

## Chapter 6

# Gender, Work and Learning

Women and men are very differently situated in relation to the labour market. Women often have different domestic and personal situations, marry earlier than males and carry a disproportionate responsibility for household chores in all societies. There are commonalities in women's experiences that transcend cultural differences, many of these related to caring roles and societal expectations. These factors influence identity formation and life chances in fundamental ways. When the responsibilities of the individual (and indeed their rights) are constructed around direct economic contribution through paid work, inequities between men and women are compounded.

As in previous chapters, this chapter builds on and expands the evidence on how gender differences are experienced by young adults trying to take control of their lives in the contrasting labour markets of English and German cities: men's advantages in the labour market despite high educational performance of young women, the continuing pressures on women to prove themselves and the challenges of tackling non-traditional roles. The chapter extends beyond these general views to a more detailed exploration of the vocational education and training (VET) experiences of young people and adults, drawing on research conducted in a wider European landscape. This leads to an elaborated concept of gender autonomy that encourages rethinking of the relative responsibilities of individuals, institutions and governments in advancing gender equity.

There are significant differences between German and British society in the ways in which gender and social class interact and combine to impact significantly on life chances and the life course. The emergence of post-industrial society and associated educational developments brought many changes for women's lives and those of men too. In the first part of this chapter, patterns of gendered experience are viewed within the social landscape of each city-region area, and then compared to draw out differences that are attributable to the social landscape and its underlying structures. Gendered patterns of experiences revolve around opportunities and discrimination, career orientation, future prospects and plans and political activity (an extended discussion of these relationships can be found in Woolley 2005).

## 6.1 Young Adults' Awareness of the Influence of Gender on Life Chances

Gender issues tend to arouse lively discussions among young adults although the advantages and disadvantages associated with gender were also considered a non-issue for some, particularly those in higher education. These discussions give some important insights into the ways young people at pivotal stages in their lives become aware of the impact of structural factors on their chances and choices.

In both Hanover and Leipzig, the discussions in all groups emphasised the limitations that childbearing and childrearing place on women. The German employed groups also concentrated on the advantages and disadvantages of different professions and occupations. Many mentioned the advantages for women in gaining employment in typical female occupations, but there was an overall awareness that there are enduring inequalities in the levels and status achieved by females and males in employment and the economy, despite equal or superior performance of women in educational qualifications.

The extracts in the next section illustrate the complex interplay of these perspectives.

### 6.1.1 Leipzig: Men Have the Upper Hand

A group of employed young adults in Leipzig discussed the impact of gender on the workplace and seemed to agree that men have more advantages. They believed that people should receive jobs on the basis of merit rather than gender, but acknowledged that gender can make a difference.

Q: Do you believe you are privileged or disadvantaged in the apprenticeship and labour market because of your gender?

Young man, Leipzig:

I hope that I have better chances because men don't bear children, and if there is a child then a mother stays at home when it's ill. Don't get me wrong, I don't believe a woman's place is in the home, but I hope that I have better chances than a woman. I know it's not fair to say that so openly here as there are so many women present. But in the end, it is individual performance that counts.

Q: Do you think that being a man gives you better chances in your profession?

Young man, Leipzig:

There aren't many men in the bank where I work, but the higher you go up the organisation, the more men there are. That's almost a rule in a bank and I don't think it will change much in the near future. It should be the case that you get a job because you deliver an excellent performance. Gender shouldn't play a part in it. But in a bank – and in other areas too – it's important to have social contacts to get somewhere. And even a woman will reach a high position if she has social contacts she can make use of. But to my mind its individual performance that counts. I haven't seen women treated unfairly because of their gender.

Young woman, Leipzig:

In my experience there are differences. In my job, we've been working on building sites with industrial painters and floor covering workers, but we also need some needlework done. Men don't want to sit down at a sewing machine and do that kind of work. Of all the male apprentices, not one likes that kind of work. On the other hand there are girls who like to work on building sites and do men's work, and it may be that there aren't disadvantages. But there are some types of work that only men can do, like heavy lifting, so men have an advantage there. Women do the easier work and that's when I notice the difference that gender can create.

### ***6.1.2 Women Have to Prove Themselves***

In the Derby groups, there was a lively and extended debate about how being female affects women's lives. The participants acknowledged that being one of a few females in a male-dominated workplace can be advantageous: you stand out, are noticed and are looked after to an extent. Nevertheless, it is their view that in order to gain respect, women need to prove themselves.

Young woman, Derby:

I'm the only female among probably 200 guys and the female/male bit is not a problem at all. In one way it's slightly more difficult for me because I almost have to prove myself. But in another way I get quite a lot of attention because everybody knows who I am, and because I'm the only female in that group. But it's difficult because you feel like you have to prove yourself to be accepted.

Another woman added that she felt women had to prove themselves twice as much as men. This theme also came up in the German interviews.

Men have a big, fat advantage

Young man, Hanover:

I strongly believe that men have a big, fat advantage in the labour market. I've experienced it myself many times and I don't think we've got very far with equality of the sexes. I would go so far as to claim that this applies to all sectors of professional life. There is no equality of the sexes. In the area where I intend to work in the future (mechanical engineering), it's always said that women have to work twice as hard as men to be respected to the same degree. And they earn less than men for double the work.

In the mixed group, both males and females asserted that they had experienced no disadvantages due to their gender, and on the contrary, one of the females felt being female in the largely male-dominated company she worked for was an advantage.

No, I've found that being a female in the company that I work for is actually an advantage. . .in the company I work for there's about 1000 men and about 30 women and you just stand out and so you are more likely to get picked on for certain things I'd say. I got picked on by the managing director because I was on a course and there were only 40 people and I was the only girl, so you sort of get to know people more because they remember you because you were the one girl in the group.

### ***6.1.3 Prejudice and Stereotypes***

Two of the women from Derby said they had experienced one-off incidents of overt sexism and prejudice in the workplace. In one person's case, her company had taken action. More generally, people said that stereotypes came into play in the way they were treated by others.

Young woman, Derby:

The amount of times I've walked into an office and asked to speak to someone and they ask: Are you the new temp? and I say: No, and she says: Oh, what's it about? And I say: I'm the engineer in charge of the engine or whatever, and she's like: Oh, I'm sorry, and she scurries off. I've had that three or four times now and they immediately presume you're the new secretary.

One woman expressed the view that much of the disparity between the career choices of males and females can be explained by their own expectations.

Young woman, Derby:

It drives me insane the amount of girls who say they want to work in childcare because they think that's the only thing they can do. Maybe it's because their mums got a young kid and they say: Oh, I like babies, and I think, Oh, please. I think you get to a certain age where you think to yourself, hang on a minute, there's lots of other things that I can do. And that's why it's refreshing to hear someone like you who's an engineer. Personally when I go to Rolls Royce I think, my God, if I had my time again I'd be an engineer.

### ***6.1.4 Tackling Non-traditional Roles***

In all three cities, people discussed the difficulties they encountered when trying to gain work in areas traditionally dominated by the other sex.

Young woman:

I'm doing a construction course at college. I do bricklaying, plumbing, joinery, I do it all at college and I get the piss took out of me. All the lads there just do not accept us. There's one tutor there, his names Fred, and he doesn't accept us and he told us what he thought of us. There's 13 of us women, we've been in the paper and that. So, from my point of view they are sexist in some things because if I went to get a job on a building site, and a man did, and we both had exactly the same papers, they're gonna give that job to a man. I know they are.

Young woman:

Well, working with wood is traditionally a man's trade isn't it? So, French polishing, you know, restoration, is traditionally a man's trade. I was fortunate to find a female employer. Because if I'd had a bloke employer then it would have been slightly different, definitely.

Young man:

Last year I was doing a course at college, childcare, and I was OK, I was doing the course work OK. But when the placements came up I was sent to a place where I was supposed to do evaluations on the kids and things like that and the teacher there didn't give me enough

time to – well didn't give me any time at all – to do the course work and the placement. But I had to leave college eventually because I was two months behind on work and I didn't have any time in the placement to do any of the work.

Young man:

I used to want to work with kids. And I went to one job and they gave the job to a girl who had just left school with a GCSE, yet I had proper qualifications from college. So where does that come into it? She's got that basic GCSE and that's it, yet I've spent two years at college, got the proper qualification, know exactly what I'm doing, I've first aid and all sorts. So there was no reason why I couldn't do the job, it's just that they didn't want you to do it.

### *6.1.5 Gender Issues Come to the Fore in Employment*

The main response from both young women and young men in the Derby higher education group was that their gender had affected their lives neither adversely nor positively. A different view came from a 24-year-old single mother who entered higher education via one of the 'access' courses associated with widening participation (see Chapter 3):

... when I was at school it was like we went to do the business studies and the typing and the needlework and stuff, didn't we? and the boys went off to do whatever they did. And it went on from college as well, when you left college you were expected to go and do a business admin course... which everybody did. Do you know what I mean? Everybody hated it, everyone dropped out half way through, and then ended up working in wherever for a few months and then deciding on this is what I really want to do and going and doing it. And I mean that's because that's, I don't know really, its just what you're expected to be doing being a female. It's certainly what I thought.

The responses from the two employment groups differed in tone, and this may have been a result of their different compositions: one was mixed and the other female only. The feelings of the group were summed up by a 19-year-old modern apprentice: 'things are changing and everything's equalling out now if you know what I mean'.

The consequences of parenthood were raised in only one Derby groups, and this was an unemployed group with several young mothers in it. To these young people, a key issue affecting their lives was that of the cost of childcare, which they saw as a significant barrier to further education and training. Their collective view was typified by the following comment:

Young woman, Derby:

Because its, its I'm gonna say it, its nearly, it is normally, the **norm** is that the woman is the one that stays at home with the kids so what I'm saying to go out and try and get training when you've got kids and you're a woman. But apart, if you went for a job and there's a man stood there and woman stood there I don't think its like that anymore now, I think they just go for the one that's most appropriate for the job. I wouldn't say it's like sexist like that, I don't think it's like that anymore.

In both Hanover and Leipzig, the discussions in all groups emphasised the limitations childbearing and childrearing place on women, as well as what they saw as the inevitability of the choice between family and career for women.

I: Do you believe you are privileged because of your gender in the labour market? Or do you believe you are disadvantaged because of your gender?

Young man, Leipzig:

I hope that I have better chances because I am always told that a man can roll up his sleeves and cannot bear children and if there is child then a mother stays at home when it has fallen ill. Do not get me wrong – I am not of the opinion that a woman belongs behind the hearth, I can cook myself, you know, but I hope that I have better chances than a woman. I know it is not fair to say that so openly here as there are so many women, I mean, ladies present now but in the end it is individual performance that counts anyway.

## 6.2 Patterns of Experience in the English City Region

These qualitative insights need to be better understood in the context of the gendered patterns and regularities that are found in the ways in which young adults see themselves, their future possibilities and their ability to influence their life chances by their own actions.

Young women in the English city region were found to regard their futures more positively than males (making more plans and having higher expectations) and also to attribute their present circumstances more to their own planning than to chance. Young men had the greater experience of unemployment and expectation of facing it again in the future. Overall, it appeared to be the case that males were having the tougher time and that such differences were most pronounced within the employed group.

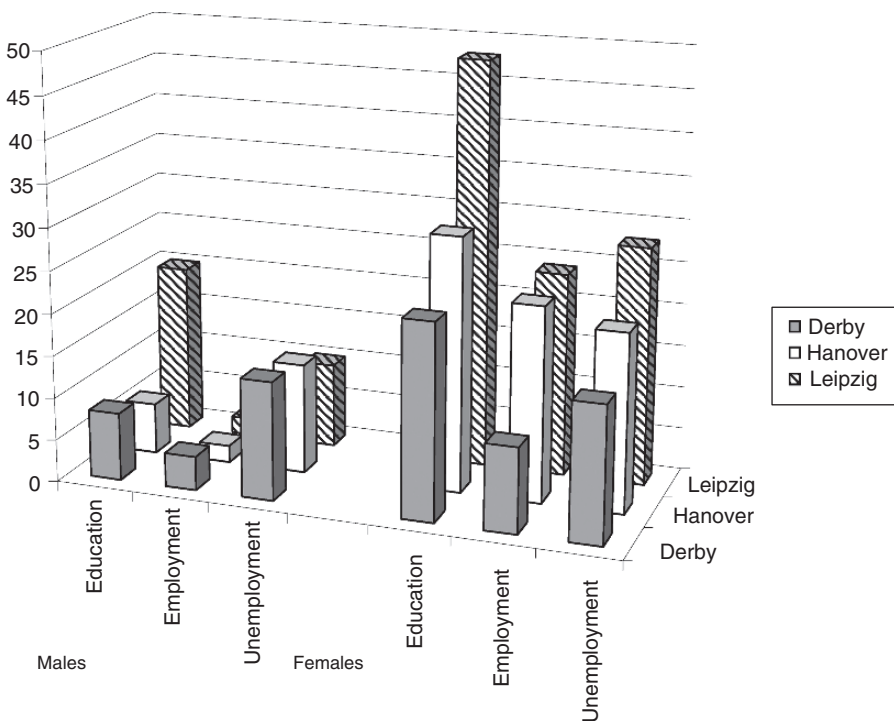
The most striking difference in males' and females' backgrounds was that regardless of their current circumstances (unemployed, employed or in higher education), females were generally first to leave their parental homes. Just over half of the young men were still living at home, compared with 36% of the young women. Only 34% of the men had left home before the age of 19 compare to 56% of the women. Additionally, a greater percentage of females who were already living away from parents thought this would be permanent (76% of females and 58% of males). More unemployed females than males had moved into local authority accommodation (40% compared to 6%), more employed females had become homeowners (31% compared to 15%) and more female students had moved into student residences or private rented accommodation (65% compared to 54%).

More females were encouraged by their parents to stay on in education when they reached minimum school-leaving age (52% of females compared to 42%), and this was most evident in the employed group (62% of females and 40% of males). Across all settings, more males than females had experienced multiple spells of unemployment, and in both the unemployed and employed groups, males had re-taken examinations more often.

### 6.2.1 Career Orientation

Young women in the English city were more likely than males to attribute their current circumstances to their own plans. This was shown by comparisons of their scores on the ‘planned not chance’ factor.<sup>i</sup> They also scored rather more highly than men on the factor fulfilled at work (often feel sense of achievement, use initiative, make own decisions, feel stretched and challenged, set own goals and given responsibility).<sup>ii</sup> Taken together, these results suggested that the young women in Derby were thinking ahead and achieving more satisfying results for themselves.

Young women who had entered higher education scored more highly on the ‘planned not chance’ factor, were more active in seeking career and had previously searched for full-time employment. They also scored more highly on the factor ‘believes own weaknesses matter’. This factor combined responses on items asking whether individuals attributed failures in their work and personal lives to lack of skills, lack of qualifications and/or their own weaknesses. In the employed group, this pattern was reversed with men scoring more highly than women on their activity in career seeking and their beliefs that their own weaknesses matter in work and life chances. There were no such differences within the unemployed group.



**Fig. 6.1** Percentages of males and females seeing it a important to combine career with child-rearing

When these young people were asked what three things they most wanted from work, the responses most frequently chosen, by both males and females, were good pay and good job security, followed by prospects, challenges and a friendly atmosphere. The option 'possibility to combine a satisfactory career with child-rearing' was not chosen by many people but, a similar proportion of males and females who were currently unemployed placed this childrearing possibility in their top three priorities for work. This contrasted with the education group, where three times more females than males chose this priority (see Fig. 6.1).

Young women in Derby were more positive about their futures. Males scored more highly on the factor 'negative view of future prospects'. A higher score on this factor was a result of feeling that it was unlikely they would secure the kind of job they wanted, having no plans for the future, being more unlikely to seek further qualifications and feeling more that future unemployment is likely. This was also found to be the case within the employed group.<sup>iii</sup>

### **6.3 The City Region in Western Germany**

There appeared to be less diversity in the experiences reported in the western German city of Hanover than in Leipzig or Derby. While young men also appeared to be searching for work more actively than young women, more of them had experienced unemployment. In both the education and employed groups, about 90% of females reported having no experience of unemployment, compared with 74% of males. In the unemployed group, more males had been unemployed on two or more occasions (35% of males compared with 23% of females).

Around 10% more young women than men had previously left their parents' home, largely a result of young females in employment leaving earlier than their male counterparts. Of those in education, more females felt their parents encouraged them to remain in education when they reached minimum school-leaving age, whereas more males felt the decision had been left up to them. Males had first left education at age 18 or younger more often than females (38% of males and 23% of females). In the unemployed group, females first left education at younger ages than males (73% of females left aged 18 or younger, compared to 58% of males) and fewer had been encouraged to stay on by their parents.

#### **6.3.1 Career Orientation**

Activity in career seeking was the most important difference identified between the young women and young men of Hanover. Men were found to be more active in searching for work, and this gender difference was most marked within the employed group. Interest in following a helping/people-orientated career also differentiated between young men and young women. Females were more likely to want a job which enabled them to contribute to society and meet lots of people, but it should



be noted that these work values were not rated highly by large numbers. As in the English city, most preferred to aim for work that provides good job security, good pay, a friendly atmosphere, prospects and challenges. Three times more females than males considered the possibility to combine a satisfactory career with childrearing as important. Differences between the responses of men and women were greatest in the employed group and least in the unemployed group.

### ***6.3.2 Future Prospects and Plans***

More young men than women thought it is at least possible that they would become unemployed sometime in the future (42% compared to 27%). This difference in expectations is particularly apparent in the unemployed group (54% compared to 27%) and the education group (43% compared to 28%). The men in education appeared much less likely to consider moving from the area or from the country of Germany.

## **6.4 The City Region in Eastern Germany**

Very clear differences were found between the attitudes and expectations of young women and young men in the eastern German city of Leipzig. Women's lower scores on the factor 'believes opportunities open to all' and higher scores on 'believes ability is not rewarded' appear to suggest they are less inclined to believe that meritocracy operates in society after the political changes. This finding was accompanied by young women showing a greater openness to the possibility of moving away from the area and being more politically active.

As in the English city, females tended to leave their parental homes at younger ages than their male peers. This was found to be the case across all settings but was most pronounced in the employed group, where 63% of males had never left compared with 29% of females. This is consistent with the finding that 69% of females in employment and 51% of males felt themselves to be financially independent of their parents. However, around 22% more females felt at least partly dependent on their parents for practical advice and emotional support.

Also in common with the English city, young men reported more experience of unemployment. Within the unemployed group 74% of males compared with 50% of females had experienced unemployment on a multitude of occasions. More females than males stayed in full-time education until they were aged 18 or older (44% of females, 26% of males).

### ***6.4.1 Opportunities and Discrimination***

A pronounced difference between young East German men and women was found in their beliefs on whether opportunities are open to everyone and whether ability

is rewarded. Women believed less that opportunities are open to all and believed more that ability is not rewarded. Unemployed young women scored more highly than their male peers on sociability, confidence and fulfilled personal life. This last factor comprised the following items: well equipped on social skills/relating and confidence/decision-making skills and, in personal life, often feel sense of achievement, use own initiative, make own decisions, feel challenged, set own goals and given responsibility.

### **6.4.2 Career Orientation**

Males in the employment setting were shown to attribute their current situations to planning more than females by their higher scores on the factor 'planned not chance'. As in the English and western German cities, young men most frequently named their work priorities as good pay, job security, friendly atmosphere, prospects and challenges. However, young women chose the possibility to combine career and childrearing third most frequently. As in western Germany, the disparity in proportions of males and females rating this as an important factor is greatest amongst those already working, while the gap among those in higher education is not so great (see Fig. 6.1).

## **6.5 Comparison Across Areas**

Young women from all three cities, Derby, Hanover and Leipzig, were more likely to leave their parental homes at younger age than males. This trend was most noticeable in the employed groups, which would presumably have the greatest numbers with the financial means to live independently of their parents. Where there was an imbalance in proportions of males and females feeling financially better off and worse off than in the previous year, it was the females who were suffering more. Why is it that females appear more inclined to set up with lives lived away from their parents and to do this despite the greater financial pressures which this will normally bring? This raises questions of whether young women value their independence more than males, since it is unlikely that they are encouraged to leave earlier by their parents.

The greater incidence of spells of unemployment among young men is another noticeable trend. In Derby, multivariate analyses found that multiple spells of unemployment related to being male and being from Derby, as well as to being currently unemployed, believing your present circumstances are related more to chance than planning, having had more than one type of setback and being older. When area and setting were removed from the set of possible explanatory variables, multiple spells of unemployment continued to show an association with being male. It is by no means a new finding that repeated experience of unemployment is suffered by males more than females, but this does confirm that opportunity for secure employment

**Table 6.1** Percentages stating social characteristics have ‘considerable’ effect, by gender

	Derby		Hanover		Leipzig	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Gender	20	20	33	30	34	46
Race	25	20	57	50	69	78
Social class	30	30	43	48	46	67
Family background	23	26	33	30	28	34

continues to be lacking for at least a minority of males. The effect is particularly strong in Derby where greater deregulation of the market, as well as the lack of an apprenticeship structure, creates a less secure pathway from school into working life. It seems that this leaves a greater problem for young males than it does for females.

A striking gender difference in degrees of belief in opportunities and rewards being available for all emerged across the areas. Table 6.1 depicts the findings and shows similar levels of belief in males and females in Derby and Hanover but a gender difference emerging in Leipzig. It is interesting that it is in Leipzig, where social characteristics are most visible to the respondents, that young women were significantly less likely than young men to believe in the existence of meritocracy. The table gives percentages of males and females in each area ascribing differences in life chances to social characteristics. It appears that the young women in Leipzig perceived the effects of social characteristics on opportunities in life more clearly than their male peers.

Across all areas, young men in employment were found to have been more active in searching for work than females (see Fig. 6.1). This is most evident in the Derby and Hanover areas, adding further weight to the idea that males were faced with a tougher time in negotiating the labour market than females. This raises the question of whether this is a result of difficulties with finding themselves work per se or a result of being more demanding about the work which they are prepared to consider?

Young women more often included consideration of childrearing as one of their top work priorities, and this was true in all settings and areas. It can be seen from Fig. 6.1 that this consideration was felt most keenly by females in Leipzig and least so in Derby. Only small numbers of males chose this option as a priority, with the exception of male students in Leipzig. Across settings, young women in higher education included the item ‘combine career with child-rearing’ in the highest proportions. This suggests that young women are aware of the realities of society and therefore set out considering the effects childbearing and childrearing will have on their lives. Some choose to minimise these effects from the beginning by choosing a career which need not be prioritised over a family.

Young women were also significantly more positive in their views of their future prospects than males in the Derby samples, but not in the other areas. This is consistent with findings given in Table 6.2.

More young women than men from Derby thought it likely they would gain more qualifications, train for another occupation and get the job they desired and thought

**Table 6.2** Expectations of further training, qualifications, employment by sex (percentages)

	Derby		Hanover		Leipzig	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Very likely to obtain additional qualifications	29.5	40.9	40.3	36.6	31.5	35.1
Unlikely or no chance of becoming unemployed	29.5	38.3	23.7	31.1	21.5	23.2
Very or quite likely to train for another occupation	15.7	24.6	8.6	10	12.1	13.9
Very unlikely or no chance of training for another occupation	9.6	3.9	29.5	28	28.2	19.9
Very/quite likely to get desired job	32.3	44.1	29.7	30.5	20.1	13.9

it unlikely they would become unemployed. Their expectations of these situations were at a higher level than their counterparts in the Hanover and Leipzig samples and higher than those for males in all cases, except expectation of gaining further qualifications, where the Derby females equalled the Hanover males in proportions seeing this as very likely. More females in the Leipzig sample thought it possible that they would train for another occupation, though fewer expected to get their desired job, than their male counterparts, and more females in Hanover thought it unlikely that they would become unemployed, but generally the female and male levels of expectation were closer in the German samples. In all areas, there had been a decline in traditional (mainly male) manufacturing jobs and in traditional apprenticeship schemes. Where the numbers of jobs had expanded, this was usually in the service sector, in the kinds of areas where females were more likely to be employed, such as catering, leisure and office work, though it should be stressed that all cities still had a sizeable manufacturing sector.

Comparison across all 900 young adults on the mean scores for males and females on the factor politically active has shown that it is the female population which is the more politically active. This was found to be a significant difference both within the Derby and Leipzig areas as well as within particular settings within these areas. Furthermore, this greater political activity on the part of females was found despite lower levels of expressed interest in politics than their male peers (see Chapter 7).

In summary, the underlying patterns in engagement with the labour market have shown young men to display greater activity and also experience greater challenges in obtaining the employment they want. Young women were more fulfilled at work, believed own weakness matters, planned for the future, were more likely to move and were more politically active.

Juxtaposing their own accounts of how gender impacts on their everyday lives with these social regularities provides some further unique insights into how

position in the gendered social landscape affects the ways in which the person interprets his or her experiences and perceives relative advantages or disadvantages. These have to be seen in relation to personal goals and horizons, which have some shared, gendered characteristics. In the next part, the ways in which experiences of gender are mediated in and through VET are considered further.

## **6.6 'Gender Autonomy' and Social Responsibility: Challenges for Work and Vocational Learning**

Underlying the surface terrain are the structural features of social landscapes that are slow to change. Educational and labour market institutions reproduce the features that underlie the visible landscape in many respects. Accepting this as inevitable and as 'always the case' misses the spaces for action that open up as people act in and through intermediary organisations. For example, in the public sphere of VET, individual strivings and practitioner commitments to gender equity can combine in ways that can reduce barriers and open up new horizons.

A wider international perspective on vocational learning and preparation for work has been provided by participation in the EU Fifth Framework Project on Gender and Qualification.<sup>iv</sup> Research partners from five European countries (Finland, Germany, Greece, Portugal and the United Kingdom) investigated the impact of gender segregation in European labour markets on VET, with particular regard to key competences and qualifications. This research explored the part played by gender in the VET experiences of (i) young adults entering specific occupations in childcare, electrical engineering and food preparation/service and (ii) adults changing occupations. The international research was conducted using hermeneutical and empirical methods.<sup>v</sup>

Empirical data from 244 interviews, observations in VET institutes and at workplaces and content analyses of job advertisements, curricula, brochures and other sources confirmed that 'gender still matters', from the viewpoint of the individual, in their experiences of skill formation and attribution, occupational choice and personal development. But empirical data also revealed 'gender blindness' in VET institutes and at workplaces when it comes to considering, positively and constructively, the continuing significance of gender differences in VET and in work. In this chapter, a secondary analysis of key findings (see Evans 2006) identifies the need to create the conditions for strengthening gender autonomy as a conclusion of most relevance to the UK VET and lifelong learning policy context. The significance of this idea extends to other societies which face the same challenges, although the dynamics differ. The concept of gender autonomy offers ways of understanding how individual responsibility entails social responsibility, with scope for reflexive shaping of social processes and practices.

As well as working cross-culturally, a particular challenge of the European project on gender in VET and work was the attempt to bring together two segregated perspectives – gender studies have tended to treat concepts of competence

and qualification as relatively marginal when compared to other issues of gender inequality in the labour market, while there has been a tendency to ignore gender studies in VET.

Key competences have become part of the language of policy throughout the EU. While these labels and the ideas they encapsulate are highly contested, and ascribed many different meanings, they are linked by the argument that these embody capabilities that can and should be deployed by everybody in or seeking to enter the labour market. Yet there is a gendered discourse in these areas. For example, the interpersonal competences that are often cited as key in this sense are also often held to be 'female skills'. The origins of these attributions are varied. Personality and actions of the individuals, the cultural background, the structure of VET and the structure of the labour market are all important, but above all gender stereotypes, part of the day-to-day lived experiences of individuals has a more determining influence on ways in which the relative competences and skills of men and women are recognised and ascribed.

Men and women often choose gender-typical occupations because of social expectations or social 'normalcy' and consequently develop or are trained in gender-typical competences. Thus, gendered key competences become intensified by gender-typical occupations, and gender segregation is reconstructed, because occupational tasks and requirements influence ways in which key competences are recognised and deployed. The findings that led to this conclusion are reviewed and exemplified in the following sections, with a view to elaborating the concept of gender autonomy as a useful means for understanding, and then intervening in, the macro-, meso- and micro factors that shape gendered experience.

### ***6.6.1 Rethinking Key Competences***

Nijhof and Struemer (1998) have attempted to review the multiple definitions and concepts circulating in national and international discourses. They conclude that key competences are designed to help prepare young persons for life, for an occupation, for employability and for citizenship (Nijhof 1998) based on the affirmative assumption that they are necessary and useful (p. 20). Uncritical use of the concept ignores, or treats as unproblematic, the differences in access to the informal contexts and everyday situations that shape many versions of key competences. These differences in access and experience can further reinforce the social inequalities of existing gender regimes, themselves rooted in network of norms, regulations and principles in the structure of social practices (Connell 1987 p. 139). This applies particularly in the differential values ascribed to competences gained through paid and unpaid forms of work and different types of occupation.

The concept employed in the research emphasised the compound mix of inner abilities of the person which are not clearly visible but can be made effective when the situations within which the person is expected, or has an opportunity, to perform are favourable (see also Evans et al. 2004). Key competences, understood as inner capabilities, are developed reflexively through experiences in a range of life and

work environments, and there is potential to support people towards the achievement of critical insight (see Roth 1971) into the limits and possibilities afforded by their everyday situations in paid and unpaid forms of work.

### 6.6.2 *The Typical Cases*

Occupational choices of people in gender-typical occupations were influenced by social and cultural contexts of the partner countries but also demonstrated gendered features that transcend national boundaries. The majority of people interviewed said they had chosen their occupation largely through the influence of family and relatives, yet those choices were very different for men and women. There was evidence of characteristics and competence being ascribed to gender in all three areas. In children's nurseries, female workers were ascribed characteristics of greater tenderness and patience, better able to help children with basic hygiene, feeding and clothing. Trainers and female nursery nurses in all countries themselves considered males less sensitive and to have less aptitude in connecting socially with the children and parents. Often such skills are deemed to come more naturally to women. This is consistent with the observation of Noon and Blyton (2002) that so-called female skills are viewed as natural – leading to a further view that they are not deserving of the same level of reward as skills that have to be acquired and learnt, such as technical skills.

While these patterns of attribution were very visible in the work environments of electrical engineering and nurseries, divisions of labour according to ascribed characteristics was also apparent in the gender-mixed environments of food preparation and restaurants. Men were given the heavier tasks of arranging chairs and tables, while the decorative, ornamental tasks tended to fall to the women – although this division of labour was certainly not always in line with personal preferences. In our analysis, then, gendered key competences are regarded as typical for men or women because they are more often performed by, ascribed to or expected from men rather than women or vice versa.

Despite this, in response to questions such as do men make better electricians than women and can men be good children's nursery workers, two-thirds of interviewees considered that there are no inherent differences between the sexes in abilities to work successfully in any given occupation. One-third of interviewees perceived clear differences between the sexes in their occupational abilities. However, within this second group, most also held the view that things were changing, with only 3% thinking that *only* men or women can do certain occupations successfully.

The findings showed that the pervasiveness of gender in everyday work relations contributed, paradoxically, to its invisibility to the eyes of many VET practitioners, most of whom claimed that they treated everyone as an individual irrespective of gender (see Hoffmann 2004). In many cases, they regarded gender as no longer an issue.

Two ways of uncovering the effects of gender were employed. The first was to investigate the experiences of the exceptional cases – people who have made

atypical career choices of children's nursery work (for men) and electrical engineering (for women). The second was to examine the experiences of adults moving into the labour market after periods of interruption in their occupational life.

### ***6.6.3 The Exceptional Cases***

Finding male nursery workers and female engineers proved more difficult in some countries than in others. For example in Portugal, Greece and the UK, very few men choose to become nursery workers or childcare assistants, where pay and social status is very low, while increasing (although still small) numbers of women are entering engineering. In Germany, the reverse is found: there are more male children's nursery workers than female electricians. Kampmeier (2004) argues that low pay and status is not such a disincentive in the German context, and most men entering this area aim for career development through training. Engineering, however, is a very high status job in Germany with a high competition for training places and jobs, and very few women put themselves forward for this area of work.

The views from people working in gender-typical occupations could be compared with those from the 'exceptional' cases, that is men working or being trained as children's nursery workers or nursery nurses and women whose occupational choice is to become an electrician. This provided very valuable insights since these people have a 'near image' of the situation, and they know about gender differences from their own experiences: they can therefore compare these with the 'far images', the public opinion held with respect to gendered key competencies. They are aware of the parts played by gender in the social practices of VET institutions and at the workplace. They also recognise, to a much greater extent than the 'typical cases', the variety of ways in which gender-'typical' behaviour and gender-'typical' personal competencies can be observed during training and at the workplace. It was found that these 'exceptional' cases, indeed, manifested different configurations of prior experience as well as personal competence, compared to the 'typical' cases.

Most research cases who had made exceptional career choices had developed non-typical interests during their childhood and had developed particular patterns of key competences through this process. These were further developed during their training as female electricians and male nursery nurses. For example, in the UK study,<sup>vi</sup> the two female electricians had both been encouraged by their fathers earlier in life. The first, for example, had been encouraged by her father, who was a construction engineer. Within the family, she helped her father with the D-I-Y and fixing the family car. She and her sister were also interested in Formula 1 racing, and they would go as a family to watch it. Similarly, another female electrician, when asked why she had chosen electronics, said that it was related to the interest she had from childhood in how things worked:

I had always been interested in puzzles, making things fit and work . . . From when I was a child, I was always involved with PCs because my father built them when they were first brought out, and I knew how to programme them, no problem. My friends were into radios and we used to take them apart and change the frequencies . . . I looked back and thought



I did get enjoyment from building and making things and proving why things work; the logic. It's like a challenge to me . . . That's why I thought it was something to try.

These two exceptional cases are consistent with the findings of Newton (1987: 195), whose research on women engineers showed that they were quite likely to be the daughters of engineers and that the fathers' attitudes were important influences in the occupational choice process. Women who chose engineering as a career were also significantly more likely to have had 'unconventional' interests (i.e. those normally associated with boys) in their childhood.

Family members had also been involved in the choices of the male nursery nurses. The father of one, for example, had helped by obtaining information about the course, knowing his son's interest in working with children, and had supported and encouraged his son in the choice he had made. For this young man, working with children had been a long-standing interest. During his teens, he would help out on play schemes during holidays. When he was 18, he was offered a job helping to run a play scheme and then enrolled on the course. For another young man on the course, though, this was a second choice of occupational field. He would have preferred a job with power and status, but illness and disability had made it difficult for him to pursue what he had initially wanted. His parents had been supportive but worried about the demands of children's work on their son, and he had become enthusiastic about and highly committed to the work.

The exceptional cases reported a variety of ways in which they were treated differently as compared to their gender counterparts, in their worksites and training programmes. These reports could then be compared with the attitudes and views of their trainers. Trainers thought that female electrician trainees were tidier and more industrious than men, but they also sometimes thought them to be not so strong with respect to logical thinking and technological creativity. Yet this was something one of the female electrical engineers identified as her particular strength:

Being able to work on your own; if something isn't working properly, to be able to fault find . . . The equipment in my eyes is very easy to use. It's all very logical. Somebody would need to have a logical mind to work the equipment, but really it just like learning to type. Maths is important, as there are a lot of formulas involved. The main thing is that you need to very precise.

She explained that it was not necessary to be strong because the engineers are not expected to carry the instruments themselves. When asked whether she thought the problem-solving skills that she had emphasised were more associated with males or females, she seemed puzzled by the question and said, 'I don't think that gender has anything to do with it'.

Male nursery workers were often expected to concentrate on playing with the children, particularly during outdoor activities, and were often called on for everyday practical tasks of a physical or technical kind. Their female counterparts more often chose – or were urged – to do the basic caring. The ways in which they reacted to these expectations varied. One male nursery worker reported how he would question why he should be asked to carry heavy boxes while his female colleagues stood and watched. His female colleagues had notions of what tasks were appropriate

for males, but he challenged these notions and resisted the pressure to behave in accordance with gender stereotypes.

The part played by gender in the experiences of the exceptional cases contrasted starkly with the significant number of people interviewed who felt that gender was no longer an issue. The exceptional cases felt that they had to overcome rather strong reservations and sometimes prejudices on the part of employers and colleagues, but also of family and friends. One of the young women engineers, for example, had to withstand stupid remarks from boys and their disbelief that she was studying engineering. Her strategy for managing this is to demonstrate that she is interested in the same things as they are – cars for example. In this way, she felt that she gained acceptance. Her female friends thought that she was brave. They did not understand her interest in technical things, but there is no evidence in her comments that she experienced any discouragement from them.

A young male nursery worker talked about how the attitudes of the children's parents towards men caring for their young children caused him difficulties. In his social life, he and the other exceptional cases would find different ways of presenting what they were doing, for example nursery officer or professional training in childcare, to avoid mockery and disbelief. This illustrates a particular problem experienced by all the exceptional cases that they have to struggle to assert their gender identity in the face of the prejudices they encounter. They wished to assert their gender identity as well as an occupational identity, and the older ones had already achieved that. One nursery worker said that the VET course had affected his identity as a male. He said that his female peers regarded him as 'one of the girls'. He often felt isolated and had experienced problems with finding a girlfriend. The female engineer who felt that there was no difference between males and females in terms of performance on the engineering course did try to preserve her female identity. She said that she wears make-up, perfume and jewellery, and her hair is always tidy. In contrast to the boys, her boiler suit is much cleaner, her writing is neater and her car is tidier. In her words, she does not want to turn into a bloke. Interestingly, she also said that she could never go out with a boy who was a nursery nurse.

The evidence showed that overcoming prejudices in atypical training and employment requires particular resilience and much determination. Another young woman talked of some of the pressures of being the only female in the training programme. While she believed that there is not really a difference between male and female trainees, she felt that she continually had to prove herself. She said that she had to work very hard and everyone noticed when she did something wrong. Yet the tutors felt that there was no differentiation according to gender – males and females were treated equally and any differences stemmed from individual abilities and personalities.

In discussion of their ambitions and longer term view of their prospects, gender influences surfaced even more strongly for the exceptional cases. For females, any difficulties faced were seen as part of a process of buying into the better pay and prospects of an engineering career. Yet the interviews with male engineering trainers showed the further gender segregation they would encounter. One said that he thought women had more of a chance of finding work in digital electronic

engineering and programming because of skill shortages in these areas. Computer-aided design (CAD) was also identified as an area where women are more likely to be employed. One of the young women engineers talked of female friends who worked in CAD companies but only doing 'simple designs'; nevertheless, she had in her sights an occupational future as a design engineer.

For the male nursery workers, who were buying into a low-status, low-paid occupational area, the difficulties they faced in acceptance of their chosen roles were compounded by the potentially disempowering and limiting nature of the work. Recurrent complaints are that nursery nurses 'are treated like skivvies by the parents' and the job is low paid. 'They don't treat us with the actual knowledge we have got. We are just playing with the children . . . They don't see the background work'. With few opportunities for promotion, many men decide not to stay as nursery workers, a finding also highlighted by Cameron et al. (1999). The desire to work with young children is combined with aspirations and plans to move as quickly as possible into a professional job within the field. For example, one had the ambition to be a head of unit and had applied for two posts without success. To him, the absence of male heads of units in his present company was indicative of gender discrimination. These ambitions contrasted with the aspirations of the female students who said that they wanted to become nannies and nursery nurses.

The personal accounts of the male nursery workers showed them to be resilient and highly committed, with a sense of purpose and vocation. They also revealed how far their experiences of becoming nursery and childcare workers were being negatively affected by gendered attitudes and behaviour. Therefore, it is little surprise to find it reported in the colleges that a lot of young people leave an atypical training at an early stage. The evidence that many find learning and working environments difficult and sometimes unpleasant, through a mixture of attitudes and conditions encountered, undoubtedly contributes to this. Those people, however, who break through these difficulties appear to be more conscious about their occupational choice and thus sometimes more engaged. They demonstrate 'gender autonomy', and recommendations should aim at supporting them, while creating the conditions to enable more people to stay the course without having to display the exceptional resilience of the survivors.

The UK cases used illustratively here were paralleled in the other country studies, showing shared features of experiences of exceptional cases that transcend national boundaries, although it should be noted, following Heikkinen (1996), that the cultural embeddedness of expectations does vary considerably between settings and cultural groups at a more detailed level.

#### **6.6.4 Gender Autonomy**

So far, these encounters point to the need to strengthen and support *gender autonomy*. Gender autonomy means that everybody, regardless of gender, should be given the opportunity to develop their chosen career path (whether in paid or unpaid

occupations or a mixture of the two) according to individual predilections, *without gender-related penalty or disadvantage accruing from that choice*.

Supporting *gender autonomy* could be at the centre of improvements regarding gender segregation in the labour market, as an alternative (or at least complementary) strategy to seeking ways of equalising the numbers of people from each sex in each occupation. This does not lead to a deficit model conclusion that people should become more resilient and determined to succeed, while the barriers they face remain untackled. It leads, instead, to some insights into the kinds of support needed for people who want to exercise their gender autonomy by going into atypical fields, while enabling the many women and men who want to do so to exercise gendered preferences with neither penalties nor unfair advantages.

As far as key competences are concerned, the accumulated evidence on gendered perceptions of competences enables us to link the previously segregated discourses of gender studies and VET to ask to what extent they can be part of the solution as well as part of the problem. A further test for these ideas of supporting gender autonomy can be made in relation to men and women changing direction in occupation and spending time out of the labour market. The data from the 127 interviews conducted in the five European countries confirmed that in almost all cases there was a clear division of labour within the home and that the women's occupational choices were circumscribed by the need to fit their occupational roles around their domestic responsibilities.

In the UK study 20 biographical interviews were carried out, 15 with men and women who had returned to the labour market after taking time out of work for family reasons or a period of unemployment and five with people whose change in occupational direction arose primarily from a wish to change direction while in work.<sup>vii</sup> Most expressed satisfaction with their area of work. In the UK cases, the only person interviewed who had held a professional job continued with her commitment to teaching. Another was reasonably happy with her work as a bookkeeper in her husband's company. Another two women wanted to work with children, and in addition to being a part-time school road-crossing attendant, one of them was also involved in a range of voluntary work, including special needs teaching. This was also the case for another who was also working as a school meals assistant and was also involved with helping with toddler groups and on a Night Shelter management committee. It was evident that these women possessed a wide range of skills that were being deployed in areas outside their paid employment, which was in most cases classified as low skill and low status.

The five who had returned to the same field of employment also expressed satisfaction with their jobs. These three women, all of whom were involved in office work, appeared very clear about their occupational choices, and all said that they had wished to return to full-time office work as soon as possible. The two men, who were both in traditionally male jobs, plumbing and metal machining, had both got their jobs through friends. One was working part time because he had childcare responsibilities as a single parent.

An analysis of the abilities that these women said they had developed and mastered whilst being out of the labour market revealed a mix of methodological

and social competences, together with personal attributes that they felt had been acquired or strengthened. From the viewpoint of those returning to work from family breaks, competences acquired outside paid employment are not seen as having much relevance or importance to the workplace apart from jobs which encompassed caring and domestic roles. The women who were working with children could see the value of their skills in terms of their transferability although this term was not explicitly used by them. Those who were engaged in work unrelated to caring, particularly the males, could not see their relevance at all.

Taken together, these encounters raise questions as to whether these kinds of competences are themselves gendered and seems to lend some support to the issues raised by Hoffmann (2001 pp. 40–41) in relation to the persistent and notorious term, female skills, citing popular media sources that assert that female skills including empathy, caring, listening and time management are becoming increasingly essential in the workplace, with men exhorted to get in touch with their feminine side (see e.g. *The Future is Female*, BBC Panorama).

If the premise is accepted that these types of competences are generic, and valuable to the process of transfer between different types of occupations, then these competences need to be seen as gender neutral. Ascribing gendered features to these competences contributes to the maintenance of gender segregation in the labour market. The idea that the recognition of key competences could be used to strengthen and support gender autonomy therefore has to be seen in the wider context of the social processes, often linked to social stereotypes, that influence the ways in which the relative competences and skills of men and women are recognised, ascribed and valued.

### ***6.6.5 Furthering Gender Autonomy***

The furthering of gender autonomy then has to be considered at three levels:

- the individual level;
- the level of VET systems and recruitment practices in the labour market; and
- the macro-level of socio-political features of the society.

On **the individual level, people** can be supported in developing relevant attributes and competences connected to self-assurance; that is

- to try to become aware of ones own attributes and competences beyond usual prejudices;
- to call in question the conventional perceptions of what is a male or female occupation;
- to dare to make 'atypical' occupational choices; and
- to develop perseverance in order not to give up at an early stage of an atypical career.

On the level of VET systems and recruitment practices, it is important to provide this encouragement for all people. In addition, it is of particular importance to support people who intend or have decided to choose an occupation which is atypical for their sex, using pedagogical approaches to support the development of competences in the direction of the critical insights and critical engagement in their VET and work environments, as part of dialectical, or shaping processes.

In VET (including training in companies) this means actions

- to counteract the processes which render gender invisible to practitioners, including tiredness with gender issues and conceptions, at least in the UK, that the problem has already been solved;
- to give opportunities for people to work in gender-mixed classes;
- to provide mentoring by people who have themselves made an atypical choice; and
- to be more aware of prejudices regarding gender-typical key competences.

These actions can be taken by VET practitioners and personnel managers responsible for recruitment. As far as policy-making on a meso-level is concerned, this has to provide the framework conditions for these practices to be successful. This includes training for teachers, trainers and personnel managers. In addition, the macro-societal conditions are of utmost importance, for example setting wages according to gender equity and making provisions for childcare, parental leave and part-time work.

If gender autonomy is aimed for at a societal level, how far advanced a society is in relation to the goal of gender autonomy is measured by the extent to which people can choose to follow typical or atypical paths without penalty or disadvantage. This applies both to material disadvantage and to social approval or disapproval. If the aim is to counter gender stereotyping, it is also important not to stereotype societies when undertaking cross-national analyses. The research study 'Gender Autonomy in Europe – An Imprecise Revolution' by Singh (1998) showed that Nordic countries can be classified as advanced despite a high level of gender segregation, as policies and practices are in place, which enable both women and men to exercise gendered preferences without penalties or unfair advantages.

The Nordic countries unequivocally provide the most sound basis for gender autonomy, ... although Nordic women experience above-average segregation in the labour market, any disadvantages accruing to such work are more mitigated than elsewhere by protection afforded by the high unionisation of part-time work and the public sector, as well as through generous social benefits. (Singh 1998, p. 150)

Running against the normal stereotypes, southern countries, particularly Greece and Portugal, were classified as having high progressive potential, in the sense that they have potential to progress by virtue of their present modernising process rather than by their actual performance. Recent laws have yet to be fully enacted but are generally in line with the latest European guidelines. Both countries also have strong

non-formal sectors which potentially allow for high levels of role sharing between men and women:

... since these countries simultaneously support the family and favour the concept of the welfare state . . . , the combination works well for women's abilities to balance the private and public spheres. (p. 154)

Germany and England were both classified as conservative, with change taking place slowly:

because of the belief either that it is not the states role to provide redistributive services (the UK) or that egalitarianism is at best of secondary interest to stability (Germany), the conservative mode tends not to minimise the structured inequalities between the public and private spheres

Impediments and entrenched barriers (such as lack of adequate affordable pre-school childcare in England and relatively weak legal bases for equal opportunities in UK and Germany) have slowed the pace of change in women's experiences in the labour market despite the strong rises in female educational participation and achievements.

Switzerland and Ireland were classed separately as underdeveloped, with major barriers in the fields of reproductive and legal rights, and rankings near the bottom in all of the indicators of reconciliation between the private and public spheres of activity-maternity leave benefits, childcare policies and gender role-sharing initiatives. Resistance towards state intervention and change also characterised these societies in the field of gender relations.

If the aim is to move towards greater gender autonomy, there is a need to reduce the gender-related penalties and barriers for those who make particular occupational choices, within our respective societies. These may be the gender-related penalties of low pay for caring occupations or the penalties/barriers of hostile working environments for people entering gender-atypical occupations. The systemic features discussed above can change but are slow to do so; the conservative forces are great and the state of social development uneven. Yet as Connell (1987 p. 139) argues, gender regimes can be seen not as static but reflexive, with the relations of power subject to conflicting social interests, formation and dissolving of accepted categories and the re-structuring of institutionalised relations.

## **6.7 What Is Possible to Change Through Vocational Education and Training?**

The question here is deliberately focused at the level of VET practices, asking what can be achieved in VET to encourage and support change, while also recognising that what VET can do will always be very partial. Social structures take much longer to change, but what influences can be exerted by VET practitioners to support change in the desired direction? The accumulated evidence has pointed to the relevance of considering, through the concept of 'gender autonomy', how

highlighting of key competences and improving learning environments can contribute to improving options for career choice and enhancing human potential. The evidence shows that

- overcoming barriers in atypical training and employment requires particular resilience and much determination;
- the exceptional cases who survived the challenges are the tip of the iceberg; drop-out in the early stages occurs quite frequently for people who are less resilient or who find particular situations and attitudes intolerable;
- this does not lead to a deficit conclusion that people should become more resilient and determined to succeed without tackling barriers; it leads instead to insights into the kinds of support needed for individuals who want to exercise their gender autonomy by going into atypical fields;
- people who survived in atypical occupational situations found different ways to assert their gender identity; and
- their experiences also reflect the power and social position of the gendered occupation they are entering, a process that experiences as doubly disempowering for males entering low-status female-typical occupations.

These insights lead to the following recommendations:

- Use of key competences as tools for policy and practice cannot advance the cause of gender autonomy alone, without building gender issues into vocational pedagogy – doing gender.
- This requires much more mixed-gender teaching across occupational areas to explore and challenge assumptions about skills, to consider gender identity issues and to provide identity support.
- Create supportive networks of practitioners who are gender sensitive and committed to change. For example, in the same way that colleges would not dream of sending a trainee to a placement that had poor health and safety practices, VET institutions could take steps to ensure that only those placements are used which can demonstrate good gender practices. This can be done in a non-bureaucratic way by establishing networks of practitioners with common aims and goals.
- Take steps to counter the gender tiredness of teacher and trainers who are not already committed to change in this field, with approaches that are fresh (e.g. based on identity and work and evidence-informed practice) and feasible (e.g. networks based).
- Recognise that working for policy change in the framework conditions at a societal level takes longer, but should take place alongside and in parallel with creation of such networks.

VET can only exercise partial influence on the forces and factors that restrict gender autonomy. It cannot by itself change macro-social forces or the early experiences of individuals. But is the space that VET does have being used fully? Expanding awareness of the spaces which can be used by VET practitioners to advance the



cause of gender autonomy can, in time, make the exceptional less exceptional. But macro-level changes in the framework conditions have to be worked for collectively, to reduce the penalties (social, economic and emotional) for those who exercise their gender autonomy in new directions.

## 6.8 Summary and Conclusions

The ways in which people experience the effects of gender in their personal lives depends to a large extent on their position in the gendered social landscape. Yet young adults trying to exercise control over their lives in the contrasting labour markets of English and German cities have important experiences in common: men's advantages in the labour market despite high educational performance of young women and the continuing pressures on women to prove themselves and the challenges of tackling 'non-traditional' roles typically dominated by men or women. The pursuit of gender autonomy means that everybody, regardless of gender, should be given the opportunity to develop their chosen career path (whether in paid or unpaid occupations or a mixture of the two) according to individual predilections, *without gender-related penalty or disadvantage accruing from that choice*.

The evidence shows that overcoming barriers in atypical training and employment requires particular resilience and much determination; people who survived in atypical occupational situations found different ways to assert their gender identity. Supporting *gender autonomy* is an alternative (or at least complementary) strategy to seeking ways of equalising the numbers of people from each sex in each occupation. This does not lead to a deficit model conclusion that people should become more resilient and determined to succeed, while the barriers they face remain unattacked. It leads instead to some insights into the kinds of support needed for people who want to exercise their gender autonomy by going into atypical fields, while enabling the many women and men who want to do so to exercise gendered preferences with neither penalties nor unfair advantages.

Social forces that impede this take much longer to change, but influences can be exerted by practitioners in gendered occupational and career arenas and by the large numbers of adults and young people whose learning they facilitate. The spaces for challenging and changing practices at the level of intermediary organisations, particularly those providing VET, are often underestimated. Practitioners need support in understanding better how the practices facilitate or impede learning and the confidence to change them. Breaking out of the straightjacket of managed approaches of the present system world will not be achieved quickly, but it is at this level that individual strivings and practitioner commitment can combine. Changes can be achieved in the practices of VET institutions to accommodate people's preferences and counter the barriers and penalties they face in taking paths that are atypical for their sex.

This exercise of social responsibility by those who participate in VET, whether as students, teachers, trainers or supervisors, will not have immediate influences on the

social forces and factors that produce gender-based disadvantages. It will however promote awareness, co-operation and action that can feed into the longer term pursuit of macro-level changes in the ‘framework conditions’ of society. These can be worked for collectively through social movements which, in the cause of gender relations and gender equity, have proved particularly effective and sustainable over time. Where individual strivings, practitioner responses and social action combine, the exercise of social responsibilities at these different levels of society promises to reduce, incrementally, the penalties (social, economic and emotional) for those who choose to exercise their gender autonomy in new directions.

The first part of this chapter showed how the ways in which people experience the effects of gender in their personal lives depends to a large extent on their position in the gendered social landscape. Their gendered locations affect the ways in which people interpret their experiences and perceive relative advantages or advantages in education and the labour market. The idea of gender autonomy shows how the responsibility of the individuals to strive for their chosen and desired futures entails wider social responsibilities, exercised at the macro-, institutional and individual levels. The actors themselves have the social responsibility to assert their gender identity and preferences, individually, on their own account, and collectively, for themselves and others. The spaces for change that open up at the level of intermediary organisations are often underestimated. Here individual strivings and practitioner responses combine. Changes can be achieved that accommodate individuals’ preferences and reduce the barriers they face. This equates to the exercise of social responsibility at the meso-level, setting up interdependencies that can feed into the macro-level changes in the framework conditions that have to be worked for collectively. These levels of social responsibility can combine to reduce, incrementally, the penalties (social, economic and emotional) for those who exercise their gender autonomy in new directions.

## Notes

- i. This was found within the education setting also (mean scores: males =  $-0.03$ , females =  $0.36$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). The ‘planned not chance’ factor combined responses on whether long-term goals, interest and didn’t choose it – had no choice were reasons for their current situation arising, as well as responses to the statements ‘Getting a job is just a matter of chance’ and ‘Being successful at work is just a matter of luck’.
- ii. ( $p = 0.08$ ).
- iii. For a full account of these findings, see the doctoral thesis by Claire Woolley (June 2005), ‘*Shaping Lives: Agency in Young Adult Transitions*’, University of Surrey.
- iv. Gender and qualification was a project of the Fifth European Framework Programme, subtitled *Transcending Gendering Features of Key Qualifications for Improving Options for Career Choice and Enhancing Human Resource Potential*, the project aimed to investigate the impact of gender segregation of European labour markets on vocational education and training, with special regard to key competences. The project, coordinated by Heidegger and Kampmeier (Germany), was undertaken by a partnership of teams from England (Evans, Hoffmann, Saxby-Smith), Finland (led by Heikkinen), Greece (led by Patiniotis) and Portugal (led by Figuera).
- v. Documentary and literature analysis covered

- gendered structures of respective national VET systems and labour markets, together with a synthesis of commonalities and structural differences of the participating countries;
- VET-related gender studies including historical, cultural and economic conditions and research on career orientation and gender; and
- the state-of-the art of national discourses on key qualifications

For the empirical part of the investigation, the following were carried out:

- observation of classes in 10 vocational schools (Further Education Colleges in England) in child-care/nursery nursing (female typical), electrical engineering (male typical) and food service (mixed gender) and in work sites;
  - interviews with 100 participants in the above-mentioned programmes, including trainers and employers;
  - studies of 17 exceptional cases (male nursery workers, female electricians);
  - 127 interviews with adult occupational changers; and
  - content analyses of advertisements, brochures and information materials.
- vi. See Evans and Saxby-Smith (2003) for fuller accounts of the UK cases.
- vii. A fuller account of cases is given in Evans and Saxby-Smith (2003).