

Summary: The Teaching Profession. Aspects of Gender Equality in School

The ninth publication from the series *Aspekty* (Aspects)* contains the findings of analytical study carried out as part of the project ruzovyamodrysvet.sk (pinkandblueworld.sk) *Gender Sensitization in the Educational Process at Elementary and Secondary Schools as Preparation for Future Job Desegregation*. The project was realized in 2005-2008 within the framework of the European EQUAL Community Initiative funded by the European Social Fund. This qualitative research was initiated by ASPEKT (www.aspekt.sk) - the leading organization of the project partnership, and conducted by the Institute for Public Affairs (www.ivo.sk) and FOCUS (www.focus-research.sk).

To a degree, the gender bias in education in Slovakia stems from general attitudes of teachers. It is therefore important to identify the extent of their gender sensitivity or of presence of gender stereotypes in their perception, and hence also in their profession in general. These findings could help to reveal where and how it is possible to intervene in order to foster gender equality and dismantle gender injustices in the educational sector. The gender dimension of education in Slovakia and related gender inequalities are highly visible in high feminization of the sector and low remuneration of the teaching profession which is far below the national income average.

The analysis of the research findings is divided into two main parts: the first maps the current status of the teaching profession in Slovakia - it describes and evaluates its various aspects and areas, one part of this analysis is the gender dimension of the teaching profession. The second part of the analysis identifies the degree of gender sensitivity through the reflection on gender differences in both the professional and private life of teachers, and through their declared attitudes and opinions about the situation in schools.

The gender relations and presence of gender stereotypes in schools were studied through the qualitative research method of focus groups interviews with elementary school teachers. All together 5 focus groups took place in 4 Slovak towns: four of them were interviews with female teachers and one with male teachers. This division mirrors the female-to-male ratio of teachers in primary education in Slovakia. 36 female teachers and 8 male teachers took part in the interviews, and the composition of the focus groups was rather diverse. It encompassed younger as well as older and middle-aged teachers whose professional experience in teaching ranged from 3 to 37 years.

The qualitative data gathered via the focus groups were analyzed in two main contexts:

1. Gender sensitivity of elementary school teachers in relation to their female and male pupils, their school activity, behavior, talents and aptitudes, but also in relation to their general attitudes towards their female and male pupils;
2. Visibility of the gender dimension in the perception of elementary school teachers related to their profession, interaction with pupils, their parents but also teachers as such.

Summary of main research findings from the perspective of the gender analysis:

- Both female and male teachers overlook gender inequalities in education. Despite the fact that their professional life takes place in a setting characterized by a strong gender bias (more than 80 percent of all elementary teachers are women) and by many gender inequalities, teachers do not see them. When asked this question directly, they even deny the existence of these inequalities. They also overlook gender inequalities in their families, which is no different from the way these are perceived by the general public. It is mostly women who take

care of children and the household and these tasks are also understood as women's primary responsibility. The idea that the family and household is primarily a women's sphere is among female teachers even stronger, as it is reinforced by the idea that the teaching profession is particularly suitable for women due to the organization of working time facilitating reconciliation of the family and professional life.

- Teachers do not perceive gender inequalities in their profession (also due to the gender bias of the whole sector compared to other sectors) or their family (also due to the so called advantages of the teaching profession); hence it is no surprise that they act upon gender stereotypes also in their teaching. The five focus groups interviews show that – just like in other countries – also in Slovakia gender stereotypes are deeply rooted in education. They are reflected in and perpetuated by the way in which teachers perceive their pupils in the context of the school. Also many general stereotypical attitudes and prejudices are alive in the school setting. Teachers have different expectations from their male and female pupils. Many of them are convinced that boys are better at mathematics and technical subjects (including working with PCs) and girls are better at social sciences and humanities (such as languages). A large part of the teachers who took part in the research were convinced that boys have a higher ability for logical thinking and that mathematics is harder for girls. Worse learning results are also explained in a gendered manner: while worse school marks of boys are explained by their lack of efforts or discipline, those of girls are ascribed to their lower aptitudes.

- The interviews revealed that the teachers perceived the behavior of boys and girls in the school setting differently and pointed to their different treatment: boys need more motivation because they are livelier, while girls do not need as much motivation since they are calmer. Thus, pupils are being taught the prevailing gender roles also in schools. Teachers in general more or less accept the fact that boys are more active and critical; their behavior meets with more approval of teachers, they even appreciated it. The image of the school classroom with more active boys and more docile girls can be an outcome of a different gender socialization of girls (socialized to be polite and less assertive – e.g. not to interrupt when others are speaking), but it can also be related to the fact that teachers do not appreciate – boyish – behavior of girls. The research also shows that the teachers pay more attention to more active boys (they try to find different ways to attract their attention).

- The teachers often used a gender biased language. They address both boys and girls in the generalized masculine way, which can lead to a symbolic exclusion of girls and their invisibility in the classroom. In spite of the prevalence of women in education and on the staff of particular schools, both male and female teachers used the masculine gender when speaking about their situation. The interviewed female teachers used the masculine gender even when they spoke concretely about themselves.

The research pointed to many areas that would require intervention in order to achieve gender justice in schools, classrooms, and the education process as such. First of all, what is needed is to increase gender sensitivity of teachers both in the classroom and their daily lives. One big task is to inform the public about consequences of gender stereotypical ideas about development of boys and girls. But that is just a beginning. It is important that findings of research projects – also those carried out within the framework of European EQUAL Community Initiative – are taken into account in formulation of educational policies.

* The series *Aspekty* (Aspects) open up different approaches to gender issues that have become part of the public and political discourse (e.g. reproductive and sexual rights of women, violence against women, women in politics and women's politics, gender mainstreaming, histories of women, gender aspects of parliamentary elections).