

# Constructing and Deconstructing Gender Stereotypes Across Cyprus' Schools

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## Abstract

*As primary agents of socialisation, schools convey values and behavioural models which often reinforce gender stereotypes. At the same time, education can be an effective tool in challenging unequal gender-based power relationships. The purpose of this research is to further obtain insight into the reproduction of gender stereotypes across Cyprus' schools. It also aims to record good practices, which, consciously or not, resist dominant gender-based stereotypes and strike a blow to the phenomenon of entrenched gender inequality. I have conducted this research in the course of my work at the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies, in a six months period in 2018.*

**Keywords:** gender stereotypes, gender segregation, education, Cyprus

## Introduction

As shown by several feminist studies on education, the school, as an institution, tends to mirror and reproduce gender stereotypes, gender inequality and hegemonic masculinity.<sup>2</sup> As early as kindergarten, children are raised according to the boy-girl binary, steered towards different colours, games and interests, according to their gender. Further on in their education, students learn which gender is the more valuable and therefore more important across subjects like history, science, sports. Students are inundated with stories of great male politicians, historians, artists, scientists, poets, while women are mentioned less often, and usually as supporting characters in national struggles or occupying secondary roles in the public sphere. In this manner, the educational system supports the exclusion of half the population, while at the same time broadening the opportunities of the other half.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Christine Skeleton & Becky Francis, *Feminism and 'the schooling scandal'* (London: Routledge 2008); Madeleine Arnot & Mairtin Mac An Ghaill, *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Education*. (New York: Routledge, 2006); Sara Delamont, *Sex Roles and the School* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn London: Routledge 1990)

<sup>3</sup> Giorgos Tsiakalos, *The Promise of Pedagogy (Η υπόσχεση της παιδαγωγικής)* (Athens: Epikentro 2008) (In Greek).

Boys and girls are socialised differently, which heavily impacts their educational and vocational choices, that often reflect gender stereotypes.<sup>4</sup> The long tradition of women's social role being attached to the care of the home and children might explain why more women choose studies and professions related to care, such as teaching young children or nursing, which are considered to be an extension of the role of women in the household.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, boys and men learn from a young age to be strong, aggressive and technically proficient, which might explain the over-concentration of men in technical professions. The divergence in these choices is based on the dominating stereotypes around which sectors are more appropriate for women or men respectively, as opposed to proven differences in performance.<sup>6</sup> Core agents of socialisation, such as schools and the media, create different expectations from men and women regarding the roles they are asked to perform. Along the lines of a self-fulfilling prophecy, people tend to internalise and reproduce these expectations when making educational and occupational choices.<sup>7</sup>

Statistics on educational options in Cyprus and Europe illustrate that girls and boys do in fact choose different education and occupation areas, creating the phenomenon of horizontal gender segregation. According to the most recent survey on academic choices, gender segregation is apparent within secondary education in Cyprus. The most important gender divergence can be found in courses such as technology (only 3,7% girls compared to 16,5% boys) and history (21.4% girls compared to only 6% boys). Moreover, despite the fact that mathematics is one of the most popular courses for girls, there is still a considerable gap between genders by 25 percentage points.<sup>8</sup> Gender segregation in the selection of subjects at second-

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<sup>4</sup> Becky Francis, 'Is the Future Really Female? The Impact and Implications of Gender for 14-16 Year Olds' Career Choices' (2002) 15(1) *Journal of Education and Work* 77-88; Joscha Legewie & Thomas A. DiPrete, 'The High School Environment and the Gender Gap in Science and Engineering' (2014) 87(4) *Sociology of Education* 259-280; Vassiliki Deligianni-Kouimtzi, *Gender Sensitive Counselling (Συμβουλευτική με την οπτική του φύλου)* (Athens: Ellinika Grammata, 2010) (in Greek).

<sup>5</sup> Behrooz Kalantari, 'The Influence of Social Values and Childhood Socialization on Occupational Gender Segregation and Wage Disparity' (2012) 41(2) *Public Personnel Management* 241-255.

<sup>6</sup> Francine M. Deutsch, 'Undoing Gender' (2007) 22(1) *Gender & Society* 106-127.

<sup>7</sup> Cecilia L. Ridgeway & Shelley J. Correll, 'Unpacking the Gender System: A Theoretical Perspective on Gender Beliefs and Social Relations' (2004) 18(4) *Gender & Society* 510-531.

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance of the Republic of Cyprus, *Combating Gender Segregation in Employment - Provision of Training Services for Career Counsellors, Teachers and Parents. (Καταπολέμηση του Επαγγελματικού Διαχωρισμού με βάση το Φύλο- Παροχή Υπηρεσιών Κατάρτισης Συμβούλων Επαγγελματικής Αγωγής, Εκπαιδευτικών και Γονέων)* (Nicosia: Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance of the Republic of Cyprus 2013) (in Greek).

ary education level is reflected in tertiary education, where women often limit their choice to the fields of social and human sciences, while men choose science and technology. Gender segregation is prevalent across Europe and has led to an over-concentration of boys and men in fields related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics.<sup>9</sup>

Other than the concentration of women and men in differing subjects and fields of study, vertical gender segregation describes the phenomenon of male overrepresentation in management positions.<sup>10</sup> In Europe, only a third (33%) of executives are women.<sup>11</sup> In Cyprus, the percentage of women in management positions is among the five lowest in Europe, at 26%.

Gender segregation is a social problem, as it reproduces gender-based inequality and limits the range of options for both men and women. Women in Cyprus and in Europe are concentrated in low-paid professions and at the lower levels of the workplace hierarchy. This leads to gender inequalities such as the pay gap, which has reached 14% in Cyprus and 16,4% in Europe.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, gender segregation confines the choices of children and adults to predetermined roles, often preventing them from exploring fields which do not mesh with the expectations set for their gender. Boys and girls find it challenging to dream of a career in a field where their gender is significantly underrepresented.<sup>13</sup> This overconcentration of men in technical professions and women in the field of humanities has therefore given rise to the concern that the human race is likely missing the opportunity to make use of women's talents in science and, correspondingly, men's talents in the field of humanities. Fighting against gender segregation and stereotyping would broaden the range of options for boys and girls, offering them the freedom and flexibility to navigate their options. At the same time, this is the key to eliminate the abovementioned gender inequality in the labour market.

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<sup>9</sup> European Commission, *Promoting Citizenship and the Common Values of Freedom, Tolerance and Non-discrimination Through Education: Overview of Education Policy Developments in Europe Following the Paris Declaration of 17 March 2015* (2016), available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ebbab0bb-ef2f-11e5-8529-01aa75ed71a1>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Eurostat, *Gender Pay Gap Statistics – Statistics Explained* (2016), available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Gender\\_pay\\_gap\\_statistics](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Gender_pay_gap_statistics).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Behrooz Kalantari, 'The Influence of Social Values and Childhood Socialization on Occupational Gender Segregation and Wage Disparity' (2012) 41(2) *Public Personnel Management* 241-255.

Education is a fundamental tool for the elimination of gender stereotypes that contribute to horizontal and vertical gender segregation and gender inequality across all aspects of social life.<sup>14</sup>

## Methodology

Our research followed qualitative methods, utilising focus groups with students, professors and careers counsellors, as well as school observations. Semi-structured questionnaires were used in the course of conducting the focus groups. Two focus groups with a total of ten educators were conducted, which included practicing public school secondary education teachers and careers counsellors. The subjects they taught included both sciences and humanities, and they came from schools in Nicosia and the district of Famagusta, in order to cover a wider geographical sample. Participating students, a balanced selection of boys and girls, came from the age range of 13 to 16 years old. The sample included children from public and private schools from the city as well as the wider district of Nicosia, in order to ensure an adequate socio-economic range for the sample. A total of 15 young people participated in the two student focus groups.

At the same time, the researcher also performed school observations. This method was selected as an additional mean of understanding gender issues, as it contributes to the monitoring of experiences and interactions among the relevant groups within the context of the school environment in particular.<sup>15</sup> A variety of schools, both middle schools and high schools, were included from the cities and wider districts of Nicosia, Larnaca and Limassol in order to achieve the widest geographical sample. The researcher performed sustained observations over a total of 32 teaching hours, eight in each school. I observed classes in both sciences and humanities. I also noted what was happening during break times. In order to validate the research and also respect the participants, the researcher followed a protocol, which stipulated silent observation at the back of the class, without interfering in the lesson, in order to minimise her impact on the natural flow of the lesson.

The research data was analysed in a two-step process. First, the data yielded from the research, the transcripts of focus group discussions with teachers and

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<sup>14</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), *Gender in Education and Training* (2016), available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-education-and-training>.

<sup>15</sup> Jerry R. Thomas, Jack K. Nelson, Stephen J. Silverman, *Research Methods in Physical Activity* (4<sup>th</sup> edn, Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2001).

students and the observation notes, was codified. I used inductive reasoning (i.e. looking at the research data in isolation, without drawing from related theories or previous research) to identify some basic analytical categories, ten which emerged from concepts consistent throughout the data. In the second phase of analysis, the data was examined through the lens of feminist theory, to see whether gender stereotypes were being reinforced or challenged in school.

## Research results

### *Construction of Gender Stereotypes in the School Environment*

The research revealed that one of the core beliefs that perpetuate stereotypes in school is the focus on biological differences between boys and girls. This focus feeds the stereotype that boys and girls tend to hold distinct skills and talents. While biological differences undoubtedly exist between genders, these should not lead to generalised beliefs, since the boy / girl classification does not accommodate the range of diversity among those who share a gender. As the renowned biologist, Richard Lewontin<sup>16</sup> warns us in his book *Biology as Ideology*, we must be wary of those using biology to justify social stereotypes and inequalities. Below, I list a number of dominant beliefs regarding the differing skills between genders that emerged during our research, as well as practices through which these beliefs could be challenged.

One argument related to the biological differences between genders, specifically that of physical strength, was consistently confirmed by behaviours and perceptions exhibited during both focus groups and school observations. The argument supports that girls should be excluded from subjects, activities and professions which require or are deemed to require a certain measure of physical strength. This belief is reinforced even through simple, everyday school practices. Angela, a student, describes her experience below:

*'If a teacher, for example, asks a student to move a desk, they will no doubt ask a boy to do it, without even thinking that a girl would be able to'.*

Angela, private school student

During an observation at a middle school, one professor told a student, 'Nicolas, you turn on the projector, you are the tallest in the class'. Four girls in the class began to laugh out loud, telling the teacher that Nicolas is indeed the tallest among

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Lewontin, *Biology as Ideology: The Doctrine of DNA* (London: Penguin 2001).

the boys, but there were girls in the class taller than him. This incident proves the extent to which stereotypical images of female and male bodies limit observations and evaluations about their respective capabilities.

Physical strength can also be used as an excuse to exclude women from technical subjects and occupations. For example, some teachers who participated in the research attribute the fact that girls do not express much interest in electrical engineering to their beliefs around physical strength.

*'They might be thinking that, you have to be dextrous to become an electrician or an engineer. Or that you have to be agile, to lift weights, to go up ladders.'*

Elpida, technical school teacher

The view that technical professions are not suitable for women and girls, due to a difference in physique, seems to be embraced by Stavros, technical school teacher:

*'Some professions need strength. I would see her, a half pint, trying to hold a bolt. I mean, some things fit a certain body type. She will need to do manual labour which, if she does not have the strength, that body type, she will not be able to do. On the other hand, there are tasks that men might not be able to perform due to their body type, tasks that require a gentler touch, let us say.'*

Stavros, technical school teacher

It is interesting how the rest of the teachers refuted this argument, by claiming the following:

*'There are machines now for these tasks!'*

Konstantinos, technical school teacher

*'Ok, these stereotypes are being increasingly done away with. See what is happening in the army. Women had better results in shooting than the men this year. We are seeing a reversal. Men are proving to be better cooks than [the women] (laughs).'*

Andreas, technical school teacher

I also encountered the stereotypical belief that boys are stronger than girls in my observations during physical education. Physical education teachers who participated in the research clearly argued for the maintenance of gender-segregated classes because, in their opinion, boys and girls perform differently.

*'Boys are stronger, it is difficult to put them together (with the girls).'*

Marina, physical education teacher

*'Boys and girls should always be separate, because the level of training is very different. Even in sporting events, don't men and women compete separately?'*

Michalis, Physical Education teacher

At this point, it is worth mentioning that the Cyprus Association of Physical Education Teachers is officially opposed to placing boys and girls into mixed groups in physical education. The association protested this very topic outside the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) in 2016.<sup>17</sup>

Although the MoEC guidelines have not changed, this research illustrated that teachers' opinions vary, with some adhering to gender-segregated teaching, while others welcoming mixed classes. One physical education teacher, Michalis, for example, keeps boys and girls apart, adapting his class according to gender. He instructs girls to run fewer laps around the track. On the other hand, Marina, who also teaches physical education, allows both mixed and gender-segregated classes. Her view is that gender segregation helps physical education teachers reach their quota of working hours, but it is also useful in tailoring the subject to the genders' respective capabilities, which she agrees, differ.

As I observed her class, I saw how the above belief was challenged by the students themselves, for example, in a mixed class of boys and girls, Marina demonstrated a floor exercise for the students. At some point, she gave two variations, one which was easier than the other, saying, 'Girls can do this (the easier version)'. Some girls performed the more difficult variation. Some boys, such as Phillipos, reacted along the lines of, 'Miss, what about gender equality, why do they get to do the easier exercise?' Marina replied by saying, 'I did not say that they should not do it, I said, if they cannot do it, they can do this'. The next time Marina was giving instructions, she avoided mentioning gender, opting for, 'If somebody finds it difficult, they can do this'. Although while observing her class no differences were

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<sup>17</sup> Politis newspaper, 'Association of Physical Education Teachers: boys and girls should not exercise into mixed groups' (Σύνδεσμος Γυμναστών: Να μην γυμνάζονται μαζί αγόρια – κορίτσια) *Politis newspaper* (Nicosia, 8 September 2016) (in Greek) <https://politis.com.cy/article/sindesmos-gimnaston-na-min-gimnazonte-mazi-agoria--koritsia> (last accessed 10 August 2020).

detected in boys' or girls' interest and energy levels, Marina, nevertheless noted that, 'Girls are less keen because of their hormones'.

Some students who participated in the research did not share the views of their teachers regarding girls being physically weaker, having a limited interest or lower performance in physical education. They were rather critical of the teachers' tendency to have lower expectations of the girls' performance. The following was covered during a focus group with high school students:

- Anna: *Generally speaking, education also promotes stereotypes, like segregating boys and girls in gym class.*
- Afroditi: *It depends, for example in gym class they did not have us take a particular exam because they thought we would not perform as well as boys.*
- Orestis: *Yes, it is like they instruct girls to run four laps around the running track, while we do six. A girl could also run six laps. it is just that not everybody can do it, it is not gender-related.*
- Haris: *Yes, this has to do with a person's physical condition, their stamina.*
- Researcher: *Are there boys who cannot run six laps?*
- Everybody: *Yes, there are.*

Although no student participating in the research explicitly expressed opinions in favour of gender inequality, school observations illustrated that there was often a discrepancy between what students would say and what they would do. This demonstrates that, despite the contemporary educational practice of promoting political correctness, there has been no radical change in practices which essentially reproduce unequal power relationships between the genders. Boys overwhelmingly dominated the school environment and even devised ways of maintaining it if said dominance was seen to be threatened, despite not openly admitting to doing so.

The most distinctive example was observed during a free period, when the children were instructed to play football. A mixed group of boys and girls went to the football field. Two boys appointed themselves team captains and began to build their teams by selecting players. During the selection, they left out five girls who were waiting along with the other children. One of them asked, 'Hey, who are we with?' without receiving any answer. Out of the five girls who were initially interested in playing, only two stayed on the field, Artemis and Thekla. The two girls who

stayed on were eventually included into the two teams, but only by their own initiative. Thekla assumed a less active role in the game, bringing the ball back when it went out of the field. Artemis seemed more combative. Christophoros, a boy sitting on a bench, asked her at some point to leave the game and give him her notebook so he could copy an exercise from her. She ordered him to take the notebook himself and, five minutes later, he told her, 'I do not want to hurt your feelings, but you have to come and tell me what you have written, because I cannot figure out your handwriting'. Artemis did not leave the game, instead she tried to participate and complained when they did not pass her the ball, saying, 'Why did you not pass me the ball, you guys, I was free, I could have scored', and Aristos replied, 'Oh please, girl, what would you have done, a bicycle kick?'. As the game went on, Artemis persisted, playing more dynamically and managing to steal the ball from Yannis and scoring a goal. Yannis then grabbed her by the waist, picked her up and put her in a different spot. When the bell rang, the children headed to the classroom for their next period. Yannis hugged Artemis, saying:

- Yannis: *We will play again and you will see what you will get if you ever take the ball from me. Oh and by the way your little pink swimsuit is perfect.*
- Artemis: *Where did you see it? I do not have any photos on Facebook wearing my swimsuit. (Thinks for a second and shouts to another boy). Andreas, I sent you that photo in confidence!*

The aforementioned incident indicates some of the ways in which boys impose and preserve unequal power relations in schools. As noted by feminist theorist, Nancy Fraser<sup>18</sup>, exclusion and social status allow for discrimination against women and any other person considered inferior. In the example above, the boys clearly adopted both these practices, through excluding the girls when picking teams, ignoring them, and minimising the social status of girls who try to participate. Artemis, who fought to change her role within the team, became the target of violent behaviour, which had the sole purpose of weakening her and putting her in her place.

In the course of the same incident, Antonis, a smaller boy with a high-pitched voice, that he would be teased for in class, received a higher status and acceptance by his peers when he played football well. Whenever he managed to score a goal or

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<sup>18</sup> Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: a Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy' (1990) 25/26 *Social Text* 56-80

steal the ball, the boys encouraged and cheered him. It seems that boys have more areas in which they are afforded the opportunity to have a voice and gain social acceptance. One only needs to observe the most common spatial planning in schools. The soccer field, which is statistically dominated by boys, usually occupies the largest area of the schoolyard. Girls are frequently confined to the periphery of the field.

Nevertheless, boys who have no natural talent for sports are also an easy target, as they do not live up to the prerequisites of their gender. For example, in the course of observing a gym class, certain boys began to jeer one of their classmates who could not complete the laps, calling him little girl, period pad and faggot. The characterisations that make reference to women and homosexuals give boys a dual message. On the one hand, if he does not live up to the social rules regarding male power, he will not fit into the hegemonic category of being a heterosexual man; while, the message concurrently denigrates women by placing them in the weaker group. Similar incidents also emerged in discussion with students and teachers, for example:

*I had a student who was kind of chubby, and they would make fun of him, he did not want to do come to gym class, whenever he had gym he would not come to school, then his mum came, we told him that he was missing classes, etc. In the end, he said he did not want to come to school when they had gym, because they were making fun of him when he was training and running. It got to the point where he had been absent so many times, that he was close to failing his grade, all because he did not want to come to school'.*

Maria, counsellor

Although research based on the subject of physical education demonstrated that girls are vulnerable in mixed classes, the solution does not seem to lie in segregating classes by gender. Segregation might create a safer environment for girls, but it would not protect weaker boys. Furthermore, some of the incidents I described above could evidence that mixed physical education classes are conducive to challenging dominant stereotypes regarding the potential of girls and boys, as corroborated by the classroom studies conducted by Koca<sup>19</sup> in 2009 and McCaughtry in 2014<sup>20</sup>. The binary discourse, as imposed by gender-segregated classes, encourages

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<sup>19</sup> Canan Koca, 'Gender Interaction in Coed Physical Education: A Study in Turkey' (2009) 44 *Adolescence* 165-185.

<sup>20</sup> Nate McCaughtry, 'Learning to Red Gender Relations in Schooling: Implications of Personal History and Teaching Context on Identifying Disempowerment of Girls' (2014) 75 *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 400-412.

the view that boys and girls are more different than they are alike. This might risk strengthening the stereotype that boys are more capable in physical education. As we have seen, this stereotype is problematic both for boys and girls, since the distinction based on gender leaves no room for differing levels of performance and interest towards a subject. Therefore, the solution does not lie in segregation, but rather in sensitised scheduling and supervision, taking into account potentially emergent gender inequalities.

The present research has indicated that the use of Greek language in schools reproduces power relations between genders in two ways: a) through the dominance of the masculine gender in grammar, e.g. adjectives, nouns and other parts of speech, and b) through the pejorative use of female adjectives. Through classroom observations, but also textbook examination, it was confirmed that the masculine gender is used predominantly as a generic term for both boys and girls, which is highly detrimental to the visibility of girls. Even in all-girl classes, teachers would use masculine pronouns and adjectives, such as: 'If somebody knows this, he should tell us {...}', 'who dares, can answer {...}', 'cooperate with he who sits next to you'. I also observed that the masculine noun headmaster was used parking lot signs or outside the headmaster's office, even when the school had a headmistress.

Participating schools also produced incidents where I observed that feminine adjectives were frequently applied to boys in a derogatory manner. This fact was observed mostly during physical education, as mentioned above, and during breaks. This observation was also noted by Yannis in one of the focus groups with counsellors:

*'Sometimes, when boys talk to each other, they say, you are acting like a girl. Or do not cry like a girl. Well, they are segregated, so when boys want to insult another boy they use feminine gender. I have never however encountered an instance when boys are mentioned in a negative way, do not act like a man, for example, for girls (they laugh).'*

Yannis, counsellor

As schools are a core arena of public discourse production, the use of language in the Cyprus education system requires further study. Feminist theory has highlighted the role of language in understanding the world and the role of gender within it. For example, Prewitt-Freilino et al.<sup>21</sup> have argued that equality indicators tend to be lower

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<sup>21</sup> Jennifer L. Prewitt-Freilino, T. Andrew Caswell & Emmi K. Laakso, 'The Gendering of Language: A

in countries where gender-discriminatory language is used. Language both reflects and has the simultaneous ability to influence social reality.<sup>22</sup> In this way, the use of the generalised masculine gender in grammar affects us and strengthens the hegemonic role of the male human and the implicitly supplemental role of the female.

Although there have been sporadic efforts to diversify the Greek language<sup>23</sup>, there has been no unified effort in either the Cypriot nor the Greek education system to use non-sexist language. It must be stressed that guidance on this topic must take into consideration historical, social and linguistic contexts, as these will be relevant in incorporating and testing the non-sexist language. Proposals that are hierarchically imposed come with the risk of creating backlash and achieving the diametrically opposite result: radical change, intended to fight against linguistic sexism and its consequences, is instead superseded by empty proclamations of political correctness.<sup>24</sup>

Another stereotype prevalent in schools that is illustrated through this research is that boys are less well-behaved than girls. For example, during an observation conducted at a Nicosia district school, a pair of girls and a pair of boys were talking at the back of the class. The teacher only reprimanded the boys, whom he moved to the front, and encouraged to participate in class. The students who participated in the research, both from private and public schools, also observed that teachers tend to tell boys off for misbehaving more frequently than girls.

*'Girls tend to be seen as more organised or quiet. Like boys and girls might both be talking in class, but it is only the boys' fault, for any reason'.*

Andriana, public high school student

*'In the classroom, it is like Kyriakos said, the naughtier, those who talk more are assumed to be the boys. They are not so strict with girls'.*

Katerina, private school student

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Comparison of Gender Equality in Countries with Gendered, Natural Gender, and Genderless Languages' (2012) 66 *Sex Roles* 268–281.

<sup>22</sup> Theodosia Soula Pavlidou (ed.), *Language-Sex-Gender* (Γλώσσα-Γένος-Φύλο) (Thessaloniki: Manolis Triandaphyllidis Foundation, 2006) (in Greek); Lera Boroditsky, 'How Does our Language Shape the Way we Think?' In Max Brockman (ed.), *What's next? Dispatches on the Future of Science* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, the guidelines of non-sexist language in official documents in Greece.

<sup>24</sup> Theodosia Soula Pavlidou (ed.), *Language-Sex-Gender* (Γλώσσα-Γένος-Φύλο) (Thessaloniki: Manolis Triandaphyllidis Foundation, 2006) (in Greek).

The research also revealed the pervasive rumour that technical schools are for badly-behaved boys. This, combined with the stereotype that girls tend to more demure, acts as a barrier to female attendance at these schools. As some teachers put it:

*'I worked in middle schools for many years, I was teaching third grade and I happened to talk with students. Who of you is intending to go to a technical school, who will go to a high school and which direction will you follow? For most girls, the attitude was: 'I am not going to a technical school; all the losers are going there'.*

Elpida, technical school teacher

Apart from the stereotypes leading boys and girls to select different subjects and schools, technical schools have been burdened with the stereotype that they offer a lower level of education and thus are more suitable for unruly students and scholars who have performed badly in school. This stereotype further distances girls from selecting technical schools, increasing the gender gap in technical vocations. Additionally, it acts as a barrier to good students of either gender, who believe, due to a shortage of adequate information, that technical schools provide a lower level of education.

*'The technical field has a lot of issues. There are taboos saying those schools are attended by boys who are challenging, who are bad influences. As much as a girl might consider it, the environment, even on open days, does not make them want to end up there'.*

Eleni, counsellor

The stereotype about technical schools seems to affect the prestige not only of the students, but also of the teachers who work there, according to Konstantinos, a technical school teacher:

*Among colleagues there is also this discrimination... 'You are working in the technical field, I am in a high school, you are in a middle school'.*

The stereotype that technical schools provide a lower level of teaching is unfounded, as explained by the teachers who participated in the research:

*'There is also the idea that: Ah! Technical schools? Full of boys and slow learners. I also had this notion. When asked: 'Would you let your son or your daughter go to a technical school?', I would answer emphatically 'No!'. Now, after I have seen the work that goes into teaching theory in a technical school, I feel that we do good work, and due to the fact that our class sizes are*

*small, I believe that we can easily be put on the same level as high schools’.*

Elpida, technical school teacher

Technical schools in Cyprus also offer specialised knowledge and skills which are required for certain technical studies or jobs. Access to technical schools could be a good start in challenging gender-based occupational segregation, which results in technical professions and classes being dominated by men. Regrettably, entrenched beliefs continue to prevent girls from selecting technical schools, which may create additional difficulties in pursuing technical studies at university. Elena, a technical school teacher, explains:

*‘At university I met fellow students from Greece. There were many courses that they passed with flying colours without even studying, because they had covered them in school, whereas we were completely ignorant, having attended high school (as opposed to a technical school). We ended up having a very tough time managing to pass those courses’.*

Eleni, technical school teacher

Girls are often vulnerable to gender violence in schools in Cyprus.<sup>25</sup> The present research, and especially the focus group with teachers, illustrated that girls in technical schools, being the minority, are particularly vulnerable to exclusion and gender-based violence coming from their male peers.

*‘The behaviour towards girls, especially by the boys, is not really appropriate. There is no respect’.*

Stavros, technical school teacher

‘If a girl walks by a group of boys, they will tease her, they will mock her, they will say something salacious and try make them cry’.

Konstantinos, technical school teacher

Even female teachers are exposed to gender-based violence in male-dominated schools, except that they are better equipped to deal with the situation, as explained by Elpida, below.

*‘I was appointed at a young age, so I dealt with pretty much the same things here as the female students. The difference was that I was shielded by my*

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<sup>25</sup> Christina Kaili & Susana Elisa Pavlou, *Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and Sexual Violence (SV) in adolescents: preventive and supportive initiatives in Cyprus* (2015), available at: <https://medinstgenderstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Deliverable1.1.CountryReportCyprus1.pdf>

*position. I had the power to inform the parents, to try to engage them in a pedagogical dialogue, even to refer the incident to an assistant, the principal, that is, to escalate it, so that the student felt that at some point he had to draw the line because you have power, something which female students do not have at school'.*

Elpida, technical school teacher

Girls in technical schools are forced to adopt specific roles and survival mechanisms. According to technical school teachers, girls either assume passive and receptive roles or they try to join in boys' groups, adopting behaviour that is socially constructed as boyish, in an effort to feel safe and accepted.

*'There was once a girl who was the only one of her class. In order to survive, she had developed the same walk, the same vocabulary and male behaviour. The boys might simply comment that she was too much of a guy to be a woman, and while there was probably also a matter of sexuality there, but of course the girl never gave them any reason. On the contrary, most treated her like she was a boy'.*

Christina, technical school teacher

*'At that stage (when they are being verbally harassed), girls have two choices: 1. They can put their head down, pretend they did not hear anything and move on; 2. They raise their head and talk back. When they raise their head and talk back, there is a very fine line that if crossed, can enrage boys and even lead to blows'.*

Andreas, technical school teacher

Based on the above, any attempt to attract girls and women to male-dominated fields of study and work should comprehensively take into account the social realities. Gendered issues, such as occupational gender segregation, are not distinct from gender-based violence and male hegemony. Additionally, the value of humanities subjects, as well as the cultivation of humanist and feminist principles are deemed to be essential to the smooth operation of schools and the minimising of transgressive behaviour. There is a risk in focusing on pushing girls into technical professions, without also trying to attract boys towards the fields of humanities. Although the market offers more employment opportunities in technology sectors, should we allow this to diminish the humanities and other school subjects? Should the school just follow market trends and what consequences will this have on its smooth operation?

Some teachers seem to espouse the common stereotype, which links care-giving professions to the status of motherhood, thus assessing women as being more suitable because of their nature. For example, Andreas, a technical school teacher, said:

*‘Imagine a primary school with men. When a kid starts school and sees a female teacher, they will feel like they are at home and the teacher is like their mum. Imagine the kid going and finding men. What would happen? The kid would be terrified’.*

The experience of one of the male teachers who participated in the discussion, who was a primary school teacher at the beginning of his career, contradicts the above stereotype, demonstrating the self-evident, in our opinion, ability of children to connect with any adult in their environment, regardless of the adult’s gender.

*‘As a primary school teacher, I many times felt that kids become close with me, like a mother, just like Andreas said. They would come in the morning and hug me round the legs, both boys and girls, they would leave their mum and come to me. They would see me as a substitute. I gained many things from primary schools and my experience has left me nothing but grateful’.*

Stavros, technical school teacher

Konstantinos adds that it is important to have both female and male role models in school.

*‘Between these two scenarios, I think they are both bad. If we had to choose a scenario, only men or only women, I think it would be disastrous’.*

Konstantinos, technical school teacher

The students who participated in the research felt in their majority that the teacher’s gender does not determine care-giving skills. For example, Aris, a high school student, said:

*‘Maybe a man would not be patient enough to withstand the sound of kids crying, maybe he would yell at them, but that is not necessarily true. A woman might not be as patient as a man or vice versa’.*

Aris, public school student

The connection between maternity and the labour market is the basis of vertical gender segregation, as women are overwhelmingly concentrated in care-giving professions, for example in the fields of education and health.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Statistical Service of Cyprus, *Labour Research (Έρευνα εργατικού δυναμικού) (2017)*, available at:

As many teachers feel, the stereotype which links girls to aesthetics and boys to practicality can be witnessed from the way that students take care of their textbooks, all the way to their performance in the workplace. Some teachers seem to believe that girls' notebooks and handwriting are tidier.

*'If I had in my hands two papers without a name, I would be able to tell which one was written by a boy and which by a girl. Girls are tidier, they will get a second pen, they will underline, while boys are messy, they write as they please'.*

Andronikos, Mathematics teacher

As regards job performance, two high school teachers expressed that women in technical professions emphasise the aesthetics of construction jobs, thus risking their functionality, while, on the contrary, men focus on functionality, thus risking aesthetics and detail. This stereotypical view was not backed up by any evidence, nor was it contested by the other participants in the discussion, quite unlike other stereotypes that were brought up.

*'We see it in construction offices. The purpose of men's sketches is functionality, while young women's sketches also strive for beauty'.*

Andreas, technical school teacher

*'It is true. Functionality is one thing and practicality is another (laughs). We (men) want practicality. We want to make something work and we do not care. A woman, on the other hand, will also observe the details'.*

Konstantinos, technical school teacher

The belief that boys think more practically has urged some teachers and students to believe that boys are, by nature, better in Mathematics.

*'The right side of boys' brains are, I think, more cultivated, let us say, when they are born, and this gives them a natural, if you like, advantage that they can, their mathematical side is a little better'.*

Kyriakos, private school student

Antonia, a mathematics teacher, initially argued that she sees no difference between genders in her classes. She then added, however, that when girls perform

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<https://www.mof.gov.cy/mof/cystat/statistics.nsf/All/DECFE28EC4C73D9CC2257D9E004E918C?OpenDocument> (in Greek).

well, this is based on studying, whereas for boys this can be attributed to on-the-spot thinking:

*'Boys, even the weaker ones, can jump up and give you an answer that would surprise you. Ok, girls too, but they study, that is why.'*

Antonia, Mathematics teacher

This opinion was refuted by Haralambos, another mathematics teacher, who did not identify any biological differences in the performance and the interest level of his students. He did, however, detect peer pressure on boys to not want to seem particularly interested in his lesson, for fear of being regarded as nerds. The classroom observations illustrated that, although he treated his boys and girls equally, boys showed signs of higher self-confidence. There were many classroom incidents where boys tried to find alternative solutions to exercises, saying, for example: 'Sir, my take on it was different'. Haralambos encouraged children to find alternatives, in an effort to cultivate their mathematical thinking, but this certainly required self-confidence, especially in a subject that seemed to attract boys more. Another observation was how boys would more frequently joke around in class and shout out answers without having raised their hand, all of which contributed to a feeling of the boys' verbal dominance in the classroom.

It is a fact that boys are more self-confident in mathematics than girls, who believe they are better at reading.<sup>27</sup> Our research revealed that social perceptions around the performance of girls and boys in mathematics and practical courses are usually expressed very openly, but also, at times, in subtle ways. For example, boys being self-confident in mathematics is so normalised, that, in the course of the observation, it was necessary to count the classroom interruptions made by boys and girls respectively, in order to show who was dominating the discussion. The notion, whether directly or indirectly expressed, that practical thinking is inherent for boys, affects girls' choices, who then become reluctant to select associated fields of study, even when their performance was excellent. Teachers should be aware of these cultural differences in the course of teaching their subject matter, so as to be able to adjust the lesson and reverse the classroom dynamics, in order to provide boys and girls with equal opportunities.

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<sup>27</sup> Gareth Rees, Jane Salisbury & Stephen Gorard, 'The Differential Attainment of Boys and Girls at School: Investigating the Patterns and their Determinants' (2001) 27(2) *British Educational Research Journal* 125-139.

## Deconstructing Gender Stereotypes in the School Environment

I have included below a list of good practices, which I encountered in Cypriot schools in the context of this research. This list is by no means exhaustive. It highlights the need for further research into good practices, which are already being applied in schools, albeit in a fragmented manner. The list also attempts to institutionalise and disseminate good practices in the context of learning among teachers.

A good practice to challenge gender stereotypes is via gender mainstreaming, which I observed in the modern Greek language class, as the students were taught the concept of freedom. Children were asked to indicate potential forms that freedom can take, such as political, social, ethnic, freedom of speech, religious, etc. The discussion moved to the constraints of technology and the computer games which boys and girls tend to play, and a girl stressed that games which are aimed at boys tend to be more aggressive.

The teacher dug deeper, showing the children a video a female robot being made, saying:

*'This man bought a robot woman, to make her exactly as he wants... This is a blatant violation, an insult to women... Can free persons be manufactured?'*

Areti, language and literature teacher

Children then started giving more examples where technology is used in ways which promote sexism and gender-based violence in society, for example, using social media for grooming purposes. Despite it falling outside the scope of her formal tasks, the teacher, Areti, seized the opportunity to mention support hotlines to report such incidents. Areti continued to implement gender mainstreaming in her lesson regarding freedom, asking the children about potential factors that threaten the freedom of individuals in a society. Through the Socratic method, the children discussed racism and sexism. With regard to sexism, which they defined as discrimination that is gender-based – between the two genders, they conversed the following:

- Georgia: *The patriarchal family is a threat to freedom.*
- Pavlos: *There is an erroneous opinion that it is inferior to be female.*
- Loukia: *Women are banned from some jobs. Why, sir, this is against my freedom!*

- Areti (teacher): *Yes, it happened to one of my colleagues, they asked her to sign a document promising she would not get pregnant and when she did, they fired her.*

During break time, the children played a song by Melina Mercouri on the classroom computer. The teacher, once again adapting to the situation, used the teachable moment to say:

*‘What do you know about Melina Mercouri, which freedoms did she fight for? Melina came to Cyprus and helped the Women Return movement, a struggle by Cypriot women for freedom’.*

Areti, language and literature teacher

The same teacher used gender mainstreaming during her history lesson, citing a passage from the Nuremberg Laws, according to which only the man was punished when couples broke the law regarding no relationships being allowed between Jews and non-Jews. This is because the woman was seen as a dependant to the man. At the same time, employers were not allowed to hire a woman under 45 years old, as it was considered that there was too high a risk of her getting raped. Areti, while fulfilling her duty to teach the set material, enriched her lesson with the use of photographs, encouraging her students to watch historical films, and also teaching them extra material.

*‘The (set teaching) material will always be a springboard for me to do something else. You have to make connections to other sources. In this way students can understand better and you also build a relationship with them. They now listen to me talking about the historical rumours and gossip stories (laughs)’.*

Areti, Language and Literature teacher

Michalis, a physical education teacher, has observed that girls are less self-confident during his lessons. In his opinion, teenage girls may feel uncomfortable with the changes in their bodies. Michalis said this might prevent them from trying out different activities in physical education: ‘It is impossible for a child not to be able to jump over the gap, it is a matter of self-confidence, the child does not feel comfortable with its body’. In order to cope with this phenomenon, Michalis specifically encourages girls in every attempt, in order to increase their enthusiasm for his lesson.

Marina on the other hand, chooses to discourage the boys in her lesson who seem to be dominating group activities. For example, when observing a game of

volleyball between two teams consisting of boys and girls, Nikiforos does not pass the ball and tries to play single-handed with the opposing team. Marina notices and intervenes by saying: 'There are other people in the team. You are turning into a one-man show, trying to be everywhere at once'.

Moreover, both Michalis and Marina have planned their classes so as to offer a wide range of sports activities. Their syllabus is flexible enough to accommodate this. After covering the set material, the majority of the boys pressure them to be allowed to play football. Nevertheless, the teachers provide a range of choices, so as to be more inclusive to girls and boys who are not interested in football. Whenever the children play football, Michalis provides other activity options on the basketball court, for the children who do not want to play soccer. Marina tries to remain informed on current fitness trends so as to remain relevant to the students.

In order to encourage the participation of students in the school's theatrical troupe, the technical school teachers decided to themselves participate as amateur actors in the school plays. Elpida, a technical school teacher, described this interesting practice:

*'Boys stayed away from the troupe, because those who participated were usually bullied a lot by the others. So we, as a group of teachers, announced that our participation in this year's play. When six-seven teachers said we would participate and held a casting call, suddenly around 50 students came! And we did this for several years, having both students and teachers participate, so that the student would want to come, thinking: 'Ah! I will play Ms A's friend' or 'I will be playing Mr B's daughter', so it became a bit of fun and it turned into a good practice'.*

The use of audiovisual material was observed in almost every lesson we attended. The media we observed included short videos on biotic and abiotic factors in biology class and a video of the Wright brothers' first ever flight in technology class.

Career counsellors stated that promoting role models, namely professionals who are successful in a field where their gender forms the minority, is inspiring to students and reassuring to parents, when the latter show concern regarding the gender-appropriateness of the profession.

*'Success stories help. I will say that I had, for example, a female student who studied chemical engineering and now she works in the field and enjoys it. Especially when you refer to your own students, your own experience. You*

*can see it, at that moment the parent's and the student's faces start to shine. See, another girl also did it and everything went well'.*

Yannis, occupational education counsellor

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this research have showed that the beliefs of teachers and students generate interactions in schools, which often reproduce gender-based stereotypes and inequalities. The main gender stereotypes that were observed were the following: a) boys are physically stronger and girls must not be assigned manual tasks, even when they can perform them as well or better than the boys; b) boys are less well-behaved than girls at school; c) the link between care-giving professions and motherhood, where teachers presume women as more suitable caregivers due to their nature; and d) girls are associated with aesthetics, boys, with practicality. Additionally, the focus group with teachers illustrated that girls in technical schools, being the minority, are particularly vulnerable to exclusion and gender-based violence from their male peers. There were incidences where students used gender violence as a mechanism for reassigning girls and boys to predetermined roles. The use of sexist language in schools also prevailed through the dominance of the masculine gender in grammar, as well as the pejorative use of female adjectives.

Gender stereotypes on the one hand constrain the educational and vocational choices of students and, on the other hand, render girls and children that do not fall into the stereotypical representation of their gender vulnerable to violence and school bullying.

At the same time, our research observed teachers and students expressing beliefs and implementing practices, which, could go some way in reversing unequal treatment in school and helping eliminate gender inequality. Some examples of this were: a) gender mainstreaming in the classroom and making use of teaching time; b) encouraging girls to participate in physical education classes, discouraging boys from monopolising the lesson, and expanding the range of activities; and c) promoting role models, namely professionals who are successful in a field where their gender is in the minority, is inspiring to students and reassuring to parents.

The paradoxical coexistence of contradictory stances and perceptions at school, some teachers and students promote gender-based discrimination and others question it, is on the balance, encouraging. This conflict shows potential movement and a certain momentum in education, one of the core agents of socialisation, which is

alive and constantly changing. In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the field of education towards gender equality. This has created an excellent opportunity for material interventions and structural changes, which can then be reflected throughout society. The vision for education's role in achieving substantive gender equality has so far consisted of fragmented interventions. Therefore, political will is necessary to deploy gender-related expertise so as to gender mainstream school activities.

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