

# theWI

INSPIRING WOMEN

## FIT FOR PURPOSE - FIT FOR GIRLS

Resolution Shortlist Briefing Notes



## Fit for Purpose – Fit for Girls

***Girls' clothing ranges often promote harmful gender stereotypes and can lack the practicality and robustness of boys' clothing due to the differing design features and materials used. The NFWI calls on clothing manufacturers and retailers to produce and market clothes for girls at all ages which are equal to their boys' clothing ranges in terms of design, quality and coverage, and which aim to empower and enable girls to feel comfortable and confident in whatever activity they choose throughout their childhood.***

### Proposer's position

The proposer is concerned about the clothing that is available for girls. She is concerned that the current range of clothing and shoes that is available lack the support and robustness of their male counterparts, hindering girls' ability to take part in physical activities such as sport and games. Furthermore, she believes that the clothing promotes an over-sexualised and overtly gendered image which impacts their developing mind sets and sense of self-image. The proposer would like to see clothes manufacturers produce more unisex clothing ranges and for girls' specific clothing to be suitable for physical activity with decorative elements to motivate rather than limit or stereotype. She would also like to see retailers advertise their clothes in a gender neutral way.

### The scale of the problem

Gender stereotypes are based on outdated ideas about men and women and their roles in society. In clothing, this goes beyond size and fit and also includes colour, slogan, motif, character, the finer details and, in some cases, font too.

Research shows that clothing marketed at girls has been described as being made of low quality materials, and in smaller sizes.

In 2020, the Commission on Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood, established by the Fawcett Society, published a landmark report in which evidence showed that harmful gender stereotypes are significantly limiting children's potential. The report claims that gender expectations significantly limits children and causes problems such as lower self-esteem in girls and poorer reading skills in boys.

The report also found that gender stereotypes contribute towards the mental health crisis among children and young people, are the root of girls' problems with body image and eating disorders, higher male suicide rates and violence against women and girls.

## The current situation

A study published in 2010 explored how clothing marketed differently to girls and boys has different levels of 'content', with boys clothing often seeking to impart information about subjects such as dinosaurs, or science, while girls' clothing did not include similar 'educational' content.

The Childrenswear Responsible Retailing guidance by the British Retail Consortium is supported by the UK Government and states that childrenswear must not unduly stereotype. However, the code of practice is purely voluntary.

There are a number of grassroots campaign organisations that aim to create more parity in childrenswear and eliminate the inappropriate sexualisation of young girls clothing. Examples include 'Let Clothes be Clothes' and 'Just Kids'. In 2017, John Lewis became the first major UK store to remove boy's and girl's labels from children's clothing in a bid to 'reduce gender stereotyping'.

Let Clothes be Clothes produced a report on behalf of the Department for Education in 2021 entitled 'Dressing Girls to Fail'. The results found that over 70% of schools had uniform policies for girls that were either significantly more expensive than boys uniform, more expensive due to less generic 'bought anywhere' items, used the term 'modesty' in girls policies only, had much more specific and complex rules around dress codes for girls and did not permit girls to wear trousers.

In Wales, after the release of a report entitled 'Charter for Change', the Welsh Government updated school uniform policy to state 'Schools' uniform policies should not dictate different items of clothing on the basis of sex/gender'. However, there has been no such guidance for schools in England.

### How could the WI work on this issue if it was passed?

A full campaign would be developed by the NFWI if the resolution is passed, taking into account developments since then. To help inform your discussions, here are some ways the WI could consider working on this issue.

**At local and regional levels**, this resolution could involve WI members writing to retailers and using their consumer purchasing power to effect change. This could include asking clothing companies to commit to ending the use of slogans and marketing approaches that trade on harmful gender stereotypes.

**Nationally**, the NFWI could engage with retailers and the British Retail Consortium to encourage retailers to adopt the code of practice set out in The Childrenswear Responsible Retailing guidance.

## Points to consider:

- The WI would be well placed to campaign on gender stereotypes and inequality and to draw links between gender stereotypes and violence against women and girls.
- WI members are well-connected in their communities, and could use their existing networks to inform more people of the effects of gender stereotyping and influence consumer choice, as well as speak to local schools to encourage them to adopt a gender-neutral school uniform policy.
- While the focus of this resolution is on calling on clothing manufacturers and retailers to take action, their practices will be influenced by consumer demand. Could a change in consumer behaviour be difficult to achieve or could a WI campaign help to drive this forward?

### Further information

**Let Clothes be Clothes:** [www.letclothesbeclothes.co.uk/](http://www.letclothesbeclothes.co.uk/)

**The Fawcett Society:** [www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/news/fawcett-research-exposure-gender-stereotypes-child-causes-harm-later-life](http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/news/fawcett-research-exposure-gender-stereotypes-child-causes-harm-later-life)

### Video content

**'You can be' animation by Zero Tolerance:**

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdzjnIJqg88&t=138s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdzjnIJqg88&t=138s)

**Girls can't wear trousers? Gender inequality in school dress codes**

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=6e4qSWyrnhI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6e4qSWyrnhI)

## Public Affairs Department Contacts

If you have any questions about the resolutions or the resolutions process then please get in touch with the NFWI Public Affairs department.

**Post:** National Federation of Women's Institutes, 104 New Kings Road, London, SW6 4LY

**Telephone:** 020 7371 9300

**Email:** [publicaffairs@nfwl.org.uk](mailto:publicaffairs@nfwl.org.uk)

**Website:** [thewi.org.uk](http://thewi.org.uk)