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The ideal of gender equality

Christos Pavlides
PhD Student
Department of Education
University of Cyprus
Nicosia
Cyprus
Email: chr.pavlides@cytanet.com.cy

Introduction

Many theoretical developments, along with social and political struggles in the 20th century, have led to new understandings of femininity and masculinity. Within such new frameworks, 'women' and 'men' are conceived as social constructions of gender rather than as biological and physiological, essentialist concepts of sex. Thus gender becomes the social design of a biological sex, determined by the conception of tasks, functions and roles attributed to both sexes in our society, in public and private life. The construction and reproduction of gender takes place at the individual and the social level. Individuals shape gender roles and gender norms through their activities and reproduce them by conforming to concomitant expectations. There is a growing

awareness that gender has to be considered also at a political and institutional level. Politics and structures play a very important role in shaping the conditions of life, and in doing so, they often institutionalise the maintenance and reproduction of the social constitution of gender[i].

The above context helps us see that gender can be approached in the political terms of equality. The challenge seems, at first sight, to be to safeguard that both sexes have equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and for contributing to, and benefiting from, economic, social, cultural and political development. Therefore, for many theorists, it is the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men and women, and the roles they play that is the main stake in gender discourse. This position is based on women and men being full partners in their home, their community and their society. Gender equality starts with equal valuing of girls and boys at school.[ii] Hence, schooling and curricula play a very important role in promoting gender equality through teaching, textbooks and school or class activities.

In what follows, some theoretical approaches to gender equality will be discussed with extra attention paid to the new sensibilities that new waves of feminism have introduced. Post-feminism, for instance, shifts the emphasis from women's simple claiming of roles that leave patriarchy unaffected to more profound negotiations of what counts as 'feminine' and 'masculine' and to more displacing and unsettling challenges of superficial, role equality. From Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous down to Rosi Braidotti and Judith Butler,[iii] new forms of resistance to the appropriation of the feminine by the dominant patriarchal culture have led to new and more complex theorizations of gender equality.

Gender equality and aspects of feminism

The equality of the sexes has been accepted as a fundamental principle of human rights since the adoption of the United Nations Charter in 1945. Many international agreements – like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), the World Conference on Human Rights (1993) and the Minimum Development Goals (2000) – have highlighted the need for all countries to take action against various discriminatory practices. Since the International Year for Women (1975) the increased focus on women has led to many improvements in their lives. Reflecting such background developments, in most contemporary official papers or curricula, the term *gender equality* refers to the equal valuing of the roles of both sexes in our society. It is spearheaded to overcome barriers, stereotypes and prejudices so that both sexes are able equally to contribute to (and benefit from) economic, social, cultural and political areas of development within the sphere of the social reality in every country. Economies grow faster and there is less corruption when both sexes enjoy equality. When women are educated, healthy, and creative their families, communities and nations benefit.

But, for thinkers who tackle the issue of gender from outlooks beyond human rights discourse, equality acquires a more complex and demanding semantics. It means equal visibility, empowerment and participation of both sexes in all spheres of public and private life. Also, this type of equality aims to promote the full participation of women and men in our society and not just the leeway for exercising their rights and prerogatives. For a long while, gender equality in Europe was defined as giving girls and boys, women and men, *de jure* equal rights, equal

opportunities, equal conditions and equal treatment in all fields of life and society. Nowadays, it is recognized that equality *de jure* does not automatically lead to *de facto* equality. [iv]

This recognition owes much to the second wave of feminism which emphasized power relations – power over women, the empowerment of women, or power as resistance. This type of feminism mainly looks at power relations between both sexes, which basically entail a kind of control over the bodies and the reproductive capacities of women. [v] Power relations also imply symbolic power: the power to name, to define, to explain, and to determine, in a normative sense, what and how women are, and what and how they *should be*. [vi] These relations lead to gender norms and stereotyped roles that sap the prospective gender equilibrium in society.

The central goal of newer forms of feminism is the empowerment of women as individuals and as interest groups. The concept feminists use to refer to male power is ''patriarchy'' to which they now give new meanings filtered through the philosophy of Michel Foucault[vii]. Postmodern feminism changed common perspectives on the concept of power. Power includes repressive power and productive power, the exercise and the possession of power and the fact that power has multiple sources (as it comes from a web of power-generating relations). Feminist groups prefer the network model to the pyramidal, hierarchical forms of organization, which are viewed as hegemonic. Likewise, in educational frameworks, mostly following the philosophy of Deleuze, the recent feminist demand is for rizhomatic rather than hierarchical structures. Changing the meaning of the concept of power should enable women to overcome the feminism of victimhood, and to look at other areas – such as knowledge or discourse – as foundational sources of relations of power and authority. [viii] The men's princeliness and use of power against

women sap the ideal of gender equality, causing a gender gap with a social disruption. Thus the third wave of feminism looks at how power can be brought to bear upon everyday life by means of micro-policies. In spite of such changes of emphasis many feminists agree that the power of men over women has been continuous, both at the level of the state, and in the context of legislation. Consequently, micro-policies are necessary, but not sufficient for overcoming patriarchy as a macro-policy (as in the power of multinational corporations)[ix].According to Kristeva,[x] the feminist struggle must be seen historically and politically as a three-tiered one, consisting of the fight for: equal access to the male symbolic order; equal right to have one's way of being legitimated by the educational system; and the right to a symbolic order that does not have as its basic underpinning the male female duality. Following a Kristevan feminism, T. Moi has summarized these as follows:

1. Women demand access to the symbolic order. Liberal feminism. Equality.
2. Women reject the male symbolic order in the name of difference. Radical feminism. Femininity extolled.
3. Women reject the metaphysical dichotomy between masculine and feminine .

The third position is one that has deconstructed the opposition between masculinity and femininity, and therefore necessarily challenges the very notion of identity.[xi] Gaining access to the male symbolic order has been very much a political/legislative battle, through which individuals and groups have suggested to remove the rules of exclusion. The second tier, celebration of femaleness, has been a personal and collective task for women made necessary by

the alienation and marginalization they have experienced and continue to experience, within the symbolic order once they have gained access to it.[xii]

An obvious 'solution' to gender inequalities, within the framework of promoting a liberal feminism is the provision of role models or women in high status positions. The absence of women in high status positions is an observable part of the inequitable social structure.[xiii] The ideal of equal opportunity has a complex relationship to the idea and practice of affirmative action, which is taken for granted in a typical job. As the concept of equal opportunity has gained moral and legal authority, social theorists have concentrated on what is practically required to guarantee equal opportunity. Identifying and articulating the practical requirements depends upon some conception of the obstacles to the ideal of equal opportunity, e.g. unequal needs and abilities, poverty, discrimination based on race and sex.

On a classical liberal model of equality, women achieve equality when they have the same citizenship rights as men and when the justice system is neutral with regard to differences of gender. On a socialist model of equality, women have achieved equality when the class differences between both sexes are removed – i.e. differences of wealth, education, and control over the state and the means of production. The ideal of equality of opportunity falls somewhere between these two models: achieving equality of opportunity requires more than removing the formal and legal barriers to equality, yet less than eradicating all class differences between both sexes.[xiv] According to classical political theory, discrimination against women is the result of differences in level of rationality: women are viewed as being less rational and less capable of autonomous action than men. They are thus unable to be citizens and to have a career. Today's

political theory stipulates the equality of sexes. At the normative level, laws and acts are no longer discriminatory. In principle, there are not obstacles to access to employment, positions, and professions.[xv] The state mechanisms and democratic institutions have to reinforce the foundation of gender equality in all the levels of social life.

International instruments for the issue of gender equality

This paper argues that the newest developments in feminist theory have not yet fully suffused educational policy and the educational lifeworld that sustains it. It is surely essential to know the international instruments adopted since the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which underpin and explain gender rights in order to investigate their discrepancies from what we have described above as new trends. However, the task itself of carrying out such investigation is beyond the scope of this paper. Hence, in this section, only a brief account of the liberal political material and its relevance to education will be given. Although the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the cornerstone of human rights, two other basic texts complement the rights system with emphasis on women and children: the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

In addition, the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna, called for the ''full and equal enjoyment by women of all human rights''.[xvi] In 1995, the Beijing Declaration (adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women) reaffirmed the commitment to ensure ''the full implementation of the human rights of women and of the girl child as an inalienable, integral

and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.'' Inherent in all these texts is the right to education as access to education is a prerequisite for achieving equality and other basic human rights.[xvii]

Equality of rights between both sexes, especially as it applies to access to education, has contributed to the development of the concept of the right to Education for All. As a result, the education sector's greater openness to girls has made it possible to re-examine the issue of social justice and promote egalitarian gender relations in society. Gender equality is a way to combat underdevelopment and ensure sustainable development, as girls' and women's education has a positive influence in the field of social activities: health, demography, economy, children's education, community welfare etc. Education, therefore, plays an important role in transforming social relations and supporting economic, social and political development.[xviii] So, under a good-quality educational policy the textbook is understood as an important educational tool, being instrumental to culture, to educational attainment and to in-service teacher training. It is also a useful tool for social change as it disseminates universal values.

It is essential for textbooks to be covered by policies which respect and include the rights of girls and women for their full enjoyment of a good-quality education[xix]. Considerable progress has been made in the area of gender equality at the European Community level since the Beijing Conference (1995). There has been a policy area concentrating on specific actions in favour of women in the social and employment sectors to being a central feature of European Union policy – making in all sectors. Gender equality is now firmly anchored into the Amsterdam Treaty

(1997). It has become a key element of policy areas such as employment, education, training and regional development co-operation.

In the area of gender mainstreaming, there is a recognition that, despite the progress, much still remains to be done. The institutional framework has been set within the European Commission to ensure that gender mainstreaming continues to move forward, but we need to increase the awareness of gender issues at decision-making levels, ensure that adequate human and budgetary resources are allocated to gender mainstreaming and that we can count on gender expertise. This is what the European Commission is now tackling by developing a more comprehensive and systematic approach to gender mainstreaming. This includes gender impact assessment of policies, gender proofing and actions to develop gender expertise and awareness amongst its own staff. The European Commission dual approach implies that, in the coming years, specific actions addressed to women will be continued and strengthened. The future Community programme on gender equality that the Commission was preparing for the period 2001-2005 was built on the two pillars: effective gender mainstreaming into all Community policies and activities and the implementation of specific actions to tackle gender discrimination.[xx]

The Council of Europe has a crucial role to play in promoting gender equality, for example by defining common principles and standards to promote the full participation of both sexes in society. Even if women have obtained *de jure* equal rights and equal status with men in the majority of European countries, they are still discriminated against in many areas. Legislation to combat discrimination and promote equal treatment has been adopted and equality mechanisms to monitor implementation have been set up. Imbalances between both sexes exist and influence

all   life domains. Other strategies and other methods are needed to reach the goal of gender equality. Gender mainstreaming is one of these strategies. Gender mainstreaming is the integration of the gender perspective into every stage of policy processes – design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation – with a view to promoting equality between both sexes. It means assessing how policies impact on the life and position of men and women.[xxi] Gender mainstreaming is a strategy of prime importance because it puts people at the heart of policy – making, leading to better government, involving gendered categories of male and female, making full use of human resources, making gender equality issues visible in the mainstream of society and additionally taking into account the diversity among the gendered subjectivities.[xxii] Certainly, a good time to start mainstreaming is when a new law is being prepared or a policy is being planned or revised, for example, in the field of education. The policy process is reorganized so that the people usually involved in policy-making take a gender perspective into account from the very beginning of the process. Mainstreaming gets gender equality out of the isolation of specific gender equality policies and involves more and new actors in building a balanced society.[xxiii] Governments and private institutions are urged to include in the curricula of all schools, colleges and universities courses and seminars on women's history and roles in society, to incorporate women's issues in the general curriculum and to strengthen research institutions in the area of women's studies by promoting indigenous research activities and collaboration.

New teaching methods should be encouraged, especially audiovisual techniques, to demonstrate clearly the equality of the sexes. Programmes, curricula and standards of education and training should be the same for females and males. Textbooks and other teaching materials should be

continuously evaluated, updated and, where necessary, redesigned and rewritten to ensure that they reflect positive, dynamic and participatory images of women and to present men actively involved in all aspects of family responsibilities.

Targets for gender equality and useful 'remedies'

The plea of this article to consider new tendencies in feminist discourse and the critique of official declarative positions (and their transference to education) that may be articulated along such lines does not underestimate the fact that gender equality must be fought for, protected and promoted – like human rights, of which it is an integral part. Achieving gender equality is a continuous process that has to be constantly put into question, thought about and redefined – and this entails that even standard targets of gender equality will also be subjected to critical scrutiny. The most important of such standard targets for gender equality include the following aspects:

- ❖ the recognition and full implementation of women's rights as *human rights.* This includes effectively respecting, protecting and promoting the human rights of both sexes, enabling them to enjoy fully these rights and combating interferences with women's liberty and dignity.
- ❖ the development and improvement of representative *democracy*. The persistent under – representation or absence of women in decision – making at all levels and in all fields of life is a major problem. Promotion of the equal participation of both sexes in political and public life is crucial for the social development.

- ❖ the individual's *economic independence*, which leads to the securing of equal pay, equal access to credit, equal conditions on the labour market and the distribution of assets that takes into account gender differences in private life.

- ❖ *Education,* which involves the ways in which societies transfer norms, knowledge and skills. It is crucial that the educational systems and all elements of these complicated systems (teachers, schools, textbooks, etc.) empower both girls and boys, and take care in counterbalancing the existing gender hierarchies.

- ❖ women's and men's common acknowledgement of the need to remove imbalances in society and their *shared responsibility* in doing so.

The achievement of the targets of human rights, democracy, economic independence and education in a context of shared responsibilities between the categories of male and female to resolve imbalances, certainly leads to a society where both sexes experience well – being in public and private life.[xxiv]

Likewise, it is said that, to cope with gender gaps at the professional level, we may use the following 'remedies':

- Establish special mechanisms to protect gender equity in recruitment; promote women in all levels and fields of expertise at the workplace; disseminate those policies; and monitor performance.

- Recognize differential needs of female employees compared to those of men and establish women's entitlement to adequate material support.

- Find the levels at which (national, district, municipal) women are most disadvantaged and make organizational effort to entice women to work at those levels.

- Ensure gender training up to the highest levels of authority for gender equity policies in the country.

- Establish affirmative action to support education of female students at universities in technical fields in order to enhance women's participation at the higher levels of decision making in technical sectors traditionally defined as men's domains of expertise.[xxv]

However, from the prism of new feminist theories, the effort towards the ideal of gender equality in a democratic world goes hand in hand with the effort to think differently and more profoundly even the very concepts and principles of equality and democracy and open up new discursive terrains for theorizing the ideal at stake.

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[i] Directorate General of Human Rights, *Gender mainstreaming: Conceptual framework, methodology and presentation of good practices.* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2004), 8 available in: http://www.coe.int/equality/

[ii] Chan Lean Heng. *Reorienting Teacher Education to Address Sustainable Development: Guidelines and Tools. Gender Sensitizing* (Bangkok: UNESCO, 2010), 17.

[iii] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985); Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); Rosi Braidotti, *Radical Philosophies of Sexual Difference* (London: Routledge, 1994); Judith Butler, ''Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an essay in phenomenology and feminist theory.'' *Theatre Journal* 40 (1988), 4: 519-531.

[iv] Directorate General of Human Rights, *Gender mainstreaming: Conceptual framework, methodology and presentation of good practices.* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2004), 8 available in: http://www.coe.int/equality/

[v] Millet, 1972, as ref. in: Mihaela Miroiu. *Guidelines for Promoting Gender Equity in Higher Education in Central and Eastern Europe* (Bucharest: UNESCO-CEPES, 2003), 17.

[vi] Ibid., 17.

[vii] Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité, 3. Le souci de soi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).
[viii] Millet, 1972, 17-18.

[ix] Ibid., 18.

[x] Kristeva, 1981 and 1986, as ref. in: Bronwyn Davies, ''Education for sexism: A theoretical analysis of the sex/bias in education'', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 21(1), 1, (1989), 1.

[xi] Moi 1985, 12-13, as ref. in: Bronwyn Davies, ''Education for sexism: A theoretical analysis of the sex/bias in education'', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 21(1) (1989), 1.

[xii] Ibid., 1-2.

[xiii] Davies 1988a, as ref. in: Bronwyn Davies, ''Education for sexism: A theoretical analysis of the sex/bias in education'', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 21(1) (1989): 4.

[xiv] Shrage, as ref. in: Alison M. Jaggar & Iris Marion Young, (eds.), *A companion to feminist philosophy* (Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 558-559.

[xv] Mihaela Miroiu. *Guidelines for Promoting Gender Equity in Higher Education in Central and Eastern Europe* (Bucharest: UNESCO-CEPES, 2003), 16.

[xvi] (Part 3, ''The equal status and human rights of women'', para.36, Declaration and Programme of Action).
[xvii] Carole Brugeilles & Sylvie Cromer, *Promoting Gender Equality through Textbooks: A methodological guide* (Paris: UNESCO), 17.

[xviii] Ibid., 18.

[xix] Ibid., 22.

[xx] European Commission, *Implementation by the European Community of the Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995 - Working document from the Commission Services* (2000), 30.

[xxi] The concept of gender mainstreaming appeared for the first time in international texts after the United Nations Third World Conference on Women (Nairobi, 1985), in the debate on the role of

women in development. The Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) called for the promotion of gender mainstreaming.

[xxii] Directorate General of Human Rights, *Gender mainstreaming: Conceptual framework, methodology and presentation of good practices.* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2004), 14-15 available in: http://www.coe.int/equality/

[xxiii] Council of Europe. Directorate General of Human Rights and Legal Affairs. Gender Equality Division. *Gender Mainstreaming.*

Retrieved on 3/8/2011 from the website: http://www.coe.int/equality/

[xxiv] Directorate General of Human Rights, *Gender mainstreaming: Conceptual framework, methodology and presentation of good practices.* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2004), 9. available in: http://www.coe.int/equality/

[xxv] F. Miraftab, "On Loan Home: Women's Participation in Formulating Human Settlements Policies" in: Jane S. Jaquette & Gale Summerfield (eds.). *Women and Gender Equity in Development Theory and Practice. Institutions, Resources, and Mobilization.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 187-189.