
Is the status of women in education in accordance with the concept of parity democracy?

by Lene Pind*

To answer this question I shall look at education at different levels, because the question is a more subtle one to answer—at least where Denmark and the other Nordic countries are concerned—than it used to be.

I shall not say anything about the importance of education as an instrument for equality and democracy, as I assume that we all agree that education is the prime prerequisite for equality and consequently for democracy. Unfortunately, however, experience has shown that education is not enough. Even when women and men are equally educated, they do not stand the same chances in the labour market. This means that they do not have the same opportunities of becoming economically independent nor of making a career as men.

I also take it for granted that we all know that the multiplying effect of educating women is much greater than that of educating men. Literate women do not have illiterate children to put it briefly.

Therefore it is very sad to see that the number of illiterates in the world is the number of women who cannot read or write is growing faster than the number of men illiterates. Women's organisation around the world must put pressure on governments and international organisations to do something about this.

Let us now turn to the situation in schools, and here I have chosen to concentrate on the Nordic countries.

In Denmark (and the other Nordic countries) women and men/girls and boys have equal access to education at all levels, and roughly speaking they are actually educated to the same degree, at least when we talk about the younger generations. This applies from kindergarten to university level. So in a sense we have come a long way in Denmark.

This, however, does not mean that we have equality in education or that parity democracy exists in schools and in the class-room. By that I mean that we still have a sex segregated educational system, and we still do not have a situation where the value of girls and boys are considered the same.

In Denmark all schools are co-educational, which is a good thing. But when the pupils reach a certain age, certain subjects become optional, and it appears that girls and boys choose different subjects just as they tend to make different choices when they leave school at 15 to go into continued education.

But a more serious problem is that the children from kindergarten right through to university are looked upon as pupils/students and not as girls and boys/young women and men. International research has proved that if teachers, lecturers, professors do not in their pedagogy think in terms of girls and boys, women and men, the boys/men are favoured. This has to do with the fact that girls and boys behave differently, often have different values, have been brought up in different ways. Consequently we cannot give them equal opportunities by treating them in the same way.

In primary school, for instance, girls and boys are in the same class-room, they have the same teachers, they are taught the same subjects etc., but in that class-room they are given different roles.

Girls are usually well-adjusted, well-behaved, they do what they are told, answer the teacher's questions. They want to be like each other, perhaps like the teacher, they put up their hands before they speak. On the whole I think we can say that they are "civilised, nice little girls", and without them many lessons would fall apart.

Boys are generally less disciplined, they speak before they are asked, are competitive, they want to be different from each other and from the teacher, they love dramatic stories, they are often disturbing elements, and they love to challenge the teacher. If they do not get most of the teacher's attention they complain. They make constructive contributions to the teaching process, are curious etc., but it is also worth noticing that there are more drop-outs among boys than among girls, at least in Denmark.

The way I have just characterized the two sexes is supported by international research. International research also

shows that boys are valued higher in schools than girls, that they are found to be more interesting than girls, who are often looked upon as boring.

Both groups are absolutely necessary in the class-room. Imagine a class-room full of only very well-behaved children or the opposite! The problem is not that there are different groups of children with different ideas, different kinds of wishes and behaviour. The trouble is that one group tends to consist of girls, the other of boys, and that pupils are expected to live up to the ideas of what is proper in a girl and what a boy is supposed to be like.

This pattern, this division of roles, if you like, continues in secondary and upper secondary schools.

On top of that girls tend to prefer certain subjects like languages, humanities, health care, etc. while boys tend to choose subjects such as the natural sciences, technology, computer science etc. If we add to this the fact that 80% of all books for all age groups are about boys and men, that many textbooks in schools are gender biased, that the general culture of schools is masculine (i.e. competitive, centred on the individual, rational etc.), it becomes quite clear that even when schools are co-educational in principle, girls and boys will leave school with very different experiences, very different ideas of their own value and their own opportunities.

This has made feminist teachers, especially in Britain, suggest that we should give up the idea of co-educational schools and instead have single sex schools. I believe in schools for both sexes, but sometimes I think that the children should work in single sex groups for specific purposes. It is my experience that in Denmark teachers often use this method, and that the experiences are good.

In further education in Denmark there are as many women as men, roughly speaking. Again this does not mean that we have parity democracy in further education in my country. Again women and men do different things, and the things they do are valued differently. Few men become primary school

teachers, nurses, social workers etc., and few women become physicists, computer scientists, civil engineers etc., and I do not have to tell you which jobs are the better paid! I shall not go into detail here, because this is not new, and because the same thing applies to most countries.

Instead I have chosen to tell you an interesting story that illustrates that even though we have come a long way in Denmark where the status of women is concerned, we still have a long way to go.

In 1991 some figures were published in Denmark showing that in some faculties at the universities there were now slightly more men than women students. This led to headlines in the papers saying that women were taking over the universities, the implications being that this was a very bad thing for the universities. In Denmark we have restricted admission to the universities, so in 1992 the Faculty of Medicine in Copenhagen decided that 25% of the students that

were going to be admitted as students of medicine should be men irrespective of their qualifications. At teacher training colleges women make up about 80% of the students. This has led to the suggestion that less qualified men should be admitted to make up for this "inequality". In other words, quota systems are acceptable when they are in favour of men! As women and democrats we can not accept such policies, and so far they have not been introduced.

If we look at who are employed in the educational system, the picture is very sad, but very simple: men at the top, women at the bottom! We have very few women in leading positions in the educational system as a whole.

Why is so little done to change the relative positions of girls and boys in schools! Research work has been carried out for many years in many countries. The EC works on the problem, the Council of Europe has published a long list of recommendations, in Denmark our Equal Status Council has published

a number of books on the subject etc. Why are all the good ideas not applied? The answer, I am afraid, is simple. Women are still second class citizens with little power and low self-esteem. This is acquired in schools among other places, and so we have a vicious circle.

I would like to end my talk on a more optimistic note by describing how I see young girls in Denmark or at least the more successful ones. They expect to be equal with men, they are very independent, they expect their future husbands to share family responsibilities, they want to have children, but they also want a career.

I think a lot of potential for change is to be found in people's expectations, but also a lot of disappointment and frustration. I hope these young women will have the courage to see to it that some of their expectations come true!

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