

Activity: Gender and Education – Finding Patterns

ITEM A

Qualifications obtained in the UK by Gender (percentages)

Percentage gaining:	1975		1991	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
A-Levels	18	16	28	31
5 or More GCSEs (A* to C)	7	9	13	17
1 to 4 GCSEs (A* to C*)	24	27	23	25
Low-Level GCSEs (D to G)	30	28	29	20
No GCSEs	21	19	7	6
Total Leavers (thousands)	423	400	324	312

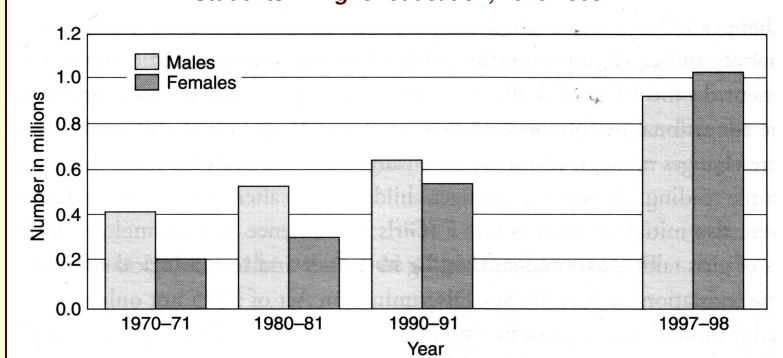
ITEM B

GCSE and A-Level results by selected subjects (as percentage of 16+ and 18+ school leavers, 1990)

	GCSE (A-C)		A-Level	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
English	40	57	4.0	8.5
Maths	36	33	7.6	4.4
Physics	19	9	5.7	2.0
Chemistry	14	12	4.5	3.3
Biology	11	17	2.8	4.6
Creative Arts	16	27	2.1	3.8
French	16	25	1.5	3.9

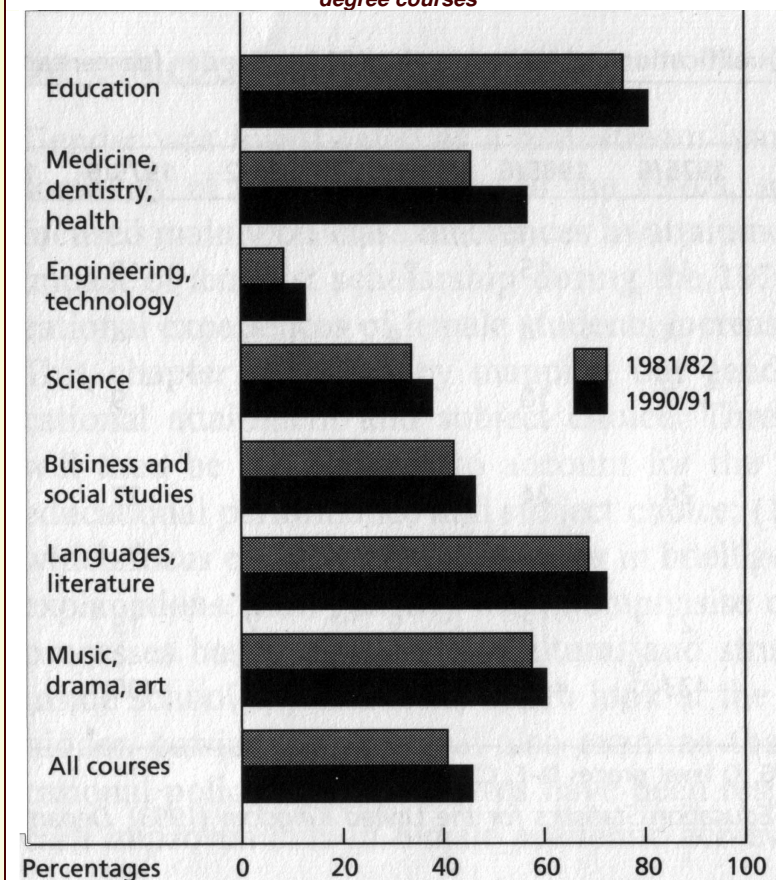
ITEM C

Students in higher education, 1970-1998



ITEM D

Female students as a % of all students in higher education: by selected degree courses



Questions (15 mins)

1. Identify the patterns of differential achievement shown in Item A.
2. Using Item B, compare the differences in attainment between girls and boys.
3. With reference to Item C, describe the trends in equality of access to higher education.
4. Give two reasons for the increase in female participation in higher education.
5. Using Item D, describe the difference in subject choice at higher education by gender.
6. How might the professions that these courses lead to differ?

Introduction & Trends

As with ethnicity, a focus on gender is a fairly recent addition to the sociology of education – largely in response to the impact of feminism in the 1970s and 80s. Early studies, focused on the underachievement and under representation of females at almost all levels of education – and the way in which education both transmitted and was shaped by wider social opinions about the “proper role” of women. For instance, the assumption that “a woman’s place was in the home” meant that, in the past, education for girls was seen as a waste (hence the rationale of making the 11-plus more difficult for girls).

The underachievement of girls is, however, a largely historical phenomenon – and many sociologists now agree, “*The most important myth that needs exposing is that girls underachieve in school*” (Blackstone, 1985)

Over the past fifty years, the inclusion of girls in education has risen greatly, together with their attainment. This is true to the extent that at the present, the overall attainment of girls at all levels (from KS1 to A-Level) is higher than boys.

However, it is important to note that education is not completely gender neutral. Although the overall attainment of girls has risen dramatically, if we examine the types of subject studied there is a notable gender divide – with girls well ahead in the arts and languages but behind in scientific subjects (with the exception of biology).

A similar trend is present in Higher Education, where the representation of genders has become more balanced. However, girls are still less likely to choose degrees of a scientific or technical nature. This gendered subject choice is important, as the degrees that girls choose are of lower status and provide fewer opportunities for entering the most powerful and well paid occupational positions.



Examiners Secret: When exploring these trends, you need to be able to argue that, although things have changed, inequality across the genders persists in a number of different ways.

In examining gender and education, therefore, we must address three main questions:

- Why has the attainment of girls improved?
- How does inequality persist?
- Why do boys underachieve in schools?

As with previous topics, we will examine in turn biological, out-of-school and in-school explanations of gender differences in education – baring in mind these questions.

Biological Explanations

As with social class and ethnicity, some explanations have equated differential attainment with biological abilities and attributes.

The Historical Context

During the 19th Century, it was commonly (and wrongly) claimed that women’s brains were smaller than men’s and as a result, women were incapable of intellectual study. Although this argument is wrong, it had a direct impact on educational attainment – as girls were denied access to education “for their own safety”. Even when, in the late 19th Century, girls were

allowed to sit exams in London, they had to be chaperoned in case the strain was too great and buckets of cold water were available if they fainted.

Modern Context

A number of biological explanations have also been suggested to account for recent changes in attainment across the genders. One common explanation is that girls mature earlier than boys – and consequently do better in early stages of education.

- ✓ This argument is supported by evidence of attainment – the gap between girls and boys tends to be more pronounced at early stages, closing as students grow older.
- ✓ It can be used to explain historical evidence. During the tripartite system, for instance, it was noted that girls tended to do well in the 11-plus but, by the age of 16 were consistently outperformed by boys.
- ✗ However, the argument fails to explain why – in contemporary society – girls are now overtaking boys in GCSE, FE and rapidly catching them up in HE.

It has also been argued that brain functions differ between boys and girls. Each hemisphere of the brain controls different abilities (called lateralisation). According to some theorists, the two hemispheres develop differently, so that females have better verbal and reasoning abilities, whilst males have better spatial ability.

- ✓ This has been used to explain why girls do better at language- and arts-based subjects, yet underachieve and are underrepresented in maths and science.
- ✗ However, **Kelly (1982)** suggests that gender differences in spatial ability can be attributed to the types of toys children play with rather than their genetic make-up. Boys, for instance, might be more likely to be given construction toys (Lego, Mechnano, etc) to play with, thus developing their spatial ability. Consequently, any biological difference can be explained in terms of nurture rather than nature – boys may have better spatial awareness because as children the parts of their brains that control these abilities gain more exercise.
- ✗ Furthermore, there has been a narrowing of gender differences in maths and science since the 1980s (although not as pronounced as in other subjects). If differences were biologically determined we would expect them to remain constant over time.

Outside School Explanations

Feminist sociology has been influential in developing a macro approach to gender inequalities in education.

Patriarchal Ideology

From a feminist viewpoint, patriarchal ideology is a set of myths created by men to maintain power over women. Men wish to retain their dominance in the home and the workplace, and see educated women as a threat to this. These kind of myths were perhaps more obvious in the 19th century than recent times, with common beliefs such as...

- Women are genetically inferior intellectually
- A woman’s place is in the home. Education is therefore less important for women

- A woman's feminine nature is not suited to the "evils of competition" which education involves – if women compete they might lose their femininity.

These arguments, which are often related to the kinds of biological explanations covered in the previous section, have been used to rationalise and justify limitations on the opportunities given to women. For instance...

- ✓ Before 1877 no British university would grant a degree to women. In fact, Cambridge held out until 1947 before awarding degrees to women.
- ✓ Within the tripartite system, on average girls attained higher 11-plus scores. To "rectify" this "problem", their scores were weighted to ensure that equal numbers of boys and girls went to grammar schools. Effectively, this meant that boys gained more places than they merited on the basis of their 11-plus scores (Skelton, 1993).
- ✓ Steering women into lower-level courses, with a domestic, emotional or "caring" component. In this way, women are prepared for their role as second-class citizens, as housewives and for their position in the lower levels of the labour force.



With reference to patriarchal ideology, formulate arguments about...

1. The improvements in girls' attainment in education.
2. The continued gendered-nature of subject choice.

Childhood Socialisation

A further strand in many feminist perspectives on gender and education relate to the differences in the ways in which girls and boys are socialised. Primary agencies of socialisation, such as the family, instil different attitudes and expectations in boys and girls – both of their own futures and of what they aim to gain from education. Secondary agents of socialisation such as the media and peer-groups reinforce these gender identities. Before examining some of the "sub-themes" of this group of explanations, it should be noted that it is related to wider social assumptions about gender – and so is impossible to separate from the patriarchal ideologies which permeate society.

- ✓ **Sue Sharpe (1976)** studied working-class girls in London, showing that girls' priorities tended to be marriage and family-life rather than jobs and careers. She found that many girls held traditional ideas about womanhood, based mainly on their available role models – who were largely "doing jobs from which they seem to gain minimal enjoyment. It makes sense to make their priorities love, marriage, husbands, children, jobs and careers, more or less in that order." Consequently, faced with the perception of an apparent futures in "unimportant" and unrewarding jobs, girls placed focused more on aspirations based around men and families.
- ✓ Following on from Sharpe's study, **Sue Lees (1986)** examined girls' attitudes and expectations in three London comprehensive schools. Lees found a higher level of emphasis on careers than earlier research – however, her girls were still reconciled to a life centred on domesticity, marriage and restricted job opportunities. Even those who hoped to enter professional occupations tended to see their future identities in terms of their relations to men (for example, expecting to take a break in their careers to raise a family).

One of the ways in which the aspirations of girls and boys may be affected by their socialisation is, therefore, their available

role models within the family. Other aspects of socialisations that may affect expectations and aspirations include:

- The differences in the **toys** given to boys and girls. **Kelly (1982)** argued that, whilst boys are given active construction toys and chemistry sets, girls are given passive caring toys such as dolls and cookery sets. Consequently, girls do not develop the kind of scientific aspirations and attitudes that males do.
- The media also presents stereotyped images of women – particularly in adverts, which define certain activities as masculine and others as feminine.

It should be noted that much of this research predates the improvement in attainment amongst girls. One explanation of this improvement could be that the influences in their early socialisation have changed – for instance, the presentation of more positive female role models in the media. This was reflected when **Sharpe** repeated her study in the 1990s, finding that aspirations of girls had changed and now reflected greater career ambitions and expectations of an independent lifestyle. This could also be related to the **consciousness-raising** activities of feminists, who have campaigned to dispel traditional myths of femininity.

In-School Factors

One problem with **any** out-of-school explanation of differential achievement is that they tend to ignore the effect of schools on attainment. Some critics argue that this acts as a "smokescreen" for the failures in the education system.



What other criticisms can be made of out-of-school explanations of differential attainment.

In this section, we will examine some of the in-school factors that might impact on educational attainment.

Teacher-Student Interaction

A girl interviewed by Sue Lees complained, "Girls get much less attention than boys 'cos boys make a fuss and make themselves noticed". This complaint suggests that boys and girls are treated differently in the classroom, and finds support from a series of empirical studies. A number of feminist social action theorists argue that the treatment of girls in their interaction with teachers, the school and the curriculum, reinforces patriarchal ideologies and prepares girls for male domination in later life.

Michelle Stanworth (1983) conducted **interviews** with A-Level students and teachers of humanities in an FE-college. She found that teachers – whether male or female – expressed more concern and interest in boy, and it was boys who were expected to do well in exams. As we have seen in previous units, teacher expectations can have substantial effects on attainment – and in this case, students seemed to share their teachers' opinions, with girls consistently underestimating their ability. Stanworth concludes that this not only disadvantages girls within the education system, but also prepares them to accept later low status. She argues that "Girls may sit side-by-side with boys in classes taught by the same teachers – and yet emerge from school with the implicit understanding that the world is a man's world, in which women take second place"

In “Invisible Women: The Schooling Scandal”, **Spender (1983)** broadly supports Stanworth’s argument that schools reinforce the gender inequality present in the wider society. The interaction and relationships in the classroom, the content of the curriculum, and the attitudes and expectations of teachers prepare girls for male domination and control.

Spender tape-recorded lessons given by herself and other teachers, finding a gender-divide in terms of the treatment of students. On average, boys received over 60% of teachers’ attention – whilst girls were “invisible”. This is compounded by the fact that boys often poked fun at girls’ contributions – and that teachers usually allowed boys to get away with these insulting comments¹.

There was also evidence of double standards in the classroom. Boys were permitted to get away with questioning or challenging the teacher, whilst girls tended to be rebuked. Furthermore, different standards were applied to the marking of boys and girls written work; with the latter being graded more strictly.

This finding was supported by research by **Goddard-Spear (1989)**, in which she gave science teachers some work to grade. Half believed that they were marking girls’ work and the other half boys’ work. Higher grades were recorded when the teachers believed they were marking boys work – despite the work being identical.

Spender concludes that in mixed education, the dice are loaded against girls. If they behaved as boisterously as boys they were considered “unladylike”, if they were docile and quiet they were usually ignored. She argues that mixed are essentially male schools which females have been allowed to enter and that discrimination is so deeply embedded that single-sex schools are the only answer.

- ✗ **Randall (1987)** has criticised the methods used by both Stanworth and Spender. In particular, Stanworth’s study was based on interviews rather than direct observation of classroom interaction. There may be a difference between what people say in interviews and what actually happens in the classroom
- ✗ **Jane French (1986)** also argues that these interpretations are also simplistic – placing all of the blame on the sexist attitudes of teachers. She argues that classroom interaction is a two-way process, and that children bring their own behaviour patterns to the classroom, patterns which differ between boys and girls. French argues that boys were more mobile, active and disruptive and demanded more attention.

French argues, therefore, that boys don’t receive more attention because they are boys, but because of the difference in which boys and girls behave – and this behaviour is shaped by wider social factors, such as socialisation in the home. Consequently, she argues that it is impossible to separate classroom interaction from wider social factors.

Content of the Curriculum

As with the explanations of ethnicity and achievement, some sociologists have also pointed to the way in which the content

¹ **Kelly (1987)** has shown that this tendency for boys to “take over” is particularly the case in science and technology, affecting girls’ ability to participate fully in science lessons.

of the curriculum and the resources used to teach (such as textbooks) are androcentric – reflecting male concerns and individuals.

This is a substantial theme in **Spender’s** writing. She argues that because men control the education system they can use it to forward their own agenda and ensure the continuity of male-dominance. She argues that the curriculum favours the male perspective, and highlights that the contribution of women to human progress is largely ignored.

This might be particularly the case in science, where practically all of the important figures are male. This could explain why more girls choose arts subjects such as English Literature, which – whilst still underestimating the contributions of women – have a higher content of female-produced work. **Kelly (1987)** extends this argument, showing that the way in which science and technical subjects are “packaged” makes them appear to be “boys subjects”. The examples used by teachers and in textbooks tend to relate to traditionally male experiences, such as cars and football.

Role Models Within Education

Women continue to be underrepresented in senior management of schools – even within primary schools where the majority of teachers are female. Within higher education, the gender divide is even more dramatic and there a very few women holding senior positions such as professorships. There are also divisions in terms of the types of subjects taught by different

Feminists have argued that the lack of women in positions of power within education is detrimental to girls, who come to see male domination of organisations as the natural order of things, and have little aspirations for reaching the upper echelons of power.



Many of the studies we have looked at in this section of notes have focused on the underachievement of girls – which no longer seems to be an issue...

1. How might these arguments be used within an essay examining the reasons for the improvement in the attainment of girls?
2. How might they be used to explain the continuing under representation of girls in science, maths and technology?

Reforms and Educational Policies

A major way in which the attainment of girls has been improved is through reforms of the education system.

- ✓ The **introduction of GCSE** is one such policy reform which is said to benefit girls. The GCSE brought with it an emphasis on coursework, which favours the consistent and conscientious work – said to be a characteristic of female students.
- ✗ It has been argued, however, that “consistent and conscientious work” is not necessarily a unique or ever-present female trait. It could be related to a new way in which teachers are labelling students.
- ✓ The **national curriculum** is further improved opportunities for girls. In creating a common core set of subjects, schools were prevented from filtering students into “relevant” subjects. For instance, girls were made to study science up until 16.

A number of policies have also been introduced to specifically address the underachievement of girls. For example,

- ✓ **Single-sex classes**, which remove many of the problems outlined above – such as the male-domination of science lessons.
- ✓ Policies that encourage female students to opt for science and technology, such as **GIST** (Girls into Science and Technology). This included visits from female scientists to act as positive role models, and developing non-sexist curriculum materials.
- ✗ It should be noted that, however, that many of these reforms claim to improve participation amongst girls within science – however, this is the one area which hasn't shown dramatic improvement.
- ✗ This suggests that the changes in female attainment are linked to wider social shifts – the **genderquake** in attitudes towards women, the increase in employment opportunities that this has created, and the consequent rise in expectations of women themselves.

Boys: The New Underachievers?

Some sociologists have argued that, in taking a largely feminist perspective on gender and education we ignore the fact that attainment amongst girls is largely no longer an issue – it is the underachievement of boys which seems to be a significant problem. In this final section of notes, we will examine some of the explanations of the lower performance of boys.

Outside-School: Cultural Deprivation

A 1994 episode of **Panorama** drew on American research to show that parents spend less time reading and discussing books with their sons than with their daughters. This could be used to explain the underachievement of males, as they may enter education with lower literacy levels, which impact on all aspects of learning.

Outside-School: Status Frustration

Mac an Ghail (1994) suggests that recent male underachievement can be explained in terms of “**a crisis of masculinity**” – particularly amongst working class boys. They are socialised into seeing a future male identity and role in terms of being the main breadwinner. However, traditional jobs in the manufacturing industry and the rise of long-term unemployment make it unlikely that males will occupy these roles. Furthermore, the increasing service-sector work (such as call-centres) is more suited to the lifestyle of women.

In some families, women may now be the major breadwinners and this threatens traditional masculine identities. Consequently, working-class boys may have a bleak and purposeless view of their future which undermines their motivation and ambition.

Interactionist Perspectives

Mitsos and Browne (1998), examining the micro-interaction between boys and the education system, suggest the following reasons for the underachievement of boys:

- Teachers may be less strict with boys, tolerating a lower standard of work and the missing of deadlines.
- Boys are more likely to disrupt classes, be sent out of classes and be expelled.

- The culture of masculinity encourages boys to want to appear macho and tough. Hard work in school (swots) do not fit with this image, does not fit with this image – consequently they are more likely to form **Anti-School Subcultures**.
- Research suggests that boys tend to overestimate their ability. They may come over-confident and not work hard enough.
- Girls may spend their leisure time in activities which support their education, such as reading and talking.



Note: Mitsos and Browne argue that these are only some initial suggestions – and very little research has been undertaken exploring male underachievement.

The Moral Panic About Men?

Weiner, Arnot and David (1997) are sceptical about the sudden discovery of male-underachievement. Arguing that we should not be overly concerned with the phenomenon. They point out that...

- The issue is blown out of all proportion by the media, who see the under-achievement of boys as a problem as it may lead to a “dangerous underclass”.
- The differences in subject-choice mean that female underachievement is a vital issue.
- The failure to celebrate the achievements of girls is part of a “backlash” against female success, as men feel threatened by the possibility of women becoming equal.