HOW GENDER MATTERS TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING IN ENGLAND

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Overview

This report sets out the research findings from a project commissioned by the Office for the Children's Commissioner for England in 2015, "Children's Experiences of Gender". Please note that the information and views in this publication set out in are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Office for the Children's Commissioner of England.

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Cover images:

"Gender Jars": These images depict artefacts created by the children and young people who participated in the research (see page 37).

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1. Executive Summary

Background and Research Overview

Understandings of gender have shifted over recent years. Diverse forms of gender identity and expression are increasingly visible in a range of spheres, including the media. Examples from 2016 already include calls by the UK Parliamentary Committee on gender and equalities to 'degender' passports and driving licences, and schools introducing new rules on uniform to accommodate transgender pupils.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner commissioned research into young people's experiences of gender because its work (including a scoping review '*Being Boys and Girls'* by Dr Lindsey Cameron, Dr Afroditi Pina, Dr Rachel Calogero and Professor Robbie Sutton, August 2014), as well as a wealth of other research, has shown that in many areas of life gender makes a big difference to young people's experiences, life chances and the realisation of their rights. Young people say that stereotypes and expectations of how girls and boys ought to behave influence their lives substantially. This influence is powerful for all children and young people, and may be particularly challenging for those who are perceived not to fit in with certain gendered expectations.

While evidence attests to the importance of gender for young people's lives, we know relatively little about how diverse groups of children and young people living in different socio-economic and geographic locales understand and experience gender today. This project was designed to provide evidence and insight into the experiences of children and young people themselves because this was identified as a particular gap.

The research was undertaken in accordance with the OCC's specifications that it should 'include the experience and views of all genders: by this we mean boys/young men, girls/young women, and other young people who may identify as gender neutral, trans*, or gender queer' and that in addition the OCC would 'like the study to include children and young people with a range of backgrounds and life experiences, including children and young people from minority ethnic and faith backgrounds, young people who identify as LGB or questioning, children and young people living in disadvantaged areas, and children and young people from both urban and rural locations'.

We explored young people's *own* views about and experiences of how gender matters to them. We agreed with the OCC to address the following specific research questions:

- What does gender mean to children and young people and how do they experience their **bodies and identities** as gendered?
- How do **socio-cultural factors** (e.g. age, race, religion, class, dis/ability, sexuality etc) and **space and place** (e.g. rural, urban, online) shape how children and young people experience their gender identities and gender relations?
- To what extent do children and young people feel and manage the **pressures of gender stereotypes**?
- What are children and young people's own views on how gender inequalities and discriminations impact upon their well-being and imagined futures?
- To what extent do children and young people find ways to **challenge gender stereotypes and gender inequalities**?
- What **messages of change** do children and young people think the OCC and other agencies dedicated to promoting gender well-being need to hear and action?
- What kinds of **knowledge and support** do children and young people think others their age (and younger) need as they negotiate their own gender identities, cultures and relations?

Research design

We employed a multi-method research design to explore young people's own views on and experiences of gender. As specified in the OCC tender, the first phase used participatory and creative activities (e.g. talking, drawing, placing messages of change in glass jars) to enable a diverse range of young people to engage in and reflect on the positive and negative experiences of if, how, when and why gender impacts upon their everyday lives. The first part of our research interviews encouraged young people to tell us about their everyday lives, enabling us to understand their views in context, before moving on to focus on gender specifically.

During phase one we worked with Years 8 and 9 in schools (most aged 13-14 years), and with youth groups (most aged 13–19 years) across six research sites in rural, urban and suburban locales in the north and south of England[1]. We interviewed over 125 young people in small friendship groups, and also conducted over 30 individual and/or paired interviews to explore individual biographies more fully. To recruit participants, members of the research team visited the sites, introduced and explained the research to wider groups of eligible young people and issued consent and information forms. In schools we then consulted with teachers to form interview groups on the basis of (1) the

[1] School 1 (Greater London); School 2 (Greater London); School 3 (South East); School 4 (North).

forms that were returned, indicating voluntary participation, and (2) the OCC's own criteria for inclusion.

The groups were voluntary and therefore self-selecting to some extent. They might be expected to include those who particularly wished to make their views known to the Children's Commissioner, since we had explained in our introductions that she is their representative and advocate. However, thanks to the OCC's own requirements we were able to ensure that we included young people who are less likely to participate in such groups, either at all or on that particular topic (such as boys, those on Pupil Premium, from faith groups, and Looked After Children for whom obtaining consent was a protracted process, involving social workers as well as foster carers).

It should also be acknowledged that most of the interviews took place in schools, which may have shaped the kinds of responses that young people felt able to provide – although in itself this is of interest and a 'finding'.

Based explicitly on the voices of young people from the interviews, Phase 2 developed a short online survey to seek the responses of a much larger sample of young people aged 13-18 from across England (n= 505 after eight days online) to the key messages that emerged from the qualitative phase. 50% of responses were from those aged 16 and under, although only 15% from those aged 13-15. We disseminated the survey initially via the OCC's own young people's Advisory Group and our academic Advisory Committee as well as other contacts and networks. As a result, we know that the survey was issued to all eligible students in at least two schools, meaning that the responses of a wide range of young people were sought rather than those of a self-selecting group.

This research summary sets out the key messages that emerged from Phase 1 and incorporates descriptive statistical data from the survey (see for statistical survey findings and Appendix 2 and 3 for the qualitative responses to final two open questions on change). As well as giving quotations from interviews, we include the key messages about gender that young people were invited to address to the Children's Commissioner in Phase 1.

The Research Team

The project was directed by Professor Emma Renold, (School of Social Sciences) and the co-investigators were Dr Sara Bragg (Education Research Centre, University of Brighton); Professor Carolyn Jackson (Department of Educational Research, Lancaster

University) and Professor Jessica Ringrose (University College London, Institute of Education). The research was supported by a wider team, including Victoria Edwards, Christopher Marlow, Kate Marston, Hannah Retallack and Eleanor Staples. The research was supported by the OCCE's third sector and young people's advisory group, and also benefited from contributions from an academic advisory group and a young people's advisory group assembled for the project.

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Acknowledgements

Our deep gratitude goes to the children and young people for their lively participation in the research. The enthusiasm, curiosity and sincerity with which they shared how gender mediates their lives and the lives of those around them was striking. We would also like to thank the teachers, parents and youth workers who made the young people's participation and this research possible. We would like to thank Frances Winter from the OCC for her support for the research project in its first stage, Anna Henry who supported us subsequently, and all the members of the OCC advisory group for their role in helping shape the research.

Key findings in summary

1. The diversity and unevenness of young people's gender cultures

Young people's experiences of gender are diverse and vary between and across peer groups, age groups, schools, and regions. A picture of gender heterogeneity rather than homogeneity emerged, making it difficult to generalise about 'all' young people's experiences.

We found very striking differences between young people's experiences of gender, even within the same school or area. For example, in School 3 we met members of a Year 9 (age 14) friendship group who were confidently exploring identities such as 'gender fluid', 'agender', 'gay', 'lesbian or bisexual' or 'pansexual', and supporting each

other in doing so. A Year 8 boy in the same school, however, was bullied both on account of his home circumstances (not living with his birth mother) and his interest in 'girl things', whether that was simply liking the company of girls, or a desire sometimes to wear dresses and make up. Rather than finding his own preferred identifications, he was labelled a 'he-she' and a 'goy' (a 'girl-and-a-boy'), terms that were acknowledged by others to be highly offensive (and in the case of the latter, speaking to much longer established histories of cultural differentiation and hierarchy).

In School 1, where many girls recounted tales of gender-based harassment, we found a small group of boys who were educating themselves about feminism, 'calling each other out' on sexist attitudes, challenging macho and aggressive expectations, and even apologising to a girl for participating in earlier 'slut-shaming' activities.

As a result, it is hard to make generalisations about the experiences of 'all' young people. Difference and heterogeneity need to be recognised through careful, nuanced interpretations and in formulating recommendations for policy and practice that acknowledge and help foster the strengths and resourcefulness of, and diversity within, youth cultures. Any intervention to support and advance gender well-being and gender equality needs to be sensitive to the socio-cultural contexts and diversity of how gender matters to young people and impacts upon their lives.

2. 'Nowadays people are more accepting': young people's views on gender diversity and equality

83% of survey respondents agreed/strongly agreed that 'people my age are more accepting of different types of gender than older generations'; only 7% disagreed/strongly disagreed.

There may be a shift in how children and young people are thinking and learning about gender, their own or others' gender identities. These shifts include an expanding vocabulary of gender identity, and a commitment to gender equality, gender diversity and the rights of sexual minorities.

> One of my favourite singers is Sam Smith cos he's gay and he's really positive about gay marriage and stuff … and in a lot of his songs, there's like a lot of things about gay people and stuff … and I feel like he's using his fame in a positive way
>
> (Nazera, age 13, School 1)

Young people are drawing on cultural resources such as social media sites and gender-diverse public figures to describe themselves and others as ‘gender fluid’, ‘agender’ and other terms that position gender identities on a continuum and not as fixed or binary. In the survey 69% of respondents disagreed/strongly disagreed that ‘there are only two genders’, with only 20% agreeing/strongly agreeing. 85% agreed or strongly agreed that ‘people should be free to choose their gender’ (only 6% disagreed/strongly disagreed). Furthermore, over three-quarters of respondents (78%) agreed/strongly agreed that ‘People should be able to choose the pronouns they prefer (e.g. ‘they’ instead of ‘he’ or ‘she’)’.

In Phase one of the research 23 different terms for gender identity were used by young people across our research sites.

> Everyone just assumes that there’s transgender then male and female but most people don’t know about agender and the difference between transgender, transsexual and transvestite (…) You can put a hashtag in (to Tumblr) … LGBQT, non-binary sexuality… there’s this one picture I’ve got and it explains sexualities and everything and it’s really useful… I thought there was just homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual and it turns out there’s like poly-sexual, demi-sexual – all sorts of things.
>
> (Sinead, age 14, School 3)

> I know people that ... don't identify male or female, you know? (….) Be how you want. If you don't feel like you're a boy or a girl then you're not a boy or a girl, you're non-binary you know?
>
> (Kye, age 14, School 1)

> “We weren’t (taught about this at school) I had to google most of it … I literally just googled ‘all the sexualities’ like that was my google term. (Ricky, age 13, LGBTQ+ youth group)

> I've been through a lot of different sort of gender labels, I started identifying as genderqueer when I was about sixteen, and then at seventeen I identified as just a binary male, as a trans man, then I found that didn't really fit me, I found a comfortable in-between as demi-boy about a year or maybe two years ago.

(Eli, age 19, LGBTQ+ youth group)

> There seems to be this stereotype where you look at a man or a woman and they're a man or a woman, but it's not actually like that. You get people who are gender fluid, bi-gender, tri-gender, agender.
>
> (Lou, age17, LGBTQ+ youth group)

Many young people expressed their principled commitment to gender equality, gender diversity and the rights of sexual minorities. They see these as 'modern' or 'twenty-first century' and their own support for these is an important aspect of their identities and values. While there may have been an element in interviews of young people feeling that these were the 'correct' views to express in that context, we also found that 98% of survey respondents agreed/strongly agreed that 'People should not be discriminated against because of their gender'; none disagreed/strongly disagreed. 74% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that 'I'd like different types of gender to be celebrated in the media', with only 10% disagreeing/strongly disagreeing.

There was debate and contestation in interviews about whether these principles conflicted, or could be reconciled, with religious and family beliefs.

> Technology is expanding but the people who are living in this world, their mind's thinking like the ones a couple hundred years ago … they still believe that boys are better than girls and stuff! (Nazera, age 13, School 1)

> Society has changed over the years, so your parents would've been brought up with something else and, nowadays, people are more accepting (Jabob, age 14, School 2)

> I'm not gay but let's just say I am gay, I don't get why people would worry about me if I'm gay like, if I'm gay, I'm gay what is it to you? (….) We are all humans and it doesn't matter if we are gay, lesbians or short, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, short, white, black. We are all human and we should stop discriminating each other because it's not right (Dameer, age 14, School 1)

> If the gay people like each other then I don't know what's the problem. …. 'Cause even my mam and dad told me that. They said like don't ever be, don't ever let anything like that happen cause that's the people's thoughts. If they like it, if gay people like each other then it's their thoughts see innit? (Marek, age 14, School 1)

Marek: If he (Conchita) wants, if he wants to be like, wants to do that, I don't really mind. It's his life so if he wants to live it.

Kushtim: I respect what they've chosen. But it's just something I wouldn't choose.

(Marek, age 14, and Kushtim, age 14, School 1)

Kye: Culture and tradition - they're … usually great but they're also … dangerous as well, they can lead to boxing people in. … Because we've always done it this way, you know, man and a woman (...) I think it's a bit stupid. I mean it's restrictive and like the genders have been really rigidly defined. If you're a man you must do this and if you're a woman you must do this. No in between, everyone must be a man or a woman, and whatever they're born with. And I think that's a bit ridiculous

(Kye, age 14, School 1)

Havva: Religion-wise, it says it's wrong, but … people that are gay, I find it something they should be proud of, they're different.

Zeynep: Like, people should get over it, to be honest.

(Zeynep, age 13, and Havva, age 13, School 1)

I know for a fact, my religion, the most wrongest thing you can do is either be gay or be something that God didn't choose for you because God doesn't make mistakes…. I don't believe that it's right but I'm not going to judge it. …. Honestly I think it's wrong I'm not going to say that I think it's right because you were born like that you should embrace it and everything but if they don't feel that way then I'm not going to question it. It's not up to me.

(Layla, age 14, School 3)

In the survey 80% of young people agreed/strongly agreed that they would 'like to live in a world without gender stereotypes', only 9% disagreed/strongly disagreed.

Young people's messages for the Children's Commissioner [2]

Gender stereotypes don't define me

[2] These were individual handwritten messages placed in small jars (see section 2.3.1)

There are more than 2 genders

Gender can change

Gender is everywhere

Gender is no longer physical, it's how people feel, not what they look like.

If there was no judgement for genders then life would be easier.

Put girls and boys in the same category

I am a girl because I feel I am, not because someone says I am

There is no such thing as a perfect girl or boy

Gender is a social construct

Girls and boys should be seen as one, rather than two separate people

If we need to be put into categories why can't we choose the category WE feel fits?

A girl and a boy can be different a boy can be a girl, a girls can be a boy,
no matter what we think

I heart my gender
Lets get rid of gender

Gender does NOT matter

No matter what you think about religions and sexuality, respect others and who they want to be

We might just be teenagers but we're growing up, let us be who we are

3. The enduring regulation of gender: norms, harassment and violence

In practice it appears that everyday experiences were much more uneven than young people's ideals.

3a Gender norms and expectations continue to regulate young people's experiences of their body, appearance, objects and activities.

Young people described a world in which objects and activities were acutely gendered. Their reference points often highlighted the role of consumer culture and schools' routine practices in creating gender categories. In particular, school uniforms were seen as highly regulatory of gender norms and a gender binary.

> I turned up to something in what was considered 'boy clothes' and … and I was quite young and everyone else was wearing pink … I was teased about it … I hated it. …. Everyone stared at me and were saying, "Why are you wearing boy clothes? Why do you buy boys clothes, are you a boy?" and it was just really negative reaction to it and I didn't turn up in anything like that ever again. (Lauren, age 13, School 4)

> I wear boy clothes, I buy my stuff out of Primark out of the boys' section, my Mum wants me to be a girl but I say no because I don't want to. (….) Like everyone just accepts who you are and what you do, when you get older. Like my Mum, she wants me to become a girl. She just needs to understand I might not want to be a girl, I might want to be a tomboy instead. (Mary Lou, age 13, School 2)

> At school people call me gay because I've got my own horses but I don't care, I just ignore them. (Jo, age 14, School 3)

> If I'm honest I didn't used to roll my skirt up when I first started and now I still don't roll it up much because I just kind of thought well what's the point it doesn't really matter, but I think there's quite a bit of peer pressure to do it … (Cari, age 13, School 2)

> Layla: the thing with the school skirts is, right mine is quite short now because I rolled it, but if I don't roll it my skirt will literally come down to here, I can't walk around with a skirt that long I can't ... it just drapes and it feels really... I don't like it.

Mia: the school expects everyone to be the same size, obviously there are people in this school and out there who...everyone's a different colour, shape, sizes, everyone's all different and unique in their own ways (both age 14, school 3)

I'm wearing a boy's shirt. I'm wearing a boy's shirt and the boy's one has pockets and it's not tight, it's really baggy … and the buttons do up the other way but that doesn't matter. (Willow, age 14, School 4)

Boys have pockets. We have no pockets whatsoever (laughter) (Kelly, age 12, School 4)

Girls should be able to wear short skirts and not be told like you're asking for someone to do something to you, it's not fair (Jamie, age 13, School 2)

I think I sort of fit into the girl category and the boy category. Because I do like girly things but I also like boy things. Like with the boys I do like really video games and sports and doing stuff like that, and then with the girls I do like dressing-up and wearing skirts and dresses (Anika age 13, School 3)

*In the survey 95% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that '*People should be able to dress how they like regardless of gender', only 2% disagreed. In response to the statement 'School uniforms should be gender neutral (not separate for boys and girls)' 60% agreed/strongly agreed; 20% were unsure; 20% disagreed/strongly disagreed.

Young people's messages for the Children's Commissioner

Just because I'm a girl doesn't mean I like pink

If a boy wears pink, doesn't mean you're gay

Girls and boys should be able to take part in the same activities

I think you are born what you are and you shouldn't change that.

Clothes and other things should not be only for one gender.

Its not fair boys get criticized if they were skirts but if girls were jeans its not problem

I think that in shops things shouldn't be labelled for girls, for boys, because both genders can wear them

School uniforms should not be categorised by gender

I want it to be acceptable for boys to wear girls clothes and girls to wear boys clothes

Gender really needs to stop mattering. I like boys clothes and when I go to shops I would like to go to the boys section and get very bad / funny looks. I think that in shops things shouldn't be labelled for girls for boys because both genders can wear them. I do lots of things boys do drumming and skateboarding but I get held back by peoples opinions even within my family. I have to pretend to be more girly.

Boys should be able to wear what they want without be judged

I hope in the future there would be less specifically labelled items and more unisex items. I think this would help everyone be who they are and like what they like.

3b) Girls especially reported feeling at risk of judgement based on gendered norms around the body and appearance; pressures around heterosexual relationship cultures and heterosexual double standards were also common

For some young people, articulating their gender identity (including how it did or did not conform to normative expectations) could be a source of pleasure and power.

> I am two different people – me when I'm with all my bloke mates, this is when I put on a really deep voice on and talk about girls and football and stuff like that. And the version we like to call Whitney … when I'm with (female friends) I'm a lot more airy, I'm a lot more happy, la-de-dar! I'm ridiculously feminine – I'm probably more feminine than most girls! I can go into a shop and compare bra colours to skin tone, so I'm that guy! There's always one guy who everyone knows who goes bra shopping with girls! That's me…. I'm open about it, apart from when I'm with my family, then I'm just like, very, 'I'm a bloke'!
>
> (Vincent, age 14, School 3)

Others, however, depending on context, lived with a pervasive gendered sense of risk, judgement and scrutiny in ways that related to the gendered body and gender norms around their appearance.

Some young people described the pressure for platonic boy-girl friendships to become (hetero)sexualized as they grew older. Girls in particular felt that heterosexual pairing up was a pressure and could lead to sexual objectification. Some young people described the gendered patterning of dating cultures (e.g. the expectation for boys to ask girls out) and some also argued that social media increased pressures around attractiveness.

> Millie: Some boys are really, like, disgusting. They're just talking about, like girls, and like their bums and … It's disgusting.
>
> Alexis: I don't feel comfortable about it actually.
>
> Millie: And then it's kind of like…we're not just there to be 'looked' at. We are 'people'.
>
> Alexis: Yeah. And we don't do it to boys …
>
> Millie: No! It's just like, we never say stuff like that! (….)
>
> Millie: People say that you should be yourselves but when you are I feel …
>
> Alexis: they judge you…
>
> Millie: …they judge you, that's exactly it. Like, they're the people that are judging you when they want you to be yourselves!
>
> (both age 14, School 3)

> Kye: I feel sometimes when you're seen talking to a girl you're, it's like eeeerrr
>
> Pjeter: It's again that hetero-normativity thing as well, like um, boy and girl.
>
> (both age 14, School 1)

> I always feel like really nervous, like people are going to judge me and that, I'm going to, like people are just going to stare at me and stuff…. everyone just stares at you and you're just like, oh I don't know what they're staring at, what's wrong? You just feel like people are watching you. They might not be, but you just feel it, you just feel uncomfortable.
>
> (Georgia, age 14, School 3)

> Boys seem to think that if you don't have the perfect figure or you're too skinny or you're too fat or you're like, even if you're normal …they'll always find something wrong about you.
>
> (Taneisha, age 13, School 2)

Molly: I know a lot of girls with anxiety … Girls get anxiety a lot at like things like parties.…

INT: What were they panicking over?

Molly: Boys were looking at them, boys thought they were ugly, that they were fat and like everything really.

INT: And what did you think about that? How did you respond to that?

Molly: Um, well, I thought, I don't feel that way, and whenever I get like self-conscious I just like, kind of like, bury it inside me.

(Molly, age 12, School 4)

When I'm walking down town everyone will just look at you up and down

(Mia, age 14, School 3)

I didn't get along with the girls in my primary school so …I was only friends with the boys. But now it's like I have to be friends with some girls in this school because if I'm always hanging out with the boys I'll be called like a sket [girl who goes out with many boys] or something like that

(Anele, age 13, School 1).

Kushtin: We thought being in a relationship was just having a girlfriend, it was the fashion innit.

Lyndal: Yeah, it was just something that you, just everyone should have …

Marek: You just want to be popular and everything so like.

Lyndal: Everyone, like, everyone wanted to have a girlfriend really. To be honest back then I don't think I had the right meaning of girlfriend.

Kushtin: Or being in a relationship

(both age 14, School 1)

And if the girl asks the boy out, that's weird (…) girls would expect boys to message first as well, but then when girls message, they think we're begging or something, so girls don't like messaging boys first.

(Havva, age 13, School 3)

Yeah there's these accounts that get made like once a month or something, and they are called like these truth accounts or like baiting accounts. And they put pictures of girls on it,

and boys, but like put a picture of a girl who was like #pancake or something, meaning she had flat breasts and stuff.

(Faith, age 14, School 2)

They'll always find something wrong about you (…) if you're self-confident about something, about your body, then people will say it's vain. But then we feel it's just like self-confidence (…) (boys) go up to you and they're like, oh, your arse is too big, or, or I can see your boobs (…) like they'll always find something, they'll find something about it to like, to take the piss out of.

(Harriet, age 13, School 2)

Young people's messages for the Children's Commissioner

Boys can feel insecure about their gender and they can also be easily judged from harmful jokes

People feel judged walking down the street by what they wear. Stop judging

Shouldn't be expected to act a certain way because of gender

3c) Young people who did not conform (or were considered not to conform) to 'heteronormative' ideals or fixed ideas about gender were often subject to specific forms of harassment and attack; in addition, general (hetero)sexual or gender-based harassment and unwelcome regulatory 'banter' was widespread.

When young people did not conform to heteronormative identity constructions or fixed ideas about gender they could be subject to various forms of harassment, attack or unwelcome regulatory banter. However, it is important to note that this affected all young people, since it was very common amongst all our interviewees to fear failing to live up to contemporary gender norms.

Just over one third (35%) of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had experienced sexual harassment because of their gender.

Many young people reported experiencing sexual harassment in public spaces, the school and online, and that they felt unsupported by schools or parents in dealing with these issues.

> Normally, when my friends go out, meet, they normally play football, so it kind of just makes me feel bored and stuff (…) so, 'cos of those reasons, I started to hang around … hang out with girls and then after, 'cos of that, I got called 'gay'… I got bullied etc and it kind of still continues (…) before my voice broke, people said that my voice was like a girl's, so they actually decided to call me gay and make up rumours
>
> (Dameer, age 14, School 1).

> My sister says I'm in the middle of a boy and a girl so I'm anti-social, because I don't listen to her because she's so annoying to the point where I want to strangle myself in my room and not listen to her
>
> (Mary Lou, age 13, School 2)

> My mum always called me gay, jokingly, because my best friend is Jack and she reckons we're going to get married (…) If I ever came out as gay they [parents] probably wouldn't, the first time they heard it they'd be shocked, and annoyed, well not annoyed, but dis… well not disappointed with it, I don't know the word, they'd probably expect me to be straight.
>
> (Lachlan, age 14, School 3)

> Mary Lou: Like Sam, a boy in our class, he has a girl's hairstyle, like hair. Like that long hair and everyone just goes –
>
> Leo: Oh he's such a girl, you've got a vagina.
>
> Andrea: And someone when he wasn't in one day said that he was a transvestite because he has a girl's haircut and that he looks more like a girl than a boy.
>
> (all age 13, School 2)

> There's these little kids on the bus (…) pointing at me saying 'Oh that girl has big tits'
>
> (Anela, age 13, School 2)

Like boys older than me like whistle at you and like stare at you and like wink at you and like shout, 'oi, you over there' or something.

(Fiona, age 13, School 2)

Dominique: In year 7 it used to be different, they used to come up behind you like, just come, boys used to come up.

Luisa: Boys used to come up behind you and just (...) grab you

Kamsi: Boys will be boys, just that

INT: So they don't do that any more, there's none, there's no more grabbing?

Luisa: The boys have matured I think.

Kamsi: They don't really give the girls much attention like they did in Year 7, "cor like, look at her". They're not all like let's plan on going up behind this girl and doing that.

(all age 14, School 1)

(A boy in primary school was) always sexually harassing me … and touching me and everything. Then, like, every time he saw me, he just came closer ... and then, I had enough, so once I started crying cos it was every single day, non-stop … and it had been going on for, like, so long and I told my mum and my mum was so angry cos the first time it ever happened to me.

(Khaz, age 14, School 1).

The boy was chasing her … it was this year and basically this boy was trying to put his hand up her skirt and you know I just remember her saying it ... I said to her that if it happens again to report it.

(Fernanda age 13, School 2)

No, they [boys] don't care who you are… as long as you have, like, something there. They'll just pretend to like you to get it (sexually explicit image) (Monique, age 13, School 2)

I get asked for images like all the time ... I know a boy, a boy in my class, he was asking for a lot. Anyway …I sent him and another boy … a picture of a girl, a naked girl, but I just looked on the internet for that, so, 'cos … I was like, oh no, you're not having me!

(Taneisha, age 13, School 2)

Young people's messages for the Children's Commissioner

I'm a girl not an object

Just because I'm a girl doesn't mean that everything I do is to impress a boy

When you are older you are expected to have a girlfriend or a boyfriend

Just because I'm a boy people expect me to like girls

Boys trying to be controlville

Boys using girls for sexual activity

Boys are perceived better than girls if they have more than one sexual encounter

Boys/men whistling at girls/women on the street

Boys touching parts of girls bodies, which girl don't feel comfortable about

Stop bullying because of different gender

4) Young people appreciate the provision of safe spaces and social networks to support and express gender diversity, and are actively participating in and contributing to these.

Spaces and forums for alternative gender expressions, gender activisms and learning about and sharing gender injustices were very important to some young people. Some of these were online.

Some young people described peer relationships (face to face and/or online) and (more rarely) families and teachers that are accepting of and support gender diversity.

> If you have, like, friends that understand you, it's a lot easier to kind of be a little different … cos you know that group of friends that always support you
>
> (Alin, age 13, School 1).

He (brother) hates shopping, I like shopping. He likes football, I hate football. So it's kind of like we're the opposite but like we still get along. And yes, it's just like, he mostly gets in fights for me because of how people call me gay. He just backs me up, and I get into fights because people call him fat. So like a brothers' thing

(Dameer, age 14, School 1)

My college was all right in terms of gender and stuff and I explained it and a few of my teachers were really awesome in getting the fact that my mum would not ever talk to them if they used my chosen name. So they would have to use my birth name to my mum, and my chosen actual name to me. And especially my chemistry teacher was awesome about it and never got it wrong and was really supportive and really nice.

(Eli, age 19, LGBTQ+ group)

My English teacher, she sometimes goes on about, like about the gender thing. And about us being like equal. And then there's some boys that go 'oh here she goes again about girls being equal to boys', and it's like, well we should be equal to boys because it isn't fair that boys see themselves as being higher than girls.

(Millie, age 14, School 3)

Peter: Social media like Snapchat … they did one of those public stories about Pride and things, which, like -

INT: They did a public story on Pride?

Peter: You post something on, like, a London story and then everyone in London can see it, not just your friends. I guess it tells people that, like … some people believe in it but, like, companies.

Rachel: Yeah, other people can see they can say their views freely, that other people are saying it too, they're not shy to say what they like.

Peter: There's an amazing image I saw of Obama holding the multi-coloured flag.

Helena: I think social media's good because you can see celebrities … things like that.

(all age 14, School 2)

Mia: I think it's nice isn't it being able to talk to someone that's not always there, like generally you don't have to see them to know that they're there. …. If I see something negative on Instagram I have this automatic thing that says ... I need to help this person, I just do, it's just something I do, I need to help this person and ask her how she is and stuff, yeah.

(Mia, age 14, School 3)

Where localized physical spaces existed (such as the LGBTQ+ groups we visited), these were highly valued and well used by young people, some of whom were explicitly critical of mainstream statutory or voluntary support services.

The survey data portray a mixed picture about sources of support and information about gender. Responses to the statement 'If I wanted support on gender issues I would know where to find it' were clustered towards middle-range responses, with only 14% and 10% strongly agreeing or strongly disagreeing respectively (strongly agree - 14%; agree - 27%; unsure – 24%; disagree – 24%; strongly disagree – 10%). Furthermore, there was a broadly similar, although slightly more positive, pattern with regard to getting helpful information from social media and websites: responses to the statement 'I get helpful information about gender from social media/websites' were: Strongly agree - 17%; agree - 36%; unsure – 20%; disagree – 21%; strongly disagree – 6%.

5) Many young people are highly critical of gender inequalities, are keen to challenge them, and have a range of existing tactics, ideas and demands for change to bring this about.

For many, promoting change and being listened to by the Children's Commissioner was a key motivation for engaging in the research project.

> We've never done anything like this (research interview) so it's all sort of bottled up … so it's quite nice that someone is gonna read this and actually take a note of it rather than (me) just like ranting about it on Tumblr or whatever and then everyone's like 'oh yeah I agree with you' but no-one ever does anything about it
>
> (Sinead, age 14, School 3)

> To whoever's out there, whoever you are, what age you are, what gender you are I have one simple message - break the binary, crush it!
>
> (Dani, LGBTQ+ youth group)

Across all the research sites many of the young people were keen to make changes around gender inequality and offered a range of strategies and ideas. Some had tactics for challenging gender inequalities, such as Kye's 'comeback' to homophobia:

> It's just the throwing around of the word, 'gay' or 'faggot' … or the horrible thing of, "I don't mind people being gay, as long as they don't do anything to me". My reply is always, "If girls don't like you, then I'm not sure boys are gonna like you", which always seems to hurt.
>
> (Kye, age 14, school 1).

Candice (age 13, School 1) described challenging sexism by making "a long speech about how you shouldn't say that – go back all the way to the suffragettes' time …. I explain my point, it's like I'm writing an essay ... I just keep going like that on and on and on and they're like okay, okay, okay, I won't call you that name!".

Young people wanted to see change. Many of them suggested that schools, including students, could be sites for change: 87% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that students should be involved in promoting gender fairness in schools. Furthermore, 85% suggested that schools should do more to stop gender stereotyping.

> You hear a lot of unpleasant really narrow-minded stereotypical things and sometimes even in front of teachers and there's never really any... they're never really challenged and they're never really... they never really explain why it's wrong.
>
> (Lauren, age 13, School 4)

> They (schools) should do more about like trans people, about all the other sexualities, because currently you're only taught about LGBT and it's much more.
>
> (Ricky, age 13, LGBTQ+ youth group)

> I just feel like some people kind of like try to protect the children from people who are … trans, people who are gay or lesbian. I feel like when you're young, people kind of avoid the topic and you know it's not something you learn about from a young age.
>
> (Joe, 15, LGBTQ+ youth group).

> No, I think teachers shouldn't be particularly involved. I think it's because probably a lot of them will think the same stuff, as the kids, you know? Just because they're older doesn't mean they're any wiser.
>
> (Pjeter, age 14, School 1)

Because of course we do PD (personal development) and we look at society's issues and things like that, but I think we should talk about gender because often we don't talk about things that really need to be talked about and people would feel so much more comfortable if they were discussed…. I think it's very important that we do make it easy for people to talk about their feelings in terms of gender and other things like that. I think that should be part of the curriculum learning about...certainly part of the form curriculum.

(Lauren, age 13, School 4)

Young people's messages for the Children's Commissioner

Gender shouldn't put you in a box because you are a girl or a boy

Gender is over stereotyped which is making people feel not confident about themselves

No one should be discriminated against because of there (sic) gender

I want people to know that is doesn't matter if you're a boy or a girl

Keep calm and don't be sexist or don't judge gender

Feminism is the radical idea that everyone is equal (not radical)

I believe everybody should be a feminist

I want people to know that gender shouldn't be stereotypical

Boys are very sexist over girls, and think they are not as good as them.

Boys think we are the weaker gender and we are not

Anyone can do no matter what gender they are

I want people to support feminism

Treat males and females the same

Transgender should be more accepted and not so alienated from life

Not enough people are open to talk about gender or sexuality and that needs to change

Teach about rape

Teachers should talk about this topic more to make people feel more confident.
(gender) it should be talked about in a positive way and people shouldnt be scared

Support groups for LGBT community in schools and out of school s (places where people can talk and be free of themselves)

I think children should be taught more about consent

Teaching kids from a young age will help shape their identity in to being more understanding which will ultimately change the world in a few years time

Take kids seriously if they prefer different pronouns

We should be encouraged to explore our own identities from a young age, not pressure to conform

We should adopt gender neutral pronouns (in finland they use HAN = he/she)

I don’t think within schools we should differentiate between gender,
girls and boys should do PE together

Teach children in lessons about confidence and accepting other views.

Stop singling people out about sexuality

Introduce more charities to help people on certain subjects

Ask what a persons preferred pronouns and names are. don't disrespect them.

talk about LGBTQAI++ in schools

Be able to change your gender without having to have counseling for month on end and be questioned about it.

More action to stop gender stereotyping in schools

Teach more kids about the laws

We're all human; teach us how it's okay to be different, teach us the differences we might have

Transgender people are normal people and they should definitely be accepted into society

It is crucial for young people to be supported about gender identities, and for all who work with young people to confidently challenge transphobic bullying

2. Researching young people's experiences of gender

2.1 Background: understanding gender, gender cultures and young people as meaning-makers

The OCC's aims for the research, as outlined in its tender, were:

- to explore children and young people's experience of gender roles, stereotypes and inequalities and the impact that gender has on their lives
- to capture children and young people's views about the key influences on gender equality – including the role of school, media, families, communities and context.
- to identify what support children and young people want and need to help them deal effectively with the impact of gender inequality on their lives.

The speed with which the diversity of gender is gaining increasing recognition, alongside gender campaigning and activism, make this project's focus on children and young people's **own** experiences of how gender matters to them both timely and urgent. To address the core aims outlined in the Office of the Children's Commissioner's tender, the project has focused on children and young people's perceptions of the everyday practices through which 'gender' is experienced. It was imperative to use methods that enabled children and young people to express the different ways they understood how gender mediated their lives and identities.

This research project built on the findings and approaches of recent research into children's own understandings of their gendered identities, cultures and imagined futures (Jackson 2009; Buckingham, Bragg et al 2010, Bragg et al 2010; Ringrose et al. 2012; Renold 2013). It focused on children and young people's views and experiences of gender as identity, and how gender manifests through a broad range of social, material, cultural and embodied expressions. It prioritised young people's own reflections on how, and to what extent language, identities, bodies, images, objects, emotions and social relations and relationships are gendered and/or imbued with gendered meanings. We have described these practices as '**gender cultures**' to get at the meanings, values and norms that are part of children and young people's everyday lives and how they might be negotiated, reproduced, subverted and challenged.

There is a long tradition of empirical qualitative research into children's gender cultures in middle childhood (see for example Best 1983; Davies 1993; Thorne, 1993; and more recent work by Tucker and Matthews 2001; Ali 2002; Renold 2004; 2005; 2007, 2008;

Jackson 2006; 2009; Duits and van Romondt 2009; Paechter 2007; Redman 2009; Pilcher 2010; Kearney 2011; Willett 2011; Ringrose 2013; Kehily and Nayak 2013; and the journals 'Girlhood Studies' and 'Thymos: Boyhood Studies'). Such research locates children not as passive recipients imprinted upon or 'socialised' by 'society', but as **active agents** fully involved in the construction of their own social and cultural worlds (Davies 1989). Attributing greater agency and self-knowledge to children's 'doing' of gender is particularly important given the historical denial of children as active constructors and mediators of their identities and social worlds more widely (James, Jenks and Prout 1999). It is also vital in an era of increasingly multiple and visible ways of expressing gender. The idea that 'gender' is not something that you 'have' but something that you 'do' and continually 're-make' through everyday social and cultural practices is increasingly acknowledged. This way of thinking about gender entails recognising that the 'doing' and 'living' of gender is much more contradictory, much more of a struggle, than other studies on children's gender experiences might contend (Renold 2013).

There is also widespread understanding that gender is distinct from sex and sexuality (Youdell, 2005) so that gender is not reducible to the sexual organs or the chromosomally suggested 'sex' of the individual. Gender is a social construction across a continuum of possible gender identities and expressions, rather than an essentialised binary, fixed to notions of two biological sexes (see Fine 2010, Fausto-Sterling 2012, for a detailed and critical analysis of how science and society create gender binaries and Fausto-Sterling's extensive bibliography for further research http://www.annefaustosterling.com/fields-of-inquiry/gender/). Growing awareness of non-binary or fluid gender is dramatically changing ideas about gender identity and equality in educational contexts and beyond, and across age groups of children and young people (Payne and Smith, 2015; Jones et al., 2016).

The idea that gender is on a continuum rather than a binary is increasingly widespread across cultures, as this example from Spain ('Gender is less like this, and more like this') suggests. (Sourced from Facebook, sent to author by email)

As qualitative research (Renold 2005; Paechter 2007, 2015; Rysst 2013) consistently highlights, however, gender binaries (tied to categories of biological sex) are often strongly felt and upheld in childhood, particularly middle childhood, as they entangle more visibly with sexuality. 'Doing gender' differently – in non-normative ways – involves grappling with powerful socio-historical gendered legacies, all of which will be experienced differently when social, economic, cultural, religious and other markers of difference come into play. Moreover, how gender mediates children and young people's lives can be both constraining and empowering in different institutional and environmental contexts (Renold 2013), such as school settings (Youdell 2005) and inner-city versus rural locales (Matthews and Tucker 2001).

Despite the increasing recognition of diverse sexualities, research illustrates how children are regulated by and make sense of their own gender and sexual identities, within a local and global culture that continues to demand a familiar, recognizable (hegemonic) form of heterosexuality. This follows from the reduction of gender to an assumed binary of biological sex (male/female) which naturalises heterosexual attraction to the 'opposite sex'. A small but steadily growing body of research is beginning to explore not only the social, discursive, semiotic and material construction of age, gender and sexuality but also how children in middle childhood negotiate issues and relations of gender and sexuality in different spaces and across diverse social and cultural communities and environments (e.g. including popular culture and social media that are paradoxically at once 'postfeminist', 'sexualised', diverse and activist).

In sum, children and young people's gendered cultures are produced in a variety of ways and yet governed by an assumption that heterosexuality is the norm (Thorne 1993; Swain 2000, 2002; Epstein et al. 2003; Renold 2005, 2006, 2008; Taylor and Richardson 2005; Boldt 1996; Mellor 2007; Allan 2009; Cullen and Allen 2009; Cullen 2015; Haugea 2009; Rysst 2010a 2010b; Jackson and Vares 2010, 2012; Kehily 2012; Afra 2013; Blaise 2005, 2013; Robinson 2013; Renold 2014).

There has been considerable discussion in recent years of how to research children's gender cultures reflexively in changing contexts of increased awareness of gender complexity including non-binary notions of gender (see for example Paechter and Francis 2015; Payne and Smith, 2015). The research team was thus sensitized to how our research practices and our conceptualisations of 'gender' can serve to create gender (e.g. by reinforcing gender binaries or gender categories). We therefore aimed to keep an open and exploratory approach to young people's meaning-making practices so as not to miss how young people move in and out of gender categories and

concepts. We have, for example, refrained from using concepts of ‘masculinity’ or ‘femininity’, cognizant of the ways in which masculinity is frequently only used about children who self-identify as ‘boys’, or ‘male’ and thus can operate to reinforce sex-gender binaries. Alternatively, children and young people who self-identify as a ‘girl’ or ‘female’ might also express themselves, or be described by others, as ‘boyish’, a ‘bit tomboy’ and ‘girly’ depending on who they are with and what they are doing (Renold 2009, 2013).

Maintaining an exploratory approach to how gender matters in young people’s lives also entails exploring children’s understanding of gender as more than identity (i.e. as more than their understanding of how gender defines their sense of self, which could be ‘male/female’, ‘boy/girl’, ‘trans’, ‘gender queer’). For example, we considered how gender is **socially** mediated (e.g. through inter-personal social and familial relations); **culturally** mediated (e.g. in media representations, fashion, toys); **discursively** mediated (e.g. through language and semiotics); and **digitally mediated** (e.g. through online practices); how gender is **embodied** (e.g. through body shape, voice and comportment); **felt** (e.g. the affective dimension of experience) and how gender is **temporal** and **situated** (e.g. how gender matters differently over time and across different spaces and place).

This approach enables us to consider how gender is ‘assembled’ in divergent, complex and dynamic ways, rather than simply existing as something individuals naturally ‘have’ and ‘express’ (see Fox and Alldred 2013). Mapping ‘gender assemblages’ across our interview based data (see ‘research design’ below) is a key way to address the exploratory emphasis of the original commission; it also embeds our research in articles 8, 12 and 13 of the UNCRC, and connects the research with contemporary theories that aim to advance our understanding of the social world. Gender diversity is a global human rights issue, as the Equality and Human Rights Commission has noted (http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/about-us/about-commission/our-vision-and-mission/our-business-plan/transgender-equality). The concept of ‘assemblages’ also challenges any notion of gender as *essentially* fixed, binary or undifferentiated, but nevertheless enables us to map if gender is felt or experienced this way. Exploring gender as constituted in and through assemblages emphasises its multi-dimensionality, and offers potential sites of intervention and renewal, making it relevant to policy-makers, professionals working with young people, as well as activists and academics.

This report thus takes a broadly socio-cultural approach to conceptualising ‘gender’ to capture a wide range of social, material, cultural and embodied practices. In doing so, it prioritises the different ways in which children themselves understand how language,

identities, bodies, images, objects, emotions and social relations and relationships are gendered and/or imbued with gendered meanings in the context and practices of their everyday lives.

As far as possible we adopt the **gender identity categories** and **pronouns** used by children and young people to describe themselves. This information was sourced from their completion of the 'about me' task (see Appendix 4) where we invited them to describe their 'gender'. It is also sourced from the ways in which they refer to themselves in the interviews, such as during the 'what's in a name' task (e.g. 'he', 'him', 'they' etc.).

As outlined above our analysis will sometimes refer to an all encompassing notion of '**gender cultures'** (Kehily and Swann 2003) to refer to the situated meanings, values, norms and experiences that are part of children's everyday lives and actively negotiated, reproduced, subverted and challenged. To describe the ways in which children and young people talked about a common culture of how perceived gendered expectations and stereotypes regulated their lives, the concept of '**gender norms'** is sometimes used.

When children and young people talk specifically about self-hood (e.g "I am a girl and a bit tomboy"), the concept of **gender identity** is used. When children and young people describe experiences that manifest in more specifically embodied ways (e.g. voice, clothing, hair etc.) we use the term **gender expression**. When the analysis refers to how children talk about personhood, bodies, everyday objects and social and cultural practices as being imbued with gendered meaning the concept of **gendering** is sometimes used. 'Gendering' can emphasise the dynamic ways in which meaning-making occurs, and how gender calls us into being in different ways,.

The term '**heteronormativity'** is used to raise awareness of and challenge the assumption that heterosexuality is the default and 'normal' sexuality, and that anything other than heterosexuality is abnormal or deviant. To address how gender norms are inextricably connected to a presumed heterosexuality (e.g. to be a 'normal' girl or boy is to claim or project a recognisable 'heterosexuality', Renold 2005, Butler 1993) and to render visible the heteronormativity of children's gender and sexual cultures, 'hetero' is sometimes inserted before 'sexual' and 'gender' (i.e. '**heterogender**').

Unless the children use the concept of 'bullying', the concept of **harassment**, rather than bullying is used in this report to conceptualise the verbal, physical, material,

emotional and psychological sexual and gendered abuses of power in children's everyday peer cultures and social worlds. Harassment is used because it can often better capture not only the individual and peer group practices that children described as unwanted, hurtful and disturbing, but also the more routine and normalised everyday sexisms and heterosexisms that circulate in peer culture and in wider social and cultural discourses and media representations. The inter-personal and individualising logic of 'bullying', with its psychological categories of victim, perpetrator and bystander, sometimes fails to address the social and cultural power relations that children are caught up in and negotiate on a daily basis (see Ringrose and Renold 2010, Meyer 2009, 2010, 2015; Gådin 2012; Charmaraman et al. 2013,). Young people themselves are used to the concept of 'bullying' from school, and tend to understand it is something long-term. Thus, for example, we differentiated in our survey questions between 'bullying' and 'teasing'.

When children do talk directly and indirectly about oppressive and subordinating symbolic and structural gender and sexual power relations and stereotypes (e.g. 'I feel I have to act in macho ways') the more sociological concept of **gender violence** is sometimes used. It is worth noting that our participants themselves had an expansive vocabulary for articulating gendered forms of discrimination and injustice, which included terms such as sexism, homophobia, bi-phobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity.

After a series of consultations with the advisory group, the following research questions were drawn up to enable diverse groups of young people to reflect upon the positive and negative experiences of if, how, when and why gender impacts upon their everyday lives. For example, RQ5 was included specifically in response to an identified research gaps around children and young people's ways of resisting, challenging, subverting or experimenting with sexual/gender norms and gender inequalities.

The first four research questions relate to children and young people's own experiences of doing, being and becoming gendered and address the OCC's first two aims:

RQ 1 What does gender mean to children and young people and how do they experience their bodies and identities as gendered? (e.g. how is a gendered body or identity felt as pleasurable, safe, constraining, risky etc.)

RQ 2 How do socio-cultural factors (e.g. age, race, religion, class, dis/ability, sexuality etc) and space and place (e.g. rural, urban, online) make a difference to how children and young people experience their gender identities and gender relations?

RQ 3 To what extent do children and young people feel and negotiate the pressures of gender stereotypes (i.e. in friendships, as boyfriends and girlfriends, in family interactions, across online and offline spaces)?

RQ 4 What are children and young people's own views on how gender inequalities and discriminations impact upon their well-being and imagined futures (e.g. identity, peer culture, friendships, intimate relationships, families, school and employment)?

The second set of three research questions address the OCC's final aim, and relate more specifically to young people's identification, practice and recommendations for change.

RQ 5 To what extent do children and young people find ways of challenging, resisting, subverting and/or experimenting with gender norms and gender inequalities?

RQ 6 What messages do children and young people think the OCC and other agencies dedicated to promoting gender well-being need to hear and action?

RQ 7 What kinds of knowledge and support do children and young people think others their age (and younger) need as they negotiate their own gender identities, cultures and relations?

2.2 Sample and participants

The 'quick scoping review' on the impact of gender on the lives of children and young people living in England from their own perspectives identified:

> … a narrow representation of children and young people in terms of background, experience, and life circumstances within the gender literature. A notable gap is the dearth of research examining the perspectives of these diverse groups of young people on the impact of gender in their lives. (p7)

We therefore aimed to ensure that a diversity of experience was represented in our sample. Members of the research team visited the sites, introduced and explained the research to wider groups of eligible young people and issued consent and information forms. In schools we then consulted with teachers to form interview groups on the basis of (1) the forms that were returned, indicating voluntary participation, and (2) the OCC's own criteria for inclusion.

We included six research sites across five locales in the north England, south west England and south east England (including four schools and two youth settings), in urban, suburban and rural contexts. We particularly sought out LGBTQ+ young people through existing support groups. However, we found that we came across considerable diversity in terms of gender identifications in the course of our research in schools, such as young trans, gender-fluid, non-binary, 'agender' and feminist participants, even where we were not necessarily expecting to do so.

In interpreting our data, it is worth noting that participants were volunteers and self-selecting to some extent. They might be expected to include those who particularly wished to make their views known to the Children's Commissioner, since we had explained in our introductions that that she is their representative and advocate. However, thanks to the OCC's own requirements, we were able to ensure that we included young people who are less likely to participate in such groups, either at all or on that particular topic (such as boys, those on Pupil Premium, minority ethnic youth, from faith groups, and from disadvantaged groups such as Looked After Children for whom obtaining consent was particularly time-consuming and difficult, involving social workers as well as foster carers).

Table 1 Research sites and locale

Locale	**Research Sites**
North of England (Rural)	School 4 Co-educational comprehensive School. The pupils are from mixed socio-economic backgrounds drawn from a very large catchment area: includes wealthy rural-land owning families and families living in some of the very deprived locales, including children living in traveller communities.
South East of England (urban)	LGBTQ+ Youth Group.
South East of England (coastal)	School 3 This co-educational school is in a coastal area that faces significant socio-economic challenges. The school has higher than average proportions of students eligible for the pupil premium and with

	additional learning needs.
South West of England	LGBTQ+ Youth Group.
Greater London	School 2 Co-Educational school. 50% of students come from a wide range of minority ethnic and faith groups. Just above national average for free school meals. Diversity of socio-economic backgrounds.
Greater London	School 1 Co-educational school. Located in regeneration area, over 40% free school meals. Nearly 90% of the students are from black or minority ethnic backgrounds with the largest group being Black African, Black Caribbean and Turkish and a diversity of faith.

Participants (Phase 1 - qualitative)

The table in Appendix 5 sets out how participants self-identified in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and faith. This information was sourced from the 'about me' self-completion questionnaire completed by participants during interviews. In relation to gender, some young people self-define as 'boy' or 'female' and transgender. We have thus added the umbrella category of transgender for those young people who openly identified as such. This category also includes young people who identified at the time of undertaking the research as gender fluid, non-binary and agender. We did not ask directly about sexuality on the 'about me' questionnaire. Where talk about sexuality surfaced in the qualitative data (as it did, significantly) we draw upon this in the analysis. In addition, three young people were 'looked after' in foster or kinship care. One young person was living in a traveller community. 68 children and young people also self-identified with a specific religion or faith (see table in Appendix 5) and one young person described having a physical disability[3]. When verbatim quotes are drawn upon in the analysis they are attributed to individual children using pseudonyms, their age, and the research site (e.g. Lyndon, age 14, School 1 or LGBTQ+ group).

[3] We had negotiated a fieldwork session built around some of the activities in the qualitative phase and quantitative phase with a charity in the South West that supports children and young people with physical disabilities. However, due to unforeseen circumstances we could not proceed for ethical and financial reasons.

2.3 Methods and Methodology

2.3.1 Phase 1: Group and Individual interviews: creative methodologies

Historically, children's accounts of social reality were rarely taken as competent portrayals of their experiences (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 1998, Christensen and James 2008). Research was (and still is) often conducted 'on' children as research objects, rather than 'with' children as research subjects and participants (Woodhead and Faulkner 2000). While there has been an exponential increase in research which foregrounds children's own experiences, very rarely have participatory methodologies been applied to questions of how children live out and define their gender identities, cultures and relations, as the OCC scoping study (Cameron et al 2014) confirmed. Research in this area is often specifically focused around a pre-given topic (such as gender and achievement, gender and the media, or gender-based bullying) in ways that do not always relate to individual or situated biographies and locales. This research begins to address this gap, and is located within a wider tradition of critical qualitative, feminist and childhood studies inquiry, where research environments and methodologies are created to maximise the opportunities through which children can communicate experiences that are important to them.

The qualitative fieldwork comprised two phases:

1. *Small friendship group interviews* (duration approximately 100-120 mins, predominantly 3-4 participants per group)
2. *Follow up individual interviews* (duration: between 20 minutes and 50 minutes). These took place during school or after school in youth group settings.

The aim of the first two phases was to generate in-depth qualitative data with children and young people across contrasting socio-economic locales and ethnically diverse communities, about the situated and embodied experience of what it means for them to navigate their own and wider gender cultures, social relations and identities.

2.3.2 Small friendship group interviews

The research activities below were designed in conjunction with the young people's advisory group (across three face-to-face meetings), the expert academic advisory group (one face-face meeting), the methodology workshop with the research team (one face-to-face meeting, and regular skype meetings), and the OCC advisory group (one

face-to-face meeting). Each activity was designed specifically in relation to the sensitive nature of the topic under investigation and the ethical imperative to create a research environment conducive to communicating and sharing views and experiences in ways that are not felt as 'personally intrusive or morally judgemental' (Buckingham et al. 2009: 59).

Choosing not to use a structured interview schedule, and instead creating a range of activities which can open up discussions around a flexible set of core issues (e.g. identity, body image, fashion, relationships, family, social media, safety and risk, futures) enabled many children and young people to direct the flow and focus of the conversation and pause on key issues or areas of experience that are meaningful for them. For example, one group of boys spent 60 minutes of a 100 minute interview talking about their relationship cultures and how being a 'boyfriend' (to girls) was central to how they were thinking about their past and future selves as 'boys' and 'men'. Another group of boys spent a lot of the discussion on gender and racial stereotypes and their relationship to popular feminism and 'femininazis'. Finding out about the different meanings children and young people attached to particular experiences was important, given how children and young people's own interpretations of how gender matters to them can be so different from ours and from each others.

Structure of friendship group interviews

The structure of the two-hour friendship group interviews was specifically designed to ensure that each of the research questions had the potential to be addressed. While there was some variation in terms of duration (as outlined above), most of the interviews flowed in the following way using a range of activities (see Appendix 6):

The **first hour** was designed to encourage discussion on everyday lives with no explicit emphasis on gender. The first task centred on 'naming' (Activity 1), the second on 'clothing and bodies' which could involve drawing (Activity 2) and the third task was a photo-elicitation task on space and place (Activity 3). These activities were designed to enable children and young people to feel safe and to direct the flow and focus of what they wanted to share. This was important in a project where we wanted to open up what counts as a gendered experience (or not), and move away from research which does little more than reinforce gender stereotypes. Also, if other aspects of their lives came to the fore (e.g. religion, pets, food, crime, YouTube etc.) there was opportunity to focus on this during the first hour. Casting a wide research lens on everyday lives, with an interest not just in the positive and negative but in the banal and mundane, also seemed to increase the potential to explore areas of young people's lives that rarely surface

(e.g. when one boy shared his love of nature during the visits to his parents' home in Bulgaria, and this story prompted a discussion amongst the group of where it was possible to find green spaces and safe spaces in the area of London in which they lived).

To break up the group tasks, and to provide some relief from talking, we invited participants to complete a short individual 'about me' chart which provided some useful and entertaining biographical and socio-cultural demographics (see Appendix 4). Participants could complete as little or as much as they liked. We draw upon this data as and when appropriate to contextualise the interview data and analysis.

In the **second hour**, we co-created activities (piloted with the young people's advisory group) which more explicitly aimed to provide young people with an opportunity to focus upon gender issues (e.g. 'stereotypes and expectations', Activity 4); popular figures campaigning for gender justice & gender equality (Activity 5); and, given the little published research on children and young people's views on representations of gender fluidity, genderqueer, agenderism or transgenderism we included Activity 6. The latter task provided participants with an opportunity to talk about popular cultural representations of transgender identities and expressions, and to consider what it might be like to live in a world without gender stereotypes or gender categories, and a world where people are can choose to be any gender they like, free from judgement or discrimination. It is important to note that if these tasks did not engage young people it was always possible to return to areas of their lives or activities that they did want to discuss. Indeed, the images on the young people's consent forms (Appendix 7) were specifically chosen to represent different facets of young people's lives and were also drawn upon as prompts (e.g. the dog selfie was very popular!).

The final task (Activity 7) drew on the success of creative and arts-based methods for researching sensitive topics and to provide alternative ways of raising awareness and/or campaign for change (e.g. Barone & Eisner 2011; Harris 2014; Leavy, 2015; Renold forthcoming). Adapted from the idea and practice of putting a 'message in a bottle' we selected jars, to connect to the definition of the word 'jar' (to vibrate, irritate, clash etc). This task was to generate data for research questions 5 – 7. Each participant was provided with a small glass jar (5cm ⌀), and a pack of multi-coloured 'Sharpies' (felt tip pens that could permanently mark glass). They were then invited to individually reflect on their group discussion and write as many messages as they wanted on what they felt most strongly about in relation to gender, what they would like to change, what they would like support on, and ideas on how to bring change about (see the comments boxes included throughout the report). After participants had folded up their messages

and inserted them into the jar, they could then decorate with pictures, slogans, and additional messages should they wish to (see figure 2).

This was a very successful activity across the sample, generating a diversity of comments, particularly on what young people wanted to stop happening, or slogans and inspirational messages for other young people. It was particularly illuminating to witness how young people who did not want to, or could not, participate in a follow up interview filled the jar with comments they did not necessarily voice in the group interview. One young person who spoke very little spent 15 minutes writing over 20 comments for their jar. The analysis of the comments and talk generated in this task informed the design of the 'How does gender matter to you?' young people's online survey (Appendix 8).

Figure 2: Messages in Jars for the Children's Commissioner

As with all research which is exploratory and participatory, there was always room to be responsive to the experiences that emerge during the fieldwork. As outlined in the young people's consent form, participants could 'just talk' and as we have indicated above, many did just that. Moreover, when working in youth group settings, some of the activities were dropped or adapted in consultation with the practitioners and young people in each of these settings.

2.3.3 Individual interviews: biographical narratives

Follow-up individual interviews were offered to a small number of participants (n=31) and generally lasted between 30-60 minutes. The objective for these interviews was for the conversation to be even more child-led, with a wider aim to situate children's views and experiences inside their individual biographies and in the context of their everyday lives, including (with their permission) their online cultures across their social media networks (see Ringrose et al. 2012). One-to-one interviews also provided children and young people with a more private space to share views that may be more difficult to express in the more public forum of a group. For example, there were a number of young people who were hesitant sometimes to share views supporting gender diversity or homophobia for example in group settings with their peers.

2.3.4 Analysing qualitative data and structuring the findings

The process of data analysis is informed by a long history of qualitative feminist methodology and academic scholarship. Key here is to recognise the situatedness of children and young people's accounts and to focus on children as narrators, rather than reporters of their experience (see Tolman et al 2005). Recognising children as narrators enables a more complex relationship to the data, allowing children's talk to be investigated not only at the level of what is said, but also considering the social, cultural and affective conditions of what can be said, with whom, and in what context, including what cannot be spoken about. The research environment is not a pure space or social vacuum where children can simply 'tell it like it is'. Children's talk does not represent the 'real' or an authenticity outside culture, but is formed 'within and through the networks of meanings made available to them, including where they resist the dominant meanings ascribed to them' (Alldred 1998: 161). The interview setting is thus a key social site, like any other, infused with power relations, in which children and young people are engaged in a considerable amount of identity work. Nevertheless, using participatory methods can go some way to create a place where children can feel able to voice experiences previously undisclosed (at least to another adult, in school). It can also provide the researcher with an insight into 'how different stories are constructed, expressed, censured, opposed and changed through social interaction' (Kitzinger 1994:159).

Crucially, the analysis of the qualitative data generated in Phase 1 is focused on the rich and diverse meaning-making of participants, where views and experiences are explored inductively and discursively. Following verbatim transcription of the qualitative data set (interview, 'about me' questionnaire and the messages in the jars) emerging themes were identified with the wider research team. To assist in the familiarization with such a diverse data set, we produced short narrative summaries of each group and individual interview. We then divided the data set between the core team and used the computer-

aided qualitative data analysis programmes AtlasTi and Nvivo, to organize and manage the data. Guided by our research questions, we identified and documented key themes and patterns, and made links between the data itself and the conceptual schemas which contextualised and framed the data.

While it is problematic to represent the qualitative data quantitatively, it is possible to gesture towards over-arching patterns and themes. With that caveat in mind, and where meaningful, the analysis does highlight (through the use of terms 'most' or 'majority' (two thirds), 'many' (roughly half), 'some' or 'minority' (roughly one third) and 'few' (under one quarter) the extent to which views and experiences were expressed across the sample or participants. However, it is the different meanings individuals and groups attached to particular experiences, sometimes in the same interview, in the same research sites and across research sites that is foregrounded.

The research findings presented in this report have been structured in such as way as to invite the reader to consider some of the meaning-making practices from the standpoint of children and young people themselves. They also encourage readers to think differently about and perhaps to re-examine the dynamic, diverse and complex performance of gender and its intersections with sexuality, race, religion, social class and locality in contemporary middle childhood across the north and south England. The findings are structured into three sections to provide a narrative of the key messages in ways that emphasize both **change** and **continuity** of how gender mediates children and young people's lives from their perspectives and experiences. While each section and its sub-themes are by no means exhaustive, they proved to be the most productive way of representing the qualitative and quantitative data (see below) of what is a vast and complex data set on a diversity of experiences.

2.3.5 Phase 2: Online 'Gender Matters' Survey

An online survey was developed following preliminary analysis of the data from phase 1 of the project, and these data and analyses informed the questions included in the survey as well as the language used in it. Our key concern was that the questionnaire should reflect the diverse voices and concerns of the young people in phase 1 of the project. In line with good practice guidance about surveys we were careful to:

- keep the survey short (approximately 10 minutes);
- ensure questions were clear, unambiguous and presented in a language that was accessible for the target groups;
- have a clear structure (3 sections with 'easy openers' at the beginning, e.g. age);

- have clear and explicit instructions about completion;
- have a first page explaining the purpose of the survey, the target group, how the data would be used, that responses are anonymous, that completing it was voluntary, that respondents could decide at any point not to submit it and would have opportunities to change their mind about doing so.
- Have closed-ended responses to most questions to ensure the survey was quick and easy to complete.
- Ensure the layout was clear visually.
- Provide plenty of opportunities for open-ended comments.
- Pilot the survey with young people and teachers. Several iterations of the survey were piloted, including with the young people's advisory group, and with young people in a range of locations (mainly south-east and north), individually or in pairs. The team also liaised with the OCC regarding the rationale, design and wording of questions on several versions and a final version was agreed upon and approved internally by the OCC team.

We used Snap 11 for the survey which had three sections:

Section 1 (16 questions) – contained questions about the respondents' backgrounds, including age, ethnicity, school/college attended, religion, indicators of social class, disability, gender definition. There were 15 questions followed by an open invitation to tell us anything else the respondent wanted us to know.

Section 2 (27 questions) – contained questions about participants' views about and experiences of gender. There were 27 statements to respond to on a 5 point scale: strongly agree; agree; unsure; disagree; strongly disagree. There were spaces for comments after every 3 or 4 questions.

Section 3 (16 questions) – contained questions how respondents would like things to be in relation to gender. There were 14 statements to respond to on a 5 point scale: strongly agree; agree; unsure; disagree; strongly disagree. There were spaces for comments after every 3 or 4 questions. These were followed by two open-ended questions.

At the end of the survey participants were provided with information about two organisations that could offer support.

A copy of the survey is available in Appendix 8.

The survey was live for just under 8 days of a planned 21[4]. We disseminated it initially via the OCC's own young people's Advisory Group and our academic Advisory Committee as well as other contacts and networks. As a result, we know that the survey was issued to eligible students in at least two schools, meaning that the responses of a wide range of young people were sought rather than a self-selecting group. During that time 506 responses were submitted. As publicity for the survey was gaining momentum by the end of the first week we predict that, had the survey been continued as planned, several thousand responses would have been submitted.

Of the 506 responses only one was deleted by the research team because no answers had been submitted. Thus, there were 505 valid responses. Throughout the data there was very little missing data for closed-ended questions: 12 was the highest number of missing responses for any single question. Although the survey invited young people aged 13-18 to respond, the majority of respondents were 16-18 years old (71%) with only 15% being 13 or 14 years old. 81% of respondents identified as White British/Irish; 9% consider themselves to have a disability; 56% are located in the south, 33% in the midlands and 12% in the north. 77% live in a city or town, with the remaining 23% living in a village or countryside.

Full summary data is provided in the Appendix 1.

2.4 Ethical Approval and safeguarding

An ethics application was submitted to Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (SREC) for approval of the qualitative phase and an application for the qualitative and quantitative phases was submitted to Lancaster University's Research Ethics Committee. Each application was approved. This was a robust process which ensured that the project team adequately addressed ethical considerations such as participant confidentiality and anonymity, the safe-guarding of children and gaining informed consent before conducting the research.

For the qualitative phase, we used our experience of conducting research with this population to produce, with the young people's advisory group, clear, age appropriate information sheets and consent forms for children and for parents and carers (Appendix

[4] The online survey was closed following negative press coverage.

7). All potential participants, and where participants were aged 15 or under, their parents/carers, received an information sheet about the project prior to the researcher's visit. Participants were informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that they had a right to decline the invitation or withdraw from the study at any time without needing to give a reason. Participants were reminded of these ethical considerations immediately prior to interview and focus group sessions.

Confidentiality and anonymity was assured in all cases, except where there were child protection concerns. Participants were informed in the information leaflet and at the beginning of every interview that if issues of concern regarding their welfare, or the welfare of others are raised, these would need to be reported to an adult within the school or youth group, and the individual concerned would be signposted to an adult that they agree could support them. In a number of cases we did discuss issues arising during the interviews with designated adults in the schools, finding however that they were already aware of these. The limits of confidentiality regarding group talk were also discussed at the beginning of every friendship group interview (and throughout the interview where appropriate). In addition, members of the research team were alert to any signs of distress or emotional responses that participants might have had in response to the discussions or group dynamics. In one case a researcher stopped recording to offer support and advice to an individual. All members of the research team had recent enhanced DBS checks.

The survey was conducted online to maximise its reach. It was aimed at young people between 13-18 years old who live in England, which we made clear on the introductory page. However, as it was online we could not restrict who completed it, nor could we get parental consent for respondents who were under the age of 16 years. Research involving children typically requires parental consent but, for the reasons outlined below, we considered the research to be low risk and were granted ethical approval.

1. The questionnaire explored children's understandings of gender and the questions were based on the data we generated during the qualitative phase. Thus, we knew that the questions are relevant for the target age group and represented the concerns and voices of a very diverse group of young people.
2. Participation was voluntary and this was stated very clearly.
3. Participants could skip any questions they did not want to answer.
4. Responses were anonymous - we could not trace respondents.
5. We very clearly mapped out the purpose of the survey, that was anonymous and that participation was voluntary before the respondents began. We also suggested that young people under the age of 16 inform their parents or carers that they intended to undertake the survey and sought their permission for that.

6. We were clear about how the data would be used.
7. At the end of the survey we provided a link to two organisations that offer support for young people. Thus, in the unlikely event that anything in the survey had upset or worried the respondent, they have information about sources of support.

Our position on undertaking a survey with young people without the consent of their parents was in line with that of the OCC on voluntary consent for participation in survey research. Namely, it is vital that young people's voices are heard in line with Article 12 of the UNCRC, and that they are able to express their views about matters that are important to them. As long as participation in a survey does not put the young people at risk (and this research did not) and that it is clear to participants that by taking part in the survey they are giving voluntary and informed consent for their answers to be used, they should not be excluded from voicing their views, concerns and experiences because parental consent is impossible to obtain.

We included with our submission a supporting statement from Anna Henry, Director of Policy at the OCC, who presented the OCC's position on survey ethics as it stood at the time of our research: 'I am writing in support of the ethics committee application for the survey into children and young people's experience of gender. I can confirm that OCC's position on voluntary consent for participation in survey research is that it is vital that young people's voices are heard in line with Article 12 of the UNCRC, and that they are able to express their views about matters that are important to them. As long as participation in the survey does not put the young people at risk and that it is clear to participants that by taking part in the survey they are giving voluntary and informed consent for their answers to be used, they should not be excluded from voicing their views, concerns and experiences because parental consent is impossible to obtain. The OCC now use specific wording for surveys with young people which makes the target age group clear, and the fact that by participating, consent is implied. The wording also recommends that in addition that those under 16 let a parent or carer know about their participation.'

We also provided the following information for schools, teachers and youth groups about the survey:

The Children's Commissioner in England has commissioned a significant study of young people's experiences of gender. Researchers at the universities of Cardiff, Brighton, Lancaster and UCL Institute of Education are carrying out the research.

Please share this **short online survey** so that we can hear from as many young people (13-18 years old) as possible.

Below is information about the survey and how staff in schools might invite young people to take part. The survey is open until the end of **Tuesday 9th February 2016**.

The link to the survey is: http://bit.ly/1OZXTXg

What's the survey based on?
The survey is the second stage of the research project. In stage one we listened to young people in schools and youth groups across England who told us about the ways that gender affects their everyday lives, and what they would like to change. The survey is based on what those young people told the team.

What's in the survey?
The survey has 3 short sections. Section 1 asks for background information about young people. Section 2 explores their views about and experiences of gender. Section 3 is about suggestions for change.

How long will it take to complete?
It is easy and quick and to complete (around 10 minutes); there are options for young people to add comments if they wish.

How can young people complete the survey?
The survey is **online** so **requires internet access**. It can be completed on PCs, laptops/notebooks, tablets (e.g. ipads), and smart phones. The survey looks a little different depending on what web browser is used (the software used to access the internet). If you have problems with one browser, we suggest you try another.

Young people can participate in many different ways. For example:
- during form time
- during a school assembly
- during a PSHE lesson
- via a text home to parents/carers with a link to the survey
- through an advertisement or link on your school website

Privacy
We strongly advise that the survey is completed individually by young people and in a place where their answers are not overlooked by others.

What young people are informed of before they begin (and which a practitioner inviting students to participate might want to highlight in advance):

The survey is for people aged 13-18 years old who live in England.
* You will not be asked for your name or any information that will identify you.
* The answers you provide are not traceable to you.
* There are no right or wrong answers - it's your opinions that matter.
* You do not have to take part.
* You do not have to answer all of the questions if you don't want to – you can skip them.
* **If you are under 16 years old we suggest you check whether your parents/carers are happy for you to complete this survey.**
[A letter home to parents informing them that you will be inviting students to take part in this survey is advisable]
* This survey is private, you do not have to show your answers to anyone else. Also, please don't look at anyone else's answers if you're completing this in a group.
* Your answers may be used by the researchers in reports, presentations and publications. If you write anything that may identify you or anyone else we will remove those parts.
* We will get your responses only if you click on the submit button at the end, so you can change your mind about taking part at any point until then.
* At the end of the survey there's information about organisations that offer support.

3. Findings in detail

3.1 The diversity and unevenness of young people's gender cultures

Young people's experiences of gender are diverse and vary between and across peer groups, age groups, schools, and regions. A picture of gender heterogeneity rather than homogeneity emerged, making it difficult to generalise about 'all' young people's experiences.

We found striking differences between young people's experiences of gender, even within the same school or area. For example, in School 3, we met members of a Year 9 friendship group (aged mostly 14) who were confidently exploring identities such as 'gender fluid', 'agender', 'gay', 'lesbian or bisexual' or 'pansexual', and supporting each other in doing so. A 13 year old Year 8 boy in the same school, however, was bullied both on account of his home circumstances (not living with his birth mother) and his interest in 'girl things', whether that was simply liking the company of girls, or a desire sometimes to wear dresses and make up. Rather than finding his own preferred identifications, he was labelled a 'he-she' and a 'goy' (a 'girl-and-a-boy'), terms that were acknowledged by others to be highly offensive (and in the case of the latter, speaking to much longer established histories of cultural differentiation and hierarchy).

In School 1 where many girls recounted tales of gender-based harassment, we found a small group of boys who were educating themselves about feminism, 'calling each other out' on sexist attitudes, challenging macho and aggressive expectations, and even apologising to a girl for participating in earlier 'slut-shaming' activities.

Many young people talked about the difficulty of being friends with the 'opposite' gender, especially in secondary school, and expressed nostalgia for the lost freedom and ease of primary school relationships. However, we also found many instances of boy-girl friendships, including amongst young people who did not conform to normative gender stereotypes about what 'boys' and 'girls' should do or wear and therefore supported each other in their non-conformity. And there were pockets of non-sexualised relationships: two girls described their 'respectful' male friends as '*boy true friends*': 'sort of like a girl in a boy version' (Millie and Alexis, both age 14, School 3).

Finding and sharing sources of support - often online - could make a tangible difference to young people's feelings of isolation or vulnerability, as we discuss further below. And on an individualised level, there were many stories of parents, teachers and other adults

attempting to offer young people support and insight into feminism or LGBTQ+ issues or respect for diversity more broadly.

We also met Honey, a 12 year old girl in foster care, in school 3. She described how she had to be driven to school due to the harassment she experienced from male drivers when waiting at a bus stop early in the morning on a busy road. Her social media use was being heavily monitored by her foster carers following an incident involving, in her words, an older man 'perving' on her. The school had already flagged child protection concerns about her. She nominated her younger sister as 'inspiring' her due to surviving health complications from their mother's drug use while pregnant. She gave her gender as 'female', wrote in her gender jar that 'I like being a girl', said that she 'never even thought about' gender, and speculated on whether she would like to live as a boy for a day or a week. While gender identity and expression seemed of less concern to her than the general struggle to cope with the adversity life had thrown at her, we were struck by the number of experiences of gender-based vulnerability she described, intersecting in complex ways with socio-economic and family issues.

As a result, it is hard to make generalisations about the experiences of 'all' young people. Difference and heterogeneity need to be recognised through careful, nuanced interpretations and in formulating recommendations for policy and practice that acknowledge and help foster the strengths and resourcefulness of, and diversity within, youth cultures. Any intervention to support and advance gender well-being and gender equality needs to be sensitive to the socio-cultural contexts and diversity of how gender matters to young people and impacts upon their lives.

3.2 'Nowadays people are more accepting': young people's views on gender diversity and equality

There may be a shift in how children and young people are thinking and learning about gender, their own or others' gender identities. These shifts include an expanding vocabulary of gender identity, and a principled commitment to gender equality, gender diversity and the rights of sexual minorities. They see these as 'modern' or 'twenty-first century' and their own principled support for these is an important aspect of their identities and values, at least in the context of the interviews.

83% of survey respondents agreed/strongly agreed that 'people my age are more accepting of different types of gender than older generations'; only 7% disagreed/strongly disagreed.

Young people's messages for the Children's Commissioner

Gender stereotypes don't define me

There are more than 2 genders

Gender can change

Gender is everywhere

Gender is no longer physical, it's how people feel, not what they look like.

If there was no judgement for genders then life would be easier.

Put girls and boys in the same category

I am a girl because I feel I am, not because someone says I am

There is no such thing as a perfect girl or boy

Gender is a social construct

Girls and boys should be seen as one, rather than two separate people

If we need to be put into categories why can't we choose the category WE feel fits?

A girl and a boy can be different a boy can be a girl, a girls can be a boy,
no matter what we think

I heart my gender

Lets get rid of gender

Gender does NOT matter

No matter what you think about religions and sexuality, respect others and who they want to be

We might just be teenagers but we're growing up, let us be who we are

Young people are drawing on cultural resources such as social media sites and gender diverse public figures to describe themselves and others as 'gender fluid', 'agender' and other terms that position gender identities on a continuum and not as fixed or binary.

In the survey 69% of respondents disagreed/strongly disagreed that 'there are only two genders', with only 20% agreeing/strongly agreeing. 85% agreed or strongly agreed that people should be free to choose their gender (only 6% disagreed/strongly disagreed). Furthermore, over three-quarters of respondents (78%) agreed/strongly agreed that 'People should be able to choose the pronouns they prefer (e.g. 'they' instead of 'he' or 'she')'.

In phase one of the research 23 different terms for gender identity were used by young people across our research sites. Throughout our research, young people spoke in ways that suggested they were working hard to educate and inform themselves, each other, and indeed us as interviewers, about contemporary gender cultures.

> Everyone just assumes that there's transgender then male and female but most people don't know about agender and the difference between transgender, transsexual and transvestite (…) You can put a hashtag in (to Tumblr) … LGBQT, non-binary sexuality… there's this one picture I've got and it explains sexualities and everything and it's really useful… I thought there was just homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual and it turns out there's like poly-sexual, demi-sexual – all sorts of things.
>
> (Sinead, age 14, School 3)

> There seems to be this stereotype where you look at a man or a woman and they're a man or a woman, but it's not actually like that. You get people who are gender fluid, bi-gender, tri-gender, agender….
>
> Lou (17, LGBTQ+ group)

Two boys who had been learning about feminism were beginning to explore how gender binaries held less relevance now, and to find a vocabulary (such as 'heteronormative', 'non-binary', homophobia, etc) to articulate gendered and sexualised pressure on young people, and to understand alternatives:

> Kye: I know people that re, don't, uh identify male or female, you know?..... (….) Be how you want. If you don't feel like you're a boy or a girl then you're not a boy or a girl, you're non-binary you know?
>
> (….)
>
> Kye: I feel sometimes when you're seen talking to a girl you're, it's like eeeerrr
>
> Pjeter: It's again that hetero-normativity thing as well, like um, boy and girl.
>
> (both age 14, School 1)

Katie, age 14 (School 2), argued that "people should be able to identify with being a boy and a girl because it's empowering to feel like you have a strong identity". However, she went on to argue that there should be less labelling of sexuality so that there could be greater fluidity of sexual expression: "if you were a girl and you'd been going out with boys your whole life and one time you went out with a girl it wouldn't mean you'd have to change your whole identity". Another group from School 2 who argued that "we need gender" also argued nonetheless that "it should be free if you like, …if you want to be a boy that wears dresses, you should be able to. If you want to be a girl who walks around in jumpsuits and a big top then you should be able to" (Jacob, age 14, School 2). In another case, belief in a gender 'binary' and gender difference was combined with support for feminism for not putting a ceiling on what people might achieve:

> Like I do think that obviously girls and boys are different, they're equal but they're different. And I think that there's definitely things that makes a girl, things that makes a boy, but I don't think that they should be contained as to what they can do and what they can achieve and stuff
>
> (Luisa, age 14, School 1)

Unsurprisingly, young people in the LGBTQ+ youth groups that we talked with had particularly nuanced and longstanding insights into the range of gender identities available. Ricky (age 13), for instance, who self-identifies as a lesbian and non-binary, described first becoming aware at the age of five that gender could mean more than boy, girl, male, female:

When I was about sixteen I was with a genderqueer person and that's when I came across the idea of a non-binary gender … and then I just explored my own gender identity and through that I've kind of identified as agender - so, without any gender - and I think coming to (LGBTQ+ group) I've learnt the term genderfluid and thought 'That's me'.

(Drew, age 19, LGBTQ+ youth group):

I've been through a lot of different sort of gender labels. I started identifying as genderqueer when I was about sixteen, and then at seventeen I identified as just a binary male, as a trans man, then I found that didn't really fit me. I found a comfortable in-between as demi-boy about a year or maybe two years ago … I identify as a demi-boy … I use hy, hym - that's spelt with a y in replacement of all the vowels. I like that written down it's different, but it sounds the same, so people that aren't comfortable with or (don't) know about non-binary genders, I don't have to explain because they think it's just the normal spelling of he, him. (I came across demi-boy) online. …. Slowly I found I wasn't really comfortable being lumped in with men or being called a man, um, and being seen as a binary man and I found the label demiboy and it just kind of like fit.

(Eli, age19 LGBTQ+ youth group)

However, other subcultures also provided access to differentiated understandings of gender and gender roles. One of these was gaming. Daryl (age 14, School 3), a keen gamer, talked at length about 'gamer gate' and the gender politics of gaming, despite being in other respects rather cautious about gender issues (his gender jar message was: "People are allowed to be different, except when it infringes on another person's beliefs"). Another online gamer, Ricky (age 13), described being inspired by and "wants to be like" their favourite gaming YouTuber who they describe as "a lesbian, married with kids" and who produces the best "comebacks" to the homophobic/biphobic comments that so many women experience in the online gaming world. Meanwhile Lauren and Poppy recognised that gender stereotypes/expectations were also evident in relation to gaming, such as, assumptions that girls are not serious gamers:

Lauren: If you're a girl and you play video games … you're expected not to play video games … you're expected to play stupid ones or you're expected to only play them to impress someone and not just be interested in them. Like one time, somebody told me that I should change my Minecraft character because I shouldn't be pretending to be a girl, which I thought was a bit annoying.

INT: Oh, so they thought you were a boy pretending to be a girl?

Poppy: Yeah, because my Minecraft name's (edited out for anonymity) so, it's kinda boyish, but not really.

(both age 13, School 4)

Popular culture provided resources and role models for thinking about gender. Indeed, in the survey 74% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that 'I'd like different types of gender to be celebrated in the media', with only 10% disagreeing/strongly disagreeing. Some young people drew support from gender diverse public figures, from Laura Jane Grace (transgender musician), Ruby Rose and Laverne Cox (both stars of the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*), to the musician and performer Pink:

> Pink! I love her. She's brilliant and she's constantly called butch and dyke and all these … these words that drive me crazy! And no she has a husband, she has a beautiful baby girl. Yes she has muscles but that doesn't make her any less womanly than someone that doesn't have amazingly big muscles (...) she's a hundred per cent what gender she wants to be
>
> (Holly, age 16, LGBTQ+ youth group)

> Ruby Rose…. She's an actor … and she's, like, very opposite … she's, like, very herself … she's covered in tattoos and she's not girly … she's got short hair and she's a very good actor.
>
> (Joe, age 15, LGBTQ+ youth group)

Celebrities like Conchita from Eurovision, who featured in our research materials, sparked debate about gender fluidity and non-binary representations, with young people expressing support for her choices, at least in the context of our interview:

> Conchita … she's saying that you can be whatever you want to be … just don't let anyone pull you down.
>
> (Ryan, age 13, School 1)

INT: Yes, okay. And what about Conchita?

Nat: Yeah, amazing if she's comfortable that way then go...

Olivia: Just because she's not shaved her beard it's showing that she's fine with being who she is, she's not going to get rid of it because she's afraid of other people

making fun of her for having a beard.

Nat: She's gorgeous.

Olivia: But she's so pretty anyway.

Jessica: Yeah, I'm quite jealous to be honest.

Nat: If she has the beard or not she's gorgeous. Literally she has the perfect, the lips, she's just pretty.

Maia: And courage to go on that show the Eurovision.

Jessica: I'm jealous of her make-up as well, she's done that herself as well.

Maia: Her eyebrows are good.

Jessica: Yeah, her eyebrows are good.

Olivia: She's prettier than an actual lot of girls…. I don't mean she's not a girl but people who are born girls she looks a lot prettier.

(all age 14, School 4)

Although they generally supported the right to change gender, young people were critical where they felt it was done for 'the money' or fame or to stage in public, as they thought might be the case for Caitlyn Jenner.

Young people in a remote farming community argued that it was 'easier' for celebrities to transgress – possibly positioning celebrity culture as something 'other' to 'normal' life, or alternatively as more progressive than what they saw as their own 'old-fashioned' community:

> I think it's harder for people who aren't in the limelight. It's easy for Jayden Smith or Miley Cyrus because it's like celebrities are meant to be different, that's what appeals to people, because they're different… But say if it was someone our age and they wanted to go and wear like, a boy wears girls' clothes, it would be harder for them because they're taken the mick out more because there's no one like that round here especially.
>
> (Jessica, age 14, School 4)

> It would be different where I live because it is more countryside and people have quite old fashioned views ... I think in our village if a boy was running around in a skirt and a dress top kind of thing people would judge them more because it's like local... your local little village and you're expected to be normal, how people think of normal, kind of

> thing. And because if you're well known, like Miley Cyrus is quite well known for doing different stuff, so it's not as difficult for her
>
> (Kyle, age 13, School 4)

It did appear that gender was sometimes seen as relatively easy to change, and a state of 'being comfortable with who you are' or with your body something that was capable of being achieved, possibly through medicalised means. In this sense, gender binaries persist even in pro-transgender rhetoric:

> But you should just be who you want to be. You shouldn't let anyone else stand in your way, because … you only live once and so if you're not comfortable with how you are then you might as well change it before it's too late….
>
> (Lorelei, age 14, School 3)

> I think that it's fantastic (that people change their gender) … I watched a documentary about it and I just…think it's great and I hate the thought of anybody being stuck in a body that they're not happy with.
>
> (Holly, age 16, LGBTQ+ youth group).

Many young people expressed their principled commitment to gender equality, gender diversity and the rights of sexual minorities. For example, 98% of survey respondents agreed/strongly agreed that 'People should not be discriminated against because of their gender'; none disagreed/strongly disagreed.

There was debate and contestation in interviews about whether these principles conflicted or could be reconciled with religious and family beliefs. Certain beliefs and attitudes (e.g. male superiority or homophobia) were sometimes castigated as belonging far back in the past, often described as 'old-fashioned' by some young people:

> They're old-fashioned and, like, that's not nice, to be honest. Like, technology is expanding but the people who are living in this world, their mind's thinking like the ones a couple hundred years ago … like, they still believe that boys are better than girls and stuff!
>
> (Navera, age 13, School 1)

Sometimes, contemporary society *in general* was argued by young people to be 'more accepting' of gender and sexual diversity, sometimes it was seen as a feature of *Britain* in particular compared to other parts of the world. Sometimes *old people* – meaning, variously, grandparents, or less often parents - were deemed more 'backwards' and less 'educable' than young people:

> In the modern time, modern days, like, there's more equality 'cos like, everyone's trying to like, you know, get involved in everything.
>
> (Khaliif, School 1, age 14):
>
> In this country there is a bit of like more equality than some parts of the world, and like some people, some like, girls, cannot like ride a bike in some areas of the world, like, Saudi Arabia or something, which is disgusting.
>
> (Dacar, age 13, School 2)

> I think like old people … some of them are like racist or sexist. But …. you can't really blame them, 'cause that's the way they were brought up. Like, my grandma, she's not like, she wanted to vote for like Nigel Farage or something, and he wanted to get like immigrants out the country, and I may not agree with that. But it's like her way of like being brought up, so it's like what she thinks is right, 'cause that's how she was like brought up.
>
> (Katherine, age 13, School 2)

> Society has changed over the years, so your parents would've been brought up with something else and, nowadays, people are more accepting.
>
> (Jacob, age 14, School 2)

The view that older generations are less accepting than contemporary young people of different types of gender was also reflected in the survey data presented at the start of this section: 83% agreed/strongly agreed that 'people my age are more accepting of different types of gender than older generations'; only 7% disagreed/strongly disagreed.

The Internet was often attributed considerable power to determine change. For instance, in Carlita's construction below, 'old-fashioned' anti-gay attitudes are caused by lack of information and education – problems that the internet could 'correct' by disseminating information at great speed:

> I think it's getting better though because … people are much more accepting now …. 50 years ago if you were gay or anything like that, that would have been heavily judged for that... people would beat you up on the street. But now I think there are people who I know (are gay) here and they don't get beaten up every day, they don't get severely bullied, some of them just get on with it and they're accepted. I think it is slowly getting better but I think it's <inaudible> through the internet because before we couldn't spread information as quickly as we can, now in a click of a button we can spread information to the whole world in less than a second but before that was impossible, people are being educated in a different way rather than just (in their) household…
>
> (Carlita, age 14, School 2)

Lucien concurred with this analysis that the internet leads to greater diversity, with a finely grained sense of generational difference in which he at 18 counts as an 'older' generation that has not benefitted from the internet to the same extent as younger people:

> Our generation is much more deprived because we haven't <inaudible> the internet, it's only started up when we were twelve, thirteen, so with this new generation I think it's going to, schools are going to be much calmer places, because people are different, … there isn't going to be one fashion … in the seventies it was like … punk and mods and stuff but then, now, we've got the internet it's all different people.
>
> (Lucien, age 18, LGBTQ+ youth group)

Sometimes support for gender and sexual diversity was part of a general morality about 'live and let live', letting others make choices that are different from your own:

> If the gay people like each other then I don't know what's the problem. I don't know, - I would challenge them then I would probably start to get into an argument with someone. Cause even my mam and dad told me that, they said like don't ever be, don't ever let anything like that happen cause that's the people's thoughts, if they like it, if gay people like each other then it's their thoughts see innit?
>
> (Marek, age 14, School 1)

> I'm not gay but let's just say I am gay, I don't get why people would worry about me if I'm gay like, if I'm gay, I'm gay what is it to you?
>
> (Dameer, age 14, School 1)

Sometimes it came from experiences of racism and a desire for differences of any kind not to be a barrier.

> (I wish that) that everybody becomes one so we're not all against each other and things like wars and stuff don't happen…basically peace. And everybody, so that everybody can just get on with their lives normally …. maybe you're Indian for example and walking around a place where there's a lot of people of one … maybe religion or something, - they don't necessarily like you. Instead of having to walk past them feeling uncomfortable and being worried that anything is going to happen to you, maybe because they don't like your skin colour or whatever, - that you can just walk and feel, um, calm and relaxed about everything that's going around…
>
> (Lyndal, age 14, School 1)

Our data included some impassioned pleas for tolerance, such as this from Dameer who has experienced years of anti-gay abuse:

> We are all humans and it doesn't matter if we are gay, lesbians or short, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, short, white, black, we are all human and we should stop discriminating each other because it's not right
>
> (Dameer, age 14, School 1)

Some were able to separate what they personally believed from respecting people's right to make decisions (for instance, about changing their gender).

> If you're born a female, I think that's the way you were supposed to be … that's just what I think… (but) that's their life, that's their business … they have made the choice so what can I do about it?
>
> (Kamsi, age 14, School 1)

> Marek: If he (Conchita) wants, if he wants to be like, wants to do that, I don't really mind. It's his life so if he wants to live it.
>
> Kushtim: I respect what they've chosen. But it's just something I wouldn't choose
>
> (both age 14, School 1)

In other cases, however, 'respect' competed with more negative and judgemental responses. Even so these were challenged by others in our interviews:

Anele: I respect people like that, but I personally don't think it's right and they'll need help.

Zeynep: Like, some people are gay and lesbian, we should just get over it, to be honest.

Anele: But they should have help with that because I don't think … I will respect it but I don't find it right.

Havva: Religion-wise, it says it's wrong, but … people that are gay, I find it something they should be proud of, they're different.

Zeynep: Like, people should get over it, to be honest.

(all age 13, School 1)

In some cases, religious beliefs conflicted with young people's sense of themselves as modern (more tolerant or pro-gay), with the latter often winning out. Navera describes below how her beliefs (in her 'head') and her faith (in her 'heart') conflict.

> I feel like I'm a Muslim but I feel like some of the things are wrong, like … a person should be allowed to marry the person that's the same gender as them … and, in my religion, that's really wrong … but I believe in it … and I usually go with my head, rather than my heart … my religion's in my heart … so, head-wise, my mind-set is that gay … it should be allowed…. Say there's a boy and he likes a boy and he can't get together with him, it's just gonna make him sadder and sadder … and then he's just gonna get detached from everything … so, religion shouldn't become like a problem for you … it shouldn't become a hurdle for you … that's what I personally believe
>
> (Navera, age 13, School 1)

> I know for a fact, my religion, the most wrongest thing you can do is either be gay or be something that god didn't choose for you because god doesn't make mistakes…. I don't believe that it's right but I'm not going to judge it. …. Honestly I think it's wrong I'm not going to say that I think it's right because you were born like that you should embrace it and everything but if they don't feel that way then I'm not going to question it. It's not up to me.
>
> (Layla, age 14, School 3)

Likewise, for Kye 'tradition' and culture could be dangerous:

> Culture and tradition - they're … usually great but they're also … dangerous as well, they can lead to boxing people in. … Because we've always done it this way, you know, man and a woman (...) I think it's a bit stupid. I mean it's restrictive and like the genders have been really rigidly defined. If you're a man you must do this and if you're a woman you must do this. No in between, everyone must be a man or a woman, and whatever they're born with. And I think that's a bit ridiculous.
>
> (Kye, age 14, School 1)

Many young people proved reflexive about conflicting sets of beliefs or values or why they struggled with particular gender issues. Kushtim, Marek and Lyndal (age 14, School 1) discussed how they might feel if Conchita, the winner of Eurovision in 2014, walked into their classroom and sat at their table. They shared their fears of feeling 'uncomfortable' and why they might feel this way, suggesting that perhaps their fear is related to the fact that transgenderism may be 'common' on TV, but more unusual in their physical locale. They provide an example of how they've become used to seeing men kiss and perhaps one day transgenderism might be more acceptable, less 'shocking and new', less "weird", even if "its not something they would choose":

Kushtim:	I would be uncomfortable. It would be weird.
Lyndal:	It would be, it would be. The reason why is because if you was to see them on the road every day it wouldn't really be anything new or shocking. But the fact that it's not – no, it is quite common, but we don't see it. …
Marek:	I don't really mind to be honest like, but frankly if he wants, if he want to be like, wants to do that I don't really mind. It's his life so if he wants to live it.
Kushtim:	Yeah but when you come in contact with that person like, like he stops you on the road, how would you feel?
Marek:	I would, I would be like what the hell why are you talking to me. (Laughter). Yeah.
Marek:	I, I would be scared like (inaudible) … I've never seen that in my life you know what I mean, only on TV.
Kushtim:	Yeah. Like if we saw them on the road all the time, it wouldn't be anything new.
Marek:	Yeah.
Lyndal:	Yeah.

Kushtim: Like for example, like back at like, I think the first time I saw a gay person, like, kissing was in Year six. I was shocked because I've never seen it in my life. Now when I see them it's just Oh - OK. Like I've seen it a few times now.

(all age 14, School 1)

In the activity which invited participants to consider living in a 'world without gender', some young people, and particularly those who had personal experience of gender-, racial- or class-based discrimination, welcomed the idea warmly, describing feelings of relief and freedom:

Alin: It would probably a lot easier to be, like, yourself and they'll be, like, a lot more, like, variety of things … like clothes … toys … shows …

Ryan: And there'll be less judgement by people.

Peter: It would be very much easier because it would actually let people express themselves in one way, like, what they actually think is good. Like wearing a dress … that would actually, um … and there wouldn't be any name calling … there'll be less of those … It would actually be better.

Alin: It would be more fair, for example, if you don't like the gender you are, you could change … you'd be happy how you look and how you are different to other people.

Ryan: Um, I think a world where you could choose your gender, it might be a lot more simple … without people maybe, like, having to go to the doctor or specialist to try and change their gender and then be … maybe a lot less ... I don't know how to explain it.

(both age 13, School 1)

Anele: It would be so much easier though, to live for my/

Trissa: Anyone would date anyone

Efie: It would be like calm.

...

Violet: I would just one day say let me be a boy today.

Anele: I think I would be a girl every day.

Violet: Yeah probably.

Anele: I can't actually picture myself as a boy…

Trissa: It honestly think it would be kind of okay. No one would be there to tell you 'Oh you can't dress like that'. You can't act like that, because there's no gender. There's no girl or boy

(Anele, Trissa and Efie, age 13, Violet, age 12 – School 1)

Pjeter: That'd be cool.

Kye: That'd be great… because there wouldn't be all this oppression that people get.

Allu: Yeah and every one's just free to do what they want.

(all age 14, School 1)

However, others found it hard to imagine in practice, some suggesting that 'if we didn't have gender we wouldn't know who we (are)', others speculating that the human race would 'die out' or on a future in which brains were transplanted into robots.

INT: Can you see a time in the future when we don't have the gender categories?

Nat: I would like to think that would happen but I don't know.

Jessica: I think it would be difficult for people to stop labelling and stereotyping because we all do it, everyone will be like oh no I don't do it. Even...I guess someone it's everyone's done something that they disagree with at one point. I do and I don't like being labelled but still do it.

Mia: Everyone does it.

Jessica: It's just hard to imagine people not doing it.

(all age 14, School 4)

In the survey data 80% agreed/strongly agreed that they would 'like to live in a world without gender stereotypes', only 9% disagree/strongly disagreed.

3.3 The enduring regulation of gender: norms, harassment and violence

In practice it appears that everyday experiences were much more uneven than young people's ideals.

3.3.a Gender norms and expectations continue to regulate young people's experiences of their body, appearance, objects and activities.

In the survey 95% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that 'People should be able to dress how they like regardless of gender', only 2% disagreed. Furthermore, only 13% of young people agreed/strongly agreed that 'toys should be labelled as for boys or girls'. In practice, however, young people described a world in which objects and activities were acutely gendered. Their reference points often highlighted the role of consumer culture and schools' routine practices in creating gender categories. In particular, school uniforms were seen as highly regulatory of gender norms and a gender binary.

Young people's messages for the Children's Commissioner

Just because I'm a girl doesn't mean I like pink

If a boy wears pink, doesn't mean you're gay

Girls and boys should be able to take part in the same activities

I think you are born what you are and you shouldn't change that.

Clothes and other things should not be only for one gender.

It's not fair boys get criticized if they were skirts but if girls were jeans its not problem

I think that in shops things shouldn't be labelled for girls, for boys, because both genders can wear them

School uniforms should not be categorised by gender

I want it to be acceptable for boys to wear girls clothes and girls to wear boys clothes

Gender really needs to stop mattering. I like boys clothes and when I go to shops I would like to go to the boys section and get very bad / funny looks. I think that in shops things shouldn't be labelled for girls for boys because both genders can wear them. I do lots of things boys do drumming and skateboarding but I get held back by peoples opinions even within my family. I have to pretend to be more girly.

Boys should be able to wear what they want without be judged

I hope in the future there would be less specifically labelled items and more unisex items. I think this would help everyone be who they are and like what they like.

As the gender jar messages, above, suggests, despite young people's support for gender fluidity and diversity, the world was constructed in such a way that binary gendered choices were frequently inevitable. Gender binaries often emerged from consumer culture – the way shops organised clothing into boy and girl sections, for example, backed up in one contributor's view by the moral force of 'bad / funny looks' from other shoppers or staff if you were browsing in the 'wrong' gender section. Although many participants argued that it was easier for girls to wear boys' clothes than vice versa, Lauren's experience revealed that this was more complex than it appeared, recounting an event when she was about seven years old:

> I turned up to something in what was considered 'boy clothes' and I was laughed at and … it got really … because I wasn't wearing pink or something like that … and I was quite young and everyone else was wearing pink … I decided to turn up in something that was considered boyish and I was teased about it … I hated it. …. Everyone stared at me and were saying, "Why are you wearing boy clothes? Why do you buy boys clothes, are you a boy?" and it was just really negative reaction to it and I didn't turn up in anything like that ever again … to anything that was … any social things.
>
> (Lauren, age 13, School 4)

Mary Lou, who identified as a girl in primary school, but then later identified as a 'tomboy' in secondary school, felt that things become easier as young people grow up:

> I wear boy clothes, I buy my stuff out of Primark out of the boys section, my Mum wants me to be a girl but I say no because I don't want to. (….) Like everyone just

> accepts who you are and what you do, when you get older. Like my Mum, she wants me to become a girl. She just needs to understand I might not want to be a girl, I might want to be a tomboy instead.
>
> (Mary Lou, age 13, School 2)

The commercial world supplied gendered sets of associations in these respects, as Mary Lou suggests. Most young people defined their gender, not through their bodies, but through their engagement with leisure and other activities and objects:

> I think I sort of fit into the girl category and the boy category. Because I do like girly things but I also like boy things. Like with the boys I do like video games and sports and doing stuff like that, and then with the girls I do like dressing up and wearing skirts and dresses
>
> (Anika, age 13, School 3)

Such gendered associations were revealed in one group's discussion of accusations that Jo's passion for horse-riding was 'gay'.

Jo:	At school people call me gay because I've got my own horses but I don't care, I just ignore them.
INT:	Hang on explain this to me, just because …
Jo:	Just because I've got my own horses they like call me names like gay but …
Lachlan:	I think they call him gay because when you think of horses you think of girls …
INT:	Really?
Lachlan:	When I think of horses I think of like …
Jo:	If you notice most riders are actually boys that you see on the telly…
Lachlan:	The same with a ballerina you think of …
Haydn:	And they're all small …
Jo:	Yeah, the jockeys…
(….)	
Lachlan:	When you think of ballerinas, you think about girls because like that little rat that dances on TV, she's a girl …
Haydn:	Angelina Ballerina …
Lachlan:	That's it, that one.

Haydn: How do I know that … oh yeah my little nephew…

Lachlan: When I think of horses I think of Barbie because you can like buy horses and Barbie rides a horse, you don't get Ken with horses … I only see like the Grand Nationals, that's all men, but then that's not horse riding that's like more of a … because horse riding you think of running across a field and jumping over rocks and stuff and …

Jo: I do that!

(all age 14, School 3)

In response, Jo took out his mobile phone and played a video of the championship horse rider Robert Whittaker competing, saying 'I'm going to be like him one day… At least I'm trying to do stuff with my life'.

Schools were another site for the construction of gendered differences, for instance through school uniforms, which made gendered bodies legible in different ways. Teachers seemed often to be required to spend considerable time ensuring students conform to the correct uniform; many young people commented that they felt the school cared proportionally far too much about the uniform codes:

Leo: It's like they treat our uniform as education.

Mary Lou: I'll say it. They teach, they care about the uniform which is not even that important, more than our education.

(age 13, School 2)

Some young people felt that their uniforms stamped out individuality much in the same way that gender works:

I think I just want to be myself however I dress, however I act and in school. I think one thing which is really kind of suppressive is our uniform because it's ... how we dress is an initial way to show people who we are and in school we're constantly told that we have to be dress a certain way and we have to perform to a certain way and I think that keeps on stamping out individuality and keeps on telling us that we should be a certain way, which is also I think what gender does rather than think of people as individuals we're told that we should act a certain way and we should do a certain thing and ever since birth we're told that we should do just because our bodies and I think that's just wrong.

(Felipe, age 14, School 2)

Some young people complained about girls having to wear more fitted and less practical jumpers and shirts than boys:

Willow: The girls' one (jumper) is more fitted and the boys' is baggy.

Aoife: Girls' one goes in at the waist and then out, so you look like kind of a Christmas tree. (Laughter) The boys' one is just straight. (Talking over each other)

Willow: I'm wearing a boy's shirt. I'm wearing a boy's shirt and the boy's one has pocket and it's not tight, it's really baggy … and the buttons do up the other way but that doesn't matter.

INT: So you're wearing a boys' shirt and a boys' jumper?

Willow: Yeah.

INT: What's the reason for that?

Willow: 'Cos it has a pocket in it and it's, like, really baggy.

INT: So it's more comfortable for you, it's more practical, is it?

Willow: Yeah

(age 14, School 4)

Uniform rules generally meant that boys had to wear trousers, while girls in theory could wear either skirts or trousers. Some argued that their options were limited in practice:

Rachel: Girls are more restricted.

Helen: These skirts, cos they're nearly fully pleated, they don't look that nice and some people in primary school, you could choose your own skirt … so you could get one that was more comfy and what you wanted.

(…)

Rachel: The trousers are really ugly, so everybody just wears the skirts.

INT: What's ugly about them?

Rachel: They're like the seventies flared ones, which is really old-fashioned … not very flattering.

(age 13 and 14, School 2)

Girls also found navigating the micro-nuances of how they wore skirts to be constrained in relation to contradictory expectations around modesty, comfort, and rolling up their skirt:

Fernanda: If I'm honest I didn't used to roll my skirt up when I first started and now I still don't roll it up much because I just kind of thought well what's the point it doesn't really matter, but I think there's quite a bit of peer pressure to do it …

Tirzah: Because everyone rolls up their skirt!

Fernanda: Everyone does it and it's kind of if you don't, it's not like anyone actually says anything to you but you're sort of labelled as 'oh you're one of those people who don't roll up'. It's true it looks nicer when it's rolled personally I think, but I wasn't doing it before because I didn't really want to get into trouble and stuff and now I don't do it much but sometimes if I'm like, like at break or something I might roll it up once maybe.

(both age 13, School 2)

Some participants commented upon the ways in which uniforms did not cater for the diversity of body size, contours and shape:

Layla: The thing with the school skirts is right mine is quite short now because I rolled it but if I don't roll it my skirt will literally come down to here, I can't walk around with a skirt that long I can't….. it just drapes and it feels really... I don't like it!

Mia: I think with the school, the school expects everyone to be the same size, obviously there are people in this school and out there who... everyone's a different colour, shape, sizes, everyone's all different and unique in their own ways and everyone expects everyone to have the same body, same height, so obviously with Layla...

INT: Yes, that's the problem with uniform they don't really cater for all differences?

Mia: Definitely.

(age 14, School 3)

Others, like Kizzie, described how she wore 'boys' trousers because trousers designed for girls were restricting:

But it just kept ripping, 'cause it was not, like, for my size I guess, so I wore the boy's trousers (laughter). I wore the boy's trousers and then they fitted me more, and I could jump up and down with them … I want to dress how I want without being called a boy.

(Kizzie, age 13, School 1)

Where uniforms are highly gendered, with subtle differences in the design of shirts and blazers, and some items only available to girls or boys, wearing the 'wrong' gender blazer or shirt (by accident, or from an older sibling) could lead to teasing. Young people who identified as trans* articulated powerfully the pain of being forced to conform to gender norms through uniform - which Eli described as the 'force feeding' of gender roles:

> I found (school) was a very difficult time for me being forced to conform… I was allowed to wear anything I liked when I was growing up, my mum didn't care whether I was wearing a dress or trousers, but suddenly all the schools really do care and are forcing you into wearing something. We had a very relaxed uniform at primary school and that was fine, it was basically just "wear these colours", grey, black, white and green and I was like a baby bat at the time so I was wearing all black and it was fine for me, but then going into secondary school and they suddenly had enforced blazers and stuff.
>
> (Eli, 19, LGBTQ youth group)

Many girls recounted spending considerable time getting ready for school in the mornings and deciding what to wear, how to style their hair, even where they described the focus on appearance as being 'for themselves':

> It's like you can't really wear what you like to wear, like, you like what you wear but if you try changing that you get criticised for it
>
> (Josie, age 14, School 3)

> In school you're always told to be yourself and you're different act that way and then they're just like oh but you can't be different to anybody else
>
> (Sinead, age 14, School 3)

Karli - strongly influenced by female rappers, and herself a singer and hiphop artist – argued strongly about there being "no need to change yourself to impress other people", but also spoke at length about the need to look "on flick" at all times, and the preparations involved in "looking right" at school and on the bus - keenly aware that she 'watches' others:

> Karli: It (hair) just needs to be right (inaudible) come to school they don't feel comfortable, people watching you on the bus if you don't have the right hair
>
> INT: Really?

Karli: Yeah … because there's some people whose hair styles are not looking good on the bus and I personally watch them

(Age 14, Karli, School 1)

Girls also faced pressure from schools and parents around sexually 'appropriate' clothing:

Tirzah: My parents say don't wear anything inappropriate like short mini skirts that show your bum and crop tops that go up to your boob, but they let me have a fashion … they don't say you can't wear something that's red or something that's green.

INT: So what's inappropriate?

Tirzah: Really revealing clothes like see through T-shirts?

Fernanda: Well I don't completely agree with that because like girls should be able to wear short skirts and not be told like you're asking for someone to do something to you, it's not fair, you know like when people roll their skirts up …

Tirzah: They like it that way …

Fernanda: It just means they're not necessarily trying to impress anyone they just like their skirts like that and I just think that actually to wear a short skirt is not such a big deal but I do think that there are sometimes people that will maybe wear revealing tops but they're doing it, sometimes they are doing it to impress someone and then I don't agree with it because I think you should do it for yourself.

(both age 13, School 2)

These girls critique the widely held gender bias that girls' clothing indicates something about their sexual availability and morality – challenging the idea that girls who wear something that 'reveals' the body are 'asking for it'.

By contrast, many boys reported the uniform being an easy part of their routine, a relief that they didn't have to worry about in the same way as dressing for out of school activities on the weekend, for instance. The uniform was also a way of avoiding pressure to wear brands or to be marked out for the value of your clothing:

INT: In school it's safe?

Troy: Like

Dillon: No, you might get beat up

Troy: Just some kids

Dillon: If you came in like Gucci, Versace

INT: Yeah

Troy: You get robbed straight away

(all age 14, School 2)

This group of boys in particular reported how clothing played an important role in differentiating them according to wealth and risks of high-value items. They travel from a housing estate that borders the "posher" area of the school, and discussed a complex code of how coloured bandanas mark out gang recognition in various London neighborhoods – noting they would 'never wear a bandana' in a discussion about a friend who had been beaten up for wearing the wrong colour bandana in a neighborhood.

Some boys explicitly transgressed normative gendered expectations around clothing and appearance. Lucien, aged 18 (LGBTQ+ youth group) "came out" in Year 10 and described how he 'edited' his uniform to make it more feminine. Danny in the rural school (like Vincent in School 3) started wearing make-up as a 'social experiment'. He was branded 'weird, 'not normal', 'girly', 'feminine' and 'gay':

Kyle: There's one boy in our year who's doing a social experiment or something at the minute and he's gradually putting more make-up on and stuff and I think he's seeing what people think…

INT: So what are people thinking about that?

Kyle: I don't really know. At first when...

Richard: I think he was getting a bit of stick at first.

Kyle: Yeah, because he kind of just came in with the make-up on so everyone thought...everyone was a bit shocked and then I think now people know why he's doing it it's just all right. Because it's just because you don't...I don't know it's just some people gave him...some people were saying why are you wearing make-up that's for girls kind of thing, others just thought oh he's wearing make-up and left it at that.

INT: What do you think about that?

Kyle: His choice.

Richard: Yeah, if they want to they can it doesn't really affect us so let them do what they want.

INT: What do you think?

Pawel: Don't really mind.

(all age 14, School 4)

The boys describe this as a personal choice, claiming (at least in the interview context) that they didn't mind it, and some of the girls went further in explicitly challenging those that called Danny 'gay':

Aoife: Yeah and (talking over each other) … he (Danny) goes to me the other day, "Is my mascara smudging?" and I just go, "No, it's fine". And then this boy that was sat opposite me …I was talking to him about it and he was, like, "That's just gay" … and I got so mad at him, I was like, "Right, just because it's more girls who wear makeup, that does not mean that it is just for girls. It is aimed at everybody".

Paige: You have to wear makeup to go on tv, so you can't say it's just for girls. Cos, like, boys wear makeup on tv.

Aoife: If that makes him feel comfortable, wearing that mascara or foundation or whatever he's wearing –

Paige: He can wear it if he wants to.

Aoife: Let him … let him ... why not?

…

Aoife: I really like it cos his parents are really supportive of him. His dad actually used to do it.

Paige: Yeah, his dad's a writer, he's written a book.

Aoife: It's actually really good.

(both age 14, School 4)

3.3.b Girls especially reported feeling at risk of judgement based on gendered norms around the body and appearance; pressures around heterosexual relationship cultures and heterosexual double standards were also common

For some young people, articulating their gender identity (including how it did or did not conform to normative expectations) could be a source of pleasure and power:

I am two different people – me when I'm with all my bloke mates, this is when I put on a really deep voice on and talk about girls and football and stuff like that. And the version

we like to call Whitney … when I'm with (female friends) I'm a lot more airy, I'm a lot more happy, la-de-dar! I'm ridiculously feminine – I'm probably more feminine than most girls! I can go into a shop and compare bra colours to skin tone, so I'm that guy! There's always one guy who everyone knows who goes bra shopping with girls! That's me…. I'm open about it, apart from when I'm with my family, then I'm just like, very, 'I'm a bloke'!

(Vincent, age 14, School 3)

Others, however, depending on context, lived with a pervasive sense of risk, judgement and scrutiny.

Millie: People say that you should be yourselves but when you are I feel…

Alexis: They judge you…

Millie: …they judge you, that's exactly it. Like, they're the people that are judging you when they want you to be yourselves!

(both age 14, School 3)

I always feel like really nervous, like people are going to judge me and that, I'm going to, like people are just going to stare at me and stuff…. everyone just stares at you and you're just like, oh I don't know what they're staring at, what's wrong? you just feel like people are watching you. They might not be, but you just feel it, you just feel uncomfortable.

(Georgia, age 14, School 3)

This sense of being judged was described far more often by girls than by boys, suggesting that it related to the gendered body and gender norms around their appearance. Thus a persistent and ubiquitous feature of girls' experience was concern about being looked at. Girls were specifically concerned about some boys' sense of entitlement to judge and comment upon their looks and bodies. Some girls described how this gaze felt really uncomfortable and was unfair and different from how girls treat boys which they argued was with 'respect':

Boys seem to think that if you don't have the perfect figure or, you're too skinny or you're too fat or you're like, even if you're normal …they'll always find something wrong about you.

(Taneisha, age 13, School 2)

Molly: I know a lot of girls with anxiety … Girls get anxiety a lot at like things like parties.…

INT: What were they panicking over?

Molly: Boys were looking at them, boys thought they were ugly, that they were fat and like everything really.

INT: And what did you think about that? How did you respond to that?

Molly: Um, well, I thought, I don't feel that way, and whenever I get like self-conscious I just like, kind of like, bury it inside me

(Molly, age 12, School 4)

They'll always find something wrong about you (…) if you're self-confident about something, about your body, then people will say it's vain, but then we feel it's just like self-confidence (…) (boys) go up to you and they're like, oh, your arse is too big, or, or I can see your boobs (…) like they'll always find something, they'll find something about it to like, to take the piss out of.

(Harriet, age13, School 2)

Millie: Some boys are really, like, disgusting. They're just talking about, like girls, and like their bums and… It's disgusting.

Alexis: I don't feel comfortable about it actually.

Millie: And then it's kind of like…we're not just there to be 'looked' at. We are 'people'.

Alexis: Yeah. And we don't do it to boys…

Millie: No! It's just like, we never say stuff like that.

Alexis: We respect them…

(both age 14, School 3)

Some girls were also concerned about boys' sense of entitlement to look at and comment upon girls' appearance and moods which they said was 'sexist':

Katherine: It's not like we do that to them, like, 'oh he looks so ugly to me'...

Rhian: They'll, they'll like look at you differently. But like/

Ester: Like, if you wear something, I think, one time these boys started laughing... because, I don't know they thought she looked fat but I don't think she was….

Katherine: Yeah. You can't, you're not allowed to be moody really, unless, you're on your period. And then if you say no, they're like, 'you obviously are, don't lie'. But if you say, 'yeah', they're like 'oh she's on her period', and like, they tell like everyone.

Ester: And they'll take the mick out of you.

Katherine: Um, they can be, like, quite sexist recently.

(all age 13, school 2)

Some girls talked about the cultural specificity of sexual objectification from boys. For these girls, "big bums" signified a perfect body. In this context, "skinny" would be an insult:

Violet: It's just what boys like.

Efie: And they, they like, you're from the Caribbean they picture you to be a certain way.

Trissa: You're from Spain; they picture you to be a certain way.

Violet: So, just because I'm a girl from the Caribbean I'm supposed to have big bum?

Efie: Mmm yeah.

(Violet, age 12, Trissa and Efie, age 13, School 1)

Some young people described the pressure for platonic boy-girl friendships to become (hetero)sexualized as they grew older.

Kye: I feel sometimes when you're seen talking to a girl you're, it's like eeeerrr

Pjeter: It's again that hetero-normativity thing as well, like um, boy and girl.

(both age 14, School 1)

Kushtin: We thought being in a relationship was just having a girlfriend, it was the fashion innit.

Lyndal: Yeah, It was just something that you just everyone should have

….

Marek: You just want to be popular and everything so like.

Lyndal: Everyone, like, everyone wanted to have a girlfriend really. To be honest back then I don't think I had the right meaning of girlfriend.

Kushtin: Or being in a relationship

(both 14, School 1)

Girls in particular felt that heterosexual pairing up was a pressure and could lead to sexual objectification. Some recounted name-calling, such as being called a 'sket' if they had several friends that were boys:

Efie: I had so many boy-slash-friends (in primary school). I still have them.

Anele: I didn't get along with the girls in my primary school so where we was, I was. I was only friends with the boys. But now it's like I have to be friends with some girls in this school because if I'm always hanging out with the boys I'll be called like a sket or something like that.

Violet: Yeah.

INT: A sket, what's a sket?

Efie: A person who goes out with many different boys.

(Violet, 12, Efie and Anele, 13, School 1)

However, as the following discussion between a Year 8 mixed gender friendship group (Mary Lou, Andrea, Marie, Leo and Vic) illustrates, it was not only the platonic friendships of boys and girls that were sexualized: Mary Lou, the ambiguously gendered girl in the group, was also teased for being in a sexual relationship with her friends Marie and Andrea:

Mary Lou: Because there's more girls in the group than boys and they just take the piss out of Vic for hanging round with us.

Andrea: Because we were hanging out once together and like me and (inaudible) and she thought we were going out.

…

Leo: Some people go 'Vic and Marie sitting in a tree, I know what they're doing, S-E-X in the tree' and that's what like loads of people say, and then like other people go, Marie and Leo or Andrea and Vic…

Mary Lou: Or Mary-Lou and Marie - one person asked me straight up.

Andrea: Yes and then when you weren't here one day, someone said me and you (Mary Lou).

Mary Lou: And that's just wrong, they just take the piss out of us.

Leo: I know, it's annoying.

Andrea: I don't like it.

(all age 13, School 2)

Some young people described a gendered patterning to heterosexual dating cultures where the expectation was for boys to ask girls out. For some boys, there was an implicit expectation that boys and men should be the ones to ask girls out on a date or to be their boyfriend. For Marek and his friends, who invested strongly in the subject position of 'loyal boyfriend' as an older more mature masculinity, asking a girl out is "made for a man to do":

> I think boys should ask a girl out but not girls ask a boy out, I don't know. I think it's right for a man to do. I don't know, it's made for a man to do. To start a relationship, a man should start it, I don't know (...) Um…only like because girls are shy I think, they're shy they don't want to do that, so it's always the boy that should take the first step
>
> (Marek, age 14, school 1)

Some girls also shared this gendered expectation, not through a discourse of girls being 'too shy' but because it might mark girls out as 'desperate':

> It just seems really weird (if a girl asked a boy out), like … the boy should just ask the girl out. Cos it seems a bit wrong … I know what I'm saying, but it seems a bit desperate, if the girl asks the boy out
>
> (Navera, age 13, School 1)

> And if the girl asks the boy out, that's weird … girls would expect boys to message first as well, but then when girls message, they think we're begging or something, so girls don't like messaging boys first.
>
> (Havva, 13, School 3)

Others girls expanded upon this notion of desperation through a discourse of how 'begging girls' can become 'sluttish girls'. However some young people talked about initiating an interaction if she is fixing a broken relationship:

> And if the girl asks the boy out, that's weird but if they was in a relationship before and they break up, the girl trying to fix stuff that's normal. But if they wasn't going out and they're just trying to know each other more, it's weird. For example, girls would expect boys to message first as well, but then when girls message, they think we're begging or something, so girls don't like messaging boys first.
>
> (Helin, age 13, School 1)

While some boys were aware of girls being upset about unwanted sexual name-calling, they suggested that girls don't understand boys' 'banter':

Dimitri: Girls think all boys are this… when they're frustrated they go, ah, all boys are just so...

Khaliif: Idiots.

Dacar: Annoying.

Dimitri: I hate it when they say that

Khaliif: They just have no um.

Dacar: Respect.

Dimitri: They're stupid. They don't understand.

Khalliif: Immature.

Dacar: Yeah.

Khaliif: Girls are like, all boys are this…no boys understand this when they're upset and confused about themselves.

Dimitri: Sometimes girls don't understand the difference between banter and horrible sometimes they think that us, just, you know, and a bit of banter with them, they take it, they take it to heart and they think we're just being mean to them. I'm not saying it's happened but, I'm saying that happens with boys, where they just, they're just playing about but, they take it to heart …

(age 13 and 14, School 2)

Many young people described heterosexual double standards – that is, how boys can be rewarded for engaging in heterosexual activity (which is viewed as a male exploit and rewarded by peers who 'rate' boys), while girls can be sexually shamed for the same activity. Some girls described how refusing to participate in sexual banter with boys could subject them to being labelled 'frigid', which is a reference to being cold and sexually unavailable to boys. On the other hand, if they did participate, they could be called a 'skank' or 'slut' or 'sket'. Referring to a teen girl who engaged in sexual activity with a boy from another school;

She was being called a slag and everything. Like, boys don't, like, if that, if boys get ratings and stuff like that, then it's like, they look cool for getting it

(Monique age 13, School 2)

Some girls suggested that heterosexual pressures were, however, from only a small minority of boys:

Rhian: It's only like the really, really horny ones.
Ester: Like they really like/
Rhian: Take advantage of you if you're not like.. mm.
Ester: It's like, let's say you're alone with someone, like. It's not like they would/
Katherine: Do anything/
Ester: Force you. But like/
Rhian: Pressure you/
Ester: They would, maintain, just like. That's a bit like worse than forcing you/
Rhian: 'Cause/
Ester: 'Cause you feel like you have to, like you just can't stop it, you just like

(all age 13, school 2)

Pressure here then is described as not being "physically" forced, but feeling under social/peer duress to sexually perform for boys, which they say is 'worse' because the girls 'feel you have to'.

Some boys were keenly aware of the heterosexual double standards girls faced:

> Um, yeah it is quite true because of that, um, if a girl goes with a boy, they get called a scat slag whore, whatever. It's not fair like because if a boy does something they don't call him anything they just leave him, and if they both did the same he should be called something as well. No one should be called anything but if girls get called for something boys should as well.
>
> (Marek, 14, School 1)

Marek also however, talked about the mixed messages they felt boys could receive from some of the girls:

> It's like they want, they want the boys to look at them. And when they're at school they complain about they, they don't like the way people look at them
>
> (Karek, age 14, School 1)

Social media was a space where girls' bodies were looked at, evaluated and judged in a variety of ways through 'likes' and comments and emojis on images, 'ratings' (a scale of judgement and peer recognition partly related to social media evaluations). These were a significant factor in peer gender and sexual cultures, impacting how young people felt about themselves:

Rebecca: Boys expect so much its just not very flattering. You'll get so many comments from people "Oh you look so flat" ...

Melanie: Yeah there's these accounts that get made like once a month or something and they are called like these truth accounts or like baiting accounts and they put pictures of girls on it or and boys but like put a picture of a girl who was like #pancake or something meaning she had flat breasts and stuff.

Faith: Boys will comment like "You look ugly" and like there's a girl who's in our squad who gets a lot of it from a lot of boys like if she just posts a photo they comment like ugly faces and stuff.

Girls discussed how they found comments like these 'sexist' and that being rated for your appearance could be 'degrading':

Rachel: I think the rating thing can be quite degrading, to be honest.

Helena: Yeah, if I see somebody posting photos that look really good or something, I'll be self-conscious for, like, a week or something.

INT: That long … a week?

Rachel: Like, sometimes, it depends, like, what it is. If it's, like, I don't know, a video or something and they're, like, rating or stuff like that, you don't feel, like, right.

(both age 14, School 2)

Due to this competitive environment and what young people called 'media' pressures to be the 'perfect teenager or perfect woman', some young people opted out of 'selfie' culture on social media saying they only posted landscapes or nature images, for example.

Other participants were, however, completely immersed in this culture, with one participant in school 2 working her way to 10,000 Instagram followers, documenting the detailed practices of selecting which images to post and the frequency to post to gain and keep followers. The likes on the photos was again key, with several participants

across different schools saying they needed to have at least 50 likes on an instagram photo of themselves to keep the photo up:

Tirzah: Of course, everyone posts pictures so we get likes, … and I won't, I won't post something inappropriate just for someone's attention, I'll never post anything really revealing or …

Fernanda: ... I really hate it when people post these pictures where it's … it just have not go any of their head and it's got their full chest and they've obviously edited it to make their boobs look bigger or something like that because I think you should be proud of your body but I think that sometimes, I don't really like but…

(both age 13, School 2)

Here, getting 'likes' for girls was a precarious balancing act between posting an image that was felt to be 'appropriate' and posting an image that could be judged as 'slutty'. For instance, as girls discussed complex gender based rules around uses of social media and the appropriateness of images posted (in relation to sexual or sexualised content in particular) they criticized some girls who were said to seek attention from their photo posting.

Havva described explicitly how heterosexual double standards were shaping reception of social media images since girls are labelled the 's-word' (e.g. slut or sket) if they take a picture in their bra - but boys are not slut-shamed if they 'post' their 'six-pack':

Havva: To be honest, like, there's this thing in our, like, society right now, yeah … when girls do something, they're being called the 's' word, but then when boys post pictures of their six packs on Instagram and Facebook, they don't get called, like, the 's' word. I find it so weird because when a girl takes a picture of their bra and posts it, they get, like, called the 's' word … but boys do the same thing because, like, they don't wear nothing and they take a picture with their six pack, so I find it weird (…)

Navera: And for example, if you're on holiday or something and the girl takes a picture in her bikini, they will say so much stuff about her but if it's a boy taking a picture with just his swimming shorts, cos boys are usually more open, they don't say nothing to them and that's just like unfair because we're just different genders but we're all same person

Zeynep: It's like a boy pulling down their trousers … some boys walk around like that … but when we girls pull down our trousers or when we, like open up top button up to here or something

(Age 13, School 1)

Where boys are typically at liberty to post photos of their 'six packs' or in their 'swimming shorts', girls' 'bikini' or 'bra' posts were subject not only to harsher scrutiny, but girls described how they expect and have to 'accept' online heterosexual harassment if they post revealing images. The girls below describe the unwanted attention from 'random blokes' received through posting a 'bikini' picture:

Melanie: She says she has got like 5 DMs a day from just these random blokes... She like um gets these random DMs from like these random people asking like because she has obviously posted a bikini picture you know in like a leopard print bikini and like she'll like DMs and all this stuff.

Faith: Yeah.

Melanie: and like she gets all this attention…

Faith: Sorry but she obviously knows that by posting that picture she cannot expect boys not like it a bit do you know what I mean?

Melanie: You wouldn't post it unless you kind of wanted some attention from it.

Faith: Yeah exactly.

INT: If you want to post those kind of pictures then you have to….

Faith: Accept it.

(all age 14, School 2)

This group of girls were also critical of a 'bisexual' girl in school who posted images of her naked torso, which they suggested she did as a sort of gender equity move- because "boys do it":

Ester: Like, boys like, take photos like from here, like right at the top, like their muscly shoulders/

Katherine: And then like, she posted one that was like…just showing, what, if a boy can do it, why can't I? /

INT: Okay, so, boys post muscly photos/

(Laughter)

INT: And so she posted a photo of her chest?

Ester: Yeah, she was just like they do it so why can't I?/

Rhian: That is a good thing, like feminism, but it's just a bit like/

Ester: Kind of disturbing

Katherine: It's just a bit like ... weird

Rhian: I'm not sexist or anything, but some people are now they'll take the piss out of that and stuff.

(all age 13, School 2)

Another group of Year 8 students were, however, highly critical of the heterosexual double standards around women's bodies and nudity both online and offline, with Fernanda arguing that women's nudity should be a sign of strength:

> Yeah I think it's great like for women to be naked and to be like confident with themselves as long as they're showing it as a strong thing and I think there are, you know like sometimes you might have a woman naked showing herself as really weak and so that's something that makes her vulnerable and I feel like it shouldn't be something that makes you vulnerable it should be something that makes you stronger. It's kind of ridiculous there are legal boobs and illegal boobs, like men can go down the street topless and women can't it's like … well how is that fair you know …
>
> (Fernanda, age 13 School 2)

Young people's messages for the Children's Commissioner

Boys can feel insecure about their gender and they can also be easily judged from harmful jokes

People feel judged walking down the street by what they wear. Stop judging.

Shouldn't be expected to act a certain way because of gender

3.3.c Young people who did not conform (or were considered not to conform) to 'heteronormative' ideals or fixed ideas about gender were often subject to specific forms of harassment and attack; in addition, however, general (hetero)sexual or gender-based harassment and unwelcome regulatory 'banter' was widespread.

Young people's messages for the Children's Commissioner

I'm a girl not an object

Just because I'm a girl doesn't mean that everything I do is to impress a boy

When you are older you are expected to have a girlfriend or a boyfriend

Just because I'm a boy people expect me to like girls

Boys trying to be controlville

Boys using girls for sexual activity

Boys are perceived better than girls if they have more than one sexual encounter

Boys/men whistling at girls/women on the street

Boys touching parts of girls bodies, which girl don't feel comfortable about

Stop bullying because of different gender

When young people did not conform to heteronormative identity constructions or fixed ideas about gender they could be subject to various forms of harassment, attack or unwelcome regulatory banter. However, it is important to note that gender based harassment affected all young people, since it was very common amongst all our interviewees to fear failing to live up to contemporary gender norms. Many young people reported experiencing sexual harassment in public spaces, the school and

online, and sometimes felt unsupported by schools or parents in dealing with these issues.

Just over one third (35%) of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had experienced sexual harassment because of their gender.

Many young people recounted their fear of how they and others could be or had been subject to gender-based teasing and harassment from friends, peers, siblings and parents for failing to conform to culturally specific gender identities ("being in the middle of a boy and a girl") or norms around gender expression ("hairstyle" or "skirt"):

> My sister says I'm in the middle of a boy and a girl so I'm anti-social, because I don't listen to her because she's so annoying to the point where I want to strangle myself in my room and not listen to her
>
> (Mary Lou, age 13, School 2)

> Mary Lou: Like Sam, a boy in our class, he has a girl's hairstyle, like hair. Like that long hair and everyone just goes –
>
> Leo: Oh he's such a girl, you've got a vagina.
>
> Andrea: And someone when he wasn't in one day said that he was a transvestite because he has a girl's haircut and that he looks more like a girl than a boy.
>
> (all age 13, School 2)

> When I was in music, the other week, there were these people being really annoying, cos I was saying … well, my friend said that you should be allowed to wear a skirt … that boys would be allowed to wear a skirt in, like, a hundred years it would be acceptable for guys to wear a skirt and I said, "Yeah, of course it will cos a hundred years ago, it wasn't acceptable for women to wear trousers as it is now". And they were like, "Oh no, that's wrong that you think that". I was like, "No, it's not", and then they started calling me a transvestite because I thought boys should be allowed to wear a skirt … So then I asked the teacher and the teacher was like, "Well, it's different, cos it's what's designed for boys … what's designed for girls" … and then they was like, "Oh, you just got mugged off by the teacher" , and I was like, "No, because if you designed a skirt that was for boys, then they could definitely wear it and I would not have a problem with it"
>
> (Paige, age 14, School 4)

Anti-gay harassment was perceived by some young people as commonplace and targeted at young people who didn't conform to culturally specific gender norms. Dameer describes the gendered expectation that, like his brother, he will love sports and play football. However, he loves shopping, hates football, and spends most of his time with his best-(girl)friend Khaz and "hanging out with girls" who share similar interests to himself. This gender non-conforming behaviour and embodiment (having a high pitched voice) resulted in him being the subject of anti-gay bullying:

> People started calling me gay and because before my voice broke, people said that my voice was like a girls, so they actually decided to call me gay and make up rumours
>
> (Dameer, age 14, School 1)

Dameer described becoming inured to it:

> When I started to hang around … hang out with girls, (...) I got called 'gay'… I got bullied etc and it kind of still continues on but, to be honest, I don't really care no more … cos I'm used to it and I know it's not true … I know I'm not gay, so, there's no point of you lot calling me this … and if I was to be gay … I'm gay, what's it to you? But the thing is, I'm not gay and, like, I couldn't just send my message through to people in my Year group … in fact to the whole school and outside school … cos there's people that are outside school, from different schools have been calling me names, in fact, I don't even know them
>
> (Dameer, age 14, School 1)

Lachlan described regulatory homophobic teasing from his mother and uncertainty over how his parents would respond if he wasn't heterosexual:

Lachlan:	My mum always called me gay, jokingly, because my best friend is Harry and she reckons we're going to get married.
Interviewer:	Okay how do you feel about that?
Lachlan:	I just ignore her…
Interviewer:	So just because you've got a best friend she thinks …
Lachlan:	We're quite, well really close, but yeah …
Interviewer:	Yeah, which is nice … do you think she's really worried or is she just teasing you?

Lachlan: She's probably teasing me just to annoy me, because she knows it annoys me.

Interviewer: And if you were gay how do you think she would be?

Lachlan: … If I ever came out as gay they probably wouldn't, the first time they heard it they'd be shocked, and annoyed, well not annoyed, but dis… well not disappointed with it, I don't know the word, they'd probably expect me to be straight….. (have) a wife, a child, and they know if I turn gay I won't be able to have children unless I adopted but I mean, I don't know… I think they'd probably accept me

(age 14, School 3)

Young people also described entrenched sexism, heterosexism, and (hetero)sexual harassment which impacted young people across public spaces, in school and online. This took the form of unwanted comments, cat-calling in public on the street or transport, as well as physical groping or 'touching-up' and grabbing of girls by boys at school, as well as negative comments and non-consensual distributing of images online.

There's these little kids on the bus (…) pointing at me saying 'Oh that girl has big tits'

(Anela, age 13, School 1)

Like boys older me like whistle at you and like stare at you and like wink at you and like shout, 'oi, you over there' or something.

(Fiona, age 13, School 2)

Some girls discussed feeing unsafe in a range of places from their neighbourhood, shopping malls, as well as parks and the school yard, particularly at night:

INT: Are there any of these spaces that you wouldn't go at night?

Khaz: The park … you'd get raped. (age 14, School 1)

I always worry about someone getting a ladder and climbing into my window but that just frightens me.

(Mia, age 14, School 3)

Sometimes the threat was specifically sexual, sometimes more nebulous or possibly class-based. In School 3, young people were highly aware of an apparent attempt at abduction, and an actual case of kidnapping:

Lachlan: I don't like the woods.

Jo: Pubs … not that I've been to a pub but … when you're outside of them, I don't like the look of them. That's because I'm a kid though … like you get drunks sometimes I guess in pubs it's where all the alcohol is … (….)

Lachlan: I'd probably like go to the road, I've obviously walked to school during the day but if it was night time I probably wouldn't be able to get past … I wouldn't be able to go up the road, I'd be too scared, I'm more sensitive I guess. I get scared easily and when you watch NCIS and stuff like that and there's people with snipers and I'd get, like when I go to my kitchen I've got like a window and I'm scared someone's going to shoot me or something. (….) I feel really quite worried, especially like if I'm walking along the street and this person, and say someone's been walking behind me to get to Asda and they've been following for a while so I stopped to do my shoe laces up just to see if they are following me…. I have quite, I have like a wild imagination so like I'll walk into school and I think to myself if a man ever came up to me I'd karate kick them and stuff… I'd beat them up and then run away and if they came to me I'd just kill them, I don't know, it's the stuff I think of.

Jo: I was walking to school before and a car drove up on the kerb and I thought they were coming to get me and so I ran down the street and I thought I was going to die and I was thinking well if I die what would it be like and I was like what if I woke up and I was thinking different things that happen.

(both age 14, School 3)

Some girls described wearing shorts under their school uniform skirts because they feared boys looked up their skirts when they walked up the stairs at school. Other girls were called names, such as 'sket' and 'slut' for wearing revealing clothes such as 'crop tops' of shorts which revealed girls buttock cheeks, and were described as "batty riders':

Dameer: Friends talk a lot about crop tops … do you know what that is … a short top, where you can see your belly. One of my friends, yeah, she wore that

for no school uniform day and for sports day and then a lot of people spoke about her … calling her names for wearing a short top.

Khaz: Yeah but she was wearing a batty rider. (…) … basically shorts that show your cheeks … I mean your bum.

(age 14, School 1)

Fernanda: The boy was chasing her … it was this year and basically this boy was trying to put his hand up her skirt and you know I just remember her saying it….. I said to her that if it happens again to report it.

(age 13, School 2)

Both verbal and physical heterosexual harassment was commonly linked to appearance and clothing:

Fiona: Like boys older me like whistle at you and like stare at you and like wink at you and like shout, 'oi, you over there' or something.

INT: Do you find it's worse in your uniform or in your regular clothes?

Fiona: In my regular clothes.

(age 13, School 2)

These girls experienced both 'cat calling' and verbal heterosexual harassment out on the street and in the playground and corridors. School was also a place they experienced unwanted grabbing and touching on the playground and in corridors from male classmates:

Faith: Oh God. The other day someone I was meeting Lanie on the street and someone did it to us and I started having a go at them. We were like "That's disgusting you're a man. How are you doing that?" and he was like "I wasn't doing it to you" and I was like "Still that's not my idea of a compliment".

INT: Mmm.

Faith: Yeah people usually just like go though. Like a lot in school people just like….

Melanie: Yeah it happens every day.

Faith: Like I was walking on the way here and someone just touched me there and just like winked me and I was like …

(age 14, School 2)

In one school, girls stated that it was actually much worse in Year 7 and the boys had matured and become less likely to physically sexually harass touch and 'grab' the girls now in year 8.

Dominique: In year 7 it used to be different, they used to come up behind you like, just come, boys used to come up

Luisa: Boys used to come up behind you and just (...) grab you

Kamsi: Boys will be boys, just that

INT: So they don't do that any more, there's none, there's no more grabbing?

Luisa: The boys have matured i think

Kamsi: They don't really give the girls much attention like they did in Year 7, "cor like, look at her". They're not all like let's plan on going up behind this girl and doing that

(all age 14, School 1)

Although both verbal comments and physical heterosexual harassment were common it was largely unreported to school staff, but there were cases of young people disclosing to their parents, in this case her mother:

(boy in primary school) always sexually harassing me … and touching me and everything. Then, like, every time he saw me, he just came closer ... and then, I had enough, so once I started crying cos it was every single day, non-stop … and it had been going on for, like, so long and I told my mum and my mum was so angry cos the first time it ever happened to me … I told her how long it was going on for and she went to his house cos I know where he lived. She went to his house … my mum … he was playing outside … my mum went next to the boy and I didn't wanna get out of the car cos I don't like him. My mum went next to him … shouted in his face, telling him to leave me alone otherwise bad things are gonna happen. Then next day in school, he didn't do anything, he stopped.

(Khaz, age 14, School 1)

Khaz explains how her mother stepped in to defend her after sexual harassment had continued at length in primary school. Others described not knowing whether or not to

report incidents in secondary school, indicating a lack of adequate awareness or responsiveness at school:

Tirzah: The boy was chasing her … it was this year and basically this boy was trying to put his hand up her skirt and you know I just remember her saying it.

INT: And was it resolved?

Tirzah: I think the person had been dared to do it, so she wasn't sure whether to report it or not.

Fernanda: I told her to report it .. .

Tirza: I said to her that if it happens again to report it

(age 13, School 2)

Some boys openly discussed the problem of 'touching up' were very critical of the limited options girls have for dealing with it:

Troy: They always get touched up by boys when they don't want to, no, they actually don't want to and then they don't like tell the school, or their parents, 'cause they'll get beaten up …by the person that was touching them up

Dillon: They'll get more touched up …the school wouldn't do anything about it, the school just stirred it up, the school's rubbish

Troy: Yeah, but who, if you don't know who to speak to, about that issue, then who would you speak to about that issue? do you get what I mean?

(all age 14, school 2)

As the boys discuss, girls may feel they will be further victimized if they do report a sexual assault. They argue the school is 'rubbish' and that girls' don't have adequate supports to address the issue.

Some young people described their phone as the safest place to be, particularly those living in areas where local public spaces were off-limits and described as dangerous, violent, risky etc. Nonetheless, given the offline harassment reported above, it was not surprising that some of the young people experienced online heterosexual harassment. This seemed most prevalent in School 2:

Faith: They just put horrible things on these accounts and take pictures just say like…

Melanie: Screenshots.

Rebecca: Screenshots of like bad pic….like slips like bad pictures of themselves and….

Melanie: And like people's nude pictures….

Faith: Yeah someone's nude pictures got posted.

Rebecca: Sex whatever you want to call it.

Faith: Yeah that got posted and they were just rude about people like….

(all age 14, School 2)

The primary concern was around the negative comments and abuse aimed at images. Girls were particularly worried about how 'nude pictures' could be 'leaked' without consent and the invasion of girls' privacy:

> I know that Instagram isn't safe because I've seen like nude pictures get leaked of people from other schools around (area of) London and I can't imagine what they'd be feeling. I mean, their privacy has been completely invaded, all of their friends, some of their family would have seen it because they'd been tagged, how can you go through that and still go through day to day life like that, it doesn't make sense?
>
> (Kelly, age 14, School 2)

Some boys didn't recognize this as heterosexual harassment:

Dimitri: I think that um, girls…need to think about what they're going to do, 'cos when they do send nudes, they don't think about the consequences

Khaliif: (but) it wouldn't have happened if the boy didn't ask for it (…) but I think then it comes up to the girl who has to decide, and maybe she doesn't feel confident in herself. Maybe she, er, is having trouble and she doesn't feel as though she has the confidence to say no

(Dimitri and Khaliif, 14, School 2)

Although distributing sexually explicit images without consent is a form of sexual harassment and a sexual offence on the part of the sender, the boys focus blame instead on girls as the producers of the images - judging them as failing 'to think' about

the consequences of making the images and for lacking the confidence to 'say no' to boys' requests.

Some girls illustrated a range of creative and humorous responses to harassment around nudes, for example, through group strategies like sending boys images that were not of them:

Taneisha:	I get asked for images like all the time...
Harriet:	Oh, it's like, I know a boy, a boy in my class, he was asking for a lot, anyway, …I sent him and another boy …a picture of a girl, a naked girl, but I just looked on the internet for that, so, 'cos
INT:	So you sent them, and they didn't know it wasn't you?
Taneisha:	No, they did! I was like, oh no, you're not having me! (age 13, School 2)

3.4 Young people appreciate the provision of safe spaces and social networks to support and express gender diversity, including in schools, and are actively participating in and contributing to these.

Spaces and forums for alternative gender expressions, gender activisms and learning about and sharing gender injustices were very important to some young people. Some of these were online, but where localized physical spaces existed these were highly valued by young people, especially where they were critical of mainstream support services (whether statutory or voluntary). Young people were actively contributing to these spaces in various ways.

The case study of two 14 year old boys below goes some way to exemplify the inter-relation of different networked spaces of support.

Kye and Pjeter are best friends who hold views on gender diversity, gender equality and feminism that are not shared by their peers as far as they know. The interview was the first time they had each spoken openly on these issues in school. Kye (mixed heritage West Africa and English) and Pjeter (Eastern Europe heritage) support each other in their dislike of "the whole machismo thing", and the expectation for boys to be aggressive and misogynistic. They are highly critical about how fixed ideas of gender and the gender binary "can lead to boxing people in". They question why people think there are "only two genders" because of the ways "the genders have been really rigidly

defined. If you're a man you must do this and if you're a woman you must do this". Pjeter particularly disliked the widely held view that "all people from South-East Europe are naturally angry or aggressive, which I'm not". For over a year, Kye and Pjeter have been sharing feminist quotes, memes and tumblr sites to learn more about gender inequalities. An example is "I write about feminism" (iwriteaboutfeminism.tumblr.com), which Kye said was "really cool cause she writes about what went on in (the police shooting in) Ferguson and a lot of that". They routinely "check themselves" since they came to believe that much of what they were previously watching and sharing on social media (they name the "The Lad Bible" as an example) was sexist. Kye is especially interested in how class, race and gender play out in perpetuating gender inequalities and has started reading books and blogs on black feminism, reverse sexism and men as feminist allies. For instance, Kye had recently bought and read the book 'We Should All Be Feminists' by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. For both boys, their interest in feminism and gender inequalities remains underground, operating as it does within a school culture they describe as "sexist" and "heteronormative". Kye warns against "teaching gender" in schools without proper training for staff.

The survey data presented a mixed picture about sources of support and information about gender. Responses to the statement 'If I wanted support on gender issues I would know where to find it' were clustered towards middle-range responses, with only 14% and 10% strongly agreeing or strongly disagreeing respectively (strongly agree - 14%; agree - 27%; unsure – 24%; disagree – 24%; strongly disagree – 10%). Furthermore, there was a broadly similar, although slightly more positive, pattern with regard to getting helpful information from social media and websites: responses to the statement 'I get helpful information about gender from social media/websites' were strongly agree - 17%; agree - 36%; unsure – 20%; disagree – 21%; strongly disagree – 6%.

Young people described peer relationships (face to face and/or online) and (more rarely) families, schools and teachers that were accepting of and support gender diversity.

As mentioned in 3.1, in School 3 we met a group of Year 9 students who were supporting each other in exploring diverse gender and sexual identities. In School 1, Alin and his friends described feeling strongly the importance of having friends who 'understand you':

> I think you can be … it might be a little harder, like, without someone to support you. If you have, like, friends that understand you, it's a lot easier to kind of be a little different … cos you know that group of friends that always support you … It just helps

to, like, talk about things and how you feel and then, like, if you're by yourself, I think people will be like suffering also … you might get to feel worse

(Alin, age 13, School 1)

Dameer spends his time with girls, and his best (girl-)friend, Khaz, because they share the same interests and support his gender expression. He describes how he and his brother support and stick up for each other to cope with the on-going homophobic and fat-shaming harassment they have respectively suffered in (and out of) school and online:

He (brother) hates shopping, I like shopping. He likes football, I hate football. So it's kind of like we're the opposite but like we still get along and yes, it's just like, he mostly gets in fights for me because of how people call me gay. He just backs me up, and I get into fights because people call him fat. So like a brother's thing

(Dameer, age 14, School 1)

These girls showed how membership of one online community (of 1Direction fans) led to exchanges of emotional support across continents:

Mia: I think it's nice isn't it being able to talk to someone that's not always there, like generally you don't have to see them to know that they're there.

Amy: They're not physically there but...

Layla: Yeah, but they're there for you from afar. I know for a fact there was this girl on Instagram ages ago and she posted a picture, a normal Instagram picture of Harry Styles or something and under it she said I can't do this anymore. So obviously, being me, I DM-ed her and was like, 'what's wrong?' and she started telling me and since then, she lives in New York, and since then we've been talking to each other every day.

INT: So was she really upset when she posted that?

Layla: Yeah, she was really quite suicidal and everything...

Mia: …. If I see something negative on Instagram I have this automatic thing that says.....I need to help this person, I just do, it's just something I do, I need to help this person and ask her how she is and stuff, yeah.

(all age 14, School 3)

There was also evidence of parents, often mothers, who supported young people's gender expressions and acceptance of gender and sexual diversity:

My mam and dad told me that…. if gay people like each other then it's their thoughts see innit? ... my dad inspired me because he's a hard working person and he also says a lot of things to me that are really inspiring

(Marek age 14, School 1)

I can't think of anything where she (mum) wouldn't maybe help me with something, maybe if something quite serious was happening or if anything bad happened or anything that I feel like I couldn't tell her she would try... I can't think of any reason why I wouldn't tell her.

(Mia, age 14, School 3)

Mary Lou: Some people they could have boy haircuts, like my Aunt, she doesn't care, she has the same haircut as this guy here and she doesn't care what people say. People at her work go like, you're a transvestite because you have a boy's haircut and girl's thing and that's what people say about Miley Cyrus. She's a transvestite because she dresses like a boy but she's a girl.

INT: What do you think?

Mary Lou: Yes, but you don't need to care about what other people say about you because you are the one who lives, you do whatever you want, you dress yourself in whatever you want. And I think she's right because if she wants to have a short haircut she can.

(Mary Lou, age 14, School 2)

Some young people identified the positive impact of teachers in their schools in supporting gender diversity and addressing gender inequalities:

My college was all right in terms of gender and stuff and I explained it and a few of my teachers were really awesome in getting the fact that my mum would not ever talk to them if they used my chosen name, so they would have to use my birth name to my mum, and my chosen actual name to me, and especially my chemistry teacher was awesome about it and never got it wrong and was really supportive and really nice

(Eli, age 19, LGBTQ+ youth group)

Lucien: I had to send an email to all my lecturers saying I'm non-binary, these are my pronouns, this is what non-binary is, if you use he pronouns, I will correct you, don't take it offensively

INT: How did they respond? Did they respect that and get it?

Lucien: Yes, I think college is so much inclusive ... I have big massive respect for one my teachers, she's like this old, this older, she's this seventies like punk rock, she used to work for virgin records and stuff till they went bust, and she's so open-minded and she let me do a project on LGBT media and like, and being non-binary and how that affects media. She absolutely understood who I was and who I am now and she's really helped me with all that and I have this great respect for her.

(Lucien, age 18, LGBTQ+ youth group)

My English teacher, she sometimes goes on about, like about the gender thing. And about us being like equal. And then there's some boys that go, 'oh here she goes again about girls being equal to boys', and it's like, well we should be equal to boys because it isn't fair that boys see themselves as being higher than girls.

(Millie 14, School 3)

In School 3, our images of 'gender justice champions' were highly familiar to students who had both watched Emma Watson's speech and studied Malala. Millie and Alexis (14, School 3) discussed how much they valued their woman PE teacher sticking up for them when the boys claimed that girls 'couldn't throw', saying that they were just as good as boys. Vincent (age 14, School 3) noted that recently when he was "in one of my feminine moods" a teacher recognised his alter ego by saying 'Hi Whitney'. "He was proper accepting, and I think that's what all teachers need to be".

School 2 had established a weekly lunchtime feminist group, of which most of the young people seemed to be aware, although only a few of the older girls we interviewed had participated in it. This group seemed to raise awareness of feminist issues, to open up space for debating a position in relation to gender equality and equity, and to offer a language of description to express what it means to live in and negotiate a gendered world. The girls who had participated in the group discussed how the feminist group helped them challenge sexism not only in school but also out of it, such as at parties and other leisure activities – "we like to get quite passionate as a group". Boys were also aware of the group, which gave them greater familiarity with the notion of feminism and the possibility that it was a political view held by boys and men. In interview, a group of 13 year old boys debated gender equality in relation to sport, and arguing that "adding women's teams (to FIFA) …. it's a big, bit step towards equality". They also readily agreed that men could be feminists, and challenged a boy who argued that he 'couldn't be bothered with' feminism. However, since the extra-curricular nature and timing of the group made it difficult to attend, many suggested that there was a need for

more feminism on the curriculum directly to combat gender inequalities, and everyday sexisms (see next section).

Kye and Pjeter (School 1) described a number of initiatives for promoting gender equalities in their school, including a girl power lunch club and a whole-day event to encourage girls to take-up computer science and coding.

In general, many young people described online spaces as the most important place to gain information about issues related to gender and sexuality, and challenge gender injustices where they surface. They referred to social media networks, especially Tumblr, Twitter and ASK.FM as ones where they accessed useful information everyday. Taneisha (age 13, school 2) described how important social media was for her daily life as a social outlet and a place to stay in touch through her use of multiple platforms often used simultaneously including What's App, Facebook messenger, Tumblr and ASK.FM. Taneisha brought up screen shots about gender issues and feminism throughout the group interview. At the time of our research, Tumblr and Snapchat story were noted as having a sophisticated gender politics:

Peter: Social media like Snapchat … they did one of those public stories about Pride…You post something on, like, a London story and then everyone in London can see it, not just your friends. I guess it tells people that, like, not just, like, some people believe in it but, like, companies, like.

Rachel: Yeah, other people can see they can say their views freely, that other people are saying it too, they're not shy to say what they like. (….)

Peter: There's an amazing image I saw of Obama holding the multi-coloured flag.

Helena: I think social media's good because you can see celebrities … things like that.

(all age 14, School 2)

As well as learning from social media, young people were contributing to online communities. For instance, Ricky scripted a rant about why they felt the vine "I'm gay for Ruby Rose" was offensive and belittled what it means to be gay or trans, and posted it every time they got 'infuriated':

> I just have it copied and pasted…just like here we go again (…) I have something on Word that I have open constantly, because literally every single day there is somebody saying 'oh yeah I'm gay for Ruby Rose' so it's just like…here we go again… it's basically me just telling them that they can't just treat women like they are a, a slab of meat that you can suddenly be (gay) and that, yeah.
>
> (Ricky, age 13, LGBTQ+ youth group)

Online spaces could also offer a safe space to play, for instance, some boys experimented with creating a female online persona (such as a Facebook profile or online avatar). Alin and his friends (age 13) mentioned above all supported each other in playing with gender expression. They described pretending to be girls on social media, sharing stories of wearing make-up or dresses as small boys and holding views on gender inclusivity that they thought would not be shared by their peers. However, Kye (see case study above) argued that it would be inappropriate for him as a man to engage in feminist blogging himself: 'I don't think I should speak about it…. I think to use where I am to elevate women's choices'.

The LGBTQ+ youth groups we visited on several occasions were evidently busy and well-used, suggesting the importance of the service they provided. Partly because of the age range of our participants, few had had many dealings with more mainstream statutory and voluntary service providers other than in schools. However, members of the LGBTQ+ groups we visited praised Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services as 'fantastic', but noted that young people were no longer entitled to these services once they reached 18 – 'since I've turned 18 it's like goodbye nice psychiatrists, hello old heteronormative man' as Eli, age 19, put it.

3.5 Many young people are highly critical of gender inequalities, are keen to challenge them, and have a range of existing tactics, ideas and demands for change to bring this about.

Across all the research sites many of the young people were keen to make changes around gender inequality and offered a range of strategies and ideas they had for addressing issues like homophobia and sexism. 87% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that students should be involved in promoting gender fairness in schools. Furthermore. 85% suggested that schools should do more to stop gender stereotyping.

Many indicated that participating in the research project was the very first time they had been invited to speak freely about gender issues. Most of them expressed either at the beginning, end, or during the interviews, how they enjoyed the research, and wished they could talk freely about gender and sexuality issues and in ways that were more connected to their own view, lives and experiences:

> We've never done anything like this (research interview) so it's all sort of bottled up, cause I'm quite opinionated anyway so it's quite nice that someone is gonna read this and actually take a note of it rather than just like ranting about it on Tumblr or whatever and then everyone's like 'oh yeah I agree with you' but no-one ever does anything about it
>
> (Sinead, age 14, School 3)

For many of our participants, promoting change was a key motivation for engaging in the research project. Many were both critical and angry about gender inequalities, stereotypes, (hetero)sexism and homophobia in both their peer cultures and in the wider society, and wanted this to change. This was particularly evident from the individual messages placed in the glass jars for the children's commissioner to read, listen to and act upon.

Young people's messages for the Children's Commissioner

Gender shouldn't put you in a box because you are a girl or a boy

Gender is over stereotyped which is making people feel not confident about themselves

No one should be discriminated against because of there (sic) gender

I want people to know that is doesn't matter if you're a boy or a girl

Keep calm and don't be sexist or don't judge gender

Feminism is the radical idea that everyone is equal (not radical)

I believe everybody should be a feminist

I want people to know that gender shouldn't be stereotypical

Boys are very sexist over girls, and think they are not as good as them.

Boys think we are the weaker gender and we are not

Anyone can do no matter what gender they are

I want people to support feminism

Treat males and females the same

Transgender should be more accepted and not so alienated from life

Not enough people are open to talk about gender or sexuality and that needs to change

Teach about rape

Teachers should talk about this topic more to make people feel more confident. (gender) it should be talked about in a positive way and people shouldn't be scared

Support groups for LGBT community in schools and out of school s (places where people can talk and be free of themselves)

I think children should be taught more about consent

Teaching kids from a young age will help shape their identity in to being more understanding which will ultimately change the world in a few years time

Take kids seriously if they prefer different pronouns

We should be encouraged to explore our own identities from a young age, not pressure

to conform

We should adopt gender neutral pronouns (in finland they use HAN = he/she)

I don't think within schools we should differentiate between gender, girls and boys should do PE together

Teach children in lessons about confidence and accepting other views.

Stop singling people out about sexuality

Introduce more charities to help people on certain subjects

Ask what a persons preferred pronouns and names are. don't disrespect them.
talk about LGBTQAI++ in schools

Be able to change your gender without having to have counseling for month on end and be questioned about it.

More action to stop gender stereotyping in schools

Teach more kids about the laws

We're all human; teach us how it's okay to be different, teach us the differences we might have

Transgender people are normal people and they should definitely be accepted into society

Young people's existing tactics for challenging gender and sexual inequalities

For many it was too risky openly to challenge sexist language, and gender inequities and discriminations when they came across them. Nonetheless some found creative ways of surviving and/or sometimes challenging them. Some girls recounted their tactics for resisting pressures from boys, such as sending nude or other photos that

were not of them (see 3.3.c), or giving out Nigerian phone numbers when asked for their numbers by strangers. Some recounted their 'comebacks', such as Kye's responses to sexism and homophobia:

> One time, when someone shouted out, "Make me a sandwich" to a girl, which really annoyed me, I turned round to them and said, "I don't get it". And if you make them explain, they realise [….] I say, "How's that funny?"… and they say, "Cos she's a girl … And I told her to make me a sandwich"… and I say, "You can't make your own sandwich?", playing dumb … "No, I can"… "Well, go and make your own sandwich" … and he says, "No, that's the point … cause she's a girl, she belongs in the kitchen"… "You see, you hear what you're saying? That's illegal!". …. And you do it with homophobia and racism as well… the horrible thing of, "I don't mind people being gay, as long as they don't do anything to me". My reply is always, "If girls don't like you, then I'm not sure boys are gonna like you", which always seems to hurt
>
> (Kye, age 14, School 1).

Candice (age 13, School 1) described challenging sexism by making "a long speech about how you shouldn't say that – go back all the way to the suffragettes' time …. I explain my point, it's like I'm writing an essay …. I just keep going like that on and on and on and they're like okay, okay, okay, I won't call you that name!".

As we noted in 3.4, a number of young people were particularly active on social media in challenging what they saw as gender inequities and discriminations, when they came across them. Some however felt social-media based activism had limited impact, with Sinead, quoted above, describing 'ranting about it on Tumblr or whatever and then everyone's like 'oh yeah I agree with you' but no-one ever does anything about it' – contrasting this with what she hoped would be the effect of participating in the research..

96% of young people agreed or strongly agreed in the survey that everyone should be able to do the same activities regardless of gender.

For young people whose identities and expressions did not fit into conventional gender categories, the expectation of living in a gender binary world was severely limiting who they could be and become and they passionately called for resistance and change:

> To whoevers out there, whoever you are, what age you are, what gender you are I have one simple message - break the binary, crush it!

(Dani, age 20 LGBTQ+ youth group)

Many of the young people who felt this way had strong views on the need for opening up a dialogue around the dangers of gender stereotyping:

> We can look at someone and say 'ignorant' but they're only ignorant because no one has taught them. It's that fundamental thing of if you hammer divisive gender stereotypes, and if you basically tell people there are these boxes, that's it…at such a young age it's everywhere that's all people see from three upward
>
> (Dani, age 20, transgender, LGBTQ+ youth group)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, young people were most vocal in expressing a critical voice on the pressures of everyday sexisms when they had direct experience of gender-based harassment. Experiencing anti-gay harassment in primary school, Lou, who has "worked through different (gender and sexuality) labels" at 17 identifies as "agender". She wishes that one day all gender labels could be "broken down" and dispensed with, because while some "labels helped me growing up", Lou "battled through" a range of imposed labels throughout primary and secondary school. Lou acknowledges how fear and anger can surface when young people try to communicate their gender fluid identities to their parents:

> You like tell your parents that 'oh I think I'm this-' and their first reaction will be fear, anger because they don't understand, because they're not you and they will erm, they will try and see things from your perspective but it's something that will never be possible.
>
> (Lou, age 17, LGBTQ+ Youth group)

Lucien (age 18) and Drew (age 19) each identified a gulf between younger and older generations (which was also reflected in the survey data) suggesting the need for increasing education on diverse gender identities and gender expressions:

> Lucien: I think older people need more education about different gender options, people being non-binary and being--
>
> Drew: I spent most of my time coming out of college explaining what my gender meant

Perhaps partly because of the age of our participants, many young people identified schools as key sites for change. They were critical of the failure to address transgender

identities in sexuality and relationships education in school, and wanted them to do better:

> I never knew trans people existed at school because we had like <inaudible > which is basically like heteronormativity, they didn't have, even within that they didn't even touch on like abusive or unhealthy relationships and I think that's something that's really important
>
> (Eli, age 19, LGBTQ+ youth group)

> They (schools) should do more about like trans people, about all the other sexualities, because currently you're only taught about L G B T and it's much more than just that (…) P: We weren't, we weren't (taught about LGBT sexualities at school) I had to google most of it … I literally just googled 'all the sexualities' like that was my google term
>
> (Ricky, age 13, LGBTQ+ youth group)

Joe, who self-identified as trans and used he/they pronouns, reflects on how discourses of innocence and protection are used to justify or avoid early learning about LGBTQ+ identities, lives and relationships.

> Some people kind of like try to protect the children from people who are … trans, people who are gay or lesbian. I feel like when you're young, people kind of avoid the topic and you know it's not something you learn about from a young age.
>
> (Joe, 15, LGBTQ+ youth group).

Many young people were critical of the failure to address non-normative gender and relationship cultures in schools, especially early on:

> The people running the school, they're all normal people and they all have their own opinions, so teachers can be biased against things, which influence us from young ages, so we don't really know. (…) if you had a teacher who was really against (transgender), you would start to go towards their views … cos as you grow up, it sticks in your mind.
>
> (Helena, age 14, School 2)

> Yeah, I think that in secondary school, you can't really … from Years Eight on … Year Eight on, you can't really educate them about things like this … you can, but they've already got their minds set on what
>
> (Peter, age 14, school 2)

Indeed, as we noted in 3.4, some young people wanted more space on the curriculum to be addressing issues of gender equality including feminism, complaining that designating these issues through clubs and societies wasn't fair.

Some young people were very clear that they wanted spaces in schools that enabled further discussion about gender in school:

> We do PD (personal development) and we look at society's issues and things like that, but I think we should talk about gender because often we don't talk about things that really need to be talked about and people would feel so much more comfortable if they were discussed, because if there's just we'll say nothing on it then people especially this age who are just sort of experimenting with what they're wearing and who they're going to be as an adult I think it's very important that we do make it easy for people to talk about their feelings in terms of gender and other things like that. I think that should be part of the curriculum learning about...certainly part of the form curriculum.
>
> (Lauren, age 14, School 4)

Receiving support from teachers was also seen as vital to Lauren as well as others:

> You hear a lot of unpleasant really narrow-minded stereotypical things and sometimes even in front of teachers and there's never really any...they're never really challenged and they're never really...they never really explain why it's wrong (…) I think teachers should do more to challenge stereotypes when they hear them because it's not that we can't think for ourselves but that we don't really listen to what other people around say that much. So if there was...there needs to be greater sanctions among people who stereotype because it's just as unpleasant, it's just as painful as physical unruliness.
>
> (Lauren, age 14, School 4)

Lauren's view that schools should do more to challenge gender stereotypes was echoed by the vast majority of respondents in the survey: 83% agreed/strongly agreed that 'Schools should do more to stop gender stereotyping', while only 6% disagreed/strongly disagreed. A similar proportion (81%) suggested that parents/carers should also avoid gender stereotyping their children.

However, others were cautious about what could be expected of schools in this respect. Pjeter (age 14, School 1), for example, expressed the view that telling teachers about, or encouraging teachers to help address, these problems might have limited effect. He argued that 'teachers shouldn't be particularly involved … because probably a lot of them will think the same stuff, as the kids, you know? Just because they're older doesn't mean they're any wiser'. Kye (Pjeter's best friend) also described the backlash to the

school's attempts to promote gender equalities, as different groups of boys felt they were being discriminated against. Kye suggested that staff needed more training on gender issues, and that gender inclusive youth groups which focused on gender issues and feminism might be the way forward.

In sum, many young people were critical of the failure to address minority genders, sexualities and relationships in schools. Nonetheless, our data suggested that some schools are making moves to try to incorporate new approaches and content, whether feminist role models, discussion of trans issues, recognising students' preferred pronouns, or encouraging them to study topics that spoke to their gender identities and expressions. Schools can and do, in other words, make a difference. However, given the generational differences that some young people argued existed in gender cultures, it is crucial that schools involve students in promoting change. As flagged earlier, 87% of survey respondents agreed/strongly agreed that students should be involved in promoting gender fairness in schools.

Other facilities and services were also identified as sites for change, however. As noted above, partly because of the age range of our participants, few had had many dealings with more mainstream statutory and voluntary service providers other than in schools. Participants in the LGBTQ+ groups, however, criticised various health service providers (from NHS psychiatrists to the Samaritans) in ways that suggested change was required. They had experienced these services being homophobic; focusing on their gender identity when that was not the issue for which they were seeking help; making 'heterogender' assumptions about them (e.g, on the phone, assuming from their voice that they were a woman when that was not their gender identity); providing insufficient options on forms to describe their gender identification.

> It's quite difficult, especially talking to mental health professionals when you're trans, because that's all they want to talk about, and it's like, I'm here because I'm hearing voices not because I'm transgender, that's not my issue… I tried NHS and privately and I've not really found any sort of psychiatrist that, one, takes me seriously and two, doesn't, just leaves my sexuality and gender alone, um, they're like constantly bringing up and that's not why I'm there…. I just feel that if you're going to be working with the public you should be educated about the public and that trans people and queer people exist…. But so many people aren't and it just gets really difficult and it's annoying having to explain yourself to like every other person, especially on the phone um because voices will be gendered and I'm constantly being gendered as female on the phone and it's just like the most infuriating thing
>
> (Eli, age 19, LGBTQ+ group)

The ‘bathroom problem’ (Browne 2004) was significant for young trans people. One described how they would return to their room in student residences rather than use a public toilet at university.

> I tend to not use, I mean there aren't any gender neutral toilets. I resent having to use (disabled toilets) because um, one my gender isn't a disability and two, I'm taking away spaces for disabled people, um, um, so I just tend to use my bathroom in halls…. Gendered toilets aren't directed to be transphobic but it's still a problem.
>
> (Eli, age 19, LGBTQ+ group)

One school in our research had been equipped with gender- (and indeed age) neutral toilets. Both staff and students we spoke to held that this was ‘modern’, although they acknowledged that it was equally a move to promote discipline: the toilets had private cubicles, but no doors to the sink area, enabling a clear sightline to any teacher wanting to keep an eye on gatherings. Our data suggested that the actual experience for students could be fraught with shame and embarrassment (for instance, for girls asking other girls for sanitary protection in such a shared space; or for one boy who described hiding in the cubicles until girls had left rather than have them use the toilet after him). In our survey, 25% agreed but 51% disagreed with the statement that ‘School toilets should be unisex (not separate for boys and girls)’. Nonetheless, changes in areas of public spaces, such as gender-neutral toilets, would go some way towards resolving the dilemmas faced by diversely gendered people on a daily basis.

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