

The Gender Bias of the Teaching Profession

This paper is the forth of ten features for EI's campaign "Pay Equity Now". It explores gender differences among teachers – both concerning the proportion of male and female teachers in different education fields, as well as concerning their salaries. The subsequent features will focus on further aspects of this issue, such as pay inequity in the teaching profession, legislation and regional disparities.

Please feel free to contribute to EI's campaign "Pay Equity Now" by sending your opinions, research, links and campaign material to equality@ei-ie.org!

Abstract

This paper examines the reasons for the stark gender bias in the teaching profession and how it affects pay structures. While women teachers overwhelmingly dominate pre-school and primary education worldwide, the higher up the hierarchical level of the education system one goes, the fewer women there are. As research shows, the more feminized an occupation is, the more likely it is that its employees will be paid poorly. Consequently the undeniable under-evaluation of the teaching profession as a whole and specifically teaching staff in the pre-school and primary sectors illustrates the fundamental imbalance between occupational requirements and pay. Teacher unions are requested to address this social injustice by analyzing their specific education system and planning action appropriate to that context.

Introduction

The International Labour Organization (ILO) recently published a report on women's participation in the labour market which shows a worldwide gender bias in the workforce (ILO 2010): looking at the total number of women workers, about 47 per cent are involved in the service sector and 37 per cent in agriculture. The typical working conditions can be described as underpaid, time-consuming and often without formal arrangements.

An OECD survey from 2004, based on data from its European members and the United States, finds that half of all female workers are employed in eleven out of 110 occupations. By contrast half of all male workers are employed in over 20 different occupations. While the so-called “traditionally male” professions are spread over a diverse range of sectors, the “traditionally female” ones are concentrated in only a few areas: the three occupations with the highest proportion of women workers are secretarial work, nursing and teaching in pre-school and primary education. Women's employment is also very high in sales, hotels, catering and domestic work. (OECD 2004)

Although the range of qualifications and requirements differs markedly, all these occupations are based in the service sector. The working conditions in the tertiary sector are characterized by an enormous under-valuation of salaries, career prospects and social status. “The salary differentials are the most serious. Occupational segregation explains the major part of the overall gender pay gap.” (OECD 1998: 9)

The reasons for occupational gender bias are multifaceted and inter-connected. One crucial aspect is the deeply ingrained assumption of “correct” female and male behavior related to specific “natural” skills and responsibilities. “The characteristics of 'female' occupations mirror the common stereotypes of women and their supposed abilities.” (Anker 2001: 139) Several studies indicate that the belief that women are more willing to take orders, accept lower wages and are less prone to complain about working conditions underpins the tenacity of occupational segregation. (Anker 2001)

The feminization of the teaching profession: a proven phenomenon

According to the Statistics Division of the United Nations women dominate the teaching profession at primary level except in several regions in Africa. As the following table shows, the proportion of female teachers declines as the education level they work in rises.

World Region	Female Teachers Primary Education	Female Teachers Secondary Education	Female Teachers Tertiary Education
Africa	44,80%	28,00%	20,00%
Asia	70,50%	54,90%	38,50%
Europe	85,80%	65,70%	42,30%
North America	79,70%	60,40%	46,00%
Oceania	63,40%	51,10%	38,80%
South America	79,30%	61,70%	41,00%

Table 1: Source United Nations Statistics Division based on data published by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics in table 4: Teaching Staff by ISCED LEVEL (December 2009)

Before the reasons for this obvious imbalance of women's employment in the teaching hierarchy can be examined, a few comments on the data are necessary: On the one hand the current data on teaching staff is far less complete than the statistics presented suggest. Although the calculation was made in 2009, the data includes the results of surveys from 1999 to 2008. Furthermore in several countries only estimates are available on the proportion of women teaching staff and, particularly for tertiary education, some states can't provide any information. This lack of data complicates the analysis of the current working conditions of the teaching profession as well as the prediction of future trends. Another factor is that education systems differ from country to country. The definitions of primary, secondary and tertiary education level elaborated in the 1997 International Standard Classification of Education (UNESCO 1997) represent the lowest common denominator. The differences in length and specific structure of each level, varied training and diploma requirements and country-specific financing systems exacerbate international comparisons.

Nevertheless the low proportion of women teachers in higher education worldwide is an undeniable fact. One reason for this phenomenon is that taking care of younger children in nursery and primary school is traditionally seen as an “extension of motherhood” and therefore a “natural” job for women. In contrast, women remain a minority among academic staff in universities. In the member states of the European Union (EU), for instance, the proportion of women with full professorships ranges between 27 per cent in humanities and 7 per cent in

engineering and technology. (EC 2009) This disparity of representation can be ascribed to two main factors: On the one hand the structural conditions of employment are still orientated towards the male bread-winner model. This implies that the husband spends extensive hours at his job while his wife supports him at home. On the other hand, people tend to advance those persons whose working style is most similar to their own. As a consequence the dominance of male professors leads to a preference for their younger male colleagues.

The secondary level was also dominated by male teachers until the second half of the 19th century, when separate secondary schools for girls were introduced. “Women’s opportunities in teaching have been sharply affected, if not conditioned, by socio-economic factors. In periods of rapid economic development, men have been attracted away from teaching into better paid jobs elsewhere.” (OECD 1998:92) Therefore the “natural” disposition of women to look after younger children occurs rather as a strategy to fit economic needs than a phenomenon that can be confirmed by practical evidence.

The proportion of women workers in a professional guild plays an important role in the amount of salary earned (Drudy 2008): several studies indicate that the more feminised an occupation is, the more likely its employees are to be poorly paid. Country-specific surveys in Korea, Switzerland, Germany and the Netherlands, where the majority of teachers in upper secondary education are male, show that the average salaries in relation to GDP per capita were higher than in most of the other OECD countries.

Gender-related discrimination

Besides the severe under-evaluation of teachers at pre-primary and primary level which leads to lower salaries and social status, more visible discrimination of women also occurs: according to a report by a British trade union (NASUWT 2008), women teachers are less likely to be on a leadership pay scale and take longer to get there in comparison to their male colleagues. A similar pattern can be identified in secondary education. Moreover promotion practices appear to be biased: In the UK, only 75 per cent of head teachers are women at primary level, while in secondary education female head teachers account for just 40 per cent. Furthermore only 9 per cent of universities are led by a female head. (EC 2009) The higher the hierarchical level and the associated power of decision making and prestige the less women are employed.

An examination of gender pay differences at the secondary level in U.S schools identified another

bias against women teachers, namely that they received a lower placement on the salary scale during the hiring process. This is quite important because further salary rises depend on the initial salary placement. (Lee/Smith 1990)

Pay Equity – What can be done?

The feminization of the lower education levels is the effect of decades of recruitment policies, which are strongly affected by changing economic conditions as well as stereotypical gender beliefs. The discrimination of women in the teaching profession is multifaceted and often disguised by standardized working routines. But just as the pressing issues are diverse, so are the strategies to address them.

The first thing to do is to build up a comprehensive database. A survey of the proportion of women in teaching staff at each hierarchical level of the education system is the key to developing further equity strategies. The information required ranges from simple statistical counting, to a closer examination of pay scale levels to looking at connections between the size of the school and the head teacher's gender.

With the aid of a solid database, the phenomenon of a feminized teaching staff and decreasing salaries can be addressed adequately. Surveys of specific working conditions and required skills and training at each level may be useful in challenging unjustified differences in pay between these levels. Furthermore specifying the broad and demanding duties of working in pre-school and primary education is important to increase the societal acceptance of demands for higher salaries.

Thirdly, the awareness of the education system as a “gendered organization” (Acker 1990) should be raised among trade unions' own staff as well as their members. Gender discrimination often occurs without attracting attention because it's so deeply embedded in our everyday life. For instance, although women represent the vast majority of teachers at primary level they are not similarly likely to become heads of primary schools. Imagining the opposite situation, where a few women are in superior position, leading a large number of male subordinates, seems disturbing because it does not fit traditional gender roles.

Conclusion

The low social status of teachers in pre-primary, primary and secondary education and the low pay levels are deeply connected with gender inequality in general. As this paper shows there is an undeniable correlation between a majority of women employees and a low salary scale. Country-specific surveys where a relatively high proportion of male teachers are working in secondary education also show that salaries in relation to per capita GDP are higher than in most of the countries where women dominate the teaching profession. Furthermore those positions with the most prestige, decision-making power and best salaries – such as head teachers – are predominantly held by men even though they represent the minority in pre-primary, primary and secondary education.

Assumptions about the so called “natural” attributes of women and men, which are supposed to equip them for specific societal responsibilities, disguise the fact that we are trained in our gender roles from our first social interaction. As evaluations of gender-related occupations reveal massive disadvantages for women such as underpayment or fewer career opportunities, a coherent policy strategy is requested. For trade unions, awareness-raising about the (subtle) discrimination of women and the development of a solid database for further strategies are the first steps in the right direction.

References

Acker, Joan, 1990: Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations. *Gender & Society*, 1990, Vol. 4(2), 139-158.

Anker, Richard, 2001: Theories of Occupational Segregation by Sex: An Overview. In: Loutfi, Martha Fetherolf, What is equality and how do we get there? Women, gender and work. Geneva: International Labour Office, 129-155.

Drudy, Sheelagh, 2008: Gender balance/gender bias: the teaching profession and the impact of feminization. *Gender and Education*, 2008, Vol. 20(4), 303-323.

European Commission (EC), 2009: She Figures 2009. Statistics and Indicators on Gender Equality in Science. ec.europa.eu/research/science-society/.../pdf.../she_figures_2009_en.pdf (09.04.2010)

Griffiths, Morwenna, 2006: The feminization of teaching and the practice of teaching. Threat or opportunity? *Educational Theory*, Vol. 56(4), 387-405.

International Labour Organization (ILO), 2010: Women in labour markets: Measuring progress and identifying challenges. http://www.ilo.org/empelm/what/pubs/lang--en/docName--WCMS_123835/index.htm (09.04.2010)

Lee, Valerie E.; Smith Julia B., 1990: Gender Equality in Teachers' Salaries: A Multilevel Approach. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 12(1), 57-81.

National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), 2008: Women teachers' careers. <http://www.nasuwat.org.uk> (30.12.2009)

Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), 1998: The Future of Female-Dominated Occupations. OECD Publishing.

Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), 2004: Women and Men in OECD Countries: Labour market. <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/19/14/38172488.pdf> (03.05.2010)

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1997: International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). http://www.unesco.org/education/information/nfsunesco/doc/isced_1997.htm (09.04.2010)

United Nations Statistics Division,,: <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/indwm/tab4e.htm> (09.04.2010)