South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People 2022

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Stereotypes and Sexism

The views and experiences of SA school students

PROJECT REPORT NO. 28 | FEBRUARY 2022

Commissioner for Children & Young People

The Commissioner's Role

The South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory position, established under the *Children and Young People (Oversight and Advocacy Bodies) Act 2016* ('the Act').

The Commissioner's role includes advocating for systemic change to policies, programs and practices that impact the rights, development and wellbeing of South Australia's children and young people.

This work is informed by the experiences and issues of children and young people themselves, with a specific focus on those who struggle to have their voices heard.

The Commissioner's strategic agenda was formulated with direct input from children and young people. In particular children and young people asked the Commissioner to facilitate their involvement in decision making and to create opportunities for them to experience authentic participation in the adult world.

The Commissioner is working with a number of partners on this agenda including ways in which children and young people can have input into the design and delivery of policies, processes and practices that relate to delivery of services aimed directly at them.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the South Australian young people who participated in conversations related to this topic. Their thoughts, ideas, insights and suggestions have been appreciated.

Please note that all quotes used in this report are reproduced verbatim. They are unedited to faithfully communicate to those who have the capacity to consider them and implement change.

Special thanks to the leadership teams, staff and students of the following schools and services who so warmly welcomed and practically supported my engagement. Without their assistance and commitment to student voice and agency this consultation would not have been possible.

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- Walford Anglican School for Girls
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Contents

Major definitions used in this report

BOYS AND GIRLS: How we refer to children who identify in school and society as being biologically male or female.

CHILDREN: Children under 12 years, regardless of their biological sex and gender.

YOUNG PEOPLE: Young people over 12 years, regardless of their biological sex or gender.

YOUNG WOMEN AND YOUNG MEN: How we describe young people who identify in school or society as being biologically male or female.

Related terminology

GENDER: Attributes that a given society considers appropriate for a person based on their sex and thereby defining their masculinity or femininity.[1]

GENDER BINARY: The classification of gender into two distinct opposite forms of masculine and feminine, whether by social system or cultural belief.

GENDER NON-BINARY: Those whose gender identity does not fit within the binary gender classification system that is most commonly used to identify whether a person is male or female (eg. androgynous, queer, transgender).

GENDER ROLES: The roles, functions and responsibilities assigned to and expected to be fulfilled in a society by people, based on their binary sex.[2]

GENDER STEREOTYPES: The generalised views or preconceptions about the roles and attributes of a whole group based on their gender, and which can perpetuate the notion that each gender and any associated behaviours can only be binary; ie male or female.[3]

GENDER SENSITIVE: An approach that identifies, considers, and accounts for the different needs, abilities, and opportunities experienced by male, female and non-binary people.[4]

GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE: Use of a gender sensitive approach that advances gender equality while working with key stakeholders to identify, address and positively transform the root-causes of gender inequalities.[5]

GENDER DIVERSE: The extent to which a person's gender identity, role, or expression differs from the cultural norms prescribed for people of a particular sex.[6]

GENDER EQUALITY: The absence of any discrimination on the basis of a person's sex in relation to accessing opportunities and equal allocation of resources, benefits, and access to services. Gender equality is often used to describe this outcome being sought.[7]

GENDER EQUITY: The provision and application of fairness and justice in relation to the distribution of benefits and responsibilities between males and females. The term recognises that males and females have different needs and power, and that these differences should be identified and addressed in a manner that rectifies the imbalances that exist between the sexes. It is also used to describe the processes adopted to achieve gender equality.[8]

GENDERED NORMS: A set of dominant beliefs and rules of conduct, determined by a society or social group in relation to the types of roles, interests, behaviours, and contributions expected from males and females.[9]

HETERONORMATIVITY: The concept that heterosexuality is the preferred or normal mode of sexual orientation and assumption that gender is binary.[10]

SEX: The biological and physical characteristics, such as reproductive organs, chromosomes, and hormones, that define people as male or female, typically at birth.[11]

SEXISM: The prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, on the basis of a person's sex.

“Sexism needs to be called out more often. People are always called out for racism, but often, sexist comments in the media and in face-to-face situations are not addressed.”

Commissioner's Foreword

As South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People my mandate is to promote the rights, best interests and wellbeing of all children and young people living in our State.

I advocate for the views, aspirations and rights of children and young people to be affirmed, promoted, and protected, working to give children and young people a 'voice' across our society.

Children and young people are the experts in their own lives, and they want to have their opinions heard, taken seriously, and acted upon; in fact, it is their right.

I have had face to face conversations and held focus groups with thousands of South Australian children and young people. They come from diverse backgrounds, live in a variety of places and spaces, and have shared their views on a vast range of issues and topics.

I have heard first-hand how many children and young people in South Australia lead happy active lives and feel respected by the adults with whom they interact. They value their family relationships, including those they have with family pets. They also value their friendships, school education, learning and culture, as well as opportunities to participate in their local communities.

I have discussed sensitive topics such as bullying, poverty, school exclusions, mental health, sex, and menstruation. I have heard from children and young people about the impacts that unstable housing and having no money has, of caring for parents who have health challenges, and of coming from a refugee or migrant background.

One of the enduring cross-cutting themes that has repeatedly surfaced across all aspects of my work is the impact that sexism, gender roles, and gender stereotyping has on the lives of children and young people. Whilst it is clear that the impacts are different for boys and girls, it still affects almost every aspect of a child or young person's aspirations, relationships, and wellbeing.

In my recent work on menstruation and sex education, I have heard about the stigma associated with menstruation, the lack of knowledge girls and young women have about their own bodies, and the lack of information males and females have about periods.

The impact of menstrual ignorance is stigma, taboo, and discrimination, which in turn impacts on young people's participation, school attendance, and overall wellbeing. This has lifelong consequences and highlights menstruation as a gender equity issue that must be addressed if we are to achieve gender equality.

South Australian children and young people have also expressed their frustration and concern that discussion and instruction about sexism, sexual assault, and domestic violence are not currently a feature of their relationship and sexual health education. This leaves them feeling unsafe at school, at work, and socially, as well as within their intimate relationships.

As a generation that demands more respect for diversity, young people want an education that uses a gender sensitive approach. They want to be part of the generation who advances gender equity by working with teachers and educators to address and positively transform gender inequality in their schools.

As the first truly global generation, young people have had unprecedented access to information and relationships that cross continents, sovereignties, and ideological lines. This has influenced their opinions and their opportunities to participate and promote change.

Consequently, many adult stakeholders believe it is only a matter of time before the current generation will 'resolve' issues around sexism, gender norms, and stereotyping. Whilst I share their hope for the future, I feel the timeframe for this gender transformation will not be completed any time soon. We still have a long way to go before the stories and experiences that girls and young women tell me about – such as being told not to wear certain clothes because they 'distract male teachers', or about a male teacher making a female student run errands for them, or indeed about a female teacher who asks for 'big strong boys' to help her in the classroom – will change. From what children and young people have told me these are still common scenarios occurring in schools on a regular basis.

We have so much further to go to address behaviours that enable girls to be 'catcalled' in the playground, coerced into sending 'nudes' of themselves, or bullied in ways that sexualise and degrade them. Not to mention the behaviours that put pressure on young men to repress their emotions, so that they don't risk being seen as 'weak' or 'feminine'.

Our work in this area must address the behaviour of children and young people as well as the behaviour of adults. We must look closely at the environments that enable and reinforce sexist attitudes, derogatory comments, jibes, and sexual harassment. A failure to challenge these gender stereotypes and minimise their impact on children and young people's lives is detrimental to everyone, regardless of age, sex, and gender.

To build our contemporary understanding of how sexism and gender stereotypes impacts on children and young people's lives, it is essential to include them in these conversations. Without their input, the effectiveness of any actions taken to challenge sexist and gender stereotyping norms and address problematic behaviours, will be limited.

The purpose of this report is to bring children and young people's perspectives and experiences of sexism and gender stereotypes to the fore. Through face-to-face conversations and by exploring how children and young people perceive the differences between the sexes,

we will better understand how our current systems reinforce any differences based on sex, including whether children and young people are aware of how gender stereotyping impacts their daily lives.

Given that gender roles and stereotypes are taught and learnt, we must understand how systems perpetuate experiences of sexism. This means looking at how systemic sexism and discrimination play out at the classroom level, and more broadly within our educational institutions.

To ensure all children and young people have equal opportunities, we must actively tackle sexism, gender stereotypes, and gender norms in schools. This means looking at the knowledge, skills, and resource barriers that reinforce the sexist stereotypes and their associated behaviours occurring in classrooms and on school grounds every day. This includes putting a stop to the experiences of many students, particularly girls, who feel they are not being heard or believed, and meaning that reporting of incidents does not lead to the kind of change they expected.

It would be far too simplistic to suggest that schools alone can change the deep gender inequality and inequity that exists in our society and its associated systems. However, it would also be remiss not to address the issues identified by children and young people themselves, and the role they say school plays in promoting and reinforcing sexist ideals, attitudes, and behaviours.

This report outlines the issues children and young people have explicitly raised with me in my conversations or engagement with them. My aim is to increase the broad understanding we all have of the impacts that sexism, harassment, and gender stereotyping has on children and young people, and in so doing create a dialogue with decision makers that can support systemic improvements in the way schools throughout South Australia work to address sexism and stereotyping in an education environment.

Helen Connolly
Commissioner for Children and Young People, South Australia

Context

Although sexism and gender stereotypes are often characterised as harmless or dismissed as 'jokes', the pervasive nature of offhand sexualised commentary can have wide ranging negative impacts on children and young people.

Gender stereotypes limit the capacity of both young men and young women to develop their personal abilities, pursue professional careers and make choices about their lives. Whether overtly hostile (such as "girls are irrational") or seemingly benign (such as "boys are strong"), gender stereotypes perpetuate inequalities.

In addition to the personal costs, there are also the social, economic, and political costs that come with sexism. Whether it's a lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services, gendered poverty, unhealthy and disrespectful personal relationships, gendered violence, or different education expectations and opportunities for girls and boys, there are many barriers preventing children and young people (particularly girls and young women) from realising their rights and achieving their full potential.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) covers all aspects of a child's life and sets out the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights that all children everywhere are entitled to receive. It also explains how adults and governments must work together to make sure all children can enjoy all their rights. Australia ratified the UNCRC in December 1990, which means that Australia has a duty to ensure all children in Australia enjoy these rights.[12]

To fully realise the rights of children and young people, we are obligated to ensure they can live free from discrimination and violence. According to UNICEF, the four principles of the UNCRC are fundamental to realising all rights in the UNCRC convention: non-discrimination; in the best interest of the child; right to life survival and development; and the right to be heard.

Australia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1983. As such, governments in Australia have a responsibility to uphold the rights of women and girls and tackle any systemic barriers that inhibit their full development.[13]

CEDAW is the key international treaty – often referred to as an international bill of rights – which outlines the responsibilities of member states to take all measures to protect and promote the rights of women:

> *'Parties shall take all appropriate measures... to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women'.*[14]

Member states must address gender stereotypes given they perpetuate sexist norms. Countries that reduce inequality strengthen their economies and build stable, resilient societies that give all children and young people the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Gender stereotyping is a frequent cause of discrimination against women. It is a contributing factor that violates an array of rights, such as the right to health, to an adequate standard of living, education, marriage and family relations, to work, freedom of expression, freedom of movement, political participation and representation, freedom from gender-based violence and the effective remedy of any violations that have already occurred, or which continue to occur.

While the drivers of violence against women are complex, international and national evidence shows that factors related to gender inequality, including rigid gender stereotypes, are the most significant and consistent predictors of violence against women.[15]

In 2019, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) endorsed the Fourth Action Plan of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022 (the National Plan). The National Plan outlines five national priorities to reduce family, domestic and sexual violence and eradicate violence against women and their children.

The National Plan was devised partly in response to Australia having one of the highest rates of sexual assault incidents reported anywhere in the world, with almost two million (overwhelmingly female) Australians over the age of 15 years experiencing at least one sexual assault in their lives.[16]

A key focus of the National Plan in addressing violence against women, is creating behavioural change through educating children and young people.[17] Sexism, sexual harassment, and gendered violence is so widely covered and discussed by young people, that it is important their voices aren't missing when devising solutions and strategies to address the problem of sexism and gender inequality.

Gendered thinking can influence what children and young people find important in a future career path and therefore shape their educational choices from a young age, including what subjects they pursue, and how they evaluate their competency in certain subjects. While gendered thinking has been shown to positively shape boys' future career paths and subject preferences, for girls it also shapes their own competency beliefs. Girls are often taught to question their own ability and confidence, whereas boys are taught to be confident and have more self-belief, even in an educational context.[18]

Sexism and gender stereotyping lie at the heart of gender inequality. They undermine girls' confidence and self-worth, and distort interactions and relationships between girls and boys in ways that are unhealthy negatively impacting on the health, safety, confidence and wellbeing of cisgender males and females as well as on those who identify as non-binary or gender diverse.

“At the heart of gender inequality is sexism and gender stereotypes that undermine girls’ confidence and self-worth and distort interactions and relationships between males and females in ways that are unhealthy and have negative impacts on the health, safety, confidence and wellbeing of everyone.”

The Issue

Research suggests that the impact of gender inequality lasts a lifetime. According to the 2020 per capita report on Gender Equality in Australia, the earlier a child can identify gender differences, the more likely they are to adhere to gender stereotypes. This in turn correlates to a higher probability of perpetration and experience of violence.[19]

Children start school with a well-established understanding of gender. This is built through the reinforcement of gender expectations modelled and communicated to them by their parents and carers and other adults with whom they come into contact.

These gendered expectations relate to what girls and boys play with, what colours they wear, how noisy they can be, how they should attract adult attention, behave in peer interactions, or respond to adult questions about future aspirations.

Once children start school, gender differences are already significant. Key assessment tools like the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) show that boys are likely to be more developmentally vulnerable than girls, with the greatest gender differences seen in the areas of social competency and emotional maturity.[20]

Gender differences in the early years of school are then further reinforced through actions in the classroom that prioritise the development of the emotional and social skills of girls, through the pointing out of gender differences, the establishment of competitive cultures, and the use of different behaviour management strategies based on a student's gender.

This narrative and the underlying gender stereotypes it reinforces is harmful to both boys and girls. It further embeds gender inequality insofar as it suggests that boys are destined to have poorer social emotional literacy and that girls can be relied upon to moderate boys' behaviour.

As children progress through primary school and move into high school, they are increasingly exposed to a range of sexually harassing behaviours, including those relating to image-based abuse such as pressure to send 'sexts'. This escalates throughout high school in an environment where sexism, sexually explicit jibes and verbal abuse are often considered so normal that they are simply 'not worth reporting'.

It is critical that we integrate gender equality into the educational, social, relational, and cultural aspects of schools. This means adopting policies and practices that challenge the gender roles and gender expectations perpetuating gender inequality as children and young people progress through school to become adults.

Many young women have spoken about the sexism and harassment they experience in school and the attitudes which enable such behaviour. In line with critical social and emotional capabilities featured in the Australian Curriculum, children and young people highlight the importance of education and education settings, as places that not only address sexist culture, but also challenge gender norms.

In addition to the ways gender stereotypes impact the wellbeing and aspirations of both boys and girls, children and young people also discussed the impact gender stereotypes have on children and young people who do not identity as either male or female. Gender diversity is an added complexity in discrimination based on a person's gender, and must also be considered when addressing sexism in schools.

Gender stereotyping is so prevalent that there are common practices and beliefs held across all schools and classrooms that lead to situations where children and young people report the following:

– There's no need for feminism anymore as boys and girls are equal now

> **"While it is always said and advertised that everyone is equal, there is still a culture of inequality between males and females that exists now."**
> **– Male, 17**

– Assertive girls are bossy and emotional boys are wimps

> **"Why is it that people are always making excuses for boys being violent – 'let boys be boys' and when girls try to show leadership or strength they are said to be 'bossy'."**
> **– Female, 14**

– Career aspirations are more important for males than females

> **"Boys grow up to make big changes in the world!"**
> **– Male, 13**

> **Boys are more creative and more imaginative than girls as girls don't think outside of the box." – Male, 11**

– Identity as a mother is more important for females than career identity

> **Girls from an extremely young age, are given babies to play with and care for. This is showing/teaching girls the 'loving/caring' lifestyle. This shows girls the path of growing up and having a 'destiny' of just being a mum. From an extremely young age, girls are forced into a stereotype that is very hard to break, due to the majority of girls being taught this." – Female, 14**

– Pressure to have the perfect body impacts self-esteem and participation in physical activity

> **Girls don't understand how unrealistic female appearance standards are. For example, a lot of girls believe their body is ugly because they don't have an hourglass figure like celebrities, but don't realise celebrities get surgery to have that body. Boys aren't taught enough emotional intelligence and communication. They think expressing their emotions is too feminine." – Female, 16**

– Gender inequality, body image, social comparison, bullying and sexual harassment are creating mental health struggles.

> **Men struggle with acceptance of close friends. Females struggle with acceptance of society – social media." – Male, 17**

Key Messages

According to children and young people attending primary and secondary public, independent and private schools:

1

Sexism, gendered norms, and stereotyping impacts on the wellbeing, participation, and experience of schooling for all children and young people.

2

Identity and gender underpin significant peer to peer bullying in high school.

3

Sexism is considered a normal part of school culture and is not generally reported due to a belief that nothing can or will be done about it.

4

School based anti-sexism strategies that involve student input and active participation are rare.

5

Sexist language and gender stereotypes in the classroom and school grounds are not approriately addressed.

Recommendations

1

All South Australian schools review existing relationship and sexual health education and bullying materials to ensure they specifically address sexism, sexual harassment and gender based bullying.

2

Pre-service and practising teachers are supported through access to ongoing training in relation to the prevention of sexism, sexual harassment, and stereotyping in the classroom.

3

All schools review existing procedures for reporting and resolving incidents of sexism and gender based bullying and sexual harassment against the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations.

Who we Talked to

Number of Participants:
365

Number of Sessions:
18

Gender breakdown:
161 male, 175 female,
24 gender-diverse young people

Age range:
11 to 19 year olds

Geography:
Metropolitan Adelaide

Session information:
Schools: 14
Non-Government Organisations: 4
Same Sex Female: 8 sessions
Same Sex Male: 5 sessions
Mixed: 5 sessions

What we Heard

Consultations occurred with 365 children and young people across metropolitan South Australia. They were conducted in schools and non-government organisations and involved a diversity of children and young people with a wide range of opinions, experiences, backgrounds, ages, and abilities.

Groups included same sex as well as mixed groups, and while most children and young people identified as male or female, non-binary and gender diverse young people also participated.

Children and young people were asked to describe gender norms and stereotypes in relation to aspects of their lives including career aspirations, appearance, emotions, behaviours, relationships, and activities. They also discussed the role schools play in creating and promoting stereotypes, and what schools could do differently to prevent this. They reflected on the impact of both implicit and explicit gendered norms and stereotypes, and the expectations they place on their confidence, wellbeing, aspirations and participation in the school environment.

Impacts at school

Children and young people described many examples of sexism and gender stereotypes being used within classroom settings, starting early in their school years. Girls explained how teachers use female students to moderate and monitor the behaviour of boys. This included being asked to sit between boys to disrupt interactions between them, as well as taking boys to the Principal's office when they have 'done something wrong'.

> **"In co-ed schools when the boys did something bad, the girls were asked to sit between them or walk to the front office." – Female, 11**

They also spoke about teachers building tension between children of different genders by extolling the virtues of girls to boys in the classroom. Boys reported that these actions only reinforced the view that they are inherently 'naughty' and less trustworthy than girls.

The impact of these messages from teachers around gendered roles, and the differences between males and females is powerful, especially when reinforced by parents and society more broadly outside of school.

One of the most powerful and common examples of gender stereotyping, as reported by children and young people themselves, is that girls are 'soft, caring, maternal and look after their children and partners', whereas boys are strong 'providers and protectors' of the family.

This continues to influence the wellbeing of all children and young people, with girls reporting that this stereotype reinforces the view that boys are "in control of situations and can make things happen" while the main role for girls is to provide support – particularly emotional support – to boys.

> **"In primary school boys are taught to be strong like when teachers ask for things to be moved by "strong boys". Girls are taught to be complacent and always say yes." – Female, 12**

Gender stereotypes, identity, and sex are often at the core of bullying in a school environment. While attacks on belonging, worthiness, and physical appearance are the most common forms of bullying in the primary years, sex and gender bullying do occur at this age, particularly amongst boys who label each other based on their perceived interactions with girls. Starting quite early in primary school, disapproval of relationships between genders is at the core of insults, and it is quite common for boys to call other boys a 'simp' if he is too nice to a girl, or 'gay' if he hangs out with girls instead of boys.

> **"Boys call other boys simps because their jealous. Because they can get girls and they can't." – Male, 11**

In older years, bullying is intended to cause humiliation and is therefore more public in nature. Young people describe incidences of bullying based on gender identity and their sex as being common. When males direct sexualised bullying at females it often takes the form of 'slut shaming' with taunts based on promiscuity, sexual behaviour, or physical appearance such as the following:

> **"Fat bitch"**

> **"Slut (although you are completely innocent)."**

> **"You probably slept with every-one on this street you slut."**

> **"Why are you wearing that skirt? You're just asking for it."**

Young women said they were concerned about bullying and image-based abuse, sexual violence and harassment at high school and they wanted action to be taken by their school to make changes that will ensure everyone feels safe at all times.

Young women described the pressure they get to send 'sexts' to boys as constant. They also said they don't know how to deal with this behaviour and that they are scared and embarrassed by it. In many cases, they reflected on how schools and teachers failed to intervene and protect students from sexual harassment and image-based abuse.

> **"When children are young, they are bullied or judged for the toys they play with, the sports they play, who they hang out with, what they wear. The judgement and bullying is the thing that can often influence people to change." – Male, 13**

Young men described bullying that has the most impact on them as that which questions their sex and masculinity. They describe the most common and hurtful insults being when they're called a 'pussy' or a 'faggot' by other young men.

Cat calling 'flash us something' and we will leave you alone."

Female, Age 13

Many young women shared concerns about what they see as being a disproportionate focus of school discussions and policies on their bodies and appearance. They outlined the restrictions schools place on how they wear their hair, make up, jewellery and clothing. They said the schools often tell them these restrictions are in place because females "are too distracting and are a trigger for male students and teachers."

This dominant message – that boys can't manage their own behaviour or 'control themselves' – supports the expectations that girls are responsible for managing boys' behaviour. According to many young women, this is what lies at the core of victim blaming and of their feelings of being unsafe.

When students do not feel safe, it negatively impacts their sense of belonging at school, which in turn compromises their relationships with peers and significant adults. This can lead to flow-on effects for school attendance, engagement, and attainment. Many young people described feeling helpless in their efforts to tackle the overt sexism in their environments, because they didn't know what to do or where to go to seek support when it was needed neither generally or in response to bullying and discrimination. In some cases, they were worried too about the potential repercussions of doing so.

Young women also spoke about uniform policies and rules that impact their social lives and restrict their ability to fully participate in opportunities or play sport. One young person highlighted that "girls can't play on the monkey bars when they wear skirts because they will show their underwear." When the safety, confidence and comfort of some students is compromised in the school environment, it limits the safety, confidence, and comfort of all students.

> **"Girls must be presented appropriately (clothed), but boys can wear what they want. When girls wear revealing clothing, it is assumed to be for male attention – they are called a 'slut'. Schools tell girls to express their individuality but only to an extent (no earrings, hair colour). Boys should be encouraged to express their emotions without judgement." – Female, 16**

Impacts on ambitions

Gendered differences, stereotypes and expectations are frequently reflected in children's broader aspirations around their future family and working lives. Many girls and young women spoke about the impact the expectation of motherhood has on their career aspirations. This expectation is scaffolded throughout childhood with young girls given "doll babies" to hold and protect and then repeatedly asked about their ambitions to have children throughout their teenage years.

Many girls shared the expectations adults had of their futures and being directed towards helping professions, specifically childcare, nursing, and primary school teaching because the hours of work can better accommodate being a mother. The need to balance family and work was discussed as part of their decision making around suitable jobs in the future. Young women said this creates a belief amongst young women that their careers are secondary to motherhood, and that they should therefore expect less from their careers.

> **"Everybody will tell me these days that gender doesn't make a difference anymore. Then they'll buy me pink clothes, give me some Barbies, and ask me if I want to be a nurse. It isn't anybody's fault, it's the society we are brought up in." – Female, 12**

There was consensus amongst both boys and girls that girls are told from an early age that they should aspire to motherhood. Whilst many girls did not necessarily think this was problematic, many did express concerns about the young age at which they are asked about their parenting intentions: "[We] always are asked if you want children, even in year 4."

Boys shared a different experience, explaining that they were more frequently asked about career ambitions as opposed to their parenting ambitions. Discussions about careers are central to how boys describe their future. Unlike sessions with girls, no boy spoke about being asked about fatherhood, and fatherhood was not raised as an aspiration for boys. When asked directly, most boys said they eventually wanted children, but they had to establish a career first to make money and be the provider.

When discussing careers, boys are more likely to say they want to be athletes, farmers, tradies and builders, engineers, YouTubers or gamers, police officers and firefighters. They spoke about how this started early, beginning with toys that require action and interaction, such as building equipment or trucks.

> **"There is a lot of expectation and pressure for men in the workforce to find a job and support their families and wives." – Male, 16**

Children and young people spoke at length about the pressure placed on boys to have a successful career. They were very specific

about the kind of careers men should have and the pressure they experience at a young age to be successful and have enough money to provide for their families; from trades to professional and managerial careers, including doctors, businessmen, lawyers, and politicians.

Young people explained that sport was a legitimate career aspiration for many young men, whereas girls are not expected or as encouraged to pursue sport as a career.

Boys and young men described men as being the 'breadwinner' in the family and that men are inherently better placed to make more money in jobs than women, even if they do the same job. Regarding school subjects, young men identified science and maths or STEM subjects as 'male' subjects in that they underpin financially lucrative careers such as engineering or technology. All young people shared a belief that girls have smaller, less important career aspirations than boys. This is reinforced by what they see in the financial differences and values put on traditional female jobs saying 'men earn more money in the same job as women.'

The 'gender pay gap' was referenced in nearly all sessions in the context of devaluing female professions over male ones. Young women deliberated on the frustration of being told they can do anything they want as a career, while acknowledging how hard it is for females to do well in male dominated professions. They noted that there are significant barriers and limitations to pursuing male dominated careers and that while they are at school, they are often discouraged from some subjects and interests if viewed as being more masculine.

Another stereotype that had significant implications for young people's relationships, as well as for their career ambitions was the expectation for girls 'to get married'. Some young women believed that for girls 'marriage is seen as a bigger achievement than a career'. Young women also spoke about the relationship between motherhood and careers, explaining that being a mother hindered a young woman's career aspirations and opportunities as "they couldn't have everything."

> **"Teaching all students both males and females about stereotypes within society. Currently males are educated about the male-related topics while females are taught the female-related topics. But we aren't exposed to the other side. eg. educate students at an all-boys school about the hardships females face in the workplace and society." – Female, 15**

Many young women in their senior high school years expressed the pressure that was placed on them by family and friends to have a boy-friend, and discussed that their expected trajectory is university, marriage and then children. After motherhood, the next most common social role women are expected to play is a wife.

> **"As little girls, we looked up to Disney Princesses, and up until recently, many of these princesses played into the stereotypical roles of a domestic female, and that the fate of a woman's life was decided by the actions of a man." – Female, 13**

> **“Everybody will tell me these days that gender doesn’t make a difference anymore. Then they’ll buy me pink clothes, give me some Barbies, and ask me if I want to be a nurse. It isn’t anybody’s fault, it’s the society we are brought up in.”**
>
> **Female, Age 12**

Impacts on relationships

Young people spoke at length about the gender stereotypes of girls and boys in relationships. When reflecting on how gender roles play out in male-female relationships, children and young people reported that girls are considered to be 'the needy ones in the relationship' and more 'dependent' on boys.

They spoke about the prevalence of gender norms, including the expectation that boys ask girls out, and that it is still frowned upon if done the other way around. When it comes to ending relationships, there was a similar expectation that the 'guy' should be the one to break up with the girl, because if 'a girl breaks up with a guy', this is seen as a threat to his power and masculinity.

> **"Masculinity is challenged when a girl 'breaks up' with a guy – mates call him weak, he isn't perceived as that much of a masculine individual anymore." – Male, 17**

Most girls and young women described the stereotype of girls being 'submissive', 'obedient', and 'told what to do' by their partners. They said that if women are outspoken in a relationship, they are perceived as being 'bossy'.

Young women also shared the stereotypes that they feel lifelong pressure to 'find a rich husband' who they can rely upon. These messages were underpinned by the idea that to be a success they 'need a man' in their lives, now and in the future. They spoke about the underlying message that their value as a woman depends on whether a man values them romantically.

Many girls also reflected on the view that amongst their peers 'the cool girls are the ones who date'. They also discussed the pressure on girls to please men, whether as a wife, or in their peer relationships, with pressure to 'sext' and engage in other intimate acts also felt.

Young people described the role of adult women in relationships as that of the 'supporter' or the 'mum'. Boys explained that a woman "looks after people, does the household jobs, checks in with people, and relies on a husband for money."

Boys and young men said that men are expected to be dominant in relationships, to provide 'the main source of income', be 'the man of the house' and 'wear the pants' in relationships.

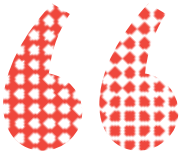
As the stereotype of men in relationships is framed around strength, boys also discussed the societal pressure they feel to be the 'protector'. Boys and young men spoke at length about this role, with boys and men being conditioned as those who must physically protect their girlfriends, wives, and children from any foreseen danger. Further, they shared how this protection extends to providing financial security, and the burden men feel to make money and provide for their partners and families, including how this impacts on their sense of identity and self-esteem when they can't.

It was not uncommon to hear references to 'men giving orders' and 'women following orders' in relationships. Children and young people discussed how boys set the rules in relationships from asking a girl out, asking her to a formal, to proposing marriage. They spoke about how these norms are still very much expected by people of all genders, and the pressure this places on boys.

Young men discussed the societal pressure they experience to be an 'alpha male' in a relationship, and how this can be accompanied by traits of toxic masculinity. Where men do not live up to this standard and show vulnerability, there was a sense that they will be labelled as 'weak' and likened to 'girls', which reinforces the binary differences.

Young people often used the phrase 'settle down' to highlight the expectations and pressure society places on them to find a partner and start a family. This expectation and pressure to couple starts at a young age. It is often described in terms of the attention given to friendships between very young children of the opposite sex.

The "cuteness" assigned to these relationships was best summed up by one girl who described how 'your parents have family and friends over and they will say "awwww what a cute couple" inferring that all relationships between males and females are essentially romantic. As children and young people get older, this assumption often drives a wedge between these friendships, further separating the lives of boys and girls and marginalising those who do not identify as heterosexual.



Boys grow up to change the world, whilst girls clean the house. Women are not seen as individuals. Women can be seen and not heard."

Male, Age 14

Impacts on self-esteem

Young people described the impacts of gender stereotypes on their body image and self-esteem, particularly those relating to how boys and girls 'should look'.

Many young women discussed the pressure girls feel to 'fit the beauty standards' of the day; to fit into a certain body shape often shown or held up as the ideal through social media platforms such as Instagram or Tik Tok. They also reflected on the impact constant and often contradictory messaging promoting 'fatphobia' and 'diets' has on them, and how it reinforces the idea that they must not only have 'curves' to be feminine and desirable, but also be skinny and petite – ie smaller than boys or men. Young women also shared their frustrations about not being able to wear shorts or pants without being labelled 'boyish', a 'lesbian' or a 'tomboy'.

> **"What a girl wears doesn't define her and it doesn't make her a 'temptress'. She shouldn't have to fit into a society curated body and she can be a leader." – Female, 14**

Young women described the level of expectation placed on girls' appearance as unfair, absurd and contradictory. An example given was that they must always look presentable and 'wear makeup but not too much'. Young women shared a frustration that rules based on gender stereotypes about appearance feel oppressive, and impact significantly on their self-worth when they're unable to conform to such 'impossible' standards with considerable evidence that this pressure leads to serious issues of body dysmorphia and eating disorders.

> **"Even with the body positivity movement, companies use new ways to make women conscious of their appearance. For example, years ago 'hip dips' were not on women's radar, now Instagram accounts tell us not to worry about them. But we weren't worried about them before that. It's like influencers are finding new ways to subtly shame women and subverting the true meaning of the body positivity movement." – Female, 17**

As so much of a young women's 'worth' is based on the way she looks, it's no surprise that the prevalence of struggles with body dysmorphia, eating disorders and other body image issues are so high.

Young people also discussed how gender stereotypes relating to appearance are often used as the basis for bullying. For instance, many young people commented that the stereotype of 'a girl wearing a short skirt is asking for it' sits at the heart of slut shaming, objectification, and sexual harassment.

When describing gender stereotypes about how boys should look, children and young people focused on physical strength. They said that boys must have muscles, be tall and be hairy. Boys spoke about the pressure of being tall in a similar way that girls spoke about the pressure to have perfect bodies, with many comments referencing the perfect height being '6ft'. The most common words to describe a male appearance were 'handsome' and 'defined'. They signalled that if men look tough, they look like men. Some boys even commented that boys shouldn't wear glasses, another signal of the pressure for boys to always appear strong and infallible.

A key gendered difference in terms of appearance was that boys can be hairy, whereas girls must be hairless. Both girls and boys reaffirmed this stereotype, sharing the view that girls must shave their armpits and legs while boys had no need to. It was also considered more acceptable for boys to come in a range of body weights and sizes, with boys and girls often describing men as 'fat' or 'chubby', whereas women were expected to fit into a narrower mould of 'skinny' or 'curvy' but definitely 'not fat'. In terms of descriptions of clothing, boys were not subject to as many rules and restrictions about what they should or should not wear as girls.

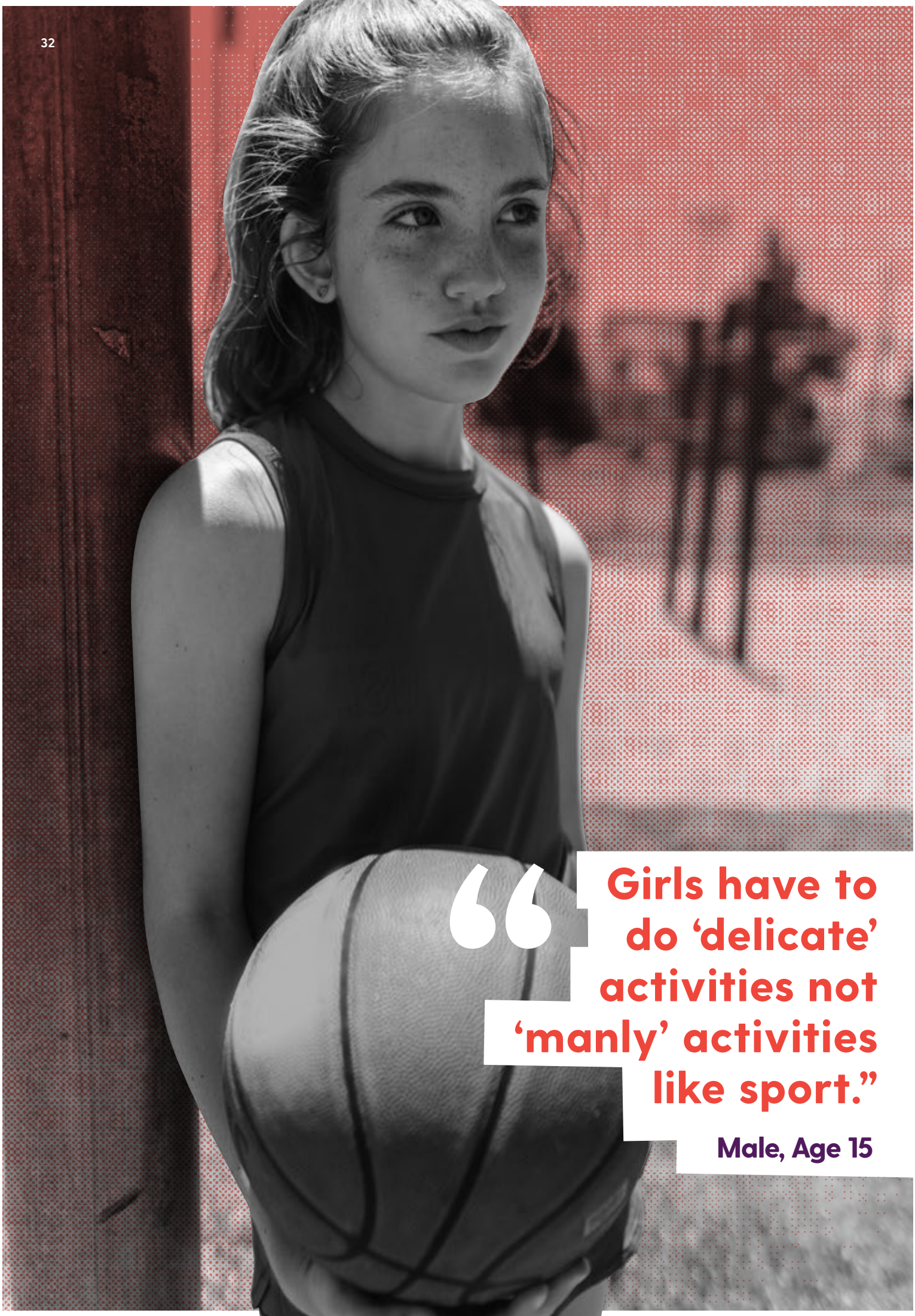
The way in which gender interacts with social media has different consequences on young people's wellbeing. We heard that social media reflects and reinforces gendered roles, with boys describing themselves primarily as 'consumers' of content produced by males, female friends and influencers, and girls describing themselves as being as much creators of content as consumers of it. While boys' online activities and posts on social media, (specifically Instagram) focus on their sporting achievements ('boys post about the footy game' and 'something they've done') girls post selfies and photos of their appearance which are often targeted at boys. This practice was explained as 'boys look and girls post'.

Most young women said they felt pressure to look a certain way and to seek approval and validation online from their male peers, regardless of them knowing that this leads to them feeling judged, or as though they're not living up to modern societal standards.

In terms of interpersonal relationships, young women shared how their value is based on the number of likes, follows, and shares they receive, as well as who has reacted to their photos. More particularly, whether boys 'like' their selfies and 'approve their attractiveness'. Girls and young women also spoke about the pressure they get from boys to produce and share explicit material online, and the anxiety they face due to threats they receive when their images have been shared online.

Girls' confidence and wellbeing is deeply connected to how they perceive society and how males in particular view their physical appearance both online and offline. In contrast, boys seek approval from other boys on their achievements, with boys expected to 'show off' and compete against one another to impress their male and female friends and acquaintances.

Both boys and girls place importance on approval from males, and described how those who do not meet the standards for this approval are more likely to be socially excluded, and to therefore have lower levels of confidence and self-esteem.



> **“Girls have to do ‘delicate’ activities not ‘manly’ activities like sport.”**
>
> **Male, Age 15**

Impacts on participation

Young people were unanimous in their views about the different activities that society deems acceptable for boys and girls to pursue from a young age.

Children and young people noted the prevalence of stereotyping around passive activities such as reading, writing, cooking, or artistic endeavours being generally more suitable for girls. Boys also described arts and crafts as 'girly' activities. Boys and young men discussed their views that girls like 'shopping' and 'make up' and being active on social media, and because 'they seem to like playing with Barbies and babies,' they must like caring and looking after others.

The views on what constituted "boys' activities" were similarly gendered, with boys being associated with action-oriented activities that included playing with cars, action figures, comics, games, and online gaming. Whatever the activity, those that were 'hands on' or 'outdoorsy' – including riding, skating, and climbing trees – were considered more masculine, whereas passive activities were more often associated with being feminine.

This distinction between 'boys as active' and 'girls as passive' mirrors young people's reflections on gender roles in relationships and career ambitions, as noted earlier. This distinction also reinforces the view that sport is a physical activity and therefore a male activity, with significant implications for female participation in sport. While netball, gymnastics, and calisthenics were considered "female sports", many girls found this very frustrating and one of many gendered barriers that limited their participation in sports of their choice.

Young women also said that female clothing, particularly school uniforms and sports uniforms, restrict their participation in sport and physical activities at school.

Many girls and young women stated that 'skirts and dresses aren't functional!' and that white-coloured shorts can compound their embarrassment when they have their period and be a significant menstruation-related barrier to participation.

Girls and young women in co-ed schools spoke about the anxiety they have playing sports at school, because the sports uniform is "sweaty and smelly" and they're not able to shower in a clean and private space after they exercise.

> **"Bike shorts are not comfortable, and people make fun of me if they see my underwear when I do gymnastics, which means I am less active in a dress or a skirt." – Female, 12**

Many children and young people also commented that 'boasting' about sporting prowess is a masculine behaviour, and that the competitive elements of sport complements boys' dispositions.

Together, these gender norms influence girls' decisions when selecting a particular sport in the first place, and whether they continue with it as they age. This related to both sports considered to be "girls sports" and those seen traditionally as being male. These concerns can not be separated from those young people may have around gendered expectations relating to physical appearance and beauty standards. Further, when girls do well at sport, they describe being teased for 'trying to be one of the boys'. Some girls also worry about being less attractive to boys if they are good at sport, or worse still, being labelled as "butch".

Impacts on behaviour expectations

Across all schools and from early years to secondary school, children and young people spoke about the impacts gender stereotypes have on behaviour expectations at school. While girls were typically described as well-behaved and the 'good' ones in a school setting, boys were described as the 'naughty' ones, who are less able to moderate or control their own behaviour ('boys will be boys').

The most common descriptor of girl's behaviour was that girls are 'ladylike', 'gentle' and 'respectful'. When asked what ladylike means or looks like, young people said that it is being 'well-behaved' and 'well-mannered', with typical behaviours including girls 'crossing their legs' when they sit down, being more 'civilised', 'elegant', 'looking pretty' and not stooping to 'boys' bad behaviour'.

In classroom settings, young people of all gender identities described girls' behaviour as being 'more on task', 'more willing to change their minds' and 'less comfortable to share their views'. Most boys believed girls are 'quiet', 'gentle', 'respectful' and 'well-behaved', all traits that are more favoured in the classroom and rewarded in school settings. They often described girls as being a 'teacher's pet', particularly in the primary school years. Mainly because girls are often the ones who tell teachers about the 'bad behaviour' of other students, and are more likely to 'dob' on others, particularly boys. They described how this can cause conflict and tension between boys and girls, particularly when girls are asked to moderate boys' behaviour. They also described how boys sometimes internalise a message that they are 'naughty' or 'bad', influencing their behaviour choices so they live up to expectations.

> **"Teenage boys are expected to be reckless, or are considered 'trouble-makers'. But girls are supposed to be 'young women' and act mature (be a role model for teen boys)." – Female, 15**

For many children and young people, being 'naughty' was the behaviour most associated with boys. This was underpinned by 'being funny', again something seen as a male trait. This was often outlined in relation to the classroom, with boys being the 'class joker' who can fart in class and for this to be seen as funny. This was not the same for girls, with many boys describing how 'girls don't fart'. Young people described this accepted male behaviour as 'boisterous', 'loud' and 'outgoing'.

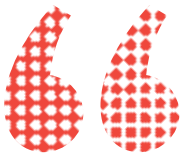
The most common stereotype of positive male behaviour was being described as a 'gentleman'. When asked what this looks like, young people labelled this as being 'respectful' and 'kind', demonstrated by 'holding doors open for women' or having 'good manners'. Boys found it quite challenging to describe what it meant to be a 'gentleman' despite this being something they were told by many adults around them that they must strive to be, especially in how they behave toward girls. Boys described 'filtering' their behaviour depending on the gender of the person they were interacting with. They described how 'if you're impressing a girl, you're a good bloke'.

Many of the same gender stereotypes that influence behaviour expectations and management in classroom settings also shape relationships between boys and girls, as well as their aspira-

tions for the future beyond school. Indeed, a key difference in young people's aspirations for the future is the potential for leadership. This reflects a gender stereotype which is reinforced before children start school and throughout the school years: that boys have permission to be loud and seen, whereas girls must be quiet and demure.

Young women reflected that men are 'the ones' who lead and become CEOs and decision makers in our society. Young people spoke about the characteristics which make boys leaders such as, strength, confidence, self-assurance and emotional reserve. As expressed by one young woman, 'men believe that they are never in the wrong whilst girls consistently second guess themselves'. Young women believed that a key difference in future leadership opportunities being more available to men is because men take on less responsibility for the emotional wellbeing of others.

Young women discussed that they 'have to do it all' – study, work and caring roles for others – whereas boys are able to 'just focus' on a career or study. Young people said these factors decidedly impact the opportunities for leadership available to young men and young women. Where there was a sense that 'things are improving' towards greater equality with a growing number of female role models in positions of power, there was also a sense that men are set up to be successful leaders from a young age, whereas women face more barriers and always have to prove themselves more.



Boys are more competitive and more aggressive. Girls never fight and always speak instead of fight. Girls are karens. Boys love flexing money."

Male, Age 12

Impacts on mental health

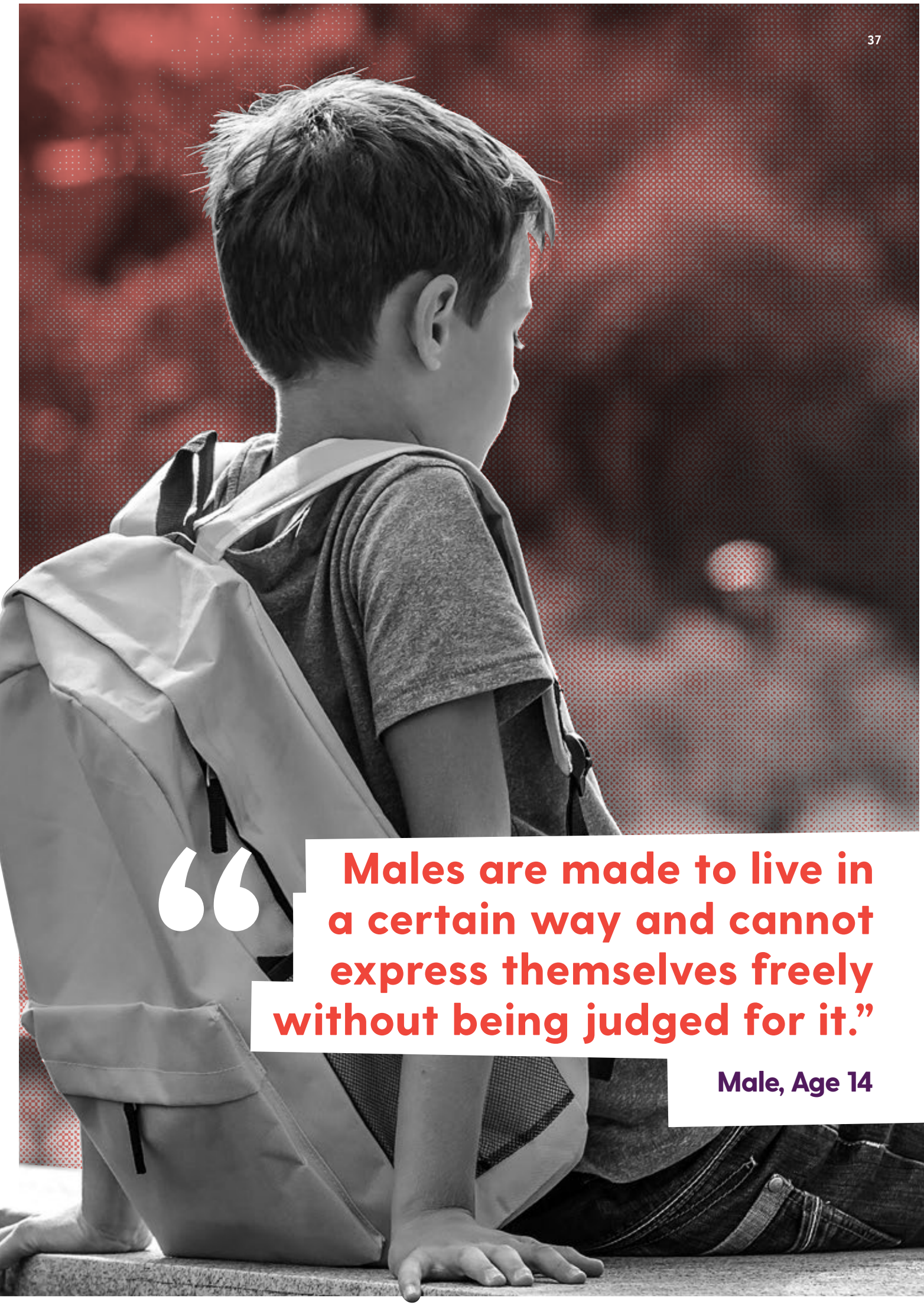
Children and young people spoke about the impact gender stereotypes have on the kinds of emotions that were acceptable for boys and girls to express. Showing emotions was viewed as an innately feminine trait and often characterised as girls being 'easily upset', 'weaker' and 'more sensitive' with significant implications for the mental health of both boys and girls as they grow into young men and young women.

Young people described women as being 'soft', 'kind' and 'gentle' – three very common stereotypes of femininity, with boys adding that 'girls cry all the time' and are 'not very strong minded'. They highlighted that girls are happier to show their emotions and more likely to talk and discuss their feelings on various topics. In doing so, young people described women as 'open', 'honest', and 'outgoing'. Often this was linked to being emotional due to their periods, with 'PMS' constantly raised in relation to female emotions. Many girls and young women expressed frustration that so many of their emotions were dismissed because of their periods: 'if we are sensitive, it is always because we are on our periods'.

Indeed, young men said that girls are 'too emotional' and that this impacts on their ability to make big decisions. An extension of this gender stereotype was outlined by young men when they described women as 'irrational' and 'dramatic'. Both young men and young women highlighted a link between these gender stereotypes (that female emotions are 'irrational' and impede sound decision-making) and that the under-representation of women in leadership positions relates to the treatment of women in these roles. For example, one young person shared that women are 'too emotional for a big role', citing Julia Gillard's treatment as Prime Minister as evidence. Young people also discussed that gender expectations about the 'appearance' of girls and boys impacts their mental health. They feel constantly judged on how they look and whether they look 'like they should' with worries around appearance impacting especially on young women as well as on LGBTQIA+ young people.

> **"When my nanna fat shames me or ... When my aunty tells me things like 'shave your legs' or 'act more like a lady'."**
> **– Female, 11**

Common words used by boys and young men to describe male emotions are 'stern', 'tough and 'fearless'. On the contrary, vulnerability was described as the worst possible trait for a man to display. Young people commonly described boys as 'having no emotions' or as 'suppressing their emotions' and that this capacity is what lies at the core of male strength. Young people also discussed, that unlike women, men are expected to be silent about how they feel; they're expected to 'keep their feelings to themselves' and 'act tough'. When something is wrong, they just need to suck it up and 'be a man'.



> **“Males are made to live in a certain way and cannot express themselves freely without being judged for it.”**

Male, Age 14

> **“Men don’t cry, men struggle to show emotion, I reckon men should not show emotion. However acceptance is needed in today’s world.” – Male, 17**

Young people were concerned that these gender stereotypes have serious implications for young men’s mental health and for any likelihood of developing help-seeking behaviours. Most boys are under significant pressure to show strength in all situations and to not seek help for fear of being seen by others as a failure and unable to deal with a problem themselves. Not being able to solve problems for themselves is seen as a sign of inadequacy, with fears that they will be judged, made fun of, or labelled as ‘a whimp’ or ‘a girl’.

> **“From personal experience, boys who don’t act as stereotypes are usually excluded more often. Such as if they are weaker, display their emotions more often – they are usually the ones bullied or made fun of.” – Male, 14**

Young men described very prescriptive conditions in which they will be open or share their vulnerability. There is generally just one friend ‘they’ll have DnMs [deep and meaningfuls] with’ rather than sharing within a group of other young men. It is often left to key female figures in young men’s lives – their mums, sisters, girlfriends – to push them to go to a doctor or seek help when something isn’t right. In contrast, girls are said to quickly turn to external networks for support to help them with conflict resolution and that they often seek out opportunities for others to mediate on their behalf.

While many young men consider that displaying emotions is an inherently feminine attribute and therefore a sign of weakness, the one exception to this is anger. This emotion is seen as a fundamental one for men. Girls and young women describe men as ‘angry’ and ‘moody’, showing their emotions through ‘aggression’. Young men suggested that for men, anger is a way to show emotion in a way that still upholds a perception of them being tough. Young people said that boys don’t seek help with conflict resolution and instead try to resolve issues amongst themselves, which often leads to aggression and sometimes to violence.

What can Schools do?

Although gender stereotypes and sexism are prevalent well before children start school, the significance of school as a place where these messages are amplified and perpetuated is clear.

Schools have a responsibility to deliver environments that address and prevent safety concerns. This requires leadership and role modelling at a classroom and whole school level, supported by policies and a culture that promotes equality and inclusion at every year level.

This also requires self-reflection and a willingness among teachers and school leaders to challenge common expectations, practices, and behaviours, particularly those that inadvertently perpetuate gender stereotypes, sexism, and harassment.

Children and young people identified several practical things schools and teachers can do to promote gender equality, and thereby create gender inclusive environments that promote physical and emotional safety for all students.

Overall, they want teachers and school leaders to role model behaviour and language that is more gender-neutral. They want them to talk more openly about gender inequality and its impacts on males and females and gender diverse people. They want gender equity attitudes to be embedded in teaching materials, in project choices and in behaviour management.

> **“Some stereotypes are good but some are bad. If equal respect is given, the world would run smoother. Boys and girls should be taught similarly about fatherhood and motherhood.”**
> **– Male, 14**

In the primary years, boys should be encouraged to take responsibility for their actions. Equally important is that boys and girls should be held to the same standards with their behaviour managed in the same way. Specifically, many girls suggested that the gender roles in stories that have boys as the heroes should be limited, or openly discussed and explicitly pointed out as an example of stereotyping that has been perpetuated over many years. As with other serious issues, children want open discussions that encourage exploration of gender related issues. They want the focus to be on developing a better understanding and greater empathy with these issues and their impact on both sexes as well as on those who are gender diverse. This includes providing explicit instruction on the differences between sex and gender as concepts, and on the existence and acceptance of sexual diversity.

> **"Boys and girls should be taught at school or have the options at school to be equal. From subject choices to learning the ways of or even the opportunity to have equal sporting opportunities equally and through their specific countries." – Male, 16**

Students have said it is important that teachers call out sexism, gender-based teasing and bullying, and have open discussions with students about the impact and limitations of gender stereotypes and assumptions. It is also important to use inclusive language that avoids making potentially harmful generalisations about children's identity, aspirations, appearance, emotions, and relationships. Teachers should assume that there will be students in their classrooms who are gender and sexually diverse and ensure that groupings for tasks and desk allocations are not based on gender assumptions such as (use of gendered colours or mental or physical weakness and strength). Instead groupings should be based on general interests or other markers not related to gender in any way.

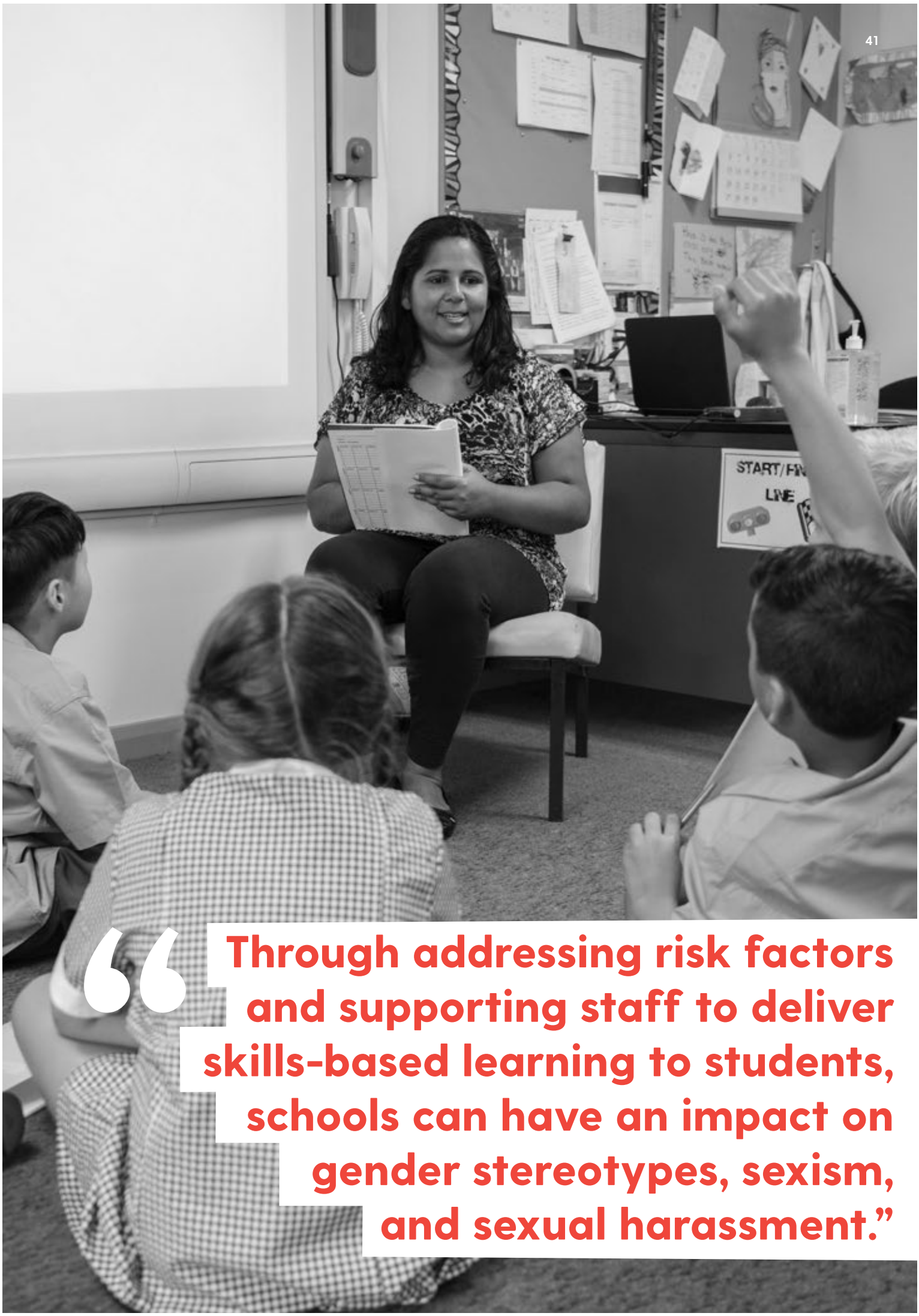
Ideas suggested by students include training for all teaching and non-teaching staff so that they understand gender stereotypes, gender-bias, and gender-based bullying and harassment. This training needs to support teachers to gain confidence in identifying and responding to incidents occurring between students, as well as to those that are directed towards teachers themselves.

This training must be supported by anti-bullying policies that name behaviours and identify words and language that is problematic. It should also describe how groups of students are more prone to experiencing negative attention and harm because of their gender, gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation. All school policies should be reviewed through a gender lens to ensure they are gender neutral including bullying policies, uniform policies, menstrual wellbeing policies, and sports policies.

> **"Normalise women wearing whatever clothing they'd like, in public and in schools. Skirts and dresses should be allowed as well as pants. Short hair should be publicly accepted as well." – Female, 13**

Children and young people report that it is at recess and lunch time that harmful behaviours occur. Children and young people say that the provision of structured activities during these breaks, as well as bringing organisations in from outside the school to run inclusive and affirming games and activities, would help reduce these incidents.

A critical component in preventing sexism and sexual harassment within the school environment, is to ensure relationships and sexual health education is delivered across all year levels in a way that is supportive, age appropriate, culturally relevant, and inclusive. At the heart of this approach is strong teacher-student relationships, regular classroom contact, and a culture of student voice, agency, and influence. This type of environment encourages open dialogue, and explicit teaching of content to cover power in intimate relationships, consent, social media, 'sexting', violence in relationships, respectful break ups, pornography, respect and intimacy, as well as what constitutes a positive relationship between intimate partners.



“Through addressing risk factors and supporting staff to deliver skills-based learning to students, schools can have an impact on gender stereotypes, sexism, and sexual harassment.”

Like many issues related to gender, problems develop over long periods of time and don't just go away because we choose not to talk about them. Through addressing risk factors and supporting staff to deliver skills-based learning to students, schools can have an impact on eliminating gender stereotypes, sexism, and sexual harassment.

Children and young people need to know what is acceptable, how to respond, and be comfortable reporting incidents knowing they will be taken seriously (and not made worse). Once the definitions of stereotyping, harassment and sexism are understood, and the impacts of gender stereotypes discussed, the capacity to report harmful and unwanted behaviour is more likely to build.

Commitment to raising awareness of what is and isn't acceptable in both friendships and intimate relationships is the essential first step. This includes creating opportunities for children and young people to have open conversations with trusted adults about the pervasive and negative impacts sexism and gender stereotypes has. It is clear from conversations with children and young people that they are well aware of the way gender stereotypes, harassment, and sexism impacts almost every aspect of their lives, from their subject choices and career aspirations to their relationships, appearance, self-esteem and mental health.

It is also clear that they know gender stereotypes impact young men, young women, young transgender and young gender diverse people in different ways, and that this impact is ultimately harmful to the health, development and wellbeing of all children and young people, regardless of their individual gender identity.

Challenging gender stereotypes at a school-wide level – as well as beyond this at a community and state-wide level – means creating safe and inclusive environments for all children and young people. These are environments where no one is bullied for defying gender expectations, encouraging all children and young people to be their authentic self and where no one is denied opportunities or is sexually harassed because of their sex, gender identity, or gender expression. It's where girls and young women feel safe from discrimination and violence, can focus on their education and wear what they want to wear without being responsible for the behaviour of their male peers or male teachers. And it's where boys and young men can express emotions other than anger, can easily seek help when they need it, and can value and respect girls and young women without being judged.

Schools are powerful places. Not only do they shape children and young people's broader expectations about the way the world works beyond the school gates, they also shape their personal aspirations in lifelong ways. Currently, sexism is too often considered a normal part of school culture with numerous incidents that go unreported. This is mainly due to a belief that nothing can or will be done. Where this is challenged and modelled correctly by adults, we can be confident children and young people will be set up to safely navigate their transition into adolescence and adulthood so they can succeed in homes, workplaces, and their broader communities, regardless of what gender they are.

Endnotes

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251 Morphett Street, Adelaide SA 5000
GPO Box 1146, Adelaide SA 5001
08 8226 3355 | commissionercyp@sa.gov.au

@ccyp_sa
/ccypsa
ccyp.com.au

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