

Background

Poverty is inherently gendered. The overall pay gap in Scotland currently sits at 15% ([A Fairer Scotland for Women: Gender Pay Gap Action Plan](#), 2019) and linked to this gap, there is a disproportionate number of women, in particular single mothers (39%), living in poverty (Poverty and Inequality Commission Scotland, 2020).

Factors contributing to this are:

- The percentage of unpaid carers is significantly higher amongst women.
- Women are more likely to be in unstable zero hour contracts.
- Women are more likely to take on most of the childcare responsibilities or have primary custody if single parents.
- Women are more likely to be in low paid jobs and/or work in sectors deemed as feminine and therefore valued less by our society.
- The prevalence of violence against women and girls.

The Scottish Government's [annual pupil census](#) indicates that in 2020, 226,838 pupils in Scotland's schools (publicly funded primary, secondary and special) were identified with Additional Support Needs (ASN). This represents just under a third of all pupils (32.3%), of which 58.0% are boys. The number of pupils identified with ASN has nearly doubled (92.2%) since 2012 (from 118,011 pupils). Children and young people with ASN are disproportionately impacted by poverty. For example, 29% of those who live with a disabled household member live in poverty. They also have poorer educational and employment outcomes than those with no ASN.

1 in 4 children in Scotland are living in poverty. The report of the Commission on [Race and Ethnic Disparities](#), March 2021 states that the "largest disadvantaged group is low income white boys, especially those from former industrial and coastal towns, who are failing at secondary school and are the people least likely to go to university" (p29)

However it is also important to note that the rate of relative poverty in Scotland is more than double for those from minority ethnic groups compared to majority white Scottish/British communities. Children from minority ethnic families in Scotland are still experiencing rising levels of poverty. Almost half of all children in minority ethnic families were living in relative poverty in Scotland over 2016-19. ([CRER](#)) This rising level of poverty should be considered when planning targeted or universal interventions for pupil equity.

For a number of these groups the poverty rates have increased and have been exacerbated by COVID-19. It is for this reason that data must be examined intersectionally and not in isolation in order to be able to be more aware of gaps and effectively target interventions and reduce the poverty related attainment gap.

Perception of the intersection of poverty and gender in schools and settings

Morag Treanor speaks of the misunderstanding of poverty amongst teaching staff, and how it is often attributed to parental values, choices and financial skills as opposed to 'institutional structures and values' (Treanor, M. 2020).

The perception of lone parenthood is inherently sexist. The majority of lone parent households are female (90%) and that percentage has stayed stable over the last few years. Lone mothers are often vilified by the media and perceived as 'welfare-dependent, as bad parents responsible for raising feral children' (Treanor, M. 2020). Lone mother families are not necessarily poor, but they are at higher risk of poverty, due to many of the factors that contribute to the gender pay gap. Poverty is not inevitable for lone parent families, it depends on the policies and structures in place to support them, if these are absent then poverty is more likely.

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Considering gender when responding to children in poverty

The response should not be individualised, but rather a response and engagement that includes whole families and communities.

Deconstructing gender roles can help prevent the cycle of poverty – single mothers are more likely to experience poverty if their mother has (Treanor, M. 2020). Helping to widen opportunities can address this too.

Whilst boys may be the most impacted in terms of the poverty related attainment gap (for example, In 2012, The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy's Boys' Reading Commission estimated around 60,000 boys failed to reach the expected level in reading at age 11), this gap is significantly less pronounced in institutions where gender constructs are less apparent. The need to address inherent gender norms is therefore crucial to addressing the attainment gap and will benefit children and young people of all genders.

It should also be kept in mind that even though the attainment of boys living in poverty is lower, this doesn't necessarily have an impact on their long term achievements in life. Girls are still more likely to be impacted long term even if they are attaining better in school due to the structures of gender inequality. Gender roles and the inequality that lay the foundation for these constructs can have a significant negative impact on girls' confidence, self-efficacy and in turn engagement and attainment, particularly in subject areas where they are underrepresented or feel that they do not belong. This lower self-efficacy can mean reluctance to take risks, and can create barriers to subject choice or learner pathways.

Things to consider when exploring attainment in schools and settings

- Work to address the poverty related attainment gap cannot happen in isolation, but instead should be part of a larger body of work that addresses gender inequality, restrictive gender norms and race inequality both within the school and within communities and families.
- Consider also how conforming to normative expectations of gender may benefit or hinder children and young people in different environments, and which gender stereotypes are beneficial or detrimental. For example, society may congratulate and foster competitiveness, aggression and risk taking amongst boys and men. These traits are ultimately beneficial to succeed in a competitive, capitalist workforce that seeks individuals who are assertive and stand out from the crowd. On the other hand, these behaviours and traits may actually be detrimental to succeeding in a rigid and rule-oriented learning environment. For girls, the traits that are encouraged within our society may centre far more around compliance, rule-following and people-pleasing. This may be beneficial to attainment and success within the confines of a school environment, but conversely, these traits are not perceived as strengths and may be barriers to succeed in the workplace outlined above.
- When exploring gendered patterns in attainment, or in engagement and participation, it is important not to think in a binary way. Whilst it can be useful to disaggregate by gender to identify gendered patterns, we would suggest going further and exploring which boys and which girls are being impacted in different ways. This will help to explore the ways that various barriers intersect (for example, gender, ethnicity, poverty, disability), but also allow exploration of the impact of gender roles in terms of which roles various children and young people conform to, and how this may correspond with success or barriers in specific areas.
- Educational authorities should consider how the interests, knowledge, identities and resources of underserved young people and communities (e.g. those from minority ethnic backgrounds or lone parent households) are being recognised and valued. The influence of unconscious bias should also be considered especially in relation to whose ideas are valued and how they influence PEF intervention planning. By considering each of these points, it places the child at the centre and aligns with the UNCRC: Article 3 – bests interests of the child and article 12 - respect for the views of the child. There are also explicit links with the goals of education (articles 28, 29, 31) and gender equality.

References

- "A Fairer Scotland for Women: Gender Pay Gap Action Plan". Scottish Government. (March 2019).
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- Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities – Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities: The Report - March 2021 (publishing.service.gov.uk)
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- Treanor, M, C. (2020) *Child Poverty: Aspiring to Survive*. Bristol University Press, Policy Press.