

Development with Women

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Preface

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It has long been argued by various UN agencies that the critical determinant of women's socioeconomic status is education, and that 'education, education, and more education' (as UK Prime Minister Tony Blair put it) is the key to achieving social development by improving the wellbeing of girls and women and thus promoting gender equity.(1) The statistical link between high female educational levels and a reduction in female fertility has also served to bring on board those aid agencies for whom gender justice is not a necessary goal in itself. However, the fact that twice as many women as men in the world would be unable to read a simple newspaper article demonstrates that for many millions of girls the right to education - and to 'free universal primary education' as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) - is a long way from realisation.

Even if all girls and boys did have an equal chance of going to school, criticisms of the formal education system abound and are most trenchantly expressed in the work of the late Brazilian educationalist, Paulo Freire. Leaving aside questions about universal access, and about the quality of formal education and its questionable links with upward social mobility, it is important to go beyond simple headcounts and ask what factors most influence children's academic performance; and how far educational opportunities for girls actually translate into well-paid, satisfying jobs and a more rewarding and fulfilling adult life.

The experience of the industrialised countries, where formal education is compulsory for 10 years and a high percentage of students remain in full-time education for 15 to 20 years, has some useful lessons to offer; lessons that are highly relevant to social activists and organisations in a wider range of fields, who want to articulate a vision of development that is truly shaped by those whom the prevailing paradigm ignores, oppresses, exploits, or marginalises. Given that most people living in poverty are women and girls, this is necessarily a vision of development which places feminism at its core.

In the late 1970s, feminist educationalists in the UK were focusing attention on whether mixed or single-sex schooling better served girls' interests. Of particular concern at the time was the drop-off in girls' educational performance at secondary school, particularly in mathematics and the sciences. By then, it was no longer acceptable simply to attribute this to 'biology' (the argument that girls reach intellectual maturity sooner than boys, but that boys then overtake them in adolescence since men are, by nature, intellectually superior to women) ; other causes had to be identified. Sex-differentiated data on educational attainment were then scarce, and an understanding of gender as a social category had not yet passed into popular consciousness, far less into attitudes of the formal establishment.(2) A great deal of pioneering work was to be done in order to challenge the conventional view that since society is made up of two complementary sexes, schools should reflect this, irrespective of the fact that girls' academic performance

at single-sex schools was consistently higher than at mixed schools, while the opposite held for boys.(3)

The period saw numerous reviews of educational materials which revealed that the degree of sexism (and, indeed, racism and class discrimination) in textbooks on every subject, from infant school to university, was even more marked than in the real world (Spender 1982:61). Empirical research linked the differentiated performance of girls and boys to the sex and, more critically, to the attitudes of their teachers - boys did better in the science subjects that were traditionally taught by men, though girls performed just as well in these subjects if they were taught by women or in an all-female environment. In the context of this Reader, however, some of the most interesting studies concern the practices and perceptions of dedicated teachers (and the perceptions of their pupils) who wanted to practise gender-fairness in the classroom. Dale Spender of the Institute of Education at London University, for instance, tape-recorded a large number of her own and others' classes. She found that even when the teachers' explicit aim was to divide their time equally between male and female pupils, this was never achieved:

At the end of the lesson I have felt that I managed to achieve that goal - sometimes I have even thought I have gone too far and have spent *more* time with the girls than the boys. But the tapes have proved otherwise. Out of ten taped lessons (in secondary school and college) the maximum time I spent interacting with girls was 42 per cent and on average 38 per cent, and the minimum time with boys 58 per cent. It is nothing short of a substantial shock to appreciate the discrepancy between what I *thought* I was doing and what I actually *was* doing. (Spender 1982:56, emphasis in original)

More telling still is the fact that the boys shared the same perceptions:

'She always asks the girls all the questions' said one boy in a classroom where 34 per cent of the teacher's time had been allocated to girls. 'She doesn't like boys and just listens to the girls' said another boy where boys had interacted with the teacher for 63 per cent of the time; and these are among some of the more 'polite' protests. (ibid.:57)

As Spender bleakly comments: 'Because we take it so much for granted that boys are more important and deserve more of our time and attention, giving the girls 35 per cent of our time can feel as though we are being unfair to the boys' (ibid.:56). In other words, schools reproduce the prevailing values of society more often than they challenge them. Some of the main mechanisms by which boys would command attention included collectively and individually engaging in unruly and disruptive behaviour whenever a girl was speaking, or whenever a 'girlish' ('sissy') subject was the topic of discussion. In this way, they would both set the agenda - football was a legitimate and serious topic, reproductive health was not - and force the girls (and the teacher) into silent compliance.

The implication is that *both* male and female pupils experience the classroom as a place where boys are the focus of activity and attention - particularly in the forms

of interaction which are initiated by the teacher - while girls are placed on the margins of classroom life. (Stanworth 1981:34)

This was found to affect how students rated their own ability and performance, with boys characteristically having inflated self-images *especially* in relation to girls, whereas the reverse was true of their female peers:

In the 19 cases out of 24 where pupils' rankings were different from those of their teachers, all of the girls underestimated their rank; all but one of the boys overestimated theirs. Furthermore, two-thirds of these errors involve only classmates of the other sex - that is, girls down-grading themselves relative to boys, boys up-grading themselves relative to girls. (ibid.:40)

Clearly, in an all-female environment, girls would not be forced into either competing with boys on male terms (i.e. becoming a surrogate male) or being a negative reference group for boys (i.e. assuming a 'typical' feminine role). On the other hand, the chance for girls and boys to learn mutual respect, and to challenge damaging gender stereotypes, would be very much reduced. One proposed solution was to teach subjects associated with strong gender stereotypes in same-sex groups, but to have mixed classes in subjects that are perceived as more gender-neutral; in other words, to recognise that the power dynamics at play in mixed settings are generally disadvantageous to females and to be committed to dismantling these gender-based impediments. But this solution would require greater resources in the form of additional teachers, classrooms, administrative workload, and so on; resources that were seldom forthcoming as state schools have increasingly had to raise their own funds for books and other basics. The parallels with what Dorianne Rowan-Campbell describes in the context of individual development projects - in the allocation of funds, in programme design, in the articulation of policies, in setting development priorities, in agencies' organisational structures, in individual development workers' behaviour - are staring us in the face.

In so many situations, and in so many ways, however tenuous is women's grasp of rights that are supposedly universal, already this is felt to be too much - an 'imbalance' in the natural order of things, something to be redressed. Again, this is borne out in the context of current debates on education in the UK. While female representation in the upper echelons of most professions remains disproportionately low (and the percentage of women in low-paid, low-status, part-time or temporary jobs disproportionately high), girls' academic performance has been generally improving over the past ten to 15 years across all disciplines, right through to university level. It is odd that, in a meritocratic society, men's actual and potential average earnings should continue to outpace women's by some 30 per cent. Still more remarkable, as girls' performance improves after centuries of enforced underachievement, protests are voiced about 'male social exclusion', and the spectre of 'maternal deprivation' rears its head once again as it did in the 1950s.⁽⁴⁾ Rather than considering proposals to re-orient the education system better to meet the needs and potentials of *all* of tomorrow's citizens (which would mean a real transformation of the economic base of society, and thus a new division of work between the sexes, particularly in relation to the unpaid reproductive labour that women generally

perform), the focus has been on compensatory investment in boys's schooling and on rectifying the 'unfair advantage' supposedly enjoyed by girls. Patriarchy, after all, sees women's empowerment in terms of winners and losers.

What does all this tell us about how we can achieve gender justice? First, it reinforces Doriene Rowan-Campbell's argument that learning to work in and with mixed-sex groups does not mean that women and men don't also need to work in a same-sex environment on issues concerning gender identity; and that such environments can be a valuable way to develop a critical consensus. Within development organisations, this suggests that gender mainstreaming and gender specialisation are complementary, not mutually exclusive, strategies. Second, it emphasises that despite certain gains, women continue to be prevented from realising their full potential because of patriarchal structures and institutions which constrain them, and because of prejudices about their proper station in life. The essays in this Reader attest to the many ways - from psycho-social pressure to sheer brute force - in which women are told when they are transgressing the accepted norm. Third, it demonstrates that good intentions are not enough to make our own behaviour consistent with the goal of gender justice. Gender trainers, development professionals, social activists - in short, change agents - are highly motivated people. But, like the teachers who wanted to be gender-fair in their classrooms, there is often a large gap between what we as individuals and in agencies aim to do and genuinely believe we are doing, and what we are actually doing. We constantly need to seek critical feedback, and to collaborate with others in finding new ways to close the gap.

Working for gender equity, for development with women as well as with men, is not something that can be compartmentalised. It is not an issue one chooses to sign up for on one day but not on another; it cannot be divorced from political action. It has to be a way of life, and it cannot be done alone.

Notes

1 Oxfam International's education campaign falls squarely within this gender equity tradition, while also articulating an argument frequently advanced by UNICEF, namely that the single most important contribution to improving the life-chances of infants and children is to educate the girls who will become mothers. See <www.oxfam.org.uk> for details.

2 Ann Oakley's ground-breaking work *Sex, Gender and Society* was first published in 1972, and had been re-printed five times by 1980. However, it was not until her work on issues such as motherhood and housework began to appear in popular as well as academic form that her ideas gained widespread currency.

3 See R. R. Dale's influential three-volume work, *Mixed or Single-Sex School?*, London: Routledge, 1969; 1971; and 1974. He maintained that girls' depressed academic performance in mixed schools was of less importance than the 'social advantages' of

being educated alongside boys - 'advantages' that would translate into lower status and lower-paid work opportunities in adult life.

4 In *Maternal Deprivation Reassessed*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972, Michael Rutter argued against the blanket and ideologically motivated assumptions about what was then - and is still - viewed as the 'problem' of working mothers, and called instead for a focus on what, in any given circumstance, actually constituted 'bad' childcare.

References

Spender, Dale (1982) *Invisible Women: The Schooling Scandal*, London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative.

Stanworth, Michelle (1981) *Gender and Schooling: A Study of Sexual Divisions in the Classroom*, London: Women's Research and Resources Centre Publications.