

Thank you, conference for waiting until this last motion before you depart, some of you I imagine returning to children just started their new school year. Before we do that, I'm here to ask you to ensure that our equal education policy really is equal.

The Women's Equality Party was correct to focus on STEM subjects as an area where girls are under-represented. I say that both as a woman who fought to study and pursue a career in theatre AND as the daughter and grand-daughter of engineers. Both of those engineers gave this girl spanners and both have a love and appreciation of ARTS that made them so good at what they did. It also made them terrific and empathic leaders.

We're all here this weekend as the result of one of the best examples of how arts are necessary to an equal society.

The idea for the Women's Equality Party was articulated in a world-renowned arts centre, at a festival celebrating women and girls, a festival which was conceived by a woman - with a multi-disciplinary advisory group - a woman who has devoted her life to the pursuit and promotion of arts and culture for everyone.

Jude Kelly didn't have the idea for WOW out of nowhere. Years of training and discipline, stamina, analysis, rigour and research, a sense of history and curiosity for the undiscovered,

a lot of guts and cheek got her to that place – all skills that arts subjects teach.

Privileging STEM subjects in our education system devalues and forces time for other disciplines such as arts and humanities out of the curriculum. It perpetuates the narrative which tells us that these so-called “soft” subjects are for filling in around the edges. And the damage must be stopped. We must end this false binary.

Since 2010, when the Westminster Government started pursuing this agenda aggressively, the numbers of students following arts courses in state schools with specialist teachers has plummeted by 30%.

This is a human rights issue and class issue – our children of any gender – especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds who rely on the state for access to arts - must not be prevented from following courses of study at which they excel.

It's a diversity issue – Arts subjects are the training grounds of our writers, thinkers, broadcasters, presenters, journalists - and we all know how much we need to see women and minorities participating in the national conversation about who we are and what kind of society we want to live in. (Brexit anyone?)

It's a healthy society, and wellbeing issue –

Young people who study arts in their teens enjoy greater opportunities in adulthood. They are 20% more likely to become politically engaged, to empathise with people from other backgrounds and to enjoy better health/wellbeing.

Learning empathy is not just a nice thing to do – it is vital – and it is difficult - BUT think about the contribution it can and does make to eliminating violence, prejudice and hate.

There's an economic issue – The UK's creative and cultural industries are the envy of the world, providing 2 million jobs country wide, £92bn contributed to the economy. The creative industries sector is one of the only ones that is growing. UK employers increasingly seek out candidates with creative skills and training. And yet government policy through promotion of STEM and the Ebacc is making it harder for the majority of our state schools to offer those subjects.

AND Yes – STEM to STEAM is a gendered issue:

Our society does not value the people who work in arts, and we tell our children that they are not a serious career.

And guess which gender predominantly studies arts....?

Our society's attitude to arts as the "soft subjects" is based in a feminization and a simultaneous devaluing of them - much as is the case for traditionally female occupations of nursing, social care, primary school teaching....

WE must and do support women and girls in STEM. But we must not do this at the cost of those girls who excel in arts. We must not ignore the needs and rights of those girls.

Our girls have something of huge value to bring to society in a world of unprecedented challenge. They need to be encouraged to take their place in exploration of new technologies

(by the way studies show how arts encourage girls into exploring STEM disciplines, and make them their own) –

we must stop trying to get girls to fit the suit or lab coat – we must encourage the girls to redesign that suit.

And boys and their parents need to understand that arts are for them too.

Let's make sure that we are really are campaigning for an equal education that will help to bring about an equal society -

Arts are not soft, arts are diamonds. And we all know what diamonds are