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Gender Mainstreaming in Education, a Historical Perspective

The Council of Europe has been working for gender equality since its inception in 1949, and since the 1990s, it has emphasized the importance of education in relation to this goal. The main instrument in the fight for equality is gender mainstreaming, which is the theme in this section.

So – what is gender mainstreaming? The Council of Europe defines it this way:

Gender mainstreaming is the (re)organization, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making.¹

This means that all actors from top to bottom within the educational system are committed to working for equality between girls and boys, men and women. But what is equality in this connection? In its gender strategy document for 2014-2017, the Council of Europe holds that gender equality is “equal visibility, empowerment, responsibility and participation for both women and men in all spheres of public and private life.”²

Although it is true that inequality can be a major problem for boys and men, it is important to realize that a gender equality programme is not gender neutral. Male stereotyping can be limiting in the choice of an education and a career, and sometime isolate or force men into a lifestyle that they suffer under. But women are still the underprivileged group.

The main purpose of gender mainstreaming must be to work against the discrimination against women. According to the Strategy document, women still have fewer opportunities to “affirm their rights and assert their agency”. They need to be empowered to fulfil their potential. This will be good not only for women, but for the whole society. Societies and economies thrive when women have equal chances to be socially and politically active.

Schools, colleges and universities are fundamental in shaping the values and practices of young people, contributing heavily to the way gender is perceived and the way gender relations are played out. If one wants to intervene in order to create a greater degree of equality, school should be the obvious place to start.

But schools are an integral part of the larger society. They reflect the attitudes to masculinity and femininity that we find outside of the schools: for instance in popular culture, in family life and in politics. Teachers, parents, learners and school leaders may find popular, but detrimental perceptions of gender perfectly acceptable, and are sometimes unwilling or not very motivated to try to change them.

The heavy weight of history

How do we work for gender equality and empowerment of women? The answer goes a long way back – into the relationships between genders and the domination of men over women. Historians Joyce Goodman, James Albisetti and Rebecca Rogers write in a book about girls’ secondary education that more recent democratization of the educational system has not erased “the historical weight of gendered visions of femininity and women’s relationship to knowledge and the public sphere.”³ I am going to talk about some of the history that constitutes this weight of gendered visions.

Early educational reforms

In the beginning of the 19th century, children from affluent, European families were taught at home or went to private, single-sex schools. At that time, the major goals, curriculums, methods, depth of knowledge and amount of teaching were different for the sexes. Boys learned Greek, Latin, mathematics and physics, girls learned women's crafts like needlework, embroidery and making lace, together with religion and reading aloud. Well-to-do girls were also supposed to learn a little history, some French or another foreign language, and some music, so that they could take part in polite society. Modesty and malleability were seen as a woman's greatest virtue. She was to "be, but not be seen", said a Norwegian school reformer in the middle of the 19th century.⁴

Education for children from lower class families was either neglected, left to charity or to the Church. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, illiteracy was still widespread all over Europe, and this particularly affected girls and women. In Britain, 45% of the female population was illiterate in 1850, but only 30% of the men.⁵ In 19th century France, school attendance was much lower for girls than for boys, and in the years 1841-1870, illiteracy was 45 % among girls, but only 25 % among boys.⁶

Even when both girls and boys went to school, it did not mean that they learned the same, basic skills. Prussia and other German states were early out with a functioning school system for both sexes. In the middle of the 1850s, most children went to a five year elementary school.⁷ Serious schooling was for boys, however. Girls had much fewer lessons, and often did not learn to write.

Reforms in industrialized countries

By 1870, the industrial revolution had spread in the western, central and northern parts of Europe. There was a great need to prepare young people for life and work in a modern, industrial and more secularized society. Everybody, including future mothers, required the skills of reading, writing and doing simple arithmetic. France introduced free and compulsory elementary school in 1881. In England, elementary school became compulsory in 1870, and free ten years later. Before the First World War, almost all children in the industrialized parts of Europe went to school.

This was of course a long step forward for the many girls who now got a basic education. But even though boys and girls got approximately the same amount of teaching, the attitude towards the sexes was still quite different, and the curriculum was planned in accordance with this. Working class boys were taught to be "workers and soldiers", girls to take care of a household and do general "women's work".⁸ Girls and boys were kept apart in single-sex schools or at least single-sex classrooms and they usually had different curriculums.

The same was true for secondary education. The trend was that girls had special educational programmes, and that authorities saw these as less important than what the boys were learning.⁹

Secondary schools were first and foremost oriented towards the training of "public men". Boys could go to academic high-schools like the German Gymnas, The French Lycée or the English Public school. Girls went to private finishing schools. Many of the finishing schools held a high standard, but had curriculums that were adapted to what was commonly thought to be "the nature of women".

According to this stereotype, women were not able to think rationally the way men did. In addition, they were frail physically and psychologically, and had to save their energy for menstruation, pregnancy and motherhood. That meant schools did not offer Greek, Latin, Mathematics or Physics, which were seen as both too strenuous and too difficult. Not quite by accident, these subjects were often necessary for those who wanted to go on to a university.¹⁰

The rise of the women's movement

A women's rights movement was established and grew in European countries during the 1860s and 1870s, becoming a considerable cultural and political factor. These organizations claimed that women had the ability to reason, just like men did, and they encouraged opening schools or organized campaigns for female education. Women from the professional middle classes took up the battle for educating both themselves and their daughters. Increasing numbers of women entered campaigns for better education. Female teachers were strongly represented in this struggle. In many countries, women teachers organized in their own associations, working hand in hand with women's rights organizations.

Feminists worked for high-quality education for girls, but disagreed on important questions like co-education and the content of learning for girls and young women.¹¹ Some of the feminists who were in favour of a special curriculum for girls and young women changed their minds later on. They saw that special learning programs for girls stopped them from going on to higher education.¹² During the 1880s and 1890s, many girls' schools started expanding their curriculums with more academic subjects. That way, they could give their learners the basis for taking middle or upper secondary school exams or for entrance exams at a university.

Entering the universities

The higher up in the educational hierarchy and the more prestigious the learning institution, the more resistance women met when trying to enrol. Only Italy had an unbroken tradition of women both studying and teaching at universities from the middle ages through the 19th century. Elsewhere in Europe, higher education was closed to women till 1863, when French universities allowed women to enrol. The exception was the Sorbonne, which opened its doors a couple of decades later. Germany, at that time the academic fore-runner and model, opened its first University to women in 1904, and some years later the extremely prestigious University of Berlin followed suit. The University of London granted college degrees to women from 1878 on, but Britain's most famous Universities, those in Oxford and Cambridge, did not do so till 1920.

Even when they were formally open to women, studying at a university could be very difficult. Many could not enrol because they lacked required subjects like Latin and Greek. Most were dependent on economic support from their families. In many families, higher education for girls was not judged seemly. And even parents who would have liked their daughters to go to university, could feel they had to give priority to their sons.

Once having enrolled, female students often had tough, negative experiences – everything from a lack of respect to serious harassment.¹³ Professors and male students thought women lost their femininity when studying, or they claimed that their courses would be destroyed when someone from the "weak sex" (*sex faible*) entered.¹⁴

Women also soon discovered that getting a tenured position at a university was almost impossible, and so was gaining other positions in civil service. In the Scandinavian countries, women were allowed to graduate from university in the years between 1870 and 1882, but

they did not get access to civil service positions till after the turn of the century – in Norway in 1912, in Sweden as late as 1923.

After the Second World War

Through the 1920s and 30s, and in the years following WW2, the segregation of the sexes in different schools and classes went on, and curriculums were still different. The number of girls taking secondary school rose, and more women enrolled at universities. Still, boys' education was prioritized, sometimes in ways that were blatantly unfair to the girls. Helping the boys could be done in several ways; I will give a couple of examples:

In post-WW2 England, all children up to the age of fifteen had the right to a secondary education. When 11 years old, they were tested to see which school they could get into: grammar, technical or secondary modern school. Only grammar school led on to higher education and the professions. When it became clear that girls did consistently better than boys in the 11+ exams, the results were weighted so that fewer girls than merited went on to grammar schools.¹⁵

Quota systems in favour of men seem to have been common, but sometimes not clearly visible. In Norway, for instance, home economics was an obligatory subject in primary school for girls, but not for boys. To make room for this, girls had much fewer lessons in general subjects, for instance in Norwegian and mathematics. In the mathematics books, some of the problems were marked with a star, which meant girls did not have to solve them. In spite of this, the curriculum goals were the same for boys and girls, and girls had to take the same exams as boys when competing to get into lower secondary school. In the beginning of the 1950s, this created uproar among outraged parents. Feminists and politically engaged women started campaigning against the discrimination of girls. In a new school act in 1959, home economics was made compulsory for both boys and girls.¹⁶ The last formal gender inequality was done away with ten years later, when the 9 year youth school was established. Boys and girls now had exactly the same curriculum, and went to the same classes in the same schools.

Conclusion

Summing up the examples of gendered educational history from about 1850 to the 1950s and 60s, I would like to highlight three points:

First, independent of social class, boys and men were prioritized before girls and women in all types of education during the whole period. The means to make this happen were sometimes openly admitted to, sometimes hidden or even denied.

Second, the arguments for hindering girls were based on traditional gender roles intertwined with negative ideas and stereotypes about the capabilities of females. Some of these ideas seem strange today, while others are still easy to recognize. There is, for instance, a lot of conscious and unconscious resistance to women becoming leaders in politics, business and higher education, and to women speaking out in public or in social media.

Third, when school systems changed and opened up to new groups, it was on the basis of changing economic and social structures. But the initiatives for changes, and the drive to put them through, came from engaged persons and groups. In the case of women, these were first and foremost girls and women who wanted access to education, together with female teachers, feminists and feminist organisations. These were often supported by enlightened men.

During the powerful feminist movement of the late 1960s and the 1970s, great efforts against the discrimination of girls and women took place, leading to a much sharper focus on gender equality. Over the years, this has led to a much improved situation. All European governments have ratified the CEDAW convention (Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women), and almost all members of the European Council have incorporated the principle of gender equality in their laws on education. The UN, EU and Council of Europe have all adopted gender mainstreaming as a way to secure that the work for equality is followed up. Still, results don't seem to be forthcoming in the tempo one might wish for.

Gender mainstreaming promotes equality through regular daily work in all institutions that are controlled politically. Norwegian professor of political science Hege Skjeie is a leading expert on gender research, and led the Committee that wrote the Official Norwegian Report on Equality in 2011. She claims that the issue is not just whether gender mainstreaming takes place and how it takes place, but who is to monitor that it does take place.¹⁷ She points out that when nobody seems to have the power to act, that in itself gets to be an excuse for not doing anything at all: "In reality, wherever someone is interested in integrating gender equality in their work, they will do it. At places where no one is interested, nothing gets done."¹⁸

Looking back at history, it is clear that individuals and groups engaged in empowering women, raising awareness and fighting for equality were essential to getting results. In order to take on a cause like this, people have to feel inspired and personally obligated. So how can we inspire and engage people today? What would be the way to make not only higher level decision makers, but principals, teacher trainers, teachers and parents personally interested in discussing and acting on gender equality?

¹ Promoting Gender Mainstreaming in Schools. Final report of the Group of Specialists on Promoting Gender Mainstreaming in Schools. Directorate General of Human Rights (EG-S-GS(2004)RAP FIN), Strasbourg 2004, p. 7.

² Ministers' Deputies CM Documents. CM(2013)136 final, 6 November 2013

³ Albisetti, James C. Joyce Goodman and Rebecca Rogers (eds.): *Girls' Secondary Education in the Western World. From the 18th to the 20th Century*. Palgrave, N.Y. 2014, p. 4.

⁴ Quotation from Hartvig Nissen in Seip, Anne Lise: *Nasjonens bygges. 1830 – 1870*. Vol 8 in Aschehoug's History of Norway, Oslo 1997, p. 133.

⁵ Lyons, Martin: "New Readers in the Nineteenth Century; Women, Children, Workers." In: Cavallo, Gugliano and Roger Cartier: *A History of Reading in the West*. Univ. of Mass. Press, Amherst 1999.

⁶ Vogt, Sidsel: *Kvinnenes Sosialhistorie. Kvinnesyn og kvinneliv i England, Frankrike og USA. (The social history of women. Women's roles and women's lives in England, France and USA)* Universitetsforlaget, Oslo 1991, p. 94.

⁷ Schulmuseum Bochum Deutsche Schulgeschichte.

<https://www.bochum.de/C125708500379A31/CurrentBaseLink/W28C6CQE563BOLDDE#par5>, downloaded 08.08.2014.

⁸ Statement by Jules Ferry, French Minister of Education and the man behind the laws on primary education in 1881 and 1882. Quoted from Vogt, Sidsel, p. 222.

⁹ Albisetti, Goodman and Rogers, p. 3.

¹⁰ Lønnå, Elisabeth: "Den kalde våren." (The cold spring) In: Materialisten, Tidsskrift for forskning, fagkritikk og teoretisk debatt, 4, 1998.

¹¹ Anderson, Bonnie S. and Judith P. Zinsser: *A History of Their Own. Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*. Vol. II. Penguin, London 1990, pp. 185. Albisetti, Goodman and Rogers, p. 4.

¹² Anderson and Zinsser, p. 186

¹³ Op.cit., pp. 188

¹⁴ Lécuyer, Carole 1996: "Une nouvelle figure de la jeune fille sous la IIIe République: l'étudiante", *Clio. Histoire, femmes et sociétés* 4, <http://clio.revues.org/437>, downloaded 07.11.2014,

¹⁵ Goodman, Joyce: "Class and Religion." In Albisetti, Goodman and Rogers.

¹⁶ Brock-Utne, Birgit, and Runa Haukaa: *Kunnskap uten makt. Kvinner som lærere og elever. (Knowledge without power. Women as teachers and pupils.)* Universitetsforlaget, Oslo 1980, p. 32.

¹⁷ Struktur for likestilling. Norges offentlige utredninger (NOU) 2011:18, pp 24. Summary in English can be found in: Structure for Equality. Official Norwegian Report (NOU) 2011:18 Summary, p. 11.

¹⁸ Hege Skjeie in *Dagsavisen* 16.11.2011