

*EDucation & GEndEr. Gender-specific education in different countries:
Historical aspects – current trends*

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EDucation & GEndEr is written for researchers and students. But the book has broader significance. It's an eye-opener for *anyone* interested in gender and racial equity, socialising children through education, and the change process itself.

Feminists and social activists will discover (or rediscover) from the trends and histories of the 12 countries¹ portrayed in *EDucation & GEndEr* just how hard it is to achieve lasting social change. A battle won today is not necessarily a secured gain tomorrow! Interest, understanding and commitment come in waves; agents of change and thought leaders shift, and battles need to be fought again and again.

Most of the countries examined have been working for decades – a few go back centuries – to overcome stereotypes that limit the role of women in society. The focus is on the power of education and the schooling of girls (and boys). The forces of change are virtually identical across the cultural settings studied. (Common sense alone suggests that they are applicable elsewhere, including my own country, the USA.) Those forces are: Politics! Religion! The Media! Education Policy! Women's Organisations!

Although specifics vary by culture, *EDucation & GEndEr* shows that regardless of national context all of these forces have a powerful role in shaping public social attitudes about the proper role of women and girls. Acting alone or in concert, they either promote new social thinking or restrict it. In progressive periods, the countries have made substantial gains in gender equality education. In regressive periods, those gains are often reversed.

In some cases, change for the good has been inspired by democratic impulses, an admired nation, or a single leader. Some has been sparked by international pressure, especially the United Nations' long commitment to gender equality. Some has come from

¹ The countries studied in *EDucation & GEndEr* are Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany, Estonia, Spain, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Turkey and the UK. A concluding chapter draws comparison among the countries in terms of variations in boys' and girls' performances and presents findings from a limited survey of teachers in some of the countries.

realising that economies do better when girls and women are enabled and motivated to participate fully in the workplace and other social institutions. Whatever lights the way, achieving gender equality through education is an unfinished agenda in all of the countries examined.

Change does not automatically last! We all tend to behave as though battles, once won, are a lasting achievement. We move on, and are not diligent in keeping an eye on progress gained (or lost). To take an example from the USA, pro-choice rights are guaranteed to women by the Supreme Court. Yet we are surprised when we suddenly hear that in some conservative states and even in our own presently conservative Court, gains of the 1970s–80s are being set back through misinformation campaigns and other means, often harming our poorest people. Moreover, women in the USA still earn substantially less than males (77%) for comparable work, and are channelled out of certain kinds of work, as in the countries studied.

Educating new generations! New generations of beneficiaries are apt to take things for granted. They need educating about gender equality issues. This book gives attention to women's studies and sports as two paths to breaking down stereotypes. To truly overcome gender inequality, gender issues, attitudes and history should be required elements of education for both genders at all levels of schooling. Women's equal participation in sports, if supported by strong public policy and balanced media attention, can also be a powerful "educating" strategy for overcoming bias. These common-sense actions are suggested by the research evidence in *EDucation & GEndeR*.

Women's organisations are important! The book shows that throughout history, women's organisations have been one of the most powerful forces affecting action and attitudes about the "proper" role of women and girls in society. The importance of this leadership cannot be overstated in a world where the politics of gender behaviour is still largely controlled by men.

Policy and practice gap! A country may have enlightened gender schooling policies – most in the study do – but actual practice rarely comes close to achieving policy goals. Even where language is well-crafted and goals are clear, policies are often not followed by effective programme implementation. Key reasons are that teacher training and student curricular content are not adapted to policy goals, and public awareness lags behind. So outmoded views persist, short-changing both boys and girls. Women's groups, caring media groups, and those charged with implementing education policy might well focus more attention on these challenges.

Need for more fundamental knowledge! EDucation & GEndeR shows how variations in cultural context make goals and outcomes harder to determine. It also reveals that we do not have solid answers to many fundamental questions. For example, is “co-education” always more likely to generate gender equality than single-sex education? Are schooling models sensitive enough to non-cognitive factors of gender identity, an issue for both girls and boys? Does the underachievement of boys and girls (and men and women) in certain academic and life endeavours mean what we commonly say they do? Apparently not! Such questions need more research attention.