

# Girls on top: is the future becoming female?

**Stephen Lambert**

**T**hroughout the North East region, girls are outperforming boys at every stage in the educational system, including National Curriculum SATs tests and most subjects at GCSE, including maths, English and science. In Newcastle last year, 58 per cent of young women attained 5 or more GCSE passes at grade A\* - C including English and maths, compared to 53 per cent of young men. A higher number of females stay on in post-16 sixth form and further education, and women school leavers are more likely to get three top A-level passes than male college leavers. This year, more women have been accepted for university than men according to UCAS figures, and women now make up over 60 per cent of undergraduates. In 1980 it was the complete opposite – only 30 per cent of women went to university!

So why do females do better than males? Clearly one factor has been the impact of feminist ideas.

The advent of moderate feminism throughout the 1970s has led to significant success in improving the legal rights, and boosting the expectations and self-esteem, of women. They have to some extent challenged the traditional stereotype of women's roles as housewives and mothers. More women today look beyond the traditional housewife role in society, and are aspiring to higher education, rewarding careers and independence.

Second, a greater emphasis on equal opportunities in the classroom has had an impact in enabling girls to fulfil their potential more easily. Policies such as monitoring teaching and learning materials for sex bias to help schools meet the needs of girls, as well as equality and diversity issues embedded in the curriculum, have contributed to their success. Most teachers today are sensitive about avoiding gender stereotyping in the classroom. (Cont.)

And third, big changes in the knowledge and service economy throughout the region have clearly led to more employment opportunities for young women.

Yet, despite these trends, young women still do different subjects to men from the age of 16 onwards. Females are more likely to study arts subjects like English, foreign languages and sociology at A-level, and in higher education from 18, and do vocational courses in health care, hairdressing and beauty. Too many avoid the science and maths subjects, even though they exceed men at GCSE level! Technology and all the key science subjects such as physics are male dominated. So how can we make sense of these disparities?

Some sociologists put it down to parental upbringing, or 'gender role socialisation', to put it in the jargon. From an early age, girls and boys play with different toys, and do different activities in the home; boys playing with toy guns and laptops and girls playing with dolls is still the cultural norm in most households. Too often they see their parents fulfilling different roles. Although more younger men are doing more in the home, such as domestic tasks and contributing to child-care, all the latest research indicates that it's still women who carry out the bulk of household chores, caring and 'emotional work', whilst working outside the home in paid, part-time jobs – what social scientists call the 'triple shift'. The vast majority of men, from both middle-class and working-class backgrounds, see their primary role as the main breadwinner – working full-time. Such observations may discourage girls from developing a commitment to scientific, technological and mathematical subjects from the age of 16.

Also, many careers advisors are still steering young women away from taking technological-based subjects at 16, perhaps reflecting their own experiences and expectations. It's still the case that science, engineering, plumbing and IT are seen as 'masculine'. Young men tend to dominate science labs, grabbing equipment first and answering verbal questions from tutors directed at girls. This undermines girls' confidence and some find it intimidating.

Despite this, more women are entering previously traditional male-dominated professions, such as law, medicine and accountancy – a slow but long overdue development. However, many are still failing to break through the 'glass ceiling' when it comes to the top jobs in society, business, media and politics. In the UK only 22 per cent of MPs are women and Britain's boardrooms are still heavily male-dominated. It's still upper middle-class men who hold most of the highly paid, powerful positions in society, such as chief executives and judges. It's still men who pull the strings and 'run our country'. When it comes to pay,

women on average are paid a fifth less than men, according to recent figures from the Human Rights and Equality Commission, despite achieving better exam results than men.

It's premature for some commentators to suggest that the future is becoming female. If women are to break into the top jobs, we need to re-affirm family-friendly, work-balance policies, stamp out discrimination based on pregnancy, and challenge the 'institutionalised sexism' that still permeates the top layers of business and the media. Employers need to recognise that many men in their thirties are becoming more child-centred, and don't want to be working excessively long hours at the office or in industry. Contrary to popular belief, long working hours contribute next to nothing in improving productivity and motivation. People need to work smarter, not longer. Overall, we need a huge shift in our culture if we're to achieve gender equality both at the workplace and in the home.

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**For further information, contact the Secretary:**

**Ben Cosin  
3 Halliday Drive  
DEAL CT14 7AX**

**CAFAS website: [www.cafas.org.uk](http://www.cafas.org.uk)**