

Secretary of State for Education - Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
20 Great Smith Street
London
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28 May 2021
(felicia.willow@fawcettsociety.org.uk)

Dear Secretary of State for Education,

Early intervention necessary to prevent violence against women and girls

No woman or girl should be – or feel – unsafe. As organisations and individuals working in the fields of gender equality, violence against women and education, we are acutely aware of the violence and harassment that many women and girls face on a daily basis. The link between gender stereotyping and a range of unequal and unacceptable outcomes, including male violence against women and girls, is clear and established.

We are convinced, based on a range of compelling evidence, that educating children about gender equality from an early age is an essential part of the solution. Children grow up surrounded by gender stereotypes – at home, in school and in the wider world – which send them strong messages about how girls and boys, women and men, should look and behave. This happens at a critical stage in children's learning about the world and their place in it, with gendered attitudes ingrained in children from around the age of 10. Any strategy that fails to recognise this link and the need for early intervention is setting itself up for failure.

Schools are a key part of any systemic response. Despite the best efforts of many educators, stereotyping is reinforced daily in the school environment. The curriculum, books, displays, language and assumptions perpetuate notions of active men and passive women, of 'strong' boys who should stifle their emotions and caring girls whose role is to please others. Girls are aware from all too young of how their bodies are judged and valued. Boys, in turn, often feel pressure to define themselves as 'men' by conforming to outdated ideals of masculinity. These learnt dynamics lead to a range of unequal outcomes throughout life, fuelling male violence against women and girls, high rates of male suicide and limiting children's aspirations along gender lines. The recent spotlight on sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools confirms pre-existing evidence showing these to be prolific. These outcomes are deeply unfair to all children.

By challenging gender stereotypes, we can reduce the harms caused by violence against women and girls, which causes such a vast human cost, as well as the £66bn domestic abuse alone is estimated to cost society each year. We can also improve a range of other outcomes, including closing the gender gap in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths fields, improving boys' reading, bringing down male suicide rates and increasing children's wellbeing.

The Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), recognises the key role that education plays in combating the underlying causes of gender-based violence, providing that all levels of education should include teaching on equality, non-stereotyped gender roles and gender-based violence against women.

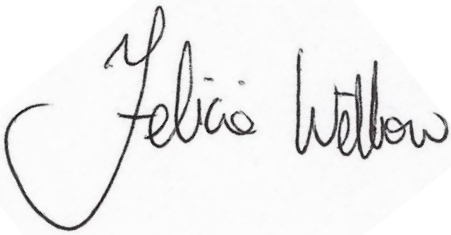
A full roll out of the new Relationships and Sex Education curriculum in summer 2021 must be prioritised, with no further delays. However, in order for schools to be part of the systemic response,

all those bodies with responsibility for the content, quality and delivery of children's education have a role to play. We therefore call on the Government to implement the following as a matter of urgency:

- Make actively challenging gender stereotypes integral to 0-11s education practice.
- To work constructively with experts, the specialist women's support sector, the education profession and organisations in the field of gender equality in education to ensure that the necessary resources and training are made available to schools, building on the existing research and small-scale work already happening with proven impact and providing funding for this work.

This will not be a quick fix, but we have to start right now so that outcomes improve for the next generation.

Yours sincerely,



Felicia Willow
CEO
The Fawcett Society



Caren Gestetner
Chief Executive
Lifting Limits

Signatories:

- Professor Dame Alison Peacock
- Chartered College of Teaching
- Hannah Wilson, Co-founder and Director, Diverse Educators
- Gender Action
- James Humphries, Head Teacher, Kentish Town Church of England Primary School
- John Hayes, Headteacher, Gospel Oak Primary and Nursery School
- Helen Bruckdorfer, Headteacher, Torriano Primary School
- Laurel Robin, Headteacher, Brookfield Primary School
- National Literacy Trust
- Girlguiding
- Plan International UK
- IC Change
- Institute of Physics
- Dr Mary-Ann Stephenson, Director, UK Women's Budget Group
- Abi Shapiro, Interim Chief Executive, Young Women's Trust
- Professor Becky Francis, UCL
- Deniz Uğur, Deputy Director, End Violence Against Women Coalition
- White Ribbon UK
- Bilkis Miah, CEO and Co-Founder, You Be You
- Camden Learning
- Our Streets Now
- Beyond Equality
- National Education Union
- Professor Wendy Sigle, Professor of Gender and Family Studies, Department of Gender Studies, London School of Economics & Political Science
- Elliott Rae, Founder & Editor-in-Chief, MusicFootballFatherhood