**Gender and Educational Achievement – External**

In this section, we will delve into the external factors that are beyond the purview of the education system, which can impact the educational achievement or underachievement of girls and boys, and subject them to critical evaluation. As previously noted, girls, on average, outperform boys in education, with girls demonstrating higher levels of literacy, mathematics, language, and personal, social, and emotional development right from the beginning of their educational journey. The gender gap in academic performance progressively widens over the years, with a slight narrowing in mathematics, science, and technical subjects but no further narrowing at A-Level. While the internal factors of the education system do have some impact, broader societal factors have likely contributed to this trend.

When examining external factors, we consider factors such as feminism, changes in employment and gender roles, socialization, and changes in the family, which are highly interconnected. These factors have collectively raised the aspirations of girls to a point where they can aim for higher educational success and career goals. However, these same changes have also led to a "crisis of masculinity" in boys, resulting in demotivation and increased underachievement. It is important to note that the study of external factors in education is a complex and multifaceted endeavour that requires the application of sociological theories and concepts to fully understand the underlying mechanisms that drive these trends.

**FEMINISM**

The first factor to be examined is the impact of feminism. The presence of more female role models in wider society has had a significant influence on the educational aspirations of girls. These role models are not limited to those occupying senior leadership positions in schools but include women who have succeeded in a variety of areas such as career, family, and relationships. These women are considered as successful role models because they have achieved success in multiple aspects of their lives, including financial success, familial success, and career success. Girls can look up to these women as inspiration and strive to emulate their success. Examples of such women include Emma Watson, who is not only a successful actress and activist but also holds a degree in English literature from Brown University in America. Similarly, Mayim Bialik from the popular TV series, "Big Bang Theory," is not only a successful actress but also a doctor of neuroscience. Women like Oprah Winfrey, who have reached high positions in business and have achieved high educational attainment, serve as examples of successful and feminine women who have balanced their professional and personal lives.

The second factor is the impact of aspirations on girls' academic performance. Research by Sue Sharpe, a sociologist, conducted a longitudinal study in 1976 and again in 1994. Sharpe interviewed teenage girls aged 13-15 years and asked them to rank the importance of various achievements, including education, career, family, and marriage. The results of the study revealed a shift in girls' aspirations from prioritizing family, marriage, and home life in 1976 to valuing education, career, and family in 1994. This shift in aspirations has led to a higher level of motivation among girls to achieve success in education. Girls who have high aspirations in education tend to work harder and aim higher, resulting in better academic performance. Therefore, it can be argued that feminism has played a crucial role in changing the aspirations of girls and their academic achievement.

**CHANGES IN EMPLOYMENT**

The next factor we need to consider is the changes in employment, which have impacted gender roles in society. Mistos and Browne have observed that there has been a notable shift in the growth of service and care industries, which has resulted in an increase in feminised career opportunities, such as healthcare, hospitality, teaching, clerical work, and childcare professions. This change has expanded the notion of women's roles beyond traditional notions of being a housewife and mother and has provided greater financial independence and career prospects for women. Furthermore, this shift has challenged the traditional notion of male breadwinning, with women increasingly becoming the primary earner in the family. Through observing successful women in not only high-ranking positions, such as CEOs and CFOs, but also in traditionally female-dominated industries, girls have been able to recognise career opportunities and expand their aspirations.

This topic is closely related to the equal pay and opportunities legislation that has been enacted in the past 20-25 years, which prohibits discrimination based on gender in career advancement. This legislation has encouraged girls to excel in education to achieve their career goals, especially in high-ranking positions, or to recognize their own value. Research has indicated that women may not be as assertive as men during salary negotiations, which may result in men achieving higher salaries due to their more demanding approach. However, recent developments, including the #MeToo movement, have created opportunities for women to pursue equal pay and high-level careers without being left behind. Moreover, there have been changes in job application laws, such as the prohibition of inquiring about a woman's childbearing or childcare plans, which have levelled the playing field for women. These are questions that are not asked of male applicants and, therefore, should not be asked of female applicants.

In terms of employment trends, there has been a noticeable decline in traditionally masculine occupations, such as coal mining, which predominantly fall under blue-collar industries. This shift has resulted in a phenomenon known as the crisis of masculinity, which has been extensively discussed in sociological literature. This crisis is characterized by a growing sense of confusion and lack of direction among men and boys regarding their roles and responsibilities in society, particularly with regards to being the traditional breadwinner of the family. Consequently, some males may view education as a futile pursuit, believing that the scarcity of suitable employment opportunities in their respective fields renders academic achievement irrelevant. Additionally, the rise of feminized industries, where women increasingly occupy the role of primary breadwinner, can exacerbate feelings of emasculation, and undermine the self-esteem of male workers. As a result, girls may be more motivated to pursue academic and career success, while boys may feel demotivated by the crisis of masculinity. Such societal changes can thus impact the career aspirations and gender identity of young people, highlighting the dynamic and complex nature of gender roles and employment trends in contemporary society. Various sociologists, such as R.W. Connell and Michael Kimmel, have explored the phenomenon of the crisis of masculinity and its implications for individuals and society at large.

**GENDER ROLE SOCIALISATION**

One significant factor that contributes to gender differences in academic achievement is gender role socialisation, which primarily takes place in the home during primary socialisation and may be reinforced through the education system. Boys are often socialised to be confident, outgoing, and even aggressive, but not in a violent manner. In contrast, girls are often socialised to be more passive, quiet, and reflective. Barber (1996) conducted a study where she assessed a group of students and asked them to rate their own performance. She found that boys tend to overestimate their abilities and believe they can do better than they can, while girls tend to underestimate their abilities and work harder to improve their performance. This can result in boys not putting in enough effort into their studies, leading to underachievement, while girls work harder and achieve relatively good grades. Thus, gender role socialisation plays a crucial role in shaping academic achievement and can affect how boys and girls perceive their abilities and approach their studies.

The individualization thesis is relevant to the issue of gender role socialisation and academic achievement, as it suggests that changes in gender socialisation are occurring, leading to more gender-neutral parenting practices. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, individuals, particularly girls, are increasingly identifying as independent and prioritizing their own goals over those of their family. As a result, they are more likely to work hard and achieve success in education. This shift in focus from the collective to the individual is reflected in the way girls view themselves, with independence becoming a core aspect of their identity.

Angela McRobbie's concept of bedroom culture suggests that gender differences in academic achievement begin even before children start school. Girls tend to engage in more social and emotional development through role-play and quiet activities, which builds ideal pupil behaviour and acceptable social norms before they enter formal education. In contrast, boys are often socialized into more aggressive and boisterous behaviours, which may not align with the expectations of the education system. As a result, girls may have a head start in developing the skills and behaviours needed to succeed academically. Overall, understanding the role of gender role socialisation and its impact on academic achievement is crucial in addressing gender disparities in education.

**CHANGES IN THE FAMILY**

The final factor that we will explore is the changes in the family structure, which are linked to changes in education, employment, and feminism. Despite an increase in the number of lone-parent families headed by men, many of such families are still headed by women. These female-headed households provide role models for girls who witness their mothers' financial struggles and their efforts to secure a better future for their families. These observations can inspire girls to aspire to similar successes and promote the ideal of women as breadwinners. However, the growing number of women entering the workforce and taking on the breadwinner role has led to a crisis of masculinity. Men face a challenge to their traditional roles as providers and are forced to consider their place in society and the family. Men may feel uncertain about their role in the face of women who have taken on the instrumental role, which was traditionally reserved for men. Men are left to perform the expressive role, which can create confusion and insecurity about their position and identity. This crisis of masculinity can filter down to children in school, who may feel uncertain about their own role and purpose in society. This internal crisis may not be overt, but it can have profound impacts on the individual and the family structure.

**EVALUATION**

There are several factors that can contribute to differences in educational achievement between genders, particularly why girls tend to perform better than boys. One key factor is aspirational levels, as girls often have higher aspirations than boys. Conversely, boys may have lower levels of aspiration, which can contribute to a crisis of masculinity. However, external factors such as the pay gap and glass ceiling also play a role in educational achievement differences.

Despite improvements in gender equality, the pay gap remains an issue in the UK, where women earn on average 89p for every pound earned by men. While this could be due to women lacking confidence in negotiations, the glass ceiling also plays a role. Women are often passed over for promotion due to maternity leave or the assumption that they will become unreliable workers after having children. Additionally, women may not apply for jobs unless they meet all the job specifications, while men may apply if they meet just some of them. These traditional gender roles are still present in the workplace, which can affect women's career aspirations.

While societal expectations are changing, the expectation that women will prioritize motherhood and family still persists. Women who delay or choose not to have children may face pressure from others to do so. While studies show that girls prioritize education and career over family and marriage, the traditional gender roles are still evident. In Sharpe’s study, girls expressed a desire for a career and education before family and marriage, but societal expectations can still influence their aspirations.

Diane Reay's study highlights the significant impact of social class on aspirations and ambition among girls. The research reveals that working-class girls are less likely to aspire to higher-level careers because they perceive them as beyond their reach. Reay argues that this middle-class concept of high-level career aspirations is not applicable to the working class, who tend to have a more collective subculture that prioritizes family over career aspirations. Working-class girls aspire to gain an education and have a career, but not necessarily at the highest levels, such as being a CEO. The myth of meritocracy, which suggests that one can achieve success simply by working hard and aspiring to high-level careers, does not consider the numerous external factors such as social class and ethnicity that can limit one's opportunities and resources. Girls tend to buy into this myth more than boys, leading to higher educational achievement. It is important to consider both internal and external factors when trying to explain gender and achievement trends.