

THE SPECIAL CASE OF WOMEN IN  
FORMAL EDUCATION HIERARCHIES

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Abstract

This paper examines the subordinate position of women in formal education hierarchies in three of the world's foremost democracies - Canada, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and the United States of America.

The paper has two major themes - that the causes of women's underachievement are to be found in (1) the conditions responsible for their entry into and concentration in the lower ranks of the teaching profession and (2) the social, cultural and psychological factors which collectively have kept them in subordinate positions.

The discussion draws mainly on the arguments put forward by a number of published researchers, foremost among them being Hennig and Jardin (1977), Prentice (1977) and Byrne (1978). It concludes that the status quo may be attributed to such complex causes as: historical tradition, prejudice and vested interest; the inferior education of women leading to underachievement; the ill-equipping of women (by virtue of their upbringing) for managerial jobs embedded in a male-oriented culture; the failure of women themselves to accept their changing roles.

Introduction

Certain generalizations can be made about the position of women in formal education ranks whether one is referring to Canada, the United States of America or the United Kingdom. Stated briefly, these generalizations are as follows:

Overall, in numbers, women dominate the teaching profession, but their numbers tend to be concentrated in the lower ranks of the formal education hierarchy. They occupy fewer positions in leadership and senior posts generally. Although they outnumber men in primary and junior schools, yet the majority of headship/leadership posts are held by men. It is only at the elementary/primary level that women hold the majority of headships and deputy headships. Women are generally in the minority in secondary schools with men dominating

in the leadership posts - headships, deputy headships and department heads.

In colleges of education in England, women are more numerous on the faculties but men occupy the top positions. Colleges of further education such as polytechnics in England have more male staff and very few women in top positions. Community and Junior Colleges in the United States while having more women on the faculties, have them concentrated at the lower ranks. In universities and institutions of higher education, women comprise a very small percentage of the faculty (in England, 1975, according to Byrne (1978) less than 10 percent were women).

These generalizations provide a picture of women generally excluded from the areas of management, decision-making and responsibility in education. Society at large is made aware of women as subordinate in the very ranks of the organization which should have a foremost responsibility for promoting equality among the sexes in all areas of endeavour and public life. Consequently the message to society must be that women are inferior to men. Of even greater importance, the absence of women in positions of responsibility means that girls and women in institutions of education lack suitable role models and inspiration to high achievement. The lack of women in leadership roles in education must also imply their exclusion from participation in the development of education which should work at redressing the balance.

The subordinate position of women in formal education hierarchies should become the concern of all those who work in education whether as classroom teachers or institutional leaders, if for no other reason than that it is morally wrong to waste the talents of women which are equal to those of men given equal opportunities for education, training and advancement. A necessary first step for those who would redress the balance must be an understanding of the causes why females have failed to achieve equal status with males in formal education hierarchies.

This paper will consider the causes of female underachievement in education hierarchies and will be guided by two major questions as follows:

1. What conditions are responsible for the entry into and the concentration of large numbers of women into the lower ranks of teaching?
2. What combination of factors - social, cultural and psychological have combined since the earliest times of their entry in the teaching force to keep them in subordinate positions?

## The Entry of Women into the Teaching Profession

The entry of large numbers of women into teaching coincided with the provision of state education. At the time they faced considerable prejudice. It was believed that women were ill-adapted to teach in public schools either because of an inferior mentality, training or inability to handle the disciplinary and organizational demands of the public school. In particular, they faced the prejudice of schoolmen who felt that women by accepting lower salaries were degrading the teaching profession and driving out competent males.

The acceptance of women into public school teaching was conditional. Their position was accepted as a subordinate one and they were assigned to teach the younger children under the guidance of male principals and headteachers. Their salaries were also lower than those of male teachers. Their entry into the teaching force with lower salaries was to facilitate the development of graded schools and make it possible for school trustees to pay the higher salaries being demanded by schoolmen. Along with male teachers, women were encouraged in the perpetuation of the myths that the special mission of women was the instruction of the very young and that nature dictated their dependent status (Prentice, 1977, 64).

In British North America and Canada, women moved into public school teaching in the second half of the 19th century. Although the idea of a predominantly female elementary teaching force gained acceptance only slowly, yet by the third quarter of the century, they had become the majority among common and elementary school teachers (Prentice, 1977, 50).

In England, where men had also concentrated on teaching the young, by the turn of the century they were in the majority in elementary schools and held the majority of the headships. Byrne (1978) notes that for practical and attitudinal reasons, it was understandable that in the beginning women settled for the less exacting and the less advanced work. She bemoans the fact however that "women teachers should so quickly have set a pattern, which we now seem unable to break, of more limited career horizons, concentration on the lower rungs of responsibility, and over-docile acceptance of less well-paid teaching posts" (Byrne, 1978, 214).

In Canada, special concessions were made to encourage women to enter teaching once the economic benefit of their employment was realized. They were admitted to the normal schools in both Upper and Lower Canada and in Upper Canada the admission age for females was lowered to 16 years while that of males

remained at 18 years. They were also exempted from various examinations. The point is made by Prentice (1977) that these concessions tended to ensure lower pay and lower status for women.

The rapid feminization of teaching in Canada took place in the urban centres and reflected the development of the graded school system and professional hierarchies. These professional hierarchies were based on gender with male teachers receiving the higher salaries as principals and teachers of the upper grades while women taught the lower grades at the lower rates of pay. Women holding the same class teaching certificates as men were sometimes paid 10 percent less (Prentice, 1977, 50).

Nevertheless, women took employment in city schools because they wished to work outside the home and to escape the drudgery of domestic work which was the only employment alternative to teaching, even though they were remunerated similarly. Attempts were made to rationalize the position of women in the low ranks of the city schools' hierarchies. Prentice (1977) refers to the sentiment of Alexander Forester, Chief Superintendent of Schools in Nova Scotia, published in his inspirational text for teachers "that both by the law of nature and revelation" there was "a position of subordination and of dependence assigned to women and thus there ought to be situations in educational establishments better adapted to one sex than the other" (Prentice, 1977, 61).

It came to be generally accepted that the infant and primary departments were best fitted for the female, while in the headmastership and the more advanced sections there ought to be a male presence. As a result, women were to be found concentrated mainly in elementary education in subordinate positions in urban school systems. They also came to gain a reputation, deserved or not, for retiring from the profession after a few years. This reputation was used to keep women in the low ranks of the educational hierarchy and to justify their low salaries.

#### Social, Cultural and Psychological Factors Which Keep Women in Subordinate Positions

After more than a century, the position of women in the educational hierarchy seems to be little improved. Eileen M. Byrne in her admirable and comprehensive book Women and Education published in 1978 attributes the continued inferiority of women's position in the educational ranks to inequality of educational opportunity and the hidden barriers of prejudice, discrimination

and social conditioning which keep them out of leadership positions.

Byrne begins with the premise that education is the key to equal opportunity and the ladder to advancement. Consequently, she argues that there is a causal relationship between the kind of education and training received by women as girls and their later placement and advancement in occupational fields as adults. Girls and women in the U.K. in particular are on the receiving end of the discriminatory educational policies and practices of the largely male government of education. Girls are offered a different and often inferior curriculum from that of their male counterparts. Differentiation of curricula is justified by traditionally held and unexamined assumptions based on stereo-typing of expected adult roles for men and women and alleged innate inequalities among the sexes (Byrne, 1978). The expectations that women would marry and stay at home to raise the children while the men would go to work to support their families underlie the planning of the secondary education offered to girls and boys. Thus the curriculum for girls has an internal, dependent, domestic focus while that for boys is outward-looking and work-oriented with emphasis on economic independence. Translated into curriculum subjects, boys study handicraft, technical subjects and physics and are encouraged to continue their mathematics. Girls receive housecraft and biology but not physics. At thirteen plus when they choose subjects for future G.C.E. examinations, they are allowed to drop mathematics at which they did not excel in primary school and grew to dislike in the secondary school. Instead girls are encouraged by their teachers to choose from the liberal arts, the so-called Cinderella subjects.

The curriculum offered girls in the U.K. is deficient in mathematics, the physical sciences and technical studies, thus ensuring their underachievement. This practice has the effect of restricting their choice of future occupation since these are the essential basic subjects for entry into technological and industrial studies in future and higher education. Once they have left school, it is not easy for girls to acquire the basic subjects as once again they are discriminated against by employers reluctant to give them day release to attend classes and local education authorities reluctant to award girls student grants to make up the basic elements of a deficient secondary education.

Women who did not study the physical sciences, mathematics and technology, on becoming teachers and lecturers are to be found concentrated in the less well-paid sectors - primary, lower secondary and non-advanced. Byrne (1978) points to the few women in top administration in the further education sector

in England. Top administrative posts require science degrees and industrial experience or teaching background in technology. She says that women on the faculty are unlikely to qualify since few studied science and technology. The point is made that if girls do not study those areas at school or in further education colleges, they do not study them at institutions of higher education. Consequently, they will not work in the high levels of relevant employment sectors or teach in the principal departments carrying promotion posts and will not be in the field for leadership.

The causal relationship between early education and future job mobility is fairly well established. Kreps (1974) attributed the low status of academic women in the United States to their gravitation to the humanities and the social sciences. The concentration of women academics in the humanities and education (areas of oversupply) while men are dispersed throughout the disciplines, puts them at a decided disadvantage in the employment market. The attraction of women to these traditional areas, Kreps (1974) blames on their socialization which has conditioned them to believe that women have some types of intellectual interests and capacities and not others. Thus, she states, a PhD in the Romance languages seems normal but a woman choosing engineering or physics has constantly to explain her choice.

Women are also expected to be teachers of children and college teaching is seen as an extension of that role. On the other hand, scientific research and university administration are considered a male calling. Here again women are disadvantaged as in the academic world of higher education, advancement is based on scholarly productivity which means research and publishing and not a reputation for good teaching.

The inequality of educational opportunity for girls in school, continues into their student lives at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The restrictions imposed on women at these stages limit their future participation in higher education. These restrictions are due largely to the prejudiced assumptions about women and their roles held by authorities in educational institutions (Harris, 1974).

Harris argues that the theory that co-education changes men's attitudes towards women by convincing them that they are their intellectual equals, has yet to be proved. She condemns the university as the most sexist of institutions in which women professors are treated as second class citizens. She points to the fact that professors admit that women generally are their best students, yet

they seldom recommend them for fellowships and almost never invite them to return to teach in the department since they assume they will waste their education by getting married and having children. "Both male and female students receive a clear message from the university that men will use their brain and women will waste theirs" (Harris, 1974, 14).

Such assumptions underlie the preferential treatment of men for admission to graduate study and hence the discrimination against women aspiring to graduate study. Patricia Cross in her paper The Woman Student, examines the old arguments used to justify the preferential treatment of men and uses statistics from various research findings to invalidate these arguments.

The arguments put forward by the authorities of higher education institutions are: (1) that women are less likely than men to finish graduate school because of marriage and having children. Thus they waste the funds which could be given to someone else (a male); (2) that women take longer than men to earn their doctorates and (3) that women, even if they are successful in obtaining their degrees, are less productive than men.

Statistics from the ACE-Carnegie Commission referred to by Cross tend to support the argument that women have lower and slower completion rates. These statistics show that women constituted approximately a half of the graduate students in 1968 aiming for the Master's Degree but received only 36 percent of the degrees granted. A similar trend is found at the doctorate level. For example, one quarter of the candidates are women but they receive only 13 percent of the degrees. Cross also notes that the Ferris study, "Indicators of Trends in the Status of American Women", published in 1971, shows that women are slower in obtaining degrees. Men on the average take 7.9 years to obtain the doctorate after the baccalaureate while women take 11.2 years.

To counter the unfavourable conclusions emerging from her examination of the foregoing statistics, Cross points to the findings of three other studies. The Berkeley study, "Report of the Subcommittee on the Status of Academic Women on the Berkeley Campus, 1970" shows that the fields in which women predominate - education, humanities and languages, have lower and slower production rates than the sciences because of their part-time enrollment. In contrast, PhDs in Science tend to be full-time. The University of Chicago study, "Women in the University of Chicago, 1970", provides attrition rates of men and women in different fields and shows that with the exception of the humanities, women are more prone than men to drop out. Cross points out, however, that the evidence is incomplete since it is not known whether

women return to finish.

To examine the argument that women are less productive, Cross referred to Helen Austin's study, "The Woman Doctorate in America", published in 1969 which shows that 91 percent of women who received doctorates in 1957 and 1958 were working in 1966, 81 percent full-time. Seventy-nine percent of these women had never interrupted their careers.

In considering productivity as scholarly production, men decidedly have the edge since more women are to be found in teaching while men hold research positions and are more likely to publish (Cross argues for new measures of productivity related to teaching). The Austin study, however, also indicates that the field of study rather than sex is probably the primary determinant of publication rate. Hence, majors in science are most likely to publish, those in humanities and education are less likely to do so.

Other factors also work to the disadvantage of women in preventing them from advancing up the formal education ranks in comparable numbers with men. Byrne (1978) refers to the 'hidden barriers' which keep women out of leadership positions. Women's chances for promotion to the administrative ranks are adversely affected by the perception which men have of women's role. Because men perceive women's role as subordinate and caring, and thus more peripheral to decision-making and responsibility, women are not groomed for seniority and responsibility by their male heads. Instead, in schools they become senior mistresses and are assigned pastoral and counselling duties. They are denied the experiences necessary for administrative work such as time-tabling, attendance at administrative meetings and curricular restructuring.

It has been claimed that women select themselves out by not applying for senior and leadership posts. This is accounted for in several ways. One alleged reason is that women, because they already carry the domestic responsibility, wish to avoid the work commitment and decision-making responsibility entailed in administrative work. Byrne (1978) refutes this reason which she attributes to the prejudices of both male and female members of governing bodies.

It has also been noted that women, despite achievement, tend to be uncomfortable about moving into leadership positions themselves or about supporting women who are assertive, opinionated and forceful (Harris 1974). She suggests also that women in academic life acquiesce in the exclusion of women from the top ranks of academic life because they prefer a father-lover figure in the chairs of responsibility.

Some insight into women's seeming ambivalence and apparent lack of confidence in moving into administrative positions might be gleaned from Hennig's and Jardin's The Managerial Woman, published in 1977. These authors theorize that women find it more difficult than men to reach the top managerial ranks because they bring a different mind-set, perceptions and skills to the management setting than men.

As a result of their clinical observations of a number of managers, they posit that men bring to management "a clearer, strong and more definitive understanding of where they see themselves going, what they will have to do, how they will have to act and what they must take into account if they are to achieve the objectives they set for themselves. In contrast, women are much less likely to bring to the same setting, the insights, understandings and skills which from boyhood men have acquired and developed among themselves - a mind-set learned, acculturated and socialized as they move into management positions" (Hennig and Jardin, 1977, 63).

These differences between male and female managers are attributed to the different upbringing (conditioning) of men and women. Differences are based on society's assumptions about male and female roles and take into account allegedly innate inequalities between the sexes. Different adult roles are perceived for boys and girls and thus, they are provided with different experiences. The experiences which the home and family and society provide and sanction for males equip them with a mental set and skills closely resembling those needed for survival in organizational management. Girls are denied these experiences due to society's sex-typing.

Hennig and Jardin maintain that women managers come ill-equipped to understand and work in and with the informal system of relationships in which management jobs are embedded. In organizations which have been founded and developed by men, the culture of the informal system is male-oriented for it is derived out of the male developmental experience. Women, they argue, will not be competent to compete with men until they acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for understanding the informal system and for working in it. Seen in this light, it is understandable that women hesitate to aspire to the male dominated top echelons of formal education hierarchies.

## Conclusion

Women entered public education after it had been claimed as a male preserve. Their entry in large numbers was facilitated by new developments: the grading of school children and the consolidation of smaller schools in urban centres.

The prejudice against women teachers was overcome partly by their acceptance of low salaries and a subordinate status as teachers of very young children. Their inferior position in the school's hierarchy came to be justified by a belief in their alleged innate inferiority and their mission to teach the young. Not the least, they themselves were expected to perpetuate these myths.

Over the decades, women have moved into all ranks in education from which they had been formerly excluded, albeit in numbers vastly inferior to those of men. This again has been due to their continued efforts to better educate themselves and in more recent times to interventions at the international and national levels to promote equality of educational and employment opportunity. So far, however, women have failed to achieve equal representation with men in the top administrative ranks of education.

The causes of their underachievement are complex. Inferior education leading to underachievement, the stereotyping of roles in the teaching profession, historical tradition, prejudice and vested interest as well as the failure of women themselves to accept their changing roles have contributed to keep them in subordinate positions in formal education hierarchies.

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