



# Gender Stereotyping in the Leaving Certificate Irish Prose.

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## ABSTRACT

Gender stereotyping in the Irish Prose Syllabus is an area of increasing interest to researchers in recent decades. The tendency to judge individuals on the basis of their gender remains a pervasive societal issue, pending legislative efforts to remove gender stereotyping from society. This study adopted a qualitative approach to examine the attitudes and experiences of four Irish post primary teachers and two Irish student teachers via semi-structured interviews. It explored the career paths and roles of women in the Prose stories and the covert messages portrayed, investigating if guidelines were being implemented. The data was analysed using thematic analysis as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The findings highlighted stereotyping with female characters being depicted in the stories as homemakers and caretakers with minimal access to education or profession. Women were expected to follow the traditional lifestyle of marrying, having children, while constantly tending and relying on the men. Their value is based on their physical beauty and their role as a mother and wife. Women are depicted as being trapped in their marriages, which discourages students from escaping the traditional roles. Policies are not being adhered to in the process of empowering female characters. The latter in the stories are illustrated in a negative light possessing the characteristics of being pitiful, subservient, manipulative, and dependent.

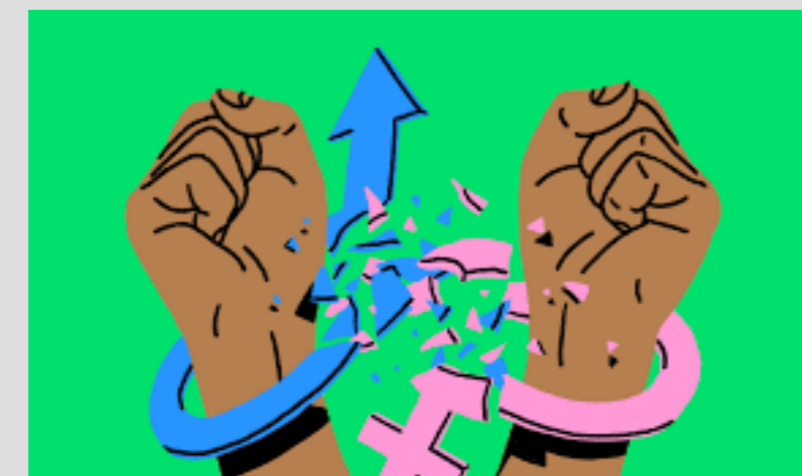
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## INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on identifying if and where the Irish Prose stories portray a gender stereotype towards the female characters. Emphasis was placed on female career paths and roles in contemporary society. A review from 2011 showed that single-sex education encourages gender stereotyping which can make it more challenging for the genders to cooperate (O Riordáin 2018). International research suggests that co-education contributes to positive social outcomes; as young people leave school; the realms of employment and socialisation are not separated by gender and it makes sense to provide an awareness of the opposite gender (Mc Guire 2017). Whilst the Prose section is a compulsory element at Senior Cycle, reform has not occurred since 2010. Societal changes have evolved significantly since this implementation. It is imperative that the career paths and roles of all genders are promoted fairly and equitably, particularly to the current generation of millennials in post-primary schools. Students' perception or experience in school impacts on their overall view and expectation on gender roles as maturation occurs. This is especially true as students experience the normalisation of gender career paths and roles in the Prose stories.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

The research questions are focused on understanding post-primary teachers' experiences and perspectives on the role and profession of women in the Prose stories and whether policy guidelines are being adhered to. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were most suitable. Due to Covid-19 restrictions interviews were conducted online using Microsoft teams and via phone call as one participant did not have internet access. Participants were chosen to participate in semi-structured interviews on the basis that they had taught the Leaving Certificate Irish Course. Convenience sampling was selected as a result of time constraints due to assignment brief and the research was not funded. It was based on the secondary school I attended and the school in which I completed teaching practice. Once the permission was received, the interviewer started to generate questions for the interviews. The participants are 4 Irish post-primary teachers (2 male and 2 female) and 2 post-primary student teachers.



## FINDINGS/ RESULTS

- **Female worth depicted through physical appearance:** The female character is portrayed in a negative light as her sole value is based on exterior looks. The prime focus is on how thin, fashionable, and attractive the female appears. Emphasis is placed on hair style, clothing, makeup, which all enhance female appearance.
- **Recognition is dependent on the male:** The prime role of the female is to tend, serve and answer to her male counterpart. The female exists to fulfil culinary and domestic duties such as cooking meals, minding children, cleaning, and dutifully listening to problems. All female characters are portrayed as craving male validation in the Prose stories.
- **Role of homemaker belongs to the female:** It is evident that the female did not have the independence or sometimes even inclination to obtain her own profession, career, or leadership role. The stark reality of gender socialisation is obvious by acceptance and expectation of the female stereotype.
- **Stories are not relatable:** Participants reported that students do not generally enjoy studying the current specified prose stories as they are outdated and not relevant to contemporary society. No female is afforded independence, professional success or illustrated using any form of technology. The expectation for the female is avoidance of a social circle outside of the home. The latter is unrealistic and sets unrelatable norms in contemporary society. There are covert messages emanating from the Prose stories which influence students' views of female career paths and roles.
- **Fulfilling current recommendations:** Current policy recommends promotion of gender equality in the curriculum. The Prose stories are obligatory in the present Irish Syllabus. Apprehension is evident regarding stereotyping relating to female career paths and roles. It is apparent that the Prose stories must be updated in order to fulfil current government policy guidelines to promote gender equality.



- An Gnáthrud
- Cáca Milis
- Dís
- Hurlamaboc
- Oisín I dTír na nÓg

## DISCUSSION

Physical appearance amplifies gender discrepancies by promoting stereotypes. Attitudes and behaviours towards gender affects relationships. Participants stated that a stereotypical image of Lisín was portrayed in Hurlamaboc. The women of the street illustrated the value and money that their husbands possessed. All of the female neighbours had blonde hair and fashionable clothes except for Mairéad Ní Loinsigh. She had black hair and was viewed as the outcast of the street. Female physicality and appearance was directly linked with their social status, which reflected the tone of the street.

Frequently, a family or social burden promotes lower social status for females (Conger et al. 2010). Females have no option but to accept submission to the status quo. Complacency is encouraged, and this conformity ensures they deserve their own opinions. Participants acknowledged this expectation in Cáca Milis. Catherine obviously felt compelled to support her mother despite having clear reservations and anger towards this role.

Study of perceptions and gender ideology at a personal level illustrates a perception of progression. There has been a significant rise in the number of males and females embracing non-traditional gender roles over the past decade (IHREC 2018). Participants illustrated the drastic shift in the role of women in Ireland over the last century, which has shown women transformed from passive homemaker to dual worker in the home and labour markets. However, teachers did not believe stories portrayed this. Cáca Milis depicted the female in a negative light as she was manipulative and scheming. The suggestion seems to be that the norm is an inability to be direct, forthright, and assertive. The duality of the female role seems to be either the passive homemaker or the extreme controlling psychopath.

Although policy has been upgraded to hinder gender stereotyping, a dominant theme culminating from this research shows the current Prose stories do not illustrate female empowerment outlined in legislation. The NWCI believe that Feminism is a vital tool for promoting women's artistic potential and skills, as well as encouraging and empowering women's full participation in society's broader social, economic, political, and cultural growth.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study examined the experience of six post primary Irish teachers. The increased involvement of Irish women, particularly married women, in paid employment since the 1990s has questioned the prevailing breadwinner paradigm (Murphy-Lawless 2000). However, evidence in this study showed that females were judged based on their physical appearance, role as homemaker and through male validation. In general, these metrics are based on the premise that family and children are a female's domain rather than a males (Eichler 1988). Attitudes are increasingly socially constructed by set traits of entities. They have the ability to affect the behaviour of males and females as part of the framework in which gender norms are created and replicated (Knudsen and Waerness 2001). Traditional roles and attitudes should be modified to build cohesion for all genders, as per policy guidelines.

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