

Inequality in education



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Is Inequality in Education Being Reduced? What Effect Does This Have on Other Aspects of Women's Lives?

Throughout history, women have been repressed in many different ways by patriarchal systems within society. In Western society, women have gradually gained more power in many aspects of their lives and some (including many post-feminists) would even go so far as to say that equality has been achieved. However, in certain developing countries feminism is a relatively new idea and women may still have very few or limited rights. A common issue with patriarchal societies is gender discrimination in regards to schooling.

In Europe, women have been discriminated against in education as far back as the medieval period. Girls were not formally educated, but rather learned from their mothers. Female role models within their community showed them how to perform household tasks, care for children and enforced the importance of feminine behaviour in order to attract a husband. It was in the mid to late 19th Century that formal education became available to females, in the form of same-sex colleges.

Women's education started to be considered more seriously following the Representation of the People Act 1918, which allowed some women to vote in Parliamentary elections. WWII also changed attitudes to girl's education, as women had been put to work while their husbands were abroad and realised that they had the potential to be more than 'just' housewives and the Education Act of 1944 ensured "free education for all from primary to secondary", including females. In 1975 the Sex Discrimination Act was passed, and women were legally required to be given the same occupational

opportunities as men. Legally, education was finally balanced between the genders, which was definite progress towards equality when compared with the uneducated females of previous centuries.

However, once legal barriers preventing women from achieving in education were removed, feminists began to focus on issues of socialisation. What a patriarchal society expected and approved of in females was harder to combat than legislation. Sue Sharp (1976, pg 132) interviewed girls in Ealing schools, and one said that " I think men should [have careers]. If they [girls] want to they can, but I think it suits men really. Once men start on something, I suppose they go ahead, but women they always change their minds". The girls in Sharpe's 1976 study showed limited career aspirations, and put more emphasis on their desire to marry and raise a family. This attitude was reflected in the fact that in the 1970s there were twice as many males in higher education than females (Major).

However, when Sharpe repeated her study in 1994 the results were different. Although girls were still likely to aspire to " Women's Work" such as childcare and beauty therapy, some showed interest in fire-fighting or mechanics. They also showed a desire to have a successful career so as not to be financially dependent on a husband in case of breakdown of a marriage, and expected husbands to help with household tasks. Also, as of 2009 Major claimed that " there are now more women than men in higher education - 51% to 49% is the average". Parents often encourage or even expect their daughters to attend university and find careers for themselves, and Darla Shine goes so far as to argue that women do not have professional careers are sometimes negatively stigmatised as being " slob".

The number of qualifications girls get could thoroughly affect many aspects

of their adult life. One of the most obvious differences education makes to an individual's life is their possible income. Graduates with the highest level of qualification earn, on average, more than twice the wage of employees with no qualifications and are also half as likely to be unemployed (Careers Scotland, 2009). Poverty can lead to health issues (due to a poor diet or low quality of heating or sleep in cheaper housing) and depression and stress. Crime is also more prevalent in low-income areas, so uneducated females may be either victim of a crime or be arrested for crimes themselves, leading to imprisonment. It is, therefore, clear that refusing women this one right to education, or somehow limiting it, can contribute to gender inequality in almost all aspects of later life.

In conclusion, steps have most definitely been made towards a less male-orientated system of education. Recognising that most girls perform better in coursework than the end of term exams, many establishments have altered the assessment style to cater towards both genders. Girls are performing better than boys in school, but “gendered subjects” are still criticised as they reinforce gender stereotypes. Some organisations, such as CC4G are trying to help girls branch into male-dominated areas such as computer technology. Sharpe's study and Major's article show the differences that 20 years can make, so who knows what the result of two more decades of feminist activism will be?

Sociological Theories on Gender Inequality in Education

Most types of feminism are based on the idea that gender is a social construct which a child is labelled with at birth depending on its sex. Therefore, any ideas of male dominance in cultures are seen to be a

consequence of socialisation and not a natural and biological state of being. This leads to the conclusion that men and women can potentially have the same sets of skills, and can learn all subjects equally well in education establishments if patriarchal socialisation does not interfere.

Feminists recognise that girls often choose to pursue subjects such as English, social sciences, healthcare and childcare or beauty therapies in colleges and university, whereas males opt for more technical fields of study or manual labour. Although they accept that females make this choice themselves, some feminists are concerned that this choice is subconsciously made due to a "hidden curriculum" within schools which channels the two sexes into particular roles that are expected of them by society. The subjects picked by girls rely more on emotions and femininity, whereas technical subjects lead to well-paid executive occupations or "macho" physical labour.

Radical feminists argue that men consciously exploit women in society by limiting them to subjects that are seen as feminine in order to prepare young girls for their intended role as wife and mother. Oakley (1974) noted that men might approve of women who are moderately successful in their occupation, as long as they are willing to run the home as well. This is known as a "triple shift", where the woman provides financial support by working, emotional support for the family, and keeps the home in order.

Liberal Feminists also believe that society is still discriminatory against women, yet trust that progress is being made towards equality and males are generally cooperative to the cause. They believe that males have been socialised to act in certain ways which discriminate against women, but do

not necessarily exploit females consciously and that some of the problems lies within women's own attitudes. They refer to the studies of Sue Sharpe, which show that girl's opportunities and ambitions are improving, and are optimistic that over time equality will be achieved. Sharpe (1976, pg 66) states that " It is in the media that the most conventional and exaggerated stereotypes are found, parodying the ways in which people are supposed to live". It is thought that because education establishments are usually run by males, with women in pastoral positions such as teachers and learning assistants, girls do are not shown that it is men who hold executive positions.

New Right theorists believe that gendered subjects can have positive effects, as the traditional gender roles which they prepare young people for can strengthen nuclear families so that they are self-sufficient both economically and emotionally.

Functionalists take a ' march of progress' view and say that joint conjugal roles are becoming more common in Western homes. Ferri and Smith (1996) observed that in dual full-time earner households, fathers were more likely to share in child care and domestic work. This is allowing women to pursue professional careers more easily, so young females are expected to do well in education from an early age in preparation for their adult working life. Functionalists say that a school is a positive form of socialisation which teaches females skills that will aid them in the future.

Socio-biologists on the other hand, believe that gender is inherent to sex and behaviour is controlled by your DNA. They point out that the male and female hormones cause different behaviour which would explain why males

and females choose different paths of education. Oestrogen creates more emotional behaviour, which links to childcare or social sciences, and testosterone creates competitive personalities which cause men to choose professional subjects which will in future help them provide for their mate and offspring. Dawkins (2006) states that “ behaviour is genetically programmed according to sex and genetic differences underlie men’s dominant position in society”. This theory thinks that gender roles are a product of evolution, as males and females which followed this pattern of behaviour could reproduce and raise offspring in a stable environment to pass on their genes, making gender roles a product of evolution. They note that other animals have gender roles, and it is, therefore, the natural state. In summary, most theories agree that much progress has been made towards equality for the sexes in education. The theories do however disagree on whether gendered subjects are harmful or beneficial to society. Feminists also draw attention to the fact that even if equality is gained within education, the workplace is still male dominated, and the “ glass ceiling” discriminates and prevents women reaching their full potential. Equality in education is just one stepping stone on the way to completely equal rights, in all aspects of life.

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