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McHale, Joanne (2022). **Crossing the gender line: The pervasive power of gender roles in ECEC.** Paper presented on the 30th EECERA Annual Conference, Glasgow/Scotland, 24.8.2022.

This doctoral research project aimed to investigate the mechanisms by which the small minority of men enter the Irish ECEC workforce and once there, the path their trajectories take. This research drew on the foundational work of Cameron, Moss and Owen (1999) and subsequent studies internationally which have shown men's entry into the ECEC sector as multi-faceted and their experiences complex as they navigate the gendered workplace (Brody, Emilsen, Rohrman and Warin, 2021; Brody & Hadar, 2017; Peeters, Rohrman & Emilsen, 2015; Warin, Ljunggren & Andrä, 2021; Warin, Wilkinson, Davies, Greaves & Hibbin). Connell's (2005, 2009) theoretical perspective of gender as constructed and embedded in the structures of society and policed through relationships framed this study. An embedded mixed-methods design was employed in which semi-structured interviews with men and women ECEC workers, focus group with careers guidance teachers and a survey of parents accessing ECEC provision were conducted. Ethical approval was granted by UCL Institute of Education and ITB (now TU Dublin). Ethical considerations included informed consent, right to withdraw, privacy, anonymity and data protection. Issues of safeguarding and disclosures were considered and a supervisory mechanism embedded. This presentation discusses issues of power, gendered expectations and policing of gender roles reported by the men in this study. The issues of the continued association of ECEC with notions of maternal care and gendered expectations both on a societal level and in the workplace are discussed and suggestions for a less gendered workforce and conception of care are presented.

Keywords

Men in ECEC, Gender roles, ECEC workforce, Gender construction, Professionalism

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CROSSING THE GENDER LINE

THE PERVASIVE
POWER OF GENDER
ROLES IN ECEC

JOANNE MCHALE
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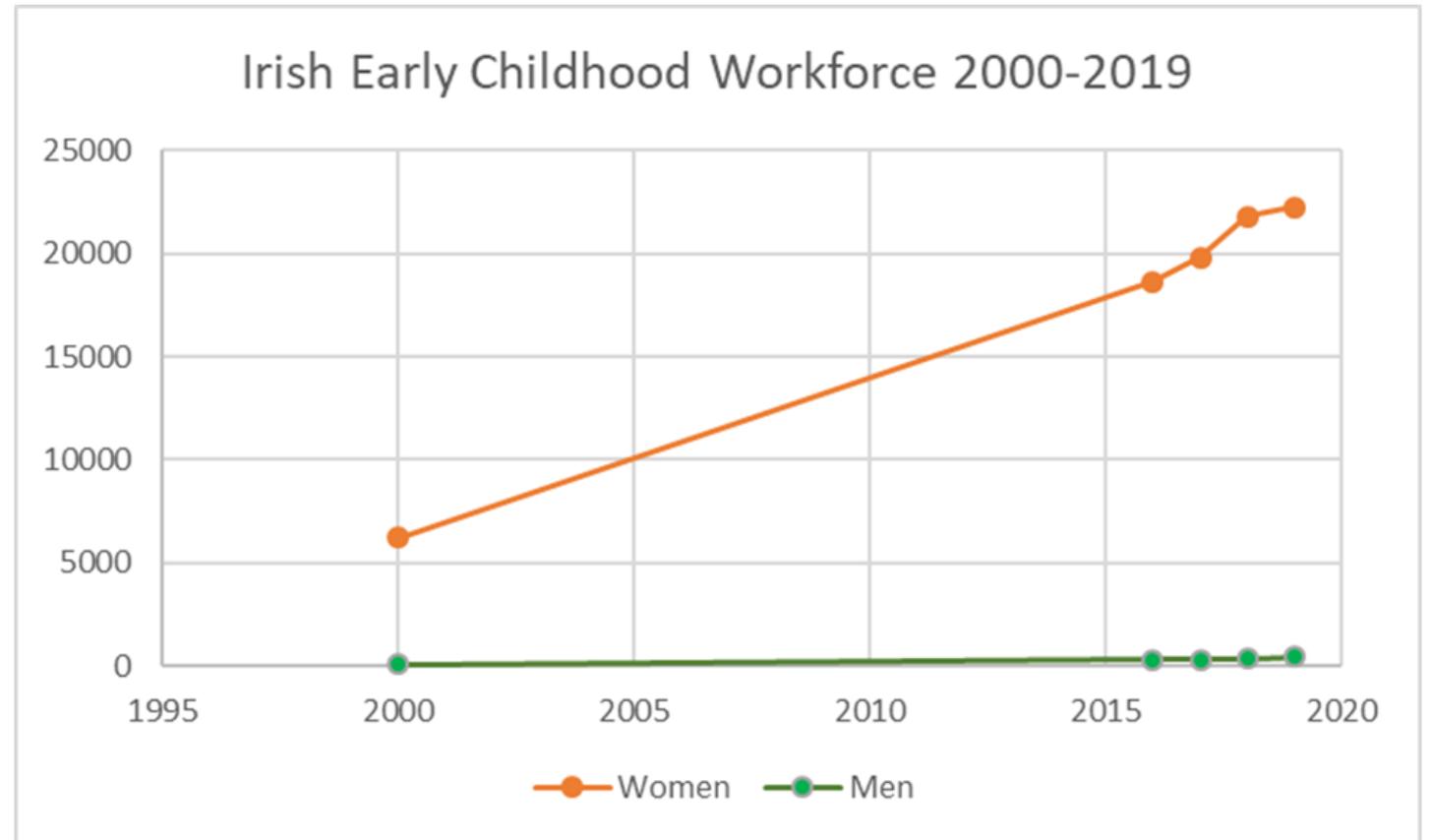
BACKGROUND – IRISH ECEC SECTOR

Rapid growth
and change

Move from
labour market
activation to
quality provision

Workforce:
minimum
qualifications

(ADM, 2000; Pobal, 2016; 2017;
2018; 2019)



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Entry: What leads men to enter the early childhood education and care workforce?

- What are the factors that influence them?
- What are the hindrances and barriers?

Trajectories: What path do their careers take?

- Where do they go when they enter?
- Do their trajectories differ from women's?

METHODOLOGY

Embedded mixed
methods design
(Creswell and
Plano Clark, 2011).

Complementarity
of perspectives
(Teddlie &
Tashakkori, 2009).

STRANDS

ECEC WORKERS: 10 men 6 women; Semi-structured interviews; Thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006)

CAREER GUIDANCE TEACHERS: 3 women, 1 man; Focus group discussions; variety of school type; Thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006)

PARENTS: 69 surveys; Parents of children under 6 in centre-based care; Descriptive analysis

LITERATURE

ECEC as “women’s work” replicating traditional gender roles in the home

The education hierarchy

Gendered influences on career aspirations

Gendered careers guidance

Visibility

Intrinsic motivations

Second chance entry

Family and friend’s influence

Significant life events “critical moments”

Differentiated treatment

Risk and (self) protection

Gendered expectations

Role modelling

Practice/pedagogy

Identity dissonance and masculinity

Recruitment and retention

Gender sensitivity

(Brody, 2014; Brownhill, 2014; Cameron, Moss & Owen, 1999; Cartei, Oakhill, Garnham, Bannerjee & Reby, 2020; Cremers, Krabel & Calmbach, 2010; Eidevald, Bergström, & Broström, 2018; Jones and Aubrey, 2019; Kedar, Andrä & Sullivan, 2021; Ljunngren, McHale & Sullivan, 2021; Lynch & Feeley, 2009; Nentwich, Poppen, Schälin & Vogt, 2013; Peeters, Rohrman & Emilsen, 2015; Rohrman, 2016; Rohrman, 2020; Rolfe, 2005; Sahin Sak, Sak, Eidevald & McHale, 2021; Van Laere, Vandebroek, Roets & Peeters, 2014; Vandebroek and Peeters, 2008; Warin, 2006; Warin, Wilkinson, Davies, Greaves & Hibbin 2020; Washington & Yarkony, 2019)



THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE (CONNELL, 2005;2009; 2014)

Social theory of gender

Embedded in all levels of society

Constructed and reconstructed

Policed through relationships

Public (male) and private (female) spheres

Not fixed but resistant to change

Influences aspirations, expectations and opportunities

KEY FINDINGS: ENTRY



THE PERVASIVE POWER OF GENDER ROLES

'For the first time in my life I was out on a limb, I've worked every day since I left school and I was always in engineering... I was made redundant I was in a position now to actually make me own choices' (Alan)

"like it took me about three weeks to get out from behind the sandpit, cos I was afraid I was going to sneeze and they were all going to start crying, but then once I settled into it, and I suppose I was oblivious to what early years was" (Robert)

'An age and stage thing... I was I was quite young with two quite young children and my sister had just done a childcare course and she suggested that maybe I do likewise or look into likewise and that's what I did.' (Mary)

REACTIONS

‘My dad’s reaction was would you not do a trade...’ (Robert)

“Especially, when I was setting up now where she was supportive and everything, she, she was very much that “oh I’ll move in for the first couple of months to help you because there’s no way you’ll be able to do it” ... While she was supportive, I think she, it took her a long time to accept that I could do it.” (Geoff)

‘like you get the usual bit of banter, lads “ah doing a woman’s job” that kind of crap like but nothing... that’s just lads being lads, and there wasn’t anything cynical in it.’ (Jamie)

GUIDANCE AND RECRUITMENT

“The career guidance in my secondary school suggested paramedic route.’ (Patrick)

“I could see some of their faces and kind of saying “ok, he’s a nice fella, right you know and I’m sure we could easily take him on, he’s only looking for placement, extra free help, you know, but do we. [need to change our practice/policies]?”” (Martin)

‘It’s easy for people to remember me, so as a result, it kind of elevates my position, do you see what I’m saying? And... I have to acknowledge that, and that has helped me a lot.’ (Ed)

KEY FINDINGS: EXPERIENCES



GENDERED EXPECTATIONS

'I think there seems to be this idea that men will be a bit more will engage more with kind of risky play and rough and tumble kind of play and generally speaking that seems to be true, certainly it's true for me.' (Alan)

*'I have a feeling sometimes, I'm being left to deal with... that some of the other members of the team are really focused on meeting the needs of the who are not settling, do you see what I'm saying? And as a result, I'm left with the boys. [It] is very complex because I believe that a lot of times people don't realise and I'm you know I speak as if, I can see everything, but I can't (laughs) I can't. I just have these vague perceptions. I think that you know the **I think gender stuff starts from, dot and it's really deep and it's really subtle...**' (Ed)*

GENDERED EXPECTATIONS

“Some of our kids that we had last year, they don't have a daddy figure, so they know automatically the male role model kind of kicked in” (Patrick)

*‘Now maybe, part of it cos I'm very tall ok and it's you know, but part of it then was kind of like the, the **unsaid presumption** that I can, I can fix anything, which I can but seventeen at the time as well, like you know, I'm no tradesperson or craftsperson but “can you fix that hinge?” (Martin)*

PRACTICE

'Yeah, now I can play with little girls just as easily as I can play with little boys but because I'm a male, if they boys want sport, I'm kind of drawn to that straight away.' (Joshua)

'Ehm, yeah, I do I feel like society kind of conditions you to think that it's the woman's job to do the changing and you kind of... I know I find myself saying "do you want me to do that?" like I, I it's not because I don't think that you're capable of doing it, a man's capable of doing it but I, I expect myself "well that's my job" I'm the carer, so I'll do it which is interesting.' (Tracy)

'I do think a lot of guys do come in to childcare d'you know often they're big kids themselves...? And the thing is, when I go on the floor, here as a manager and when I was in the early years it's lot of high fives and messing.' (Robert)

SOCIETAL INFLUENCES

'I just I just think it was more to do with the fact that I did not want to leave myself open to anything like that, that it something could be misconstrued... it was never specifically said to me' (Geoff)

'We had a situation where the mum had the maternity leave, the dad was unemployed and d'you know and because she had an ok job, they couldn't sign on so they were trying to survive on the maternity leave, so she ended up going back to work early d'you know not using the maternity and, like dad was there' (Robert)

'I suppose, I think a lot of the reason why, I think I know a couple of the men that work in the early years is during the recession time, they lost their jobs and there was a lot of jobs in childcare and that's why they trained up but I think a lot of men are kind of like the breadwinner in the family and money is just not enough to keep a family afloat' (Jenny)

PARENTS

'They don't have to make the same effort as a male colleague and can become lax with the children and lax in their communication with the parent.' (p14, mother)

'Not comfortable with a male changing nappies or taking young children to the toilet. I would prefer a female as regards changing clothing, cleaning bottom etc.' (P34)

'I'd like to see more men as it allows children to see that all roles are open to men & women in life and that minding children is not just women's work. Also, and unfortunately having men in the profession [sic] will really focus the gender pay gap, I think if men worked in childcare, it would be better paid... incomes need to improve as men usually are the main breadwinner in households.' (P48).



CONCLUSIONS

Gendered expectations influence both men and women's assumptions, aspirations and practices

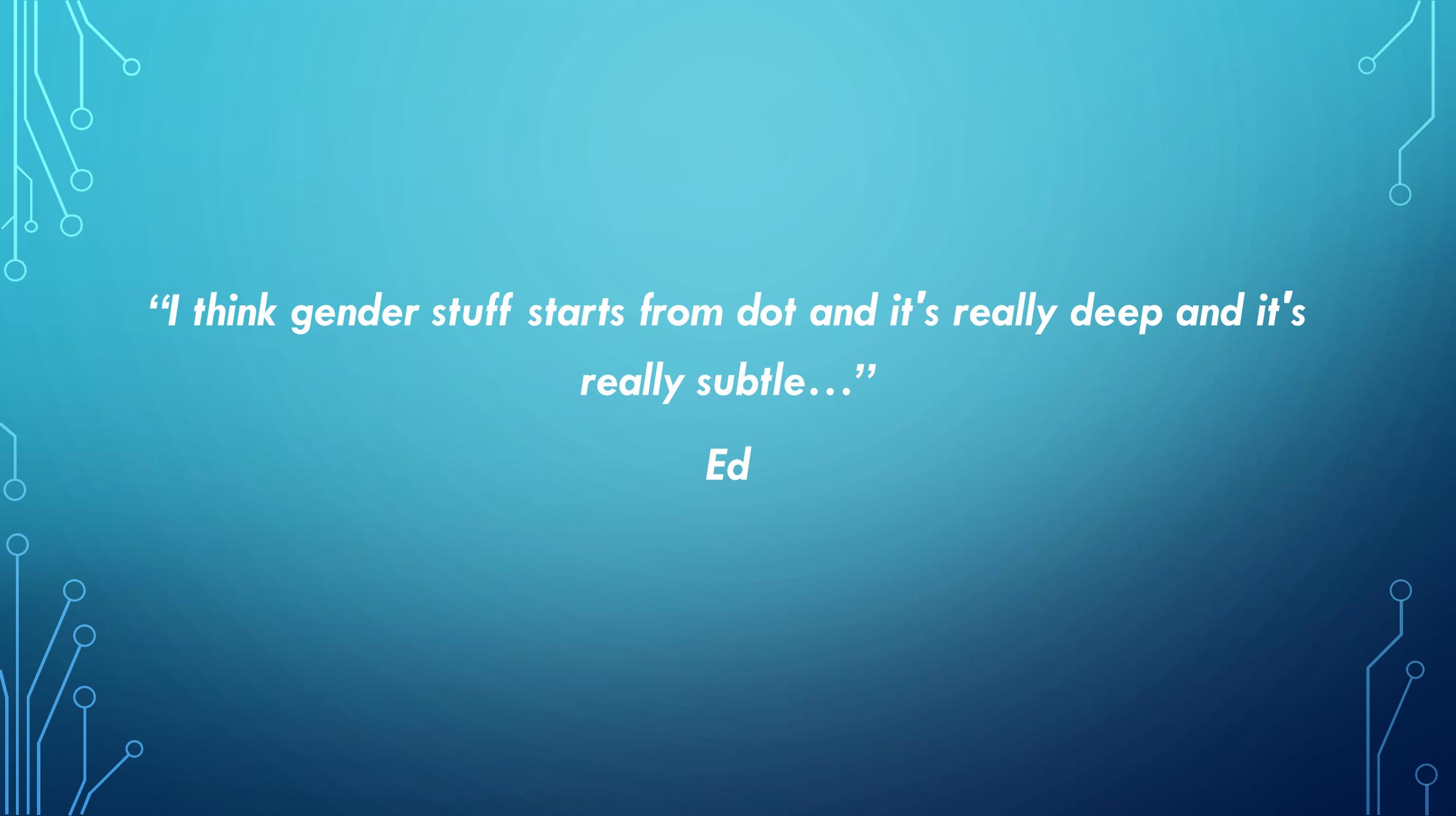
These gendered notions permeate all levels of society and impact on the visibility and value of caring professions and early childhood

Men who cross into this gendered workforce bring their own gendered assumptions as well as meeting others'

Men are expected to both reinforce "typical" masculine behaviours and challenge gender stereotypes

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Possibility:** Boys and men need to see the possibilities of ECEC as a career:
 - Visibility of male carers throughout their education experience
 - Challenging gendered subject choices & work experiences in school
 - Targeted careers advice
- **Pathways:** Visible mechanisms for entering and being supported within ECEC
 - For men and for women
- **Professionalisation:** ECEC as a professional role for men and women
 - Gender sensitivity and awareness
- **Policy:** That supports men and women to share care and economic roles

The background is a solid teal color. In the four corners, there are decorative white line-art elements resembling circuit traces or neural network connections. These lines are thin and end in small circles, creating a grid-like pattern that suggests technology or digital communication.

“I think gender stuff starts from dot and it's really deep and it's really subtle...”

Ed

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