



# Exchange of good practices on gender equality

## Gender training in education

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Comments Paper - Austria



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# Gender training in education in Austria – the present situation

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background and general policy context of Austria

#### 1.1.1. Gender Equality in Austria

In comparison with northern European countries Austria has never been a great pioneer in its efforts for gender equality.

In 1918 the right for women to vote in elections was introduced. In 1979 the law on equal pay for women and men was adopted. In 1991 a Ministry of Women Affairs was established for the first time. In 2000 it was disestablished again by a conservative and right-winged coalition. One year later the same government installed a “department for men policy”. In 2003 the Ministry on Women was re-established again and both institutions remain until today.

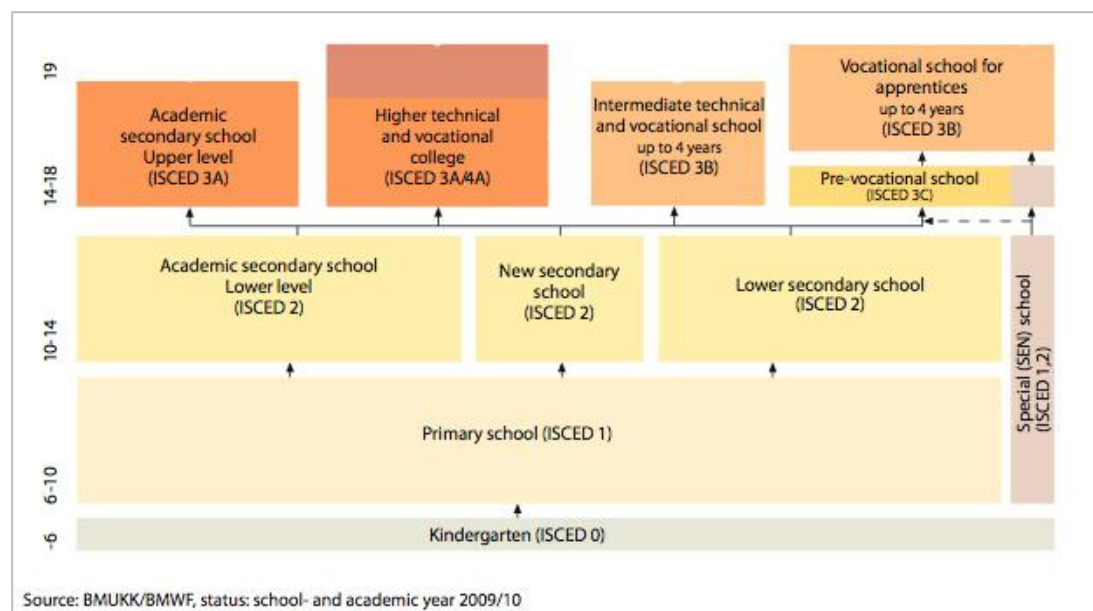
As the status given to the concept of heteronormativity in a society can be seen as an indicator for its gender progress it is relevant to know that the Austrian law which allows homosexual couples to enter into a civil partnership – not a marriage – came into effect only one and a half year ago in January 2010 and is therefore quite young.

As a conclusion it can be stated, that in Austria – as in many other European countries – the formal framework of gender equality widely exists. Still, statistics focussing on gender groups show persisting gaps regarding incomes, the segregation of the labour market, the representation in the political system and the gender-specific distribution of care and reproductive work despite ongoing efforts.

### 1.1.2. The education system in Austria

The education system consists of four sequential levels as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1: The Austrian school system (Statistik Austria 2011, adopted by the author)



The Austrian school system is characterised by a structure that forces serious and crucial decisions by students at two points on their educational path:

1. The first decision has to be made at the end of primary school at the age of 10. An academic secondary school or a lower/new secondary school are the options of choice.
2. The second decision has to be made at the end of lower secondary level at the age of 14. The choice between an academic secondary school on an upper level or a variety of vocational education opportunities is often central for further educational and career moves.

Within this structure there are the following important characteristics:

One of the most relevant structural elements of the Austrian educational framework is the question of formal accountability and the power of decision-making. Different stakeholders – on a national or state level – are involved depending on the level and type of school (as shown in figure 1). It is a network of complex formal arrangements between federal and state governments and public authorities, which characterises the educational system. The responsibilities and decision makers regarding engagement of teachers, payment of salaries, definition and control of pedagogical standards and the teachers' education itself for example are in a lot of different hands. Concerning the implementation of any structural change or transformation it is important to keep these specific structures in mind.

On a formal level all genders – as to say girls and boys from the Austrian mainstream point of view – are equal under law. Disregarding the legal frame the Austrian school system is profoundly segregated when it comes to the secondary upper level: Meanwhile female pupils are represented by 54% in academic secondary schools (2007/08), but the more vocational the education tends to be, the higher is the traditional segregation. The percentage of male pupils in vocational schools for care jobs like social pedagogy or kindergarten workers for example is

only about 4,6% whereas the amount of female pupils in higher technical and vocational schools and colleges comprises already 24,8% (2006/07) (Schneider 2012).

During the last 20 years various governmental efforts were made on a national level in order to focus on gender equality. In 1989 the “department for girls’ and women’s education” (now “department on gender specific educational matters / gender mainstreaming”) was set up as a new competence centre within the ministry of education. In order to include gender matters into the Austrian educational mainstream the educational principle on “education to equality between women and men”<sup>1</sup> was elaborated. Between 1994 and 2007 this principle was integrated into almost all school type curricula’s. As one of twelve educational principles the one on equality between men and women binds everyone working in the Austrian education system to teach and to work in a gender sensitive way. By focusing the current Austrian educational situation it has to be said “the changes on a formal level concerning gender equality may be a big success. In practice they are almost not reflecting” (Schneider/Tanzberger soon to be published, translation by the author). This means that only few teachers – and probably even less policy makers – possess profound knowledge on gender sensitivity and/or act gender sensitive even though all actors in the education system are formally supposed to do so.

## 2. Policy debate

What are the currently discussed themes and/or the most important issues regarding gender and education in Austria?

This question has to be answered in a differentiated way: Issues are debated, but the issues on the table are not always the most burning ones. The following focuses on the three most central topics in current policy discussion from experts’ point of view.

### 2.1. Gender-sensitive-language – a social irritation?

In Austria the demand for gender-sensitive-language has a long history and is very relevant within the feminist movement. Therefore language can be seen as the symbol of the persistence of social structure based on patriarchy and as a measure of gender equality within the Austrian society. The discussions on gender-sensitive language found their way into formal policies. “In 2002 a manual on ‘gender-sensitive language’ was published by the ministry of education. There are included the most important basic principles of gender-fair language and the most common strategies of gender-sensitive wording” (Schneider/Tanzberger/Traunsteiner 2009, p. 200). The manual was updated and republished again in 2010<sup>2</sup>. It has the formal status of directives for everyone who is working within the area of influence of the ministry of education such as teachers, policy makers, national and state educational authorities. The impact of this language-focused policy on daily practice differs from the importance it was given to on a formal level. The aim of introducing gender-fair language in gender-specific seminars for teachers as well as on a national social and political level still ensures huge controversies.

Best examples for these dynamics were the ongoing heated discussions accompanying the recent change of the Austrian national anthem. The line “home of great sons” was skipped in favour of a more gender-sensitive wording: “home of great daughters and sons”. The change

<sup>1</sup> Available in English at (05.10.2012): [www.bmukk.gv.at/medienpool/9718/PDFzupubID455.pdf](http://www.bmukk.gv.at/medienpool/9718/PDFzupubID455.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Available at (05.10.2012): [www.bmukk.gv.at/medienpool/7108/PDFzupubID403.pdf](http://www.bmukk.gv.at/medienpool/7108/PDFzupubID403.pdf)

can be seen as an ending point to efforts that have been made over the last twenty years by feminists and political – not surprisingly mostly female – representatives. The first parliamentary motion towards a gender-sensitive adoption was submitted already in 1992 (Schwentner 2011), the finally changed anthem is valid only since 1 January 2012.

## **2.2. Men and boys as losers of the system?**

In German and Austrian discussions on education the focus on men and boys – understood as the bipolar biological counterpart of women in the discourse – is gaining importance. The popular discourse comes up with two “facts” that are regarded as alarming towards a “discrimination” of boys and men.

On the one hand boys are called “losers” as far as education is concerned and this is backed up with arguments like the increasing number of female pupils graduating upper academic secondary school (54% in 2007/08) as well as the number of female students on university level (53,7% in 2007/08) (Schneider/Tanzberger/Traunsteiner 2009, p. 203). On the other hand the lack of men as teachers, education workers and kindergartners is increasingly viewed as a problem, which is seen as related to the boys declining success in the education system in the current popular discussion.

Both debates base on an everyday, common dichotomous gender-knowledge and implicate an implicit traditional gender policy and therefore claims to power on a social level. The core question from an experts’ point of view should not focus on how to increase the number of male teachers or kindergartners only because they are regarded on one end of a bipolar gender system when the competence and gender sensitivity among men teachers is neglected at the same time. Instead the questions to be asked are: What kind of gender competence must teachers, education workers and kindergartners possess in order to educate future generations? And: What should gender-sensitive curricula in teachers’ education comprise?

## **2.3. What to know about gender: popular know-how vs. research-based knowledge!**

A lack of research-based knowledge of sex/gender can be diagnosed in the Austrian education system. Experts state that teachers – as well as educational policy makers – often base their knowledge on gender on their very personal common, everyday knowledge. As a consequence they, their knowledge of gender and their way of teaching is based on and stuck in bipolar difference-based construction of society where men are like “this”, women are like “that”. Regarding this heterosexuality understood as the norm and this ‘normal’, ‘biological’ and ‘natural’ bipolar desire is based on two different sexes: men and women. Insofar everyday gender theories and heteronormativity are interwoven and are still a strong device in the persisting traditional education system. Understanding and knowledge on queer and/or recent gender theories is not present in the educational structures. So it is not surprising that most of the educational gender initiatives and projects are based on a bipolar gender comprehension and knowledge.

The recent gender, queer or deconstructivist theories have neither entered the education system nor the knowledge of teachers and educators. Therefore the notion of a two-gender hegemony and the focus on heterosexual normativity are strengthening the stability and performance of dichotomous gender identities within the education system and are reconstructed there every day again.

A snapshot of the current national situation leads to the conclusion that the education system is quite sluggish:

The combination of the lack of research-based knowledge together with the poor knowledge on formal gender guidelines as well as the missing reflection on gender issues in teaching processes and in schools as social systems are the reasons why the Austrian educational structures are so resistant to changes toward a gender equal system (cf. Schneider/Tanzberger soon to be published).

### 3. Transferability issues

How can the good practices of Portugal, Denmark and Spain be as a whole or partly transferred to Austria?

#### 3.1. Portugal

Creating and implementing a gender related strategy – independent of the topic – which includes all different types of schools starting from the pre-primary education up to the secondary education – is a useful and elaborated approach to change the educational system itself slowly but constantly. However excellent the idea, from nowadays view as mentioned in the chapter on the background and general policy context of Austria the national general educational framework with its' different und multiple policy and decision makers and institutions is far from any functional national or even state wide strategy that involves a band width of schools including children and pupils from the kindergarten to upper secondary education.

#### 3.2. Denmark

The detailed Danish description of the lack of research-based gender knowledge applies completely to the current Austrian situation. Therefore – as Celilie Nørgaards remarked (Nørgaards 2012, p. 11) – it has to be noted, that in the Austrian case the reliance of the transferability of the Danish good practice examples on the weaknesses of the framework – its' lack of research-based knowledge about gender – impairs the transferability into the Austrian education system. For that reason the Danish questions and issues for the debate, as for example the question on how educational policies can be based on research-based knowledge or the question on methods for research-based gender training for teachers and policy makers, are especially important.

#### 3.3. Spain

The Spanish good practice example of online training courses for teachers at all educational levels on a national level partly already exists in a similar form in Austria. A few years ago a national virtual training institute for teachers was founded. It offers some online-courses on gender topics but it must be stated that this activity attracts fewer participants as the Spanish courses. Furthermore there is an online-platform with materials on gender topics for teachers across all sections and at all levels starting on primary school level<sup>3</sup>. The use of both the online-

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<sup>3</sup> Check out here (05.10.2012): [www.gender.schule.at](http://www.gender.schule.at)

courses and the online-materials is up to the interested teaching staff and there is no obligation to engage with it.

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