

# Evidence of Gender Differences in Educational Attainment



Differences in Gender Differences in Educational Achievement/30/1/2000/Yellow Education Disc 2.

My study follows the male dominated sociological line of researching only into male adolescent activity...girls.... suffer a series of multiple oppressions which are beyond my experience and, like being adolescent in a black ghetto need researching and writing about by someone who has experienced these oppressions.

**Corrigan, Schooling the Smash Street Kids, 1979**

Women's aspirations and their image of themselves have profoundly altered in the past quarter of a century. Seventy per cent of the women surveyed say that they want to develop their careers or find employment, while only 50% regard having children as a goal. Less than a quarter of young women between 18 and 24 feel that women need a stable relationship to be fulfilled.

**Helen Wilkinson, 1994**

## Introduction

Concern about **gender and educational attainment** focuses mainly on **the extent to which females and males perform differently in different subjects and their tendency to study different subjects** given the choice. However, it is not true that males generally attain more qualifications or higher grades than females at school, in fact the reverse is the case.

## 'The Genderquake'

When gender first began to be investigated by sociologists of education, the focus was largely on **female under-achievement** at every level of the educational system, and the ways in which **traditional ideas** about the proper role of women in society **prevented** them from **achieving their full potential**. However, **females have markedly improved their educational performance** during the 1980's and 1990's, so that the contemporary situation, while **not without its problems** and issues for girls in schools, or one where the educational opportunities open to females have possibly never been greater. **Wilkinson** (1994) argues that this is part of the **Genderquake** in which **fundamental changes in attitudes** towards **female role in society** has been achieved. Prominent among the 'transformed circumstances' of women is a more positive attitude towards education as a means of improving chances at work.

## Exercise One

1. Outline the trends in achievement levels between female and male students at GCSE and A level.
2. List any subjects that boys out-perform girls in at GCSE and vice versa.
3. In which subjects is the gap the widest?
4. According to C which courses are women most likely to do at degree level. Why?

## Explaining Gender Differences in Educational Achievement

### Introduction

Gender was investigated as a **mainstream** issue relatively late in the sociology of education. **Prior to the 1970's**, sociological discussion focused mainly upon **class differences** in attainment. However, with the impact of **feminist research** during the 1970's and 1980's the educational experiences of female students increasingly came to the fore.

Three Sets of Explanation have been put forward to account for the observed variations in educational attainment and subject choice.

1. **Genetic explanations**
2. **Outside School Factors**, which emphasize childhood socialization factors based upon external cultural and structural differences.
3. **Inside school explanations**, which look at the sexism inherent in the hidden curriculum.

I will look at the first two in this handout



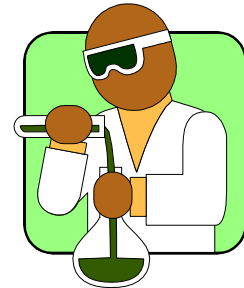
### Exercise Two

Match the statement to the appropriate writer(s)....

1. This theorist suggests that women are biologically (genetically) less intelligent.
2. ....argues that this is part of the *Genderquake* in which fundamental changes in attitudes towards female role in society has been achieved. Prominent among the 'transformed circumstances' of women is a more positive attitude towards education as a means of improving chances at work.
3. ....suggests (1982) that gender differences in spatial ability may be attributed to the types of toys children play with rather than their genetic make up.
4. ....(1976) maintain that differences in child socialization serve to generate masculine and feminine cultural identities. Secondary agencies of socialization such as the media and peer groups are said to re-inforce gender identities established during primary socialization within the family.
5. .... suggested that women now see themselves as much as workers as homemakers.
6. ....found that girls are treated differently from boys from birth, by the people who care for them.
7. Research by ... ....found that girls had set priorities that were unlikely to lead to high importance attached to education these were... '1. Love 2. Marriage 3. Husbands 4. Children 5. Jobs 6. Careers (more or less in this order)'
8. ....Found that families tend to devote more resources to boys than girls
9. .... argued that the cycle of discrimination against women is created by **parents and teachers reinforce sex stereotypes**, which then become the basis for discriminatory practices.

## Genetic Explanations:

Genetic explanations of gender differences in attainment were influential in **psychology** during the 1970's, though the biological determinist approach **has a long history**. The crucial belief of biological theorists is that **gender differences are natural and therefore unalterable**. Educationally, then, it would be right and proper **to treat boys and girls differently in schools, because their natural inclination are towards different adult roles**. Any socially constructed differences between men and women were built upon and constrained by these natural differences. For example, theories were advanced that females excelled at language based subjects because of their greater verbal and reasoning abilities, yet under-performed in Maths and science based subjects because of lower levels of innate spatial ability, which restricted their understanding of shape and form.



## But What About the Fact that Girls Out-Perform Boys?

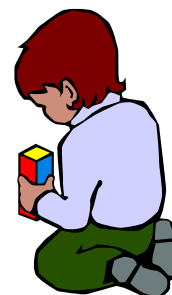
These biological theories of innate intelligence have been **strongly criticized**. **Kelly** suggests **(1982)** that gender differences in spatial ability may be attributed to the **types of toys children play with** rather than their genetic make up. Furthermore, genetic explanations cannot adequately account for the **narrowing of gender differences in Maths and Science based subjects since the 1980's** - if the differences were biologically determined we would expect them to remain constant over time.

A variation of this theme is represented by **The New Right ideologies** as put forward by **Roger Scrutton**, which suggests that the

Biological and natural instincts of the sexes determine a particular sex division of labour in the home and the gender segregation of the male dominated public sphere and the female world of the private home. These gender arrangements are seen as a 'natural necessity'.

## Childhood Socialization

Feminists such as **Sharpe** (1976) maintain that differences in **child socialization** serve to generate masculine and feminine cultural identities. Secondary agencies of socialization such as the **media** and **peer groups** are said to **re-inforce gender identities** established **during primary socialization** within the family. For example many teenage magazines targeted at female audiences present ideologies of beauty, marriage, domesticity, and subordination that serve to strengthen the messages of femininity families instill into their female members. Gender socialization of this sort is significant because it helps us to understand why females have traditionally latched onto subjects such as Home Economics, and the Arts, which have a femininised image, rather than subjects such as Technology and Science, which are packaged in a masculine way. Therefore, sex role theorists, such as **Bryne** (1978) have argued that the cycle of discrimination against women is created by **parents and teachers reinforce sex stereotypes**, which then become the basis for discriminatory practices.



## New Challenges to Socialisation into Femininity

During the 1980's a **series of research studies** challenged the assumptions that girls were socialized into one particular form of femininity, or that girls did not challenge the notions of feminine roles with which they were presented. For example, **Cornell** (1986) argued that **feminism** itself had helped to bring about **radical changes in the ways girls perceived themselves**, so that they **no longer** constructed their identity in **mainly domestic terms**. Rather women now saw themselves as much as **workers as homemakers**. More recently **Riddell** (1992) found that schoolgirls had a **dual notion** of their futures, linking their **subject choices** at school to the **local labour market** (especially working class girls) whilst also accepting that motherhood and domesticity were important parts of their identity as women. But the girls in Riddell's study were not passive in this process of socialization. Rather **they absorbed** both accepting and **undermining messages** about traditional female roles. In addition working class and middle-class girls expressed different gender codes, with middle-class girls opting for academic education and thus gaining the approval of the middle-class female teachers who they most closely resembled.



It is also important to note that **Riddell** found that parent's conceptions of **femininity** were also **complex** and **varied according to class position**. While **middle-class parents** were more supportive of the **principle of equality of opportunity**, middle-class men were most opposed to positive action to achieve it. **Working class men** were the **most supportive of traditional gender roles**. In both classes, a **minority** of mothers **strongly supported changes in women's social position**. So the view that there is a uniform socialization into one specific gender code is mistaken. Rather there are conservative and radical views concerning gender roles and different groups of parents choose elements of those agendas in different proportions, which then balance out in their children in different ways.

Other sociologists such as **Anne Oakley** in *Sex Gender and Society* (1975) note that girls are treated differently from boys from birth, by the people who care for them. Other studies by **Fiona Norman** show that girls are **expected to play with certain toys, which develop different types of aptitude**. These roles may be reflected by aspirations of the children. Research by **Sue Sharpe** found that girls had set priorities that were unlikely to lead to high importance attached to education these were...

**'1. Love 2. Marriage 3. Husbands 4. Children 5. Jobs 6. Careers (more or less in this order)'**

However, a more recent study by **Sharpe**, suggests that women no longer want to get married as they see men and marriage as a liability to their career. (1993)

## **Reinforcement**

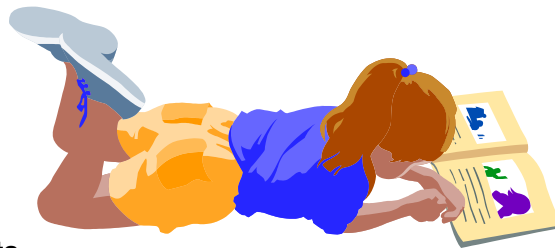
Young children learn their social roles from the behaviour of members of their family and the expectations placed upon them. Most of the early childhood learning takes place through **imitation** and **reinforcement**, imitation of behaviour they observe within the family occurs. For example, a girl may meet disapproval if she fights with another child, she will also observe in her home the distinct division of labour in domestic tasks based upon gender. There will also be differences in the type of work her parents do outside the home. **Television programmes and adverts will also maintain this.** For example, we have already looked at the work of **Dominick and Rauch, Angela McRobbie, and Marjorie Ferguson.**

In each aspect of a child's upbringing, distinct messages will be observed relating to gender roles. Children learn that being a boy or a girl means from the day they are born. When they enter school, they will already have had several years of gender learning.

## **Material Factors**

Both boys and girls come from families that come from all class structures. **J. W. B. Douglas** noted that families tend to devote more resources to boys than girls. If parents

believe their son's future depends more upon this work than their daughter's, they may be less willing to finance post compulsory education for daughters rather than sons.



## Gender, Education and the Curriculum: Relevant Perspectives

Sandra Acker usefully suggests that there are three main Western Feminist theoretical frameworks.

- Liberal
- Radical
- Socialist



### Exercise Three

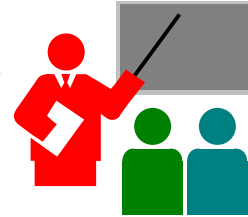
We have already looked at these in the media. Using your knowledge state whether which of the three perspectives the following statements come from....

1. The basis of this perspective is a commitment to equal opportunities for males and females. The Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 has generally been interpreted to mean that females are entitled to the same treatment as males in the main areas of public life including education.
2. This perspective considers that gender inequality is deeply linked to the class nature of capitalist society and that for female liberation to be achieved both inequalities must be effectively dealt with.
3. A Dora, has stressed the potential for the Act to legitimize strong policies of equal opportunity.
4. This group considers that patriarchy- the system of domination of females by males is the central issue for women.
5. This perspective notes the importance of the needs of the economic system.
6. Elizabeth Bott (1957) noted that conjugal roles (housework roles) in middle class society tend to be similar, but for those of the working class they were more segregated (different).
7. Dale Spender, has analyzed the cultural reproduction of patriarchy in several publications of which perhaps the most famous relevant to education is *Invisible Women*. She finds that patriarchal assumptions in both formal and hidden curriculum are common.
8. **Clarricoates** showed that gender socialization greatly was affected by the class experience of a particular male or female. In a working class school such as 'Dock Side' the behaviour and norms considered as 'typical' were sharply differentiated. 'Toughness and masculinity' was expected of boys, whereas girls were expected to be 'co-operative and helpful'. However, in a middle class school 'Applegate' sex-separation was considerably less rigid, not the point where complete role symmetry occurred.
9. Curriculum changes have led to girls having to do science until the age of 16 due to the shortage of scientists and engineers in the economic system, rather than any real attempt to reduce female inequalities.

## More Modern Perspectives

### The Conservative Perspective

We all know that for the past 18 years up to 1997 **The Conservative Party** has been in power. Until the **GERBIL** (1988) Conservative central government intervened little in gender matters in education. Thus local authorities and individual teachers and schools were **largely left to pursue their own policies** within the existing framework of legislation. To that extent the Conservatives **accepted the liberal framework of equal opportunities** set up by the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act.



The establishing of a **legally compulsory national curriculum** did have profound implications for gender and education. Henceforward, girls (as well as boys) would be **required to take science to sixteen and boys would be required to take a foreign language** as well as **English up to sixteen**. These requirements remained in place even when the compulsory national curriculum for the years 14-16 were trimmed back to five subjects back in 1991. Ironically these reforms could be interpreted as a move in the direction of the firm action demanded by many socialist feminists to establish a compulsory curriculum in which girls could not 'opt out of' and avoid 'hard sciences' and Maths. However, there is a proviso in the Act referring to science which allows students to study either 25% or 12.5% of their timetable, with only the former providing a route to A level. However, many feminists see this act as merely related to the 'national economic need' rather than any real attempt to reduce female inequality.

### A Post-Structural Perspective

**Gaby Weiner's** *Feminism in Education: An Introduction* (1994) accepts that in the future, feminism is likely to be of various ideological hues. Even so, she considers that Feminists are likely to be more effective in education if they share certain broad strategies. 'It is crucial she argues the feminist educators maintain their critique of existing school practices and offer new challenges to meet the ever-changing circumstances of educational practice'.

She goes on to suggest a number of possibilities for feminist action in education. For example...

1. Challenging the universalities and certainties of predominate male curriculum.
2. Adopting Feminist teaching/learning approaches, which allow for discussion, group work, etc.
3. Allowing Feminists to work with parents and colleagues to change school curricula or organization.

Although not new, it is clear that this book is aware that what has seemed like fragmentation in the Feminist movement can, instead by viewed positively as a variety and difference (i.e. in a poststructural way).



### Exercise Four

Consider the following qualities. Do you think of them as belonging mostly to a woman or to men? Answer spontaneously, putting W or M beside each.....

<b>Gentleness</b>	<b>Brilliance</b>	<b>Self-esteem</b>	<b>Strength</b>
<b>Wit</b>	<b>Loyalty</b>	<b>Cleverness</b>	<b>Charm</b>
<b>Understanding</b>	<b>Care</b>	<b>Beauty</b>	<b>Love</b>
<b>Studiousness</b>	<b>Leadership</b>	<b>Pity</b>	<b>Brashness</b>
<b>Tenacity (Not easily deflected)</b>	<b>Put oneself down</b>	<b>Change their mind easily</b>	<b>Artistic</b>

### Exercise Five

A father and son were traveling by car on an outing that took them across a railway crossing. Alas, the car stalled on the crossing and despite desperate efforts, the ignition key stuck and the car refused to move before a train came and smashed into the car. The father was killed instantly but the boy was rushed to hospital and prepared for an emergency operation. But on entering the theatre, the surgeon took one look at the boy on the table and said, 'I cannot perform this operation'.

**How do you explain the surgeon's reaction?**

### Exercise Six

Look at the following sentences. Why did the people do the following acts...

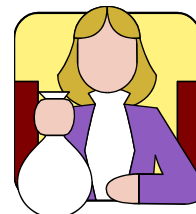
1. Great tears came rolling down his cheeks
2. Great tears came rolling down her cheeks
3. She smashed her in the face
4. He smashed her in the face
5. He smashed him in the face.





**Exercise Seven**

Who mostly does these jobs, again answer spontaneously by putting W or M



<b>Doctor</b>	<b>Au Pair</b>	<b>Milk deliverer</b>	<b>Social Worker</b>
<b>Nurse</b>	<b>Dentist</b>	<b>Road Mender</b>	<b>Army Chief</b>
<b>Gardener</b>	<b>Astronaut</b>	<b>TV programme Producer</b>	<b>Bank Clerk</b>
<b>Engineer</b>	<b>Rubbish Collector</b>	<b>Steeplejack</b>	<b>Supermarket manager</b>
<b>Lawyer</b>	<b>Cleaner</b>	<b>Chief Constable</b>	<b>MP</b>

**Exercise Eight**

As always we should not rush headlong into conclusions but be aware of weaknesses and strengths of this particular idea of female underachievement. Look at the following statements are they strengths or weaknesses of this idea.

1. Women and men are expected to have different attitudes and different values, dress differently, behave differently and to engage in the labour market differently.
2. In the early 1970's girls performed less well than boys in every educational performance indicator did after the age of 15.
3. More recent work by Sharpe shows that women now see men are more of a hindrance than help to their career and are now choosing not to marry as a result.
4. However, by the mid-1990's, this situation had been reversed in the majority of key indicators and research might now be made to explain why boys perform so badly.
5. Older research showed that women focused on family rather than career. For example, Sue Sharpe showed that their main concern were 'love, marriage, husbands, children, jobs and careers, more or less in that order'.
6. There needs to be a lot more research before it is established that Equal Opportunities policies and the efforts of teachers have significantly contributed to girls' improved exam performance.

**Resources Used in the compilation of this handout.....**

*Investigating Education and Training: Paul Trowler*  
*Sociology for GCSE: Pauline Wilson and Allan Kidd*  
*Think Sociology: Paul Stephens et al*  
*Education and Training: Paul Heaton and Tony Lawson*  
*The Sociology of Education: Karen Chapman, Society Now Series of Books*  
*Introduction to Sociology: Mike O'Donnell, Fourth Edition, 1997*  
*Sociology in Perspective: Mark Kirby et al, 1997*  
*Sociology an Interactive Approach: Nik Jorgensen, 1997*  
*Sociology Themes and Perspectives: Michael Haralambos*

Gender/26/2/97/P.Covington/Yellow 1996  
 Gender/6/1/98/P.Covington/Yellow 1996