Growing up in rural Queensland, I was often confronted with gender roles and stereotypes that I thought were unique to my community – a remaining attitude prevalent in small, country towns that are a little bit set in their ways.

In my later years, I learned that these attitudes and stereotypes were part of a wider societal problem but in my younger years, I grew increasingly frustrated.

Frustrated that in primary school I was told by a teacher that Manual Arts was a ‘boy’s subject’ and I would be much more comfortable within Home Economics. Frustrated that in high school there was, instead of personal choice, the push of the young boys towards science and the push of young girls towards Humanities. And frustrated that the lack of visibility of women in these industries – in science, mathematics, technology, computer science and engineering – led to a harder fight in justifying our inclusion in the school subjects that led to further study in these areas.

When I was in primary and high school, I did not know of a single engineer – let alone a woman in engineering – who I could point to and say, ‘That might be a career path that I am interested in pursuing’. These women, if they existed at all, were invisible to me growing up in rural Queensland.

Many young girls and women in rural regions still live through the same experiences I did i.e restricted options in career choice due to entrenched gender roles and stereotypes, a lack of visibility of women in the industry to inspire and a push within communities and educational institutions to study and eventually work along strict gender lines.

Research shows that these problems of entrenched gender stereotypes start within the schoolyard. According to the Australian Mathematical Science Institute, only 6.7 per cent of Year 12 girls across Australia took an Advanced Mathematics class in 2013, compared to 12.7 per cent of boys.

And this has contributed to a massive problem within Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). According to the Australian Government, only one in four Information Technology graduates are women and only one in ten engineering graduates are women. Women occupy fewer than one in five senior researcher positions in Australian institute, and women are around one quarter of the entire STEM workforce. Without progress, this is a problem only set to get worse.

In 2018, the theme for International Women’s Day is Press for Progress – the idea that, while the conversations around issues of inequality may have started, there needs to be a joint effort from women and men across industry to achieve the equality we are all striving towards.

And that includes equality for rural women and their engagement with STEM.

If we want to encourage more young rural women and girls to pursue engineering and other pathways within STEM, there are...
two key areas we need to double our efforts on.

Firstly, we need to battle the gender roles and stereotypes that still impact the career selection processes of young people in primary and high school. We need to educate, not only the students selecting their areas of study that lead to their future careers but their supervisors, teachers, the administration, their families and communities. Regardless of how progressive these students are, if these attitudes and beliefs about what roles and jobs women and men should have still exist within their institutions and communities, little progress will be made.

Secondly, the visibility of women in engineering, particularly within rural areas, needs to be increased. No young woman should be allowed to finish high school in Queensland (a state with high employment opportunities within the diverse field of engineering) without having seen or met a woman in engineering. The visibility of women in the field – the telling of their stories, the celebration of their achievements, and the connection of them with other young women starting their own career progression, needs to be prioritised in order to see progress within the wider industry of STEM.

2018 is the year to press for progress. And it is my hope, that in a few years from now, we will see the young rural women of tomorrow knocking down the few remaining barriers to equality in engineering.

Madeline Price is the National Director of the One Woman Project, a youth-led, non-for-profit organisation dedicated to education about and advocacy promoting global gender equality. Find out more at www.onewomanproject.org

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Christie Cole
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