and behaviour used in society and the media and this can be picked up and imitated by young people. You could:**

- Monitor how this language filters into the classroom. Treat sexist language in the same way as racist and homophobic language.
- Provide training and support for staff and students to help them challenge inappropriate behaviour or unfortunate choices of language in a constructive manner.
- Raise awareness of instances of subtler stereotypes in language. For example, the question: "Is anyone's dad an engineer?" can be an ongoing reinforcement of the idea that mums cannot be engineers, just as "I found physics hard" reinforces the idea that some subjects are easier than others.

### E.3. Communicating with parents and carers



**It is important to engage families in the broad issues around gender stereotypes and specifically around subject and career choices. You could:**

- Regularly explain the rationale of the school's focus on gender through newsletters or social media.
- Highlight that parents are likely to have the same gender biases as everyone else.
- Support parents/carers in not passing on any anxieties they themselves may have about certain subjects eg the perception that mathematics is difficult.
- Highlight local employment opportunities as well as those that require moving away from the area and provide sources of further information to allow parents or carers to learn about different employment sectors, prospects and routes.