



## **Close the Gap submission to the Education Reform Consultation on Behalf of Professor Ken Muir, and Independent Advisor to the Scottish Government**

**November 2021**

### **1. Introduction**

Close the Gap is Scotland's policy advocacy organisation working on women's labour market equality. We have been working with employers and policymakers for 20 years to influence and enable positive action to address the causes of women's inequality in the workplace.

Education and skills policy is a strategic focus for Close the Gap as areas which influence women's labour market inequality. Close the Gap engages with a wide range of education stakeholders on key education policy frameworks and programmes, including on Curriculum for Excellence, Getting It Right for Every Child, Developing the Young Workforce and most recently the Young Person's Guarantee. Throughout this work we have advocated for a gender mainstreaming approach alongside the delivery of specific commitments on gender equality, providing support at a strategic and delivery level to a range of education stakeholders.

Gender inequality is a problem spanning the cradle to the labour market, and beyond. Girls and boys have different experiences in school which shape their lives and their futures, and influence their decisions on entering post-school education, and the labour market. Evidence shows that gender stereotyping from a very early age has an impact on the decisions that girls and boys, and young women and men, make about subject and career choice.<sup>1</sup>

Research shows that as children and young people progress through the education system, their ideas about gender and work become increasingly

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<sup>1</sup> See Levy, G. D., Sadovsky, A. L., & Troseth, G. L. (2000). Aspects of young children's perceptions of gender-typed occupations. *Sex Roles*, 42(11-12), 993-1006; Care, Esther, Jane Deans, and Robert Brown (2007) "The Realism and Sex Type of Four- to Five-Year-Old Children's Occupational Aspirations" *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, v5 n2 p155-168 2007; and Chambers, Nick, Dr Elnaz T Kashfekpakdel, Jordan Rehill, Christian Percy (2018) *Drawing the Future: Exploring the career aspirations of primary school children from around the world*, Education and Employers

fixed, and results in their concentration in subjects, based on gender stereotypes.<sup>2</sup> Gender segregation in subject choice in schools is a primary cause of gender segregation in apprenticeships, and in colleges and universities, where similar patterns of gender segregation can be seen.

Sexual harassment and sexualised bullying is a cause and a consequence of gender inequality and persists at endemic levels in education settings. 71% of 16-18-year-olds say they have heard sexual name-calling such as “slut” or “slag” towards girls at school daily or a few times per week and 29% say they have experienced unwanted sexual touching at school.<sup>3</sup> The 2018 Girlguiding Girls’ Attitudes Survey found that 16% of girls and young women aged 13+ often experience sexism in school, a 20% increase from 2014.<sup>4</sup> Education settings where sexism and sexual harassment are not effectively challenged contribute to these behaviours and attitudes and create a conducive context for toxic workplace cultures.

This all feeds into a labour market characterised by gender inequality. Despite young women outperforming young men at all levels and in almost all subjects, this does not translate into the equivalent in positive employment outcomes. Women are still concentrated into low paid, low status undervalued work, such as in childcare, social care, administration, cleaning and retail, and under-represented in senior roles across all sectors. For graduates, there is a gender pay gap from the moment they step into the labour market.<sup>5</sup> Women’s employment inequality contributes to women’s higher levels of poverty, particularly in-work poverty, and consequently child poverty.

While there are commonalities experienced by all women, disabled women, BME women, women of minority faiths, lesbian and bisexual women, trans women, refugee women, young women, and older women experience different, multiple barriers to participation in the labour market, and to progression within their occupation as a result of their multiple and

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<sup>2</sup> Van der Vleuten, Maaïke, Eva Jaspers, Ineke Maas & Tanya van der Lippe (2016) “Boys’ and girls’ educational choices in secondary education: The role of gender ideology”, *Educational Studies*, 42:2, 181-200

<sup>3</sup> YouGov (2010) *End Violence Against Women Poll*

<sup>4</sup> Girlguiding UK (2018) *Girls’ Attitudes Survey*

<sup>5</sup> Graduate outcomes (LEO): Employment and earnings outcomes of higher education graduates by subject studied and graduate characteristics in 2016/17

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/790223/Main\\_text.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/790223/Main_text.pdf) Accessed November 2021 AND Higher Education Statistics Agency (2020) *Higher Education Graduate Outcomes Statistics: UK, 2017/8 - Summary*

intersecting identities. Girls and young women will face a similar problem of this intersectional inequality in education and learning.

COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on Scotland's labour market, with women's employment being impacted in multiple and specific ways by sector shutdowns, furlough, job losses and increases in the amount of unpaid work, particularly childcare and care. The economic and labour market impacts of the crisis risk further entrenching labour market inequality for BME, young and disabled women who already face multiple barriers to good quality employment.<sup>6</sup>

Education settings that do not challenge gender norms and stereotypes entrench gender segregation in subject choice, occupational segregation in the labour market and wider gender inequality. Education policy design and delivery must therefore tackle the causes of gender inequality in early years settings and schools.

## VISION

### **1.1 The vision for Curriculum for Excellence reflects what matters for the education of children and young people in Scotland.**

Strongly disagree.

### **1.2 What do you think should be retained and/or changed?**

Despite the significant impact of gender norms and inequality on girls' and young women's experiences of education and learning, the vision for Curriculum for Excellence does not prioritise tackling this inequality in its aims or approach. Tackling gender segregation in subject and career choice requires a strategic approach and a focus on tackling gender norms and endemic sexual harassment and sexualised bullying in schools, which combine to undermine girls' and young women's rights and sustain gender inequality in the labour market and wider society.

There is clear space for this within the existing four capacities. For example, "Responsible citizens" focuses on enabling children and young people to make informed choices and decisions: this calls for action to tackle the impact of gender norms in education settings. However, this capacity also includes respect for others, and developing informed, ethical views of complex issues:

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<sup>6</sup> Close the Gap (2021) *One Year On: How COVID-19 is impacting women's employment in Scotland*

this must include work on the impact of sexual harassment, including how it happens and can be challenged in education settings. This is also of clear relevance to the ethos and life of the school as a community.

DYW recommendation 26 stated that Scotland should “embed equality education across Curriculum for Excellence”. The ambition is in line with the Public Sector Equality Duty’s requirement that public bodies mainstream equality in everything they do.<sup>7</sup> This should have been an opportunity to identify which aspects of the curriculum have different impacts, meanings and outcomes for each of the protected characteristics, which could have provided a strong basis for comprehensive action on equalities across the curriculum. Despite this, and the clear space for action within the vision, aims and approach of Curriculum for Excellence, tackling gender inequality in education and learning is still not being mainstreamed within the curriculum.<sup>8</sup>

As gender is not integrated into Curriculum for Excellence, work on gender inequality relies on teachers and practitioners having the necessary gender competence, the time and resource to do so (and for this to be sustained), and the influence to drive the work beyond their own classroom. In the already crowded education policy landscape such work has not been prioritised.

The lack of consistent and coherent action on gender equality throughout the learner journey is also exacerbated by the a failure to make gender equality core to other pillars of Scotland’s education policy, including Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) and the Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) strategy (now part of the Young Person’s Guarantee). This impacts the ability of policy to drive change on gender inequality in education, both individually and as whole.

For example, the findings of Close the Gap’s 2019 gender review of DYW indicate that it is failing to deliver substantive action on gender, or improved outcomes for girls and young women. Key actions implemented within the strategy have not engaged with gender, including those which have an explicit commitment to work towards gender equality. The available evidence suggests that work to address gender stereotyping and segregation is inconsistent and

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/sdsi/2012/9780111016718/contents>

<sup>8</sup> Close the Gap (2020) *A gender review of Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland’s youth unemployment strategy*

not being prioritised, and indicates varying levels of engagement on gender among different stakeholders.<sup>9</sup>

This inadequate approach to gender inequality continues to influence current work in schools to support young people's employment. In 2020-2021 around 250 DYW School Co-ordinators were recruited to work in schools to develop school-employer partnerships, with the purpose of expanding work experience opportunities and employer influence on curriculum. There is currently no strategic approach to ensuring action to tackle gender stereotyping is embedded in this work or to facilitate a joined-up approach with teachers and career practitioners in those schools where activity is taking place. School Co-ordinators have not yet received training on gender inequality to enable them to consider gender in their work. This is a significant concern as young people emerge from education into a changing labour market that is still recovering from the impact of the pandemic, and with youth unemployment on the rise.

This is just one example of how a lack of a gender-sensitive risks disrupting the coherent progression of girls and young women in their learner journeys. Young women on track for positive educational outcomes and studying male-dominated subjects may find themselves in male-dominated workplaces with cultures that do not feel inclusive to them, which influences their career decision. Young women at risk of poorer educational outcomes may be offered placements in low paid, female-typed work such as social care, childcare or administration, instead of being supported to explore opportunities for high quality employment.

While this consultation relates to Curriculum for Excellence and not directly to DYW, this example speaks to the centrality of Curriculum for Excellence in education policy and the potential therein. The key articulation points in DYW that relate to tackling gender inequality in schools are centred on Curriculum for Excellence. A strong vision for Curriculum for Excellence, which integrates an explicit recognition of the context of gender inequality in education and learning, could anchor and support the delivery of equalities ambitions in wider education policy.

The lack of progress on gender equality in education was highlighted by the First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls in its 2018

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<sup>9</sup> Close the Gap (2020) *A gender review of Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland's youth unemployment strategy*

report<sup>10</sup>. The Council recommended that Scottish Government create a Commission on Gender Equality in Education and Learning, tasked with providing bold and far-reaching recommendations on how gender equality can be embedded. In response Scottish Government established the Gender Equality Taskforce on Education and Learning in 2019, which is chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. The establishment of the Taskforce is welcome, and the education reform process needs to take account of its work. The failure to mainstream gender in education policy and the lack of gender competence in Education Scotland has entrenched girls' and young women's inequality in school settings.

Scotland's gender pay gap action plan *A Fairer Scotland for Women* sets out actions to tackle the many, inter-related causes of the pay gap, and spans a broad range of policy domains including schools.<sup>11</sup> However, the plan's commitments on schools are substantially weaker than commitments in other policy areas, again highlighting the lack of meaningful action on gender equality in education. Unless gender equality is core to education reform, young women's labour market outcomes will continue to be poorer than young men's.

**Close the Gap calls for a refreshed vision for Curriculum for Excellence that explicitly includes tackling gender inequality in education and learning as a core aim. Whichever body is responsible for Curriculum for Excellence must also have this core aim and be held accountable for its delivery.** Where institutions and individuals are not directed to act on gender inequality, this work is unlikely to be prioritised. Homogenised calls to “embed equality education” are proven to be insufficient. A strategic approach is essential; following Close the Gap's gender review of DYW, Scottish Government committed to developing such an approach. This is an opportunity to tackle the impact of gender norms on girls' and young women's experiences and pathways in education and deliver long overdue change.

## CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

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<sup>10</sup> <https://onescotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2018report.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Scottish Government (2019) *A fairer Scotland for women: gender pay gap action plan*

**2.1 Curriculum for Excellence provides a coherent progression in the journey of learners (3-18 and beyond) that gives them the best possible educational experience and enables them to realise their ambitions.**

Strongly disagree.

**2.2 Please share what you believe currently contributes to a coherent progression.**

The impact of gender stereotypes spans a lifetime, from the cradle to the labour market and beyond. In order that girls and boys, and young women and young men, have an equal chance of coherent progression in their learner journeys, Curriculum for Excellence must facilitate action on gender inequality across the whole of this journey. As set out in our response to question 1.2, there is currently a lack of consistency and continuity of action on gender stereotypes and inequality throughout the learner journey.

In Close the Gap's work on gender inequality in education we have engaged with numerous teachers and practitioners who have raised concerns about the lack of a joined up approach. There are pockets of good practice happening in early years settings, and in primary and secondary schools, but often practitioners in one setting have no information on what, if any, activity on gender is happening in other settings.

The majority of action on gender segregation in subject and career choice happens in secondary schools. Secondary school teachers, particularly those working with pupils at the time of subject choice decisions, and in the senior phase, often raise concerns that by the time young people get to this point the damage of gender stereotyping is done and there is little they can do to challenge it. This is a significant concern and a risk to coherent progression throughout the learner journey. The Girlguiding survey found that the percentage of girls and young women who believe that "girls and boys have the same chance of being successful in their future jobs" drops from 86% at 7-10 years old, to 54% at 11-16 years old and 35% at 17-21 years old.<sup>12</sup> Substantive and consistent action around gender inequality in education is required throughout the learner journey to challenge the impact of gender stereotypes on children's and young people's subject and career choices, and their wellbeing and self-efficacy.

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<sup>12</sup> Girlguiding UK (2016) *Girls' Attitudes Survey*

This lack of consistency across the learner journey is exacerbated by the often projectized nature of action on gender inequality in education. Since 2019 Education Scotland has been expanding the roll-out of the Improving Gender Balance and Equalities (IGBE) project in a number of school clusters. The evaluation of the project pilot found a range of successes including building capacity and confidence in participants around gender imbalance, exploring working practice through a gender lens, and practical changes such as amendments to timetabling to enable more non-traditional subject choices. However, there are challenges in scaling it up to national level given the resource intensive nature of the model. If gender inequality in education and learning, and in young people's employment outcomes, is to be tackled, we need to see a strategic approach that enables and resources action in all schools and education settings, not just those that are able to participate in a particular initiative.

**The development of a refreshed Curriculum for Excellence must recognise the impact of gender inequality of girls' and young women's learner journeys and future pathways. This must deliver a strategic approach to tackling gender inequality in education and learning alongside specific commitments on gender equality, and set out appropriate indicators to enable progress on action to be monitored and measured. Whichever body is responsible for Curriculum for Excellence must also be accountable for this delivery.**

**3.1 In practice, learning communities are empowered and use the autonomy provided by Curriculum for Excellence to design a curriculum that meets the needs of their learners.**

Strongly disagree.

**3.2 Please share ideas you may have on what is needed to enhance this in future.**

There is little evidence that tackling gender inequality is being considered in learning communities' design of curricula. A contributing factor to this is the lack of prescriptiveness built into Curriculum for Excellence, with teachers and practitioners granted autonomy within a broad framework to deliver education to what they perceive to be the best interests of the learners.

While there is evidence of good practice in some schools, relying on individual school leaders, teachers and practitioners to prioritise gender equality in the development of their curricula will not deliver substantive change for girls and young women. In those cases where work on gender inequality is happening, a lack of consistent and coherent approach, alongside a lack of measurability, is likely to undermine its effectiveness. Embedding action on gender inequality lacks the support of a detailed understanding among stakeholders of what this means in practice. In order to be able to consider gender in the development of the curriculum, stakeholders must first have sufficient understanding of how gender inequality manifests in education and learning, and in wider society. This gender competence<sup>13</sup> does not currently exist to a sufficient degree to enable adequate gender mainstreaming in curriculum development.

This is a missed opportunity for using the framework of Curriculum for Excellence to deliver cohesive action on gender inequality in education settings. It also has implications for wider stakeholder engagement on curriculum development, for example current employer engagement school-employer partnerships driven by DYW School Co-ordinators. The involvement of employers in shaping the curriculum is framed as positive, however most employers, have at best, a limited understanding of the gendered barriers women face in the workplace. It is therefore possible that employer involvement, where curriculum development does not adequately consider gender inequality, will perpetuate existing stereotypes and inequalities within the curriculum.

**Autonomy for learning communities around curriculum design must be situated within a Curriculum for Excellence that centres tackling gender inequality in education and skills as a key curriculum aim.** This must be accompanied by the provision of the necessary resources and capacity building for teachers and practitioners to be able to deliver on this aim in their practice. This is especially important in relation to Scottish Government’s commitment to support teachers to “take innovative decisions about the curriculum”, in line with recommendation 1.4 of the OECD review.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Gender competence is the knowledge that the roles of women and men are socially constructed and result in gendered inequalities which shape their lives, and the ability to use this understanding to inform analysis, policy and strategy. This includes knowledge about the tools, policies and strategies which relate to gender inequality, such as gender mainstreaming.

<sup>14</sup> OECD (2021) *Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future*

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

**11.1 There is sufficient trust with all stakeholders, including children, young people, parents & carers, so they are genuinely involved in decision making.**

Strongly disagree.

**11.2 Please share any ideas you may have on how trust and decision making can be further improved.**

Close the Gap welcomed the OECD review's foregrounding of the importance of stakeholder engagement, in particular the recognition that stakeholders can help "identify and sharpen the understanding of persistent inconsistencies between ideals and practices".<sup>15</sup>

Close the Gap has engaged with a wide range of education stakeholders, including individual schools, the Scottish Government's DYW team, Regional Improvement Collaboratives, the IGBE project, and Education Scotland. We have strong relationships in some areas, however there has been inconsistent engagement from some partners. Regional Improvement Collaboratives in particular have been very difficult to engage with despite several attempts.

Education Scotland holds an important position as the lead stakeholder for equality-related engagement on Curriculum for Excellence and the delivery of IGBE. Close the Gap has been concerned about a lack of meaningful engagement from Education Scotland for some time. Engagement takes place through its Equality Advisory Group, which typically met only twice a year. Given the pace of change in the policy environment this meant there was often insufficient time for discussion and opportunities to influence activity were limited. It was often difficult to identify if changes to policies, or specific initiatives, were made as group members were often not given updates on finalised versions.

The Equality Advisory Group has not met in over two years. While this may have been influenced by the pandemic, it may suggest a deprioritisation of stakeholder engagement and on work on gender inequality in its response to the Covid-19 crisis. The most up-to-date version of Education Scotland's Equality Strategy covers the period 2017-2019, therefore it appears that

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<sup>15</sup> OECD (2021) *Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future*

Education Scotland does not currently have an equality strategy in place. This is a particular concern given the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on school-age girls and young women. For example, during the pandemic 66% girls and young women aged 14-24 say they are spending more time on household chores compared to 31% of boys and young men.<sup>16</sup> This impacts on girls' and young women's wellbeing and ability to engage with education and learning.

This lack of engagement on equality sits in contrast to the increasing influence of employers in schools and on curriculum development. There are many positive aspects to such engagement, and many employers are motivated to improve the skills of young people and raising awareness of career opportunities in their industry<sup>17</sup>. However, if this engagement takes a gender-blind approach it is likely to perpetuate existing stereotypes.

Despite the significant impact of gender inequality on the experiences, choices and pathways of girls and boys, and young women and young men, throughout their education to labour market journey, gender and equalities experts are not engaged to the same level or extent on curriculum development. This is a missed opportunity to take a gender-sensitive approach to curriculum development, but also to ensure other engagement and initiatives do not unintentionally exacerbate inequality.

**It is critical that key education stakeholders are willing to engage openly with gender expertise in order to support an improved approach to mainstreaming gender in education policy and practice.**

**12.1 Independent inspection has an important role to play in scrutiny and evaluation, enhancing improvement and building capacity.**

Agree.

**12.2 Please give examples of how you would like to see scrutiny and evaluation being carried out in future.**

A significant barrier to the prioritisation and effective delivery of action on gender inequality is a lack of monitoring and accountability. Institutions will

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<sup>16</sup> *Theirworld poll (2021)*

<sup>17</sup> Scottish Government (2018) *Formative Evaluation of the DYW Regional Groups*

always place priority on actions that are likely to be scrutinised. Put simply, what gets measured gets managed.

It is inappropriate that educational institutions should have responsibility for oversight and scrutiny of their own activity. **Close the Gap is in principle in favour of independent inspection however, in line with the legal duty to use equality impact assessment as an integral part of policy development, gender inequality must inform the development of inspection frameworks and delivery.** Gender expertise should be engaged as part of the policy development process and inspectors must receive adequate training to build their gender competence and enable them to effectively identify whether education settings/schools are sustaining or reducing gendered inequalities.

This is especially important where teacher and practitioner autonomy is asserted in curriculum development, in order to ensure that action on gender inequality is included throughout.

#### FURTHER REFORM OF EDUCATION SCOTLAND

##### **15. Please share any comments or suggestions you have on how the functions currently housed in Education Scotland could be reformed.**

Education Scotland is required by the Public Sector Equality Duty to mainstream gender across all of its functions and use equality impact assessment as an integral part of its policy development. There is significant room for improvement in the institution's performance of the duties. The reform of Education Scotland is an important opportunity to reflect on how effective the institution has been at mainstreaming gender into its policy and practice and to develop a different approach in future. This consultation response sets out many concerns regarding a lack of action on gender inequality in education across Education Scotland's areas of responsibility and it is critical this is reflected in considerations of the institution's structure and purpose moving forward.

A reformed Education Scotland must include a refreshed institutional vision that includes an explicit commitment to tackling gender inequality in education and learning. There must be a strategic approach to ensure that action is delivered at all levels of the organisation and that leaders, teachers and practitioners are clear on their areas of responsibility.

It is essential that all functions have sufficient gender competence within their leadership and staff to ensure gender is mainstreamed across the institution. This includes senior leaders in schools and other education settings. Teachers and practitioners must also be supported with access to high quality, compulsory career-long professional learning to enable them to embed action on gender inequality in the curriculum and in their daily practice.