

Illusions and Old Ideas: Why Gender Matters, National Youth Council Conference Dublin Castle 17th November 2014

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1) Emma Thompson (Alias Hermoine in Harry Potter movies) recently addressed the United Nations, launching a campaign which she called *He for She*. I found her speech very moving

Essence? A recognition that men AND women need to work to create a world where gender equality exists. She woke up to this issue when she was eight years old. I was much older. One of two daughters; going to an all girls' schools; doing a degree in Social Science at UCD where 90% of the students were women, until I started paid work at 19 years it never occurred to me that gender inequality existed. Even then I just thought that it was very odd that most of the women there seemed to be on the first two floors of the building, while most of the top floors were occupied by men. The fact that this spatial pattern was related to their wages took me another twenty five years to realise. So unlike Emma Watson, I have taken a very long time to recognise gender inequality. Anyone feel the same?

2) Young people, then as now, led to believe that gender does not matter e.g. in areas of education; paid employment

Any subject; any job- no consequences/no disapproval/strange glances/peer pressure....

But many of you know that gender matters: in subject choice at school; in the kind of jobs that seem 'natural for men and women'.

Evidence that in Irish homes, **boys get more pocket money** than girls. Also evidence that boys **do less unpaid work in the home** than girls...Now why might that be???

3) I did a study of texts written by a random sample of 4,000 young people aged 10-12 and 14-17 years drawn from a total sample of 36,000 young people

a) These young people did not identify themselves as boys/girls- BUT yet much of their lives were mapped by gender.

Life styles- Boys were much more likely than girls to refer to participating in and watching, **organised competitive physical team based sports**; their memorable moments revolved around success/failure for themselves/their team in these sports.

- Some of the 10-12 year old girls played football. Yet they referred to the dominant view that ‘Girls don’t play football’ and saw themselves as different... and trailblazers...

Overall Girls were LESS likely than boys to be involved in competitive, physical team based sports. They were more likely than boys to be involved in individual sporting activities- cycling, swimming as well as reading, music etc.

Their memorable moments revolved around connectedness with people e.g. among the 14-17 year olds in school musicals.

The girls referred to MORE friends than the boys did and to more close friends.

The idea behind the original texts was to put a sample of them into a time capsule. Hence, both boys and girls saw themselves as an authoritative interpreter for AN IMAGINARY PERSON in the year 3,000.

14-17 year olds

- Boys interpreted all aspects of Irish life for imaginary person
- Girls only focused on one area: fashion.

There were areas where there were no gender differences: references to local area; to clothes; and time

But there were several significant differences: Life styles; friendships; memorable moments and in their role as authoritative interpreter.

So the idea that gender does not matter is an illusion among young people-even when we are only looking at differences and excluding power...

4) The idea that gender does not matter is **EVEN MORE OF an illusion if we look at the adult world of public power and unequal wages**

- **Pay gaps:** Across the EU 28, women's hourly pay is 16% below men's (Ireland: 14%). Total salaries vary even more
- Men and women in most countries **do much the same amount of work:** but most of women's is unpaid and most of men's is paid
- **Unpaid work:** Cooking, cleaning, shopping, caring for children **Women do 72% of it-** and even where both are in paid employment women have a higher total work load-**AN HOUR MORE DURING THE WEEK AND TWO HOURS AT WEEK-ENDS**
- In the young people's texts there was a wry recognition that this was seen as a future problem, with one young male teen-ager asking whether in the Year 3,000 whether cyborg wives were cheap and efficient..
- **Public power:** 75%-100% of positions of public power are held by men in our society: Dail; Instit Roman Catholic Church; Economy, Media etc (Does this matter? A debt of 200billion from the demise of the Celtic Tiger certainly suggests that public power and how it is exercised matters). Of course we cant

be sure that women in power would be any better- but they certainly couldn't be worse...But there is evidence that e.g. on Boards women are less susceptible to group think; more independent and conscientious

- And these inequalities in public power are in Ireland- The position of women is much much worse in many other countries. Some of you will know of **Malala Yousafzai**, a teenager who was shot for challenging girls right to attend school in Pakistan. Education, travel, public power, personal safety; disproportionate work load and inadequate resources are women's lot globally
- UN: No society in the world treats its women as well as its men

So is gender about something more than difference? I think it is.

Is it about power? Is it about privilege? That gender privileging has been called different things- patriarchal dividend by RW. Connell; a negative symbolic coefficient for women by Pierre Bourdieu ; misrecognition of women by Nancy Frazer

Does this matter? To women? To men? To COUNTY'S economic well-being (OECD says it does) to research innovation (EU says it does)

There is a subtle but relentless devaluing of women, their characteristics, their work and their contributions in the public area-and an equivalent privileging of men and the linking of these with stereotypical constructions of what it is to be a man and what it is to be a woman

Does that sound extreme? Think about two professional jobs: one dominated by women and one by men- say Nursing and Information Technology- which is seen as most skilled? Which is best paid? Which is seen by the state as most important to society?

What are the implicit ideas about masculinity and femininity embedded in these kinds of jobs? That women are caring? That men are techies/good with objects?

In Ireland many things have changed and there is now little difference in the proportion of men and women who are in paid work (66% and 56%) **but yet there are stereotypes about men being natural leaders. Dominance and aggression is depicted part of what it is to be a man.**

What does that say about what the kind of power relationship that is seen as appropriate between men and women?

Is it appropriate in the 21st Century to think of women as effectively subordinate to men? What does it imply about stereotypes of what it is to be a woman?

6) Your role as youth workers as I understand it is to empower young women and men to appreciate their value and to transcend unhelpful ways of thinking about themselves and the world

- Surely that must include challenging these unhelpful but pervasive and powerful stereotypes?? Stereotypes that implicitly legitimate male privileging? And challenging masculinist structures and procedures that are unhelpful to women?
- Greek mythology: Procrustean beds and a smith who stretched and cut people to suit the size of the beds that were available- lopping off legs here- stretching torsos there...to fit. Arent stereotypes the metaphorical equivalent of those Procrustean beds? By not challenging stereotypes is that what is being done- metaphorically to young people? Is that in anyone's interest??

I have spent much of the PAST 20 years directly and indirectly challenging these unhelpful stereotypes. I dare to hope that those of you who are youth workers will spend the NEXT 20 years doing it.