Gender Discrimination and Education Practitioners. Reality, Perception, Possible Solutions

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Abstract

This study aims at determining the extent to which Romanian prospective or current education practitioners are informed about gender discrimination (GD) problems in order to infer whether they are prepared to promote gender equality (GE) within and through schools. Drawing on recent Romanian legal provisions, statistics and research, and relating these aspects to EU and international developments in the area being investigated, a questionnaire-based survey was conducted, leading us to the conclusion that educators need being educated about GD in order to be able to promote GE, which could be achieved by means of a pre or in-service course.

1. Introduction

Promoting gender equality (GE) has been one of the targets of Western civilization for more than five decades. Nevertheless, gender discrimination (GD) is still very much a big issue in many societies and, to a certain degree, this is a result of the way people get educated within the school system. School is ‘deeply marked by gender principles, stereotypes and ideologies, the gender models it generates being very important for placing and

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integrating the individual in the society’ (Grünberg & Ţeufănescu, 2002), and, consequently, school education can play a dual role: on the one hand, it can be the main vector for promoting equality of opportunity, as a means of fighting against discrimination in general, and GD in particular, and, on the other hand it could represent a means of transmitting stereotypes and prejudice that might fuel and perpetuate inequality and discrimination. From this perspective, it is up to education practitioners to choose which role they would like to play, either forming individuals who shall think and act guided by tolerance, equal opportunity and non-discriminatory principles, or individuals who shall distortedly internalize gender-related aspects, thus maintaining inequality. Taking this into consideration, our paper is aimed at Romanian prospective or current education practitioners and their ability to promote GE, as we consider them to be the agents partially responsible for bringing about the necessary change in perspective. In part one, we briefly outline GD and GE in point of international, EU and Romanian legislation, statistics and research, the second part deals with methodology and research findings, and the final part presents the conclusions of our investigation, introducing possible solutions for the problems that have been identified.

2. GD and GE: some perspectives

As, ‘with the concept of gender, the social construction of masculinities and femininities is emphasized rather than the biological definition of the sexes’ (Young, 2001), GD is a type of discrimination that stems from the social differences that exist between men and women, leading to unjust treatment, by considering one superior to the other. The source for gender prejudice, stereotypes and roles goes far back in time, or, if we focus on the present, it could be identified in those gender-neutral, gender-blind or male-oriented policies and programmes, which maintain the gap between the legal provisions promoting GE and social reality, and, although it may affect both men and women, more often than not, women are prone to experience GD. For the purpose of our investigation, perspectives on GD and GE have been structured into three broad categories - legislation, statistics and research (at both international and European levels and in Romania) - with a special focus on the education practitioners’ strategic role in disseminating GE.

In recent past, at international and EU levels, GD has mainly been approached from the point of view of the legislation that is needed in order to ensure the equal rights of men and women. Drawing on reports, international organisations have attempted to develop legislation favouring GE and to encourage states to endorse it. Thus, The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the UN in 1979, strictly defined discrimination against women (‘any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field’ - Article 1) and invited states to adhere to it. More recently, Directive 2002/73/EC (2002) gives clear indications to what GD is: ‘one person is treated less favourably on grounds of sex than another is, has been or would be treated in a comparable situation’ (Article 2, 2.); nevertheless, according to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), GE is not consistently defined in EU documents, suggesting that a simpler definition is to be preferred: ‘equal share of assets and equal dignity and integrity between women and men, with the emphasis on women becoming equal to men’ (EIGE, 2013). As far as our country is concerned, Romania has closely observed international and EU conventions and recommendations promoting GE. For example, Romania signed and ratified CEDAW in 1980 and the Optional Protocol to CEDAW in 2000; in 1995, Romania took part in the Fourth World Conference on Women and was one of the 189 countries that adopted The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a global commitment to achieving equality, development and peace for women worldwide. Moreover, EU regulations regarding GE have been included into Romanian legislation (the anti-discrimination Act no. 48 of 2002 and Act no. 202 of 2002 on equality between men and women).

As for statistics, The Gender Equality Index Report (2013), published by EIGE, concludes that EU Member States have not yet managed to overcome gender gaps and that further efforts concerning equal treatment, positive action and gender mainstreaming are needed. In this report, in all the critical domains taken into consideration, Romania’s score is very low in comparison with the European average, its rank in the country classification proving not only the existence, but also the high frequency of gender inequalities, generally to the detriment of women (EIGE, 2013). Moreover, according to The Global Gender Gap Report, published by the World Economic Forum
since 2006 (which scrutinizes men and women’s economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment), Romania was ranked 67th in 2012; its best ranking (34th) was for health and survival, followed by educational attainment (52th) and economic participation and opportunity (54th), and it obtained its worst ranking for political empowerment (97th). Although the global tendency is in favour of effacing gender gaps and Romanian legislation has been attuned to cope with this tendency, our country seems to have been left behind, the small fluctuation of its scores, as compared to its situation in previous reports, indicates stagnation rather than positive change.

Research conducted in Romania starting with 2000 very much outlines the same conclusions stemming from international or EU reports on GD on Romania: gender inequality exists and it has reached important dimensions, being consolidated by religious norms proclaiming a wife’s obedience to her husband, inadequate models promoted by mass-media and family conservation of traditional gender roles. In addition to these, we should also consider the half a century of communism in Romanian history, period during which GE (or equality in general) was difficult or impossible to imagine (Miroiu, 2004), although the legislation in force at that time covered this issue. Therefore, although obviously necessary, legislation proves insufficient when it comes to sanctioning GD, as the procedures used are complicated, institutions responsible with promoting GE are weakly represented in the territory, there is low access to information and the population (women in particular) lacks GD and GE knowledge (Grünberg, 2006). Gender-related literature points out to Romanian women’s passive attitude (Pasti, 2003; Miroiu, 2004), their inhibitions, as well as their gender representations (Băluţă, 2006) adding up to their devalued image, which leads to (self) marginalization in family and public life.

To sum up, according to research and statistics, education might prove essential to combating GD and promoting GE. However, a 2004 study conducted by the Romanian Institute for Educational Sciences (RIES) on the gender dimension in education, outlines that teachers have serious difficulties in defining the gender perspectives in education and most of them are gender blind; they are not aware of the relevance of the gender dimension to education; they are little or not at all prepared to understand and, consequently, to facilitate gender internalization by the students, because of difficult access to information, lack of resources and lack of training. Moreover, a significant number of teachers declared that they were against or skeptical about the value of a gender perspective in education (RIES, 2004). This situation is similar to the one described in recent EU reports on the topic under discussion: teachers and teacher trainers are not aware of the way they could effectively use the gender dimension in their teaching activity - they exhibit a conservative attitude and their behavior is very much in line with traditional stereotypical ideas and expectations, having a considerable impact on students’ behavior (Eurydice, 2010); most teachers do not learn how to promote GE, and they are not evaluated on the degree to which their learning relationships contribute to gender change or social justice (EC, 2009).

3. Research Methodology

According to international statistics, women have been and are more likely to experience GD problems than men, and, as teachers, they by far dominate the primary and secondary education system all over the world. Even if our 100-subject sample was exclusively made up of women, it does not imply that male teachers may not be prone to GD; however, we considered that this situation could be suitable for our research, thus having the opportunity to get pertinent answers to our research questions. Coming from Prahova county (economically well-developed and highly urbanized), our 100 female subjects are either Bachelor or Master Degree students in Education, which further enhances the relevance of our study, as we presume that the education level and GD are inversely proportional (51 Bachelor Degree students, aged 19-21; 49 Master Degree Students, already employed in the primary and secondary education system, aged 30-45). 70% are from the urban area and 30% from the rural area. As for the marital status, 44 are married and 56 are single. Having as a reference point the recent nationally developed GD surveys in Romania, our questionnaire included 23 (closed, multiple choice, open) items that were selected and adapted in order to help us establish: (1) whether our subjects are familiar with the main features describing GD, the legal provisions regulating GD and the rights granted on account of these provisions; (2) whether they have directly or indirectly been exposed to GD; (3) whether they accept or reject GD stereotypes; (4) what causes GD in Romania and the possible remedies according to their opinion.
4. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the data showed that the marital status was not a key-variable, whereas the level of education proved to be the most important variable, the Master Degree students being more informed about GD issues than Bachelor Degree students, thus confirming conclusions in national and international research. Consequently, the level of information increases in direct proportion with the level of education, hence age. The residence variable also proved valuable as the level of tolerance towards GD is higher in the rural area.

Asked to define discrimination in general, and GD in particular, our respondents find it difficult, and their answers prove to be incomplete: 50% point to only one feature, 43% give incorrect answers and 7% are unable to provide any answer. Our subjects perceive GD as common (10%) and pretty common (50%), very much in line with the 2000 Gender Barometer results (50% of the respondents, 53% of the female respondents and 59% of the educated respondents consider that there is no real GE in Romania). 44% of our respondents personally know a GD case and a quarter of our subjects have personally been GD victims, the results being equally weighted given the subjects’ education level, age and residence.

The majority of our subjects agree that GD is discrimination against women, considering that being a woman in Romania represents a disadvantage and providing arguments similar to the ones mentioned in recent research. Thus, based on our subjects’ answers, arguments are ranked as follows: restricted access to management positions; difficult access to the labour market; the mentality of the society and the prejudiced attitude against women; quality minimization, multiple responsibilities and marginalization in case of women; the exclusively domestic role for many women in Romania; women as common victims of violence; the traditions within the Romanian society. Only 8% consider that being a woman represents an advantage, wrongly supporting their opinion by referring to natural and legal rights, drawing our attention to their low level of information.

As for the Romanian legal provisions against GD, our subjects’ knowledge is very limited. Asked to imagine being a GD victim, only 21% of the sample stated that they knew their rights, 27% stated that they did not know their rights and 52% went for the don’t know answer, the results being again equally weighted given the subjects’ education level, age and residence. What is more, when being asked to indicate the legal documents regulating GE, only 7 subjects mentioned The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and one subject pointed to The Romanian Family Code. Also, in case of being a GD victim, 37 respondents would ask their families for help, 30 would approach their friends, and only 19 would submit their complaint to a specialized institution: the National Council for Combating Discrimination (16) and the National Agency for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (3).

Unlike results stemming from recent Romanian GD research, our respondents categorically rejected traditional gender role stereotypes and prejudice (housework, raising children). As compared to data in the 2000 Gender Barometer (80% of the respondents – men and women – agreed with statements such as man is the head of the family and a woman has to follow her man, even 69% of the highly educated ones chose the ‘I agree option’), only 6% of our subjects consider that the man should be the leader, as far as family, politics or administration is concerned, thus showing that they are aware of the anachronism of the situation and the bad influence exercised by gender stereotypes and prejudice. Nevertheless, reminiscence of the prevailing distorted reality still remains as 42% of the sample agrees with the commonly used phrase men are better car drivers.

Regarding the factors causing GD, 10% of the sample chose the don’t know answer. The rest of the sample ranked the 6 most important factors (out of 14 given), according to their opinion, and the results are: mentality; school education; tradition; lack of information; passivity and legislation, confirming the fact that, no matter how adequate legislation might be, it does not suffice to achieve GE. Regarding the institutions responsible to combat GD, only 77% of the respondents provided answers; accordingly, the top 3 agents responsible for promoting GE and generating change are: schools, universities; family and community. Therefore, the education system is identified as both cause and possible remedy for reducing the gender gap in Romania.

5. Conclusions

In line with recent research and statistics, the results of our small-scale survey confirmed that, generally, lack of GD and GE education is best fought against by and through education and that Romanian education practitioners first need to become knowledgeable about GD issues in order to promote GE. Nevertheless, this complex and,
undoubtedly, serious problem definitely needs further investigation with a larger sample (including male educators, students, parents and, possibly, other stakeholders), so that a more comprehensive, detailed and less biased analysis of the situation could be performed. Therefore, while acknowledging the limits of our research, we would also like to point to our research findings that clearly indicate education practitioners’ need for education about GD and GE matters, which could be attended to by means of ‘a core module on gender equality’, as EC (2009) recommends. In our view, such a module could be integrated into either pre or in-service teacher training and it should comprise (1) a brief theoretical outline on gender, GD and GE; (2) international, EU and Romanian legislation on GD and GE; (3) practical information indicating the adequate course of action in case of GD. Thus, a proactive attitude could be cultivated, which might represent the first step towards raising consciousness and enabling education practitioners to promote GE.

Furthermore, according to Romanian curricular provisions in force, starting with primary education, teachers can propose elective disciplines for the school-based curriculum, so elective disciplines integrating GD and GE could be devised, thus giving students the possibility to make better-informed choices for their future education and career, to a lesser degree influenced by gender prejudice and stereotypes. Moreover, provided external factors (e.g. family, community, mass-media etc.) also contribute to raising awareness of GD and GE issues, this difficult task entrusted to education practitioners might be partially achieved, and, hopefully, in the near future, by growing deep roots in Romanian society, GE might gain a different status, the one which is wished for now.

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