



# Seduced by images

Have you ever considered how the media influences your career choices? The Women's Foundation's Life Skills Programme explored this issue amongst others with senior secondary students in a special workshop

**S**TUDENTS in the workshop were divided into groups, each of them reading through either men's or women's magazines. While the glamorous pictures of TV and film icons in the magazines fascinated students, their mission was to pick out the most common adjectives used, products advertised, lifestyles portrayed and messages conveyed in the magazines.

## Subliminal messages

IN the men's magazines, students found lots of ads for sports cars, watches and electronic gadgets. These ads

often portrayed men as athletic (precision of watches, for example, was linked to being a world-class sailor), strong (images of the army) and wealthy in the working world. The men in the ads were often tall, handsome and well-built. On the other hand, students who went through women's magazines came across the following adjectives describing women: **flawless** skin, practical, cute, stylish, sweet and beautiful. Images of women were often sexually revealing.

After all the words were written down on arrow-shaped labels and posted on the blackboard pointing to **respective** drawings of a man or woman (see middle picture above), everyone realised that our behaviour and judgments of ourselves and other people are shaped by these words in our daily lives. These are the gender norms and expectations of mainstream culture, and lots of companies exploit our **insecurities** about meeting those norms and expectations to sell their products. Media messages may affect what people buy, but do they affect students' career choices too?

## The gender game

MARGARET, the Life Skills instructor, also played a game with students. The class was divided into boys and girls. Both groups were given the same stack of cards. On each card was an occupation: firefighter, chef, nurse, kindergarten teacher, make-up artist, fitness instructor, domestic helper or housekeeper, driver, airline steward or stewardess, engineer and landscape architect. Each group was asked to rank the occupations according to how appealing they were.

The rankings for girls were almost the exact opposite

for boys. Whereas jobs such as engineer and firefighter ranked highest for boys, they ranked fairly low for girls. Likewise, while kindergarten teacher and make-up artist ranked high for girls, they ranked low for boys. When boys were asked the criteria they used to rank the occupations, one mentioned salary. When asked why nurse did not rank higher, since nurses are also fairly well-paid, another boy answered that boys are not caring enough. Fitness instructor also ranked quite high, because the boys thought it would be the ideal job to meet girls, and the boys would be seen as fit and cool.

Girls ranked jobs that were physically demanding, such as firefighter and chef, quite low. When asked how they ranked their preferred careers, the girls said that an opportunity to meet a rich husband was an important **criterion**. So airline stewardess ranked high. Kindergarten teacher, make-up artist and nurse were also popular, because these are jobs that are more feminine as opposed to fitness instructor. Some of the girls worried that being a fitness instructor might make them less attractive to boys because the girls thought that boys do not like them to be too muscular.

Boys thought girls would be better at jobs requiring a caring and **detail-orientated** character. When asked why the boys did not want to be a housekeeper or domestic helper, one boy replied, "We're not very careful. We could end up killing the baby or elderly person at home!"

## Making the right choices

FROM the students' discussions, Margaret was able to draw their attention to how their career choices are affected by media and **social norms**.

At the end of the day though, each person is responsible for his or her own choices. Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm, including careers. The easiest choices often have a way of turning out wrong for the individual. Sometimes, the right choices are the ones that take the most courage and commitment. Those are the ones that help us develop into better people. ●

