

THE TEENS: EQUIPPING FUTURE WORKERS

Minutes



Date	Tuesday 18 July, 2023
Time	16:00 – 17:00
Venue	Portcullis House, Room U
Chair	Jess Phillips , Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG and MP for Birmingham Yardley
Speakers	Dame Rachel de Souza , Children’s Commissioner for England Natasha Devon MBE , Body Image and Mental Health Campaigner Soma Sara , Founder of <i>Everyone’s Invited</i> (joining virtually) Laura Bell , Director of Employability and Careers at the Education Development Trust
Theme/ Background information	<p>Supporting women in the workplace starts at school. Our experiences and interests in education soon become working patterns and professional specialisms, while teenagers build their confidence and independence. As today’s teenage girls grapple with a wide range of educational options and the pressures of a narrow-minded, often misogynistic online environment, how can we best support them?</p> <p>Specifically, the session will explore:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Misogyny and sexist attitudes in schools• The impact of subject choices on career options• Equipping girls for the future workplace

NON-VERBATIM MINUTES

Jess Phillips: Opens the meeting and introduces Dame Rachel de Souza.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Thanks everyone. It really is weighing heavily on me that some of the freedoms I enjoyed in the 80s are being lost. This whole session should be a call to action, and I will go and talk to Gillian Keegan about this. I am optimistic about the girls themselves – I’ve met the next green Elon Musk, I’ve met future Prime Ministers, and just last week I was talking to Charlotte who is going to represent England in the international Olympiad for astrophysics. But there are barriers. I became commissioner in March 2021, and launched the Big Ask survey. One way we were able to break down the data was by gender. 250,000 of those surveyed were girls. They’re ambitious, and having a good job is their priority for their future. They said that not everyone around them was as ambitious for them as they were for themselves. I was fortunate to take this to the G7, and particularly to express concerns about education. A 17-year-old girl told

me that when she attended an open day physics class at the local sixth form college, she saw that the classroom was all male, so she walked out. She didn't want to be the only girl because the boys would stare at her. Maths is better, but physics and engineering are very poor for this. Girls have told me that the stigma on maths for them is severe, with one saying she felt put off by the government and the misogynistic environment. I was a head teacher, and these stories make me want to weep. We need to remember how different it is for girls. It's not just about education – one thing girls told me was that their mental health and wellbeing have taken a hit. 1 in 5 young people said their biggest concern was their mental health and wellbeing, with girls and older girls particularly overrepresented, at 40% for 16 and 17-year-old girls. When I was a young woman, myself and others often did feel unhappy, but it was miles off of this. Looking at online material, on average children are seeing pornography from age 9, sometimes in the classroom. Every group of children I have taught have seen this. I'm not prudish, but this pornography is not normal – it is deeply misogynistic, horrible material that often shows violence and coercion. Twitter was the platform where children were most likely to first see porn, after which it was porn sites. This is normalising sexual violence. Most boys thought that girls enjoyed acts of sexual aggression. We have a growing understanding of how normalised sexual violence and harassment is to women. It's a priority to make sure girls feel safe in school. We need a robust Online Safety Bill. We need RSHE (relationships, sex and health education) in school. Children need to learn about sex and relationships from adults they trust, not the internet. All of this can enable girls to unleash their full potential. One girl said she needed to be given the same opportunity to enjoy the world as her male peers.

Jess: Thank you, the situation is very depressing. One big improvement is their aim to have a good job – this is a change from my childhood. But the circumstances around pornography is appalling. When I talk to my sons, I am clear about what does and does not happen in real life. I don't want them to grow up viewing this as normal. Introduces Laura.

Laura Bell: On personal reflection, when I was a child, my school did not permit girls to take metalwork or woodwork.

Jess: I wasn't allowed to take politics.

Flick Drummond: At an all-girls school I could take whatever I wanted.

Laura: A nod to those who have worked on improving this. Research suggests that children between 3 and 5 have already built career aspirations. From age 5, these aspirations are less fanciful. By 6, these aspirations are socialised around gender, and these stereotypes are incorporated into the perception of self. By 7, almost all young people will have aspired to an "adult" occupation. Creative studies show that children will typically draw workers as a stereotyped gender, for example drawing a nurse as a woman. Can career guidance stop this? Not alone, but it is part of the conversation. EDT has research that is publicly available around youth transitions, and how to help young people make these decisions. There is a widening gap between career aspirations and the world of work. These are heavily influenced by social background and gender. Career guidance can raise aspirations and test assumptions, explore motivations and challenge us to think differently. It can help us make informed decisions. Where possible, we should help young people avoid false starts and dead ends. There is increased participation in Higher Education (HE), with about 2.8m people in HE, and many are women, but the subject matters are very gendered. In engineering about 80% of students are men, whereas psychology and health students are much more likely to be women. We are keen to understand how false starts happen. Projections show that of people who start degrees, 18% will not finish them. This puts a huge burden of debt on them. There's an expression that the day you plant the

seed isn't the day you pick the fruit. Plant careers seeds earlier and keep tending to them. If we want young people to have an effective career, we encourage them to plan this earlier. Support and encourage young people to have access to career guidance at transition points, before they make subject choices or enter Further Education (FE) or HE. They should be able to talk to a professional career's advisor. Let's lower the age range and encourage face to face contact with careers advisors.

Jess: My son is the only boy in health and social care training. He wants to be a social worker. Often, people do the jobs their parents did. Introduces Natasha Devon.

Natasha Devon MBE: My work involves going into 3 schools a week to deliver talks on mental health and body image, and do focus groups on students' experiences. They tell me what they would like lessons on. Based on their answers, I come up with lesson plans while consulting with neuroscientists. Right now, I am focusing on aspects of identity, body image and the transition to university, among others. Expert on perfectionism Thomas Curran produced a quiz to test if you are a perfectionist, and if you self-sabotage. A perfectionist will overwork where they are most confident and self-sabotage where they aren't confident. This applies to a third of boys, and two thirds of girls. There is a myth that it is easier for girls to talk about and get help for mental health complaints – this is partly true, but also women are more likely to be diagnosed with depression when they go to the doctor for a hormonal issue. They are told they are exaggerating. Completed suicides are slightly higher among men, but attempted suicide and self-harm are more common among women. Girls act on their bodies to communicate distress. There is a blurring of the lines between health and beauty, especially among health influencers. Public health messaging about the relationship between body image and health is not helpful. We need nuance. There are discrepancies around how boys and girls contribute: at an all-girl school, they will ask lots of questions. If co-ed, girls wait until the boys have spoken. This divide first shows around year 9. I have seen that the environment in the education sector has changed. Pornography plays a part, and so does misogyny. I have found teenage boys intimidating in schools, and I'm not easily intimidated. This must be worse for girls, and even impact female teachers. I have had boys wolf-whistle at me and the teachers didn't stop them – they were largely aged 12 to 16. They have walked out on my sessions. There is a huge discrepancy between what they will say in an RSHE lesson and how they act towards girls behind closed doors. We need to safeguard girls online and clamp down on online misogyny. Boys and young men are in thrall to influencers. The behaviour is impacting on educational outcomes.

Jess: As a mother of teenage sons, I think they don't realise how their behaviour effects the girls. I've spoken to a school recently, and the girls stayed behind to ask questions. I think the boys don't perceive it. They think the girls are confident. Introduces Soma Sara.

Soma Sara: I'm the founder of Everyone's Invited. We started in 2020, when I was having conversations with friends and we realised how many of us had experienced sexual harassment online. When you're online as a teenager, you're particularly vulnerable. We didn't have the knowledge or language to articulate our experiences when we were young, which created a culture of shame and silence. When my peers spoke out, they were invalidated, shamed and not believed. At university, having these conversations, I felt angry and frustrated. I decided to share my story. My peers then all told me how much this resonated. There's been a lot of resistance, and the word 'rape' is quite taboo. Misogyny and microaggressions create an environment where sexual violence can exist. I immediately began receiving stories and testimonies, and it opened the floodgates. It was challenging and heartbreaking to grapple with the scale of the problem. But it was also healing, because I wasn't alone. It was cathartic and healing. From this experience, I felt I had to do something, and so I set up Everyone's Invited. We began sharing our experiences.

This created a national conversation where 50,000 people shared their stories of daily sexual harassment, groping, following, public sexual harassment as a rite of passage, image-based violence - these stories had power. It was an incredible exercise in empathy building. So many other people had experienced it. I felt able to share. We're really proud of what we have achieved. At the time, this triggered an Ofsted review, which found that 9 out of 10 girls had experienced name calling, receiving dick pics, or similar instances of harassment. This work and those stories triggered a national overall in RSHE, safeguarding and policy. The Women and Equalities Committee published a report and urged the government to create a national policy on this. It's been a really overwhelming and challenging journey, and incredibly inspiring. It's really important for older generations to understand how the digital and real world are intrinsically linked for today's teenagers, who are developing friendships and their identity online. Sexting is real sex to a new generation. We need to reframe our perspective and approach the topic with empathy and understanding. If these topics are stigmatised, young people won't be able to discuss them. We need to bridge generational gaps. Our approach must be proactive.

Jess: I understand the judgemental attitude of teachers, because sharing intimate pictures of yourself online is extremely foreign to my generation, and to me, shows poor judgement. Let's open this up to the room.

Guest: We haven't discussed coercive control, and the role of modern technology as a method of control.

Jess: Policymakers need to understand coercive control. The only department with an advanced understanding of this is the Home Office, but generally policy has not kept up. We are still playing catch up. We need to discuss this in an education environment. I was talking to someone in education this morning who said that if someone claimed to have been groped, they would have to suspend everyone involved. This is coercive control by the institution. The new weapon is "I will sue you if you discuss your experiences". Your name will then be mud forever on the internet.

Guest: Blacklisting is a problem.

Jess: Speaking on my experience from my constituency, I have heard concerns that Muslim girls at school are likely to lose their aspirations. I was talking to some Muslim schoolgirls who wanted really impressive jobs, and when I asked them what their mums did, only one had a mum who worked. There are problems facing specific groups of teenage girls, who are getting lost.

Guest: There's a cultural divide and issue.

Jess: Using older children to help with childrearing is normal in every culture.

Guest: An experiment we did in London was to have a business governor in junior schools. Should we make this a mandatory requirement?

Jess: Good idea.

Guest: School is a pressure point. What you can do is make a safe space in schools. One of the main things I was reflecting on was, "where is this coming from?". We need a culture of consent in schools, but how can boys learn about consent when there is bullying and harassment in schools? The barriers aren't introduced to begin with. It comes down to children not feeling in control of decisions made on their behalf, as often when young people report something, the process is immediately taken away from them. In the classroom, how do you create a space

where they feel safe to share experiences? If teachers dominate the discussion rather than students, how can they express themselves?

Natasha: I have felt disheartened by the backlash against outside RSHE providers. Sometimes a teacher can do it, but often students feel more secure speaking to an outsider.

Jess: As someone who worked in safeguarding in schools, it has become a defence mechanism to say “you have to tell safeguarding about everything” because that isn’t true. I will act if they are at serious risk, but if its general behaviour, I will ask them what they want me to do. Let it be led by the person. This has gotten muddy, with staff feeling that they need to tick a box. Checking the box isn’t safeguarding, although clearly you may need to tell someone. Because of the current climate, it is almost prudent to tell people not to share details about their rape. We need safeguarding training. It is not a tick-box exercise.

Guest: Personally, I closely identified with the perfectionism point. My own daughter struggled throughout A-levels, and now in her degree as well. We need to educate parents, because I was at a loss on what to do. She also struggled with her mental health. Let’s empower parents to help their kids. Professionally, talking about careers engagement, we need to engage with employers in schools. Careers advisers will only have so much understanding of the wide range of sectors they advise on.

Laura: There needs to be a schools strategy, that embeds careers guidance within everything we do. Students need to be supported to discuss the careers connections and implications of every subject they study.

Jess: Nobody came into our schools to talk about jobs we could do.

Guest: I went to a state school where I did a course on law with a mentor. Most of my conversations with my mentor were about our experiences of sexism within the school.

Jess: Talking to those doing work experience in my office, I tell them to have a thick skin to cope. It’s incredibly tough for teenage girls.

Guest: On pornography, and its impact on girls and boys, some boys use it for gang initiation. Some girls are exposed extremely young. It can be even harder to deal with for those from a minority background, who may be less likely to have an understanding parent. These parents can be more likely to not want anyone to find out, and to blame the girl. We need to address this at a younger age, and we need more men to raise this. I also agree on the need to help Muslim girls.

Jess: There’s absolutely a cultural barrier. First of all, people are racist towards them. They may also have concerns around modesty, such as not being able to be seen with a male mentor/role model. They are more likely to choose universities that are close to home.

Guest: At Islamic schools, the girls often perform well. Should we invite them to events like this, to share their experiences? What makes them perform well? I come from Nigeria, and back in the 70s we had female pilots. We need these successful women to be visible, and to celebrate existing women’s success much more.

Jess: Yes, there is hope.