

# Education Policies and Gender Implication in Sudan\*

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The paper is an attempt to look into the stereotype role of the general education in Sudan. However, it is difficult to cover such a huge topic in a paper, I will try to shed some light on the issue.

Generally, the position of the feminist discourse within the Sudanese researchers, studies and literature is relatively new, particularly the relationship between education and gender. Nevertheless, sexual inequality in education is a well-established area within the feminist debate and research. The role of education and its potential as a conservative force that reproduces the status quo or as a source of social engineering has been debated over by feminists.

The issues of gender differences and gender equality were and continue to be talked by several feminist schools of thought. Feminist debate and analysis have produced a sizable body of literature, which lead to a range of suggestions of strategies for change. However, gender equality should not be understood to mean antagonism between men and women as individuals, since gender inequality is social phenomenon and not a personal one (Fatima B. Mahmoud, 1991).

Few examples of the main feminist schools of thought shall be addressed in this paper. These schools are the liberal, radical and Marxist, socialist and black feminist schools. Liberal feminists argue that ignorance is the main cause of sexual inequality and therefore dissemination of knowledge is the principal solutions. In this view, sexual inequality within schooling is caused by a variety of factors such as prejudice of parents, teachers, and society in general, traditional values, lack of proper role models and structural barriers (Gaby Weiner, 1994). Radical Feminist attributed sexual inequalities in schooling to patriarchal forces and male-dominated power relationships in which heterosexuality and hierarchy combine to create the dominant male-subordinate-female dualism. Moreover, radical feminist assert that sexual inequalities are manifested at every level of society: in the family, in the school, higher education system and the work place. Also radical feminists have sought to clarify the nature of patriarchal relations of schooling by looking, in particular, at the link between male power, sexual violence, masculinity and sexuality in the context of education (ibid).

Marxist and socialist feminists have argued that schooling is essential to the maintenance of capitalist society. They argue further that gender is part of the process of the reproduction of the workforce, serving to create a docile, low paid labour of women and a private



sphere for which women are responsible (P. Abbot and C. Wallace, 1990). Some European and American black feminists argue that white feminists have ignored the experience of racism suffered by black girls as a distinctive form of subordination. Hence black feminists have argued that education is not just Andocentric but also Eurocentric, denying black women's experience (ibid).

As argued by Wiener, Gaby (1994) and by Abbott and Wallace (1990), Marxist and socialist feminists appear to have less faith in the role of education in social change; rather they see it as one of the terrains upon which the sex as well as the class struggle are fought. Furthermore it constitutes a way in which patterns of social domination and subordination are reproduced and sustained. They further argue that working class girls are doubly disadvantaged in schools in undergoing similar experience of class inequality while also receiving message about female inferiority.

Against this theoretical background, this paper shall try to investigate the sexual inequalities and gender stereotyping in general education in Sudan and its effects on the Sudanese female graduates.

### **Inside Accounts of Sex Stereotyping in Education in Sudan**

Formal education in The Sudan started late in comparison with some neighbouring countries like Egypt. In fact it started in 1907 (Suaad I. Iyssa, 1996). In many parts of the world, and Sudan is not an exception in this regard, female education gives great importance to the feminine side of females, and similarly boys' education concentrates on the development of the masculine side of pupils. This observation has been made by a number of scholars. For example, Pamela Abbot and Claire Wallace (1990) point out that education for girls is a preparation for "women's jobs", and argue that their aspirations are cooled out not by just education failure, but also by expectation of their future roles in the family. Thus while boys are taught gardening and carpentry, girls are instructed in needlework, cooking and other domestic skills.

Sexual segregation, sexual stereotyping and sexual inequality are the main features of girls' education in Sudan since its beginning in 1907 (Suaad I. Iyssa, 1997). Indeed gender insensitivity of general education in The Sudan is well rooted in the general education's curriculum and syllabus. Nada Mustafa and Zienab Badawie (1991) explained some of the andocentric and practical interventions in the general education in Sudan in two separate articles published in the *Bulletin of Sudanese Studies* (October 1991). In a review of selected books from general education reading scheme, Zienab Badawie has discussed gender bias in relation to the reading scheme books used in primary schools. In the lesson entitled "The Mother", the duties of the principal character are listed as those of a housewife, with the responsibility of making the home a happy place, performing house work and, most importantly, of showering love and affection on her husband. Apparently, one of the main objectives of this lesson is the domestication of motherhood, to reinforce the traditional division of labour and separation of spheres. In other words, this scheme provides for a private sphere for women, and a public sphere, which is increasingly the sole preserve of men. In these text books the private sphere translates into the home as the realm of women, while the world outside is the domain of men.

Amorous relationships are also determined by gender. The woman's role is one of pas-



sivity, summing her to the love of the husband, and loving him in return regardless of his actual involvement in the relationship. In effect no details of the man's role are specified at all, he slips simply out of the text. The textbook does not contain a complementary lesson about "The Father" to show the tasks and duties expected of a male parent and husband. An even more alarming gap opens up with regard to the more general responsibilities of parenthood abstracted from sexual affiliation.

This allocation of roles and duties is grounded in an exposition of the biological make-up of the woman to justify her social destiny (Fatima B. Mahmoud, 1991). In other words, since mothers are women, it follows that they should be warm, loving, caring, etc. Men, by contrast, are exhorted to act benevolently.

Another example which has been drawn by Zienab Badawie, is a lesson under the title "The Hobbies", in which the gender blind manifestation is quite clear. In this topic, the educationalists who designed and wrote this text book decided to distribute the hobbies among the children in a way where, the boys, Ayman, Ahmed and Zohair chose music, drawing and general reading, respectively. On the other hand a girl, Azza, chose membership in the health association in the school. Looking briefly at this example, we firstly find that while there are three boys, there is only one girl. Secondly, we observe that while Azza's choice was made to be a member of a health association project, her male peers selected hobbies that involved more intellectual abilities. Moreover, these hobbies are joyful and involve a great deal of satisfaction. On the other hand, Azza's hobby involves a great deal of caring, nurturing and is, in fact, a duty rather than a hobby. The basic assumptions of the educationalists who designed these texts are open to two interpretations. First, girls do not have interests outside the domestic sphere; or, rather, girls lack any intelligent curiosity in the world around them. Secondly, and more insidiously, that even where girls are credited with intellectual aptitude and natural curiosity, their range of choices is to be reduced to a small number of pre-defined tasks, in concordance with the prevailing ideological image of the feminine role. Girls then are not only denied the chance to engage in out-of-school interests; they are also denied the right to enjoy. Thus, the designers/educationalists denied Azza even the right to enjoy herself with her hobby. In other words, they denied her a "choice".

Furthermore, we observe that the ethnic dimension in this example is quite in line with cultural and ethnic power relations in The Sudan, as all four characters have Arabic and Islamic names. Space does not allow giving due consideration to the impact of ethnicity on the educational policies in Sudan. However, the issue of ethnicity, being of great importance, shall be discussed in a forthcoming study.

The allocation of roles in Sudanese society at large is also heavily weighted in general education in favour of men. In her study of primary school textbooks Zienab Badawie (October 1991) notes that whereas the 37 lessons investigated provide five different role models for men, there is only one for women. In intermediary school literature men maintain that number, while the social functions of women disappear altogether.

This sustained information of gender stereotypes is continued in higher education where the curriculum and the syllabus of women's colleges is pre-determined by the desire to prepare women for motherhood, domesticity and the narrow range of specifically feminine roles. For example, at Alahfad University for Girls, founded in 1966 (Suaad I Iyssa: 1996),



there are several departments (home sciences, psychology and pre-school education) whose educational intent is to prepare female students for their roles within the family. In recognition of the importance of female staff in modern offices and administration, a department for administrative sciences has been added in recent years to pave the way for Sudanese females in public life. However, when we consider the types of the qualifications provided by this department we clearly see that it is only meant to feed society with secretaries and clerical personnel, which is, more or less, an extension of women's work. Organization and maintenance of the office is, in fact, merely the transposition of the self-same activity from the home onto the work place. Equally, the typical sex-stereotyped relationship between female secretary and male manager, does not constitute a breakthrough for female aspirations for equality, but merely extends the traditional female role of nurturing and 'love' to the professional context. This includes making coffee, tea, looking after a manager's personal phone calls, dealing with the manager's bank, etc. The example of a higher education institution such as Alahfad is quite consistent with the gender insensitivity, which goes in line with the sex stereotyping of general education in The Sudan. The way in which gender differences have begun to reproduce themselves throughout the Sudanese educational system became evident from the expansion of the Female Teachers College in Omdurman, which was established in 1921 (Suaad I. Iyssa 1996). The sole purpose of this college was to train predominantly primary school teachers. The overwhelming enrolment of women in this institute provides further proof of the link between females and primary school teaching, which involves a lot of care and looking after which are labelled as women natural characteristics.

On the other hand, Sudanese boys were offered other venues for intellectual development and school qualification. An illustrative case is provided by Khartoum Higher Technical School, which was established in 1970 (M.O. Bashier 1983) for the study of typical male occupations such as electronics and plumbing. Ironically, such educational establishments propagate the idea that rationality and masculinity are attributed to men, whereas irrationality and nurturing are inherently linked to the females. Hence the Drama and Music Higher Institute and The Higher Institute for Sports began only recently to enrol small number of female students. In spite of some recent achievements, the percentage of female students remains disproportionately low (M.O. Bashier 1983); (Suaad I. Iyssa 1996).

One of the ways in which gender stereotyping has become established within education, as well as within wider society, is through its grounding in the analogy with nature. As has already been pointed out, the biological make-up of women and men, often reformulated into the language of hormones and genetic blueprints, provides for an effective naturalisation of what are evidently social and political processes. The empirical fact that mothers are women, who develop and display certain characteristics, is inverted, for the purposes of distributing educational resources, to argue that women are mothers. Hence domestication of their intellectual endeavour is continually justified as being in harmony with nature, or in the case of some, religion. Yet the religious institutions which, prior to the 19th century, and, in some rural areas of Sudan, till today, maintain a monopoly on formal education, have traditionally included, and catered for, female students. Koran Schools, for example, have always enrolled girls. The arrival of western education, still



identified with 'progress', did however exclude female students from the outset. Following the cultural and political assertion of the Sudanese intelligentsia throughout the independence movement, and post-independence period, imported Western sexual politics have been combined with a pseudo-indigenous cultural theory of Islamic womanhood and the natural role of the mother. It is against this background that the pioneering roles of Fatima Bit Jabir and Asha Alfagiera, who held, in the 19th century, voluntary teaching jobs on equal footing with their peers, have to be understood. One hundred years later, the number of women in higher education institutions in Sudan was still small (O.M. Bashier 1983). For example, the percentage of female students in 1955/6 was 3% at Khartoum University, 10% at Cairo University- Khartoum Branch, and only 11% at all other higher education institutions (ibid.).

Suaad I. Iyssa (1996: 125) observed that the percentage of female students was substantially increased in the University of Khartoum in the mid-1980s. Apparently alarmed by this development, the University Senate took practical measures to reduce the number of female students in the university and, in particular, in some technical colleges. From my discussion with some female Sudanese graduates of the university, I came to know that female students' organisations inside the university, some members of the university staff and some women's organisations outside the university opposed this step. Acting as pressure groups, they effectively lobbied against the implementation of these measures. This sort of gender bias was not new in the history of education in Sudan, e.g., in 1980 the "Peoples Assembly", during Nimeri's regime, was unsuccessful in its attempt to introduce policies leading to the reduction of female students in universities. That attempt was the Peoples' Assembly's response to a suggestion, from the Higher Education Council in Khartoum, to introduce a quota system with regard to the admission of female students to the University of Khartoum (Suaad I. Iyssa, 1996).

The introduction of 'modern' education in Sudan was informed by the andocentric attitudes towards female education imported from the West during the last century, which was in turn rooted in the "biological argument". According to this argument, schooling will, among other things, prevent girls from performing their reproductive functions. Geared towards mothering and nurture, women are incapable of achieving intellectual parity with men. Janet Sayers (1982) has argued that the conservative educationalists, faced with regular data on female students outperforming male students in several subjects, prefer to ignore such data. One of the more flippant rhetorical questions pondered by leading theorists in the field memorably goes:

*"It will have to be considered whether women can scorn the delights, and live laborious days of intellectual exercise and production without injury to their functions as the con-ceivers, mothers and nurses of children"* (Janet Sayers, 1982:8, quoting Henry Maudsley "the eminent British psychiatrist").

*The brief quotation is part of the conservative literature that perceives women as con-ceivers and care takers of society and it appears that this perception has been adopted by education systems in many countries, including Sudan.*

Looking at general education in Sudan, we find that sex segregation is not only in the contents of textbooks, but its also evident in the subjects that are offered in girls' and boys' curricula separately. Nada Mustafa (October 1991:72, 80) has written about the



discrimination of women in some selected books. N. Mustafa found out that while there are twelve subjects common to both girls and boys in high schools, there are other additional subjects for each sex, e.g., agriculture and carpentry for boys, sewing and home economics for girls. Moreover, in her comparison of high technical schools for both sexes, Nada Mustafa has pointed out that engineering, horticulture and agricultural engineering top the list in boys' schools, whereas child care, cooking, home economics are the main subjects in girls' schools.

Looking at this picture, using gender lenses, we immediately notice the prevalence of gender bias and how the school could adopt a role that emphasises passive femininity in girls and masculinity in the boys. Also it shows the role of school in preparing a girl pupil to be housewife and a boy pupil to be a breadwinner.

This background of feminisation of girls and masculinisation of boys through the general education curriculum has directly contributed to the manner of female students' participation in higher education institutions where they find it rather difficult to contribute to public life in the university. For example, while activities such as politics and sports are not regarded as suitable for female students, it is considered natural for their male peers to engage with vigour in such activities. Of course, there have always been some female students who participate actively in these male-designated activities, but these are exceptions to the general rule.

Although data on activities that engage female graduates in Sudan is difficult to establish, group discussions with some Sudanese female graduates from the University of Khartoum and my own observations suggest that when compared with male graduates, most female graduates perform their presumed roles in public.

I am not trying to demonstrate here that Sudanese female graduates have always played passive roles, but rather to observe that they still have a lot to do in order for them to realise their potential in many areas.

### **Concluding Comments**

To conclude, I think that sex stereotyping in general education, together with some patriarchal interventions in higher education institutions, have hindered females from playing an active role in Sudanese public life. In fact, the role of general education is essentially one of reproduction of the status quo, thereby reinforcing the old gender division of labour in society.

In the future the situation of Sudanese females will deteriorate unless educational policies are fundamentally reformed.

I conclude by suggesting some gender-based policies for general education which, together with some other factors, should lead to the empowerment of the Sudanese female students and female graduates in Sudan. Such a development should eventually contribute to the development of the Sudanese society as a whole. The suggestions are the following:

\* Comprehensive revision of the general education curriculum so as to eliminate all forms of gender bias in the textbooks, teaching materials and examples. The revision should be undertaken by specialists and should emphasise gender quality. Of particular importance in such a task is the careful revision of religion as a school subject. Rather than using



religion to propagate reactionary ideas, such as the inferiority of women, all pupils should be encouraged to adopt the values of love, forgiveness, tolerance, and respect of work that are embodied in most religions properly interpreted.

\* Training of female teachers at all levels of the educational system should be one of the first steps in the wide-ranging programme of general education. This is to be combined by the recruitment of female head teachers and female educational inspectors. These policies would help to portray females' positive role models in the educational field.

\* Elimination of sex bias in subjects in the general education curriculum. For example, home economics and sports should be compulsory subjects for both girls and boys, due to the importance of physical well being, food and cooking regardless of sex and gender. On the other hand, other subjects like carpentry, gardening, needlework, agriculture and horticulture should be optional for both of the sexes.

\* Introduction of unisex school uniforms that provide girl pupils the same space and confident manoeuvring as their boy peers, instead of imposing school uniforms that hinder girls' movement and diminish their self-esteem and confidence.

\* Introduction of new subjects in the general education curriculum with the objective of exposing all pupils to highly informative and consciousness-raising areas of study. Examples are: gender studies, human rights, good governance and civil duties.

\* Technical and vocational colleges should not only be restricted to male students; females' places should be secured in these institutions through a systematic preparation in the lower rungs of the educational ladder.

\* Ethnic power relations in the Sudan, critically studied, should form an integral part of the general education's curriculum.

\* In higher education institutions, females should be encouraged rather than discouraged to enrol in technical colleges, institutes and universities.

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\* This paper was published in: Proceedings of the Conference on the State and Future of Higher Education in Sudan, ed. Mohamed el-Tom, 33-47, Cairo, Association of Sudanese Academics, 1999.

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