

## CHAPTER 10

# Democracy and Gender Issues

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Throughout history gender issues have been dominated by the need to put an end to discrimination against women. Males were consistently represented in prestigious positions. They were depicted as being more courageous and more skilful than women. Women were represented in subservient positions in social service roles. Discrimination against women became institutionalized in that both boys and girls believed in the superiority of the male. Gender bias is still being experienced in schools, politics and work places and McElroy (1988) claims that most decision making positions are filled up by males in most countries.

*Males dominate decision making positions*

### **Gender in school**

McElroy also describes a situation where gender bias remains outstanding in schools. Girls receive less attention from classroom teachers than boys do. They have fewer interactions with teachers but attempt to initiate such actions more frequently. He further states that sexual harassment of girls by boys and male teachers, from innuendo to actual assault, is increasing. This suggests that there are 'two worlds' in the classroom, one of active boys and the other of inactive girls. Male students control classroom conversation. They ask and answer more questions. They receive more praise for the intellectual quality of their ideas. This description from 1988 seems still to be viable in Malawi today, while in Norway the opposite seems to have become the case. These days, girls are systematically performing better than boys in school (Nordahl 2007) and since 2002 more than 50% of all students in Norwegian universities and university colleges are female (Statistics Norway 2004). So edu-

*Classroom situation different in Malawi and Norway*

cators are debating how to encourage boys to become more active in school. Democracy education has surely a role to play in order to balance these situations. If properly taught, democratic principles and ideals would saturate the culture in such a way that gender dominance one way or the other would not be tolerated. Ideals of equal opportunity and share of teacher attention would come natural.

*Students exercise their right to be heard*

As schools practise democratic ideals, for instance through discussing the what, why and how of learning, this is a tremendously strong witness of respect for the need of students' participation in class. Through participatory strategies students learn to listen and work as a team. Given opportunity for group work and debate, students exercise their rights to be heard and contribute freely in the discussions. They learn to act responsibly. They can make informed decisions through training in decision making skills. In addition they will be able to clarify their values through value clarification activities. Through selection of representatives who consult and discuss school and classroom issues, they learn to participate and accommodate dissenting views. Such representatives would in Malawi be prefects and monitors, while in Norway they would be members of the student board or student parliament.

*Entrepreneurship for self-sufficiency*

Where schools run entrepreneurship programmes, students learn some income generating activities and skills. This will enable them to be self sufficient after leaving school. Hand outs from politicians would not persuade them to vote for the wrong or corrupt candidate during elections. They will see the many opportunities available for them to enjoy a better life in the future.

*Need for political literacy*

Through such strategies students experience human dignity which does not discriminate on basis of gender, age or intellectual capacity. Crick & Porter (1978) claim that political literacy is an important shield against discrimination of any kind. They define political literacy as knowing what the main political disputes are about, what beliefs the main contestants have of them and how they are likely to affect people. Above all, to be predisposed to try to do something about the issue in question in a manner which is effective and at the same time respectful of the sincerity of other people and what they believe. Political literacy will help learners or the citizens to develop a critical consciousness that encourages reflection, questioning of evidence, consideration of alternatives and ability to participate (Freire 1972). To be a vibrant shield against discrimination, Porter points out the necessity for political literacy to be underpinned by

certain values (Fien et al 1988). These values include willingness to

- adopt a critical stance towards political information
- give reasons why one holds a view or acts in a certain way and to expect similar reasons from others
- respect evidence in forming and holding political opinions which also means to be open to the possibility of changing one's own attitudes and values in the light of evidence
- appreciate fairness as a criterion for judging and making decisions
- appreciate the freedom to choose between political alternatives
- tolerate a diversity of ideas, beliefs, values and interests

*Values  
underpinning  
political  
literacy*

From this it seems obvious that schools need to make sure that learners acquire political literacy and the values and attitudes that go with it to be an active part in the fight against gender inequality.

### **Strategies for improving gender equality**

The political ground and the work place are no exception for gender inequalities. The fiftieth session of the Commission on the Status of Women noted that combating gender inequalities in the world of work call for equal access to social protection. Thus an enabling environment would be created by extending national social security systems more widely. Women need to gain confidence, increase women's representation and acquire for them selves a voice in local, national and international employment policy making (Commission on the Status of Women 2006).

*Combating  
gender  
inequalities*

The Commission vice-chairperson Szilvia Szabo of Hungary said equal access to decision making and leadership at all levels is a necessary precondition for the proper functioning of democracy. According to her equal participation in political affairs makes governments more representative, accountable and transparent. It also ensures that the interests of women are taken into account in policy making. By tradition, however, women are excluded from decision making processes in many countries.

*Equal access  
to decision  
making*

It is encouraging to note that since the fourth world conference on women in 1995, women's visibility in public life has grown. In 1995, 11.3 % of all legislators were women, a number which in 2006 had grown to 16.3 %. More women judges had been appointed and

more women had reached the highest executive positions in public and private companies. Unfortunately, persistent barriers to women's entry into positions of decision making persist, and equitable participation remains a challenge.

*Women  
representa-  
tion*

The Secretary General of the Interparliamentary Union (IPU), Anders B. Johnson, observed at the fiftieth Session of Commission on the Status of Women (ibid), that achievement of democracy required a balanced participation of men and women in politics. He emphasized that one could not talk about democracy when half of a country's population did not participate in its work. The IPU has been tracking the numbers of women in national parliaments since 1970. Sweden was leading then, but in 2006, Rwanda, a developing country, had the highest proportion of women in its national assembly, at 48.8%. The critical mass which the Beijing Platform (1995) had asked for (30%) may not be generally reached until 2025, and parity may not be reached until 2040.

*Strategies for  
gender equity*

The present leadership in Malawi is also trying to achieve gender equity in decision making positions and in Norway the authorities have set high targets. Torild Skard writes that the key rhetoric of the Norwegian gender equality debate is the argument that we are 'en route' (ibid). The gender debate is characterized by harmonization strategies in which everyone seeks to agree on common efforts towards a common goal.

*Use of quotas*

Skard thinks that political systems must be made more 'women-friendly'. The use of quotas<sup>29</sup> is felt to be an important instrument for breaking down barriers and furthering women's political participation and integration. In Norway, she reported at the fiftieth session of the commission on the status of women, the use of quotas has been crucial leading to a 50/50 ratio of women and men in the Norwegian cabinet.

Johnson (ibid) points out that another requirement for women is quality education that promotes gender equality and prepares girls and women for a productive life. Besides, gender equality legislation, standards and accountability mechanisms for protection and promotion of women workers' rights should be adopted and enforced regardless of the sector of employment or place of work. The creation of an enabling environment for enhancing women's participation

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<sup>29</sup> The quota system in Norway generally demands that no representative body in government, commercial firm or other organization must have less than 40 % from either of the sexes.

would more than likely require transforming current institutions and structures. In addition better policies and programmes that respond to women's rights, needs and concerns must be created.

*Create an enabling environment*

The equal participation of women and men in public affairs is one of the fundamental tenets of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This convention was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 and has been in force since 1981. Today, more than 20 years after the signing, with 165 ratifications by states and at the dawn of the millennium, Johnson reports that women in all parts of the world continue to be largely marginalized and underrepresented in politics (ibid). Women's participation in politics on equal footing with men is still a challenge for democracy. The linking of democracy with gender equality is therefore a generally accepted principle.

*Equal participation*

Women constitute half of the world's population and comprise about 50 percent of the labour force. Decision making and priority setting continues to be largely in the hands of men. Women want to influence the decisions that affect their lives and their families. They also want to have their say in the political economy and the destiny of their communities and nations, as well as the structure of international relations. The creation of an enabling environment is urgent to improve the management of the global economy and development in general. The UN has a key role to play, particularly in limiting the negative repercussions of globalization and trade liberalization on the poor. Furthermore it should ensure healthy and safe working conditions for all. Gender balanced political participation and representation is essential for the achievement of these ends.

*Women want to influence their lives*

### **Concluding remarks**

Globally women constitute 14.3 % of parliamentarians. In the Nordic countries there are 40 % compared to 4.6 % representation in Arab countries (IPU 2002). There is a need to leave behind the traditional norms and perceptions of the position and role of women and men in society. The quality of women's participation in politics will also be valued when there is a shift in traditional perceptions of power and dispelling the notions that public life is largely reserved for men. This will require political literacy and the practice of democratic principles in all sorts of contexts. The school should work very hard to help achieve this through purposeful democracy education.

## Questions

1. Discuss the circumstances that make women feel guilty for entertaining emergent, socially unsanctioned ideas and begin to question the collective knowledge that stigmatized them as intellectually and physically inferior.
2. How can gender inequality be reduced in education and society in general?
3. Are the millennium goals on gender equity and gender equality achievable?

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