

Exchange of good practices on gender equality

Gender training in education

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1. Introduction

The main document on gender equality policy in Slovak Republic is currently the National Action Plan for Gender Equality for the years 2010 – 2013 (adopted by government on the 12th May 2010) based on primary and secondary EU-legislative. This plan contains some references about gender sensitive education, or gender in education, but the implementation of these issues is only at the beginning. In 2011, a new institutional mechanism – the Council for Human Rights, National Minorities and Gender Equality with the special Committee for Gender Equality was created. In October 2012, the Committee for LGBT-rights was constituted. There is also an executive body specializing in the equality agenda – the Department of Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities – it is a part of the Ministry for Work, Social Affairs and Family SR. Although, the Ministry for Education, Science, Research and Sport SR have no institutional body dealing with gender equality policies. Even the Department in Ministry of Social Affairs has competences cutting across various branches of the government; its real influence on them is very low.

Particularly NGOs have since 1989 been the main actors focusing on human rights education, gender competent education, as well as on many others topic and methodical innovations in the educational system.¹

In the analysis *Education through the Prism of Gender* (Jana Cviková – Jarmila Filadelfiová, published 2008) we tried to identify some aspects of key risks for the educational system from the gender perspective.² Namely in the past 10 years, the once state-run education system with a centrally organized management has undergone a significant *decentralization*. The public administration reform of elementary and secondary schools meant not only a shift away from the state administration but it also brought about change in the system of establishing, management and administration of schools and school facilities, including an important change in funding and in ownership of schools. New authorities (district and regional governments) were not prepared to fulfil this task: “The achieved degree of application of democratic principles of governance is not adequate (in terms of professional and personnel quality, self-governance bodies, legal consciousness) and so administration of education can be influenced by various

¹ Open Society Foundation as a platform of several NGOs' activities in education initiated a publication *Mimovládne iniciatívy vo vzdelávaní. Ako mimovládne organizácie vstupujú do systému vzdelávania* [Nongovernmental initiatives in education. How NGO's enter the educational system] about the key topics that have been introduced into the Slovak educational system by NGOs: global education, multicultural education, environmental education, gender sensitive education, sexual education. http://www.osf.sk/kniznica_a_open_gallery/publikacie/2010/mimovladne_inicativy_vo_vzdelavani/

² For the summary in English see http://www.ruzovymodrysvet.sk/chillout5_items/1/2/3/9/1239_9159e9.pdf; for the whole publication in Slovak http://www.aspekt.sk/sites/default/files/Rodov%C3%BD_poh%C4%BEd_na_%C5%A1kolstvo.pdf

individual, collective, regional, religious and other interests.”³ The degree of knowledge, implementation and acceptance of the gender agenda (but also e.g. of the broader human rights agenda) has been rather problematic especially in the field of education and schooling, also at the level of central bodies which have made a commitment to the gender equality agenda in relation to our EU membership.

The new law (effective since the 1st of September 2008) introduces new state and school curricula. The *State educational program* defines the obligatory content of the curriculum and is issued by the Ministry of Education. It contains binding guidelines for elaboration of the *school educational program*, drafting and evaluation of school books and evaluation of schools. Although the new law mentions the “principle of equality of the man and the woman”, state educational programs do not pay attention to gender equality or gender sensitive education. Given the situation characterized by the absence of the gender perspective in education and *a lack of linkages between gender and educational policies* in Slovakia there was a significant risk that the gender dimension will not be included in new school programs.

The current situation shows that large – and not only economic and social – *regional differences* have an impact to the principle of equal access to education – e. g. the segregation of Roma children. In the content of the curriculum, the most problematic subjects are *religious studies* (teaching of this subject is organized by churches, esp. the Catholic Church) and *ethics* as well as so called “education to marriage and parenting” because these subjects explicitly reproduce gender stereotypes. However, the hidden curriculum and approach of teachers to a large degree reinforce gender stereotypes regardless of a concrete subject.

Education is *one of the most feminized sectors* in Slovakia (the share of women in the education sector was either the highest or the second highest – after health care and social work) and it is one of the highest in the EU.⁴ Another characteristic is that for many years it has had *one of the lowest average salaries* when compared to other sectors. Nevertheless, the gender pay gap is present and visible also in this sector.⁵ So we identified as one of the biggest “risks” of the education system the *situation of teachers*.⁶

Another of the key risks is *a lack of attention paid by the official circles* (the Ministry of education, research institutions, education institutions) to gender competent education in a well-informed, systematic and continuous fashion, and the fact, that the education system is rather strictly hierarchically organized.

³ Pišút, J. – Gregušová, G. – Plesch, M. – Šranková, Z.: Školstvo. In: Kollár, M. – Mesežnikov, G. (eds.): Slovensko 2002. Súhrnná správa o stave spoločnosti II. Bratislava, IVO, 2002, p. 250.

⁴ Only 7 countries have a higher share of women (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia).

⁵ According to the Eurostat data from 2008, investments of the Slovak Republic into education are 4.3 % GNP – for instance in Denmark it is 6.7%, in Hungary 5.5 % and in Sweden 6.6 %.

⁶ See also gender surveys made by NGOs and individual researcher o. g.: <http://www.pinkandblueworld.sk/en/hlavne-menu/read/the-teaching-profession--aspects-of-gender-equality-in-school>; Bosá, M., Filadelfiová, J. (eds.). 2009. Učiteľky a riaditeľia. Rodová nerovnosť a rodová segregácia na stredných odborných školách. Prešov: EsFem.

2. Policy debate

- In these days, teachers organize a strike for higher salaries. It is the first wider strike of teachers in Slovakia – also the media pay attention to the discussions with the Ministry and Trade Unions and to the situation of people working in the sector of educational. In the past, the reforms in education were aimed at finishing of decentralization and *professionalization* of teachers and staff management. As the most important is deemed the qualification and status of teachers.
- There are NGOs and individual experts (also companies) who are very active in debates about educational system and its innovations (especially about segregation of Roma children) and gender in education and develop their work around these themes and issues. The public discourse mostly focuses on problems of the quality of schools, in particular of universities.
- Currently there is an ongoing national project (the Gender Institute) guaranteed by the Department of gender equality and equal opportunities. It is realized in cooperation with individual experts, NGOs, universities and the Department.⁷ A huge part of this project is aimed at gender in education.

3. Transferability issues

3.1. Three points of three “good practices” examples

In the submitted good practices-examples of gender in education at least three points could be relevant in the context of the Slovak experiences with gender in education. It is important to say, that these three points refer to the biggest problems encountered by those who have tried to establish gender competent education in the education system in Slovakia:

- To involve decisive official institutions – ministries as direct decision making institutions, or some other decision making institutions.
- To provide sufficient and continual financing – this point is closely related to the previous one.
- To conceptualize gender in education in theory and practice – this means to create concrete possibilities of gender education on the ground of interdisciplinary theoretical and practical knowledge of feminist and gender studies; to recognize gender in education as a cross-cutting issue and as an approach inherent in all spheres and contents of education.

To evaluate the submitted transferability examples I chose the question: Which strategies in promoting gender equality do these examples follow or pursue? It is also necessary to evaluate them in relation to the political goals they ought to achieve. Although I work only with available information, I try to ask: How is gender conceptualized in these examples? The German gender expert Barbara Stiegler

⁷ For more information <http://www.gender.gov.sk/>

considers the basic and mutually complementary goals: gender justice, gender diversity, and elimination of the stereotypical gendered structures. These goals are based on the kind of conceptualization of gender relations aiming not only at dismantling gender hierarchies, but also the gender duality and polarity on all levels: sex, desire, gender; and at the same time it supports such conceptualization of gender which is multifaceted rather than dual, complex rather than polar and egalitarian rather than hierarchical.⁸ In other words: I emphasize the transformational potential of the given conceptualization of gender. Even though not enough details about the content of submitted projects are available (the content of courses, the content of publications, the way in which gender sensitive language was used, details about gender competent didactical methods, etc.), and there is not enough space in this comment to reflect all these aspects, this type of reflection of gender can be considered the background of my thinking about how all three projects could be further applied, as well as the background of the reflection of gender in education.

This brief evaluation refers to the study that was lately published by EIGE. The study deals with the evaluation of good practice in the sphere of gender mainstreaming trainings and discusses the possibilities of good practice evaluation in general.⁹ To think about how to identify good practice and how to use it further is necessary when talking about experiences in the Slovak Republic. Several projects in the Program EQUAL focusing on gender were evaluated as good practice, but the criteria of the evaluation were not clear and there was no other use of these projects in practice by the official structures and no support on the part of these structures – in fact dissemination is the role of NGOs, but their capacities are not sufficient and there is no continual support of their existence and activities.

3.1.1. DENMARK: Gender training in education

The key recommendation in two Danish cases is the definition of the inquiry tradition (p. 10) on which the inquiry preceding the creation of the materials was based. Within these two examples various materials were produced, including 1. *The children's book on gender roles and educators' guide* and 2. *The magazine + film/CD for girls and boys about body confidence and "porn chic" + teachers guide*. The Slovak experience showed how important it is to provide materials not only for students but for teachers as well. According to these experiences, particular forms of education are needed to present the teachers' guide. Therefore I suggest translating all the materials to Slovak language and considering their use in Slovak environment in cooperation with authors and implementers of the project.

1. There is no education in the field of gender competent pedagogy for kindergarten teachers, but there is an opportunity to establish it as a form of continual education within one official educational organization. Unfortunately there is a lack of materials and a lack of experts in this field. Moreover, as several experiences have showed, in kindergarten education there is a high concentration of teachers and experts with strong stereotypical thinking with respect to gender. Another problem is the fact that gender stereotypes are

⁸ <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/asfo/02981.pdf>

⁹ http://www.eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Good-Practices-in-Gender-Mainstreaming-towards-effective-gender-training_0.pdf This „preliminary definition of 'good practice' included an action that: 1. Works well 2. Could be replicated elsewhere (transferability) and/or 3. Is good for learning how to think and act appropriately" (p. 11).

mostly internalized by children in the age of 5 - 6 years and they already establish efficient mechanisms of social control among each other. It is necessary to have in mind the fact that there is a 100 per cent feminization in kindergarten education. The last point I want to stress is that cooperation with parents and families is necessary as well.

2. Body confidence and sexuality topics are a taboo in Slovakia. This is still the fact even though teachers often encounter student (mostly of age of 14 - 18) behaviour that shows very consumerist and violent understanding and performing of sexuality and the media play an important role in this. Slovakia as a post-socialist country experienced a quick and long step into consumerism and media plurality. Teachers – primarily the older generation – have problems with a critical approach to the media content. Therefore media gender literacy is a very important part of education in gender competent pedagogy that is offered mostly by NGOs. As an implication of mostly moralistic public sexuality discourse teachers are usually not able to deal with different situations in schools. In Slovakia there has been no particular research about soft pornography effects on behaviour of teenagers. Integration of sexual education into education system is predominantly the role of NGOs while the biggest opposition in Slovakia is the Catholic Church.

3.1.2. PORTUGAL: Guides for Education “Gender and Citizenship”

It could be interesting to transfer materials and experiences from this project to Slovakia – at least as study materials for multipliers of gender competent education. This strong connection of gender and citizenship could be helpful for teachers in recognition of the importance of gender competence. For the initiatives of NGOs in Slovakia it is also characteristic that the baseline for the gender education is the feminist approach to women's rights as human rights. For the practices in Slovakia it would be helpful to see sophisticated and well-structured implementation process in Portugal. A good practice example is also the partnership of different institutions, especially the CIG, Ministry of Education, universities and schools (as it was mentioned above, there is a missing link between educational and gender equality policies in Slovakia).

3.1.3. SPAIN: Online training course: “Coeducation: two sexes in one world”

There is not enough information to think seriously about transferability of these courses. An advantage of e-learning is the possibility to reach many teachers, but there are also some disadvantages: Our experiences in gender education for teachers show how important it is to deal not only with information, but much more with emotions. There is really an important need for discussion, experience-based-learning in the group, etc. Essential here is the personal approach of the lecturer/trainer as well as the whole group dynamics. Such course can of course give some basic information about some „gender issues“, but it cannot prepare teacher for gender competent approach to the pupils and to the contents and methods of teaching.

Moreover the title of the course refers to duality in thinking about gender and maybe also to a lack of understanding of gender as a social construction: the title implicates more stability in gender inequality rather than a will to induce social change. In

Slovakia we know this kind of language from socialist emancipation of women, which was quite formal in many areas and which is a very problematic socio-cultural legacy of our country.

3.2 Conclusions

Discussed examples on practising gender in education showed how concrete experiences based on critical theoretical knowledge can encourage the discussion on different ways and forms of „doing gender“ in schools and in education itself. These examples point to the necessity to reflect and promote a close connection between gender competent education (and, at the same time, education for gender competence) and gender equality policies. The fact that the former (education, esp. college education) is to a large extent in the competence of particular EU member states, while the latter (gender equality) is covered by the EU, creates a peculiar dynamics with respect to the mutual position and linkages of these two within the framework of the national politics and EU-policies. In Slovakia (but probably also elsewhere) there is quite a big tension stemming from the fact, that the EU and gender equality promoted by the EU is perceived as something alien, delivered from the outside, which is not in accord with domestic traditions, moreover it destroys them. I formulated some recommendations which came out from the experience with promoting gender competent education in Slovakia. As a matter of fact, rather than recommendations they can to some extent be taken as impulses for opening of an international discussion on how to apply various common experiences.