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Gender Relation in Education Interview with Violeta Petrova (Bulgaria)¹

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Do you think the educational system in your country/region provides equal opportunities for boys and girls to develop their potential as individuals and citizens?

Back in the early years of the secular education before the Liberation (1878), Bulgaria was one of the few countries, providing equal opportunities for boys and girls. After the Liberation and according to the laws of the Tarnovo Constitution, the educational system guaranteed de jure an equal start for boys and girls. No matter of the changes of the political system, of the priorities of one or another political orbit, as a matter of fact the educational system in Bulgaria has never made difference between girls and boys. This is a huge advantage of our education.

I grew up in Socialist times when equality was enforced by law. So I took it for granted. During my school years no one ever made gender differentiation. I never considered myself different from the boys. Even something more ... Since I was very keen on sports, music, arts, social activities, till 7th grade I was outdoing boys in race and jump. They recognized me as a leader, so I never felt any kind of inequality. The same was in the high school and university. I’ve never considered men more intelligent or doing well. All my memories from this period are very positive.

From a professional perspective however, I think that there is a problem with the teaching staff, which is totally feminized. This has a direct influence upon the models, presented by a teacher to her students.

On the other hand, recently there are favorable conditions for raising public awareness of this issue. Not long ago, as a participant in a project in Kalugerene village (near the Northeastern coast of the river Danube), I asked myself certain questions, concerning the education within the Turkish community. Are the family stereotypes reproduced into the school

environment, especially when the teachers are members of the same ethnic group? In Socialist times the ethnic minorities got the same education as the majority; furthermore, they had special privileges when applying for universities. I’m not sure whether the situation is the same today.

In your opinion which level of education is decisive for shaping one’s career choices? Is this level different for men and women?

This is very individual and not always related to the biological differences between the sexes. The secondary school is the earliest stage of professional orientation. This is the beginning of puberty. The first choice should be made after 7th grade. But the high school years are the right time for making conscious choices related to the further education. In Socialist times the choice, made during high school years, predetermined the whole career. Today, however, the system of higher education is much more flexible, and allows people to change their educational profiles in case they don’t feel comfortable with their initial choices. This is actually the case of my daughter, who changed her mind twice before she realized what her calling is.

Moreover, we’ve gradually popularized higher education, and it has become more accessible. On the other hand, more forms of education exist today – colleges, qualification courses, etc., that help people develop skills and competences, which they need in their job positions. So, I do not think that there is a certain stage of education, which predetermines one’s career.

Which moment from your years of education you remember most vividly?

I have vivid memories, related to all stages of my education – each one represents my individual development. Here is a memory from my years in the professional school “Prof. Asen Zlatarov”, Botevgrad. As a member of the students’ committee, I was a part of a very active unit, which supervised the educational process (I’m speaking about the 70s). So, we had to organize a conference. My task was to organize the event on the level of the whole district. The topic was “Students as Subjects of the Educational Process.” Representatives of many schools and the ambassador of USSR were among the invited participants. I was a keynote speaker, and many of my classmates also presented papers on various topics, such as “rational reading”, “how to cope

with poor grades”, “students who cannot keep up with the educational standards”, “interactive methods”, etc. The modern methods, which we introduce today, seems to have been introduced to the sphere of education already at the time of my school years. It means that even then we had modern ideas, but we still cannot make students subjects of their education.

Which period(s) in your education you consider the most difficult one(s) and why?

There are no such! (laughing) Except for the “Marxism-Leninism” exam ... I was supposed to talk about a social program of the Communist party, designed to raise the standard of living, and the question was: “Is there any phenomenon, which is not determined by social class?” My answer was no. The professor provoked me by saying that “language is not determined by social class”. I opposed him, claiming that it is not possible for the language not to be determined by social class (laughing), since we articulate through language all the things, related to our life. Then I was blamed for demonstrating self-confidence, and as a result I got a lower grade. I have a working class origin, and I’ve never enjoyed privileges, but I’ve never met with any difficulties while pursuing my goals.

If you have to reconsider the steps you took in choosing educational institutions – pre-school, school, trainings, university – would you take a different turn? Why?

My greatest wish was to study in a language school, but my mother did not let me live in another town, since I was the only child in the family. She told me that I would never come back home. She reacted in the same way when I told her that I was accepted to study in the University of Veliko Tarnovo, so I had to leave my home town Botevgrad. She was not happy with the news; she was sad, knowing that I would not come back home. The systematic study of the English language is something that I really miss in my daily work.

Do you think your career track is a question of chance or you explain your present professional position as a result of hard-work, efforts, patience?

My child’s dream was to become a teacher. We were three friends in the high school – two girls and a boy. We wanted to struggle against criminality, and to become judges. Unlike my two friends, and partly because of my participation in a national political contest, I did not have enough time to prepare for two entrance exams – a necessary condition, when one applies for the Law faculty in Sofia University. I was studying just for a history exam. That is why I was accepted in the University of Veliko Tarnovo, which later on gave a meaning both to my personal and professional life. After graduating from the University, I decided to live in Tarnovo.

So, my career track is partly a question of chance, but not only ... I wanted to be something more than a history teacher in Botevgrad. That is why I applied for the position at the University of Veliko Tarnovo, and I got it. Later on, I applied for a second position, and that is how I started teaching Theory and Methods of Education.

My interest in gender studies came much later – a combination of chance and logic. As a member of the National Association of History Teachers I was invited to participate in the first international project in this field (2000-2003) together with colleagues from Macedonia and Albania within the frame of the European Association of History Educators (EUROCLIO). It was the first time I heard the word “gender”, and I remember how we were asking each other what it should mean. At that time I was also a team member of the NGO European Information Center (EIC) in Veliko Tarnovo, so I was invited to coordinate a project “Open Door to Equality”. That is how I was absorbed in gender issues, and soon they turned to be among my favorite topics.

In what way do you think you can contribute to the process of combating gender or other inequalities in society?

It is very difficult for one person to define his/her help. So, I think that one can really contribute when he/she is given the chance to work on regional, national, and international level. Then, as a snowball effect, one could find collaborators and the mechanisms of helping disadvantaged people could start working. This huge machine cannot function if it is made of just one little screw. One’s personal contribution becomes visible only in a broader context. Such are the times we live in ...

On the other hand, I think that we can be really efficient, working against the stereotypes – against violence, against ethnic and gender prejudices. But it is much more difficult to struggle against the social class stereotypes. In this case, the mechanism – inasmuch as it exists – does not work, because everything depends on much higher economical and political level. Education cannot have direct influence on this process. These types of differences are much more visible nowadays.

Do you know any governmental or non-governmental initiatives targeting gender-awareness in education in your country?

There are many such initiatives. There is a very good communication with the governmental institutions. Starting with the initiatives of EC – I work as an expert in education at the EIC more than 10 years, and we’ve managed to collect a thorough bibliography, referring to these issues; we’ve made contacts with other NGOs, working in the field. I can give as an example the Center for Women Policy Studies, headed by Tatyana Kmetova, Bulgarian Gender Research Center, Demetra Association – Burgas, Nadja Centre Foundation, BARDA (decentralised non-governmental umbrella organisation of independent regional development agencies and business centres in Bulgaria). These are some of the organizations we work with.

As a team, we are invited to participate in a big project, which aims to educate the state administration; we have good contacts with the Ministry of Education and Science, and the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy.

We are very proud with our perfect contacts and cooperation with the Gender Equality Group at the Ministry of Education and Science. Many of our initiatives get institutional support. I mean the synchronization of the institutions – getting support from the Ministry of Education and Science, from Veliko Tarnovo Regional Municipality, and from the Regional

Inspectorate of Education. This synchronization of the involved institutions makes an initiative much more practically effective and successful.

Do you find them effective and do they have impact on your co-workers, students, or more generally in your society?

Are you personally involved in any activities for promotion of gender equality through education?

Yes, I definitely think that there are particular results. We can see a serious and visible change in the history textbooks on a national level. I could tell that as a historian. When in 2000 we started the process of rewriting the history textbooks in accordance with the State Educational requirements and educational programs for contents and curricula, the topic of women is included in separate thematic units, as well as a part of wider topics. The support of the Ministry experts, who are aware of the situation on a grassroot level, makes us consider this change a real breakthrough.

My university colleagues entrusted me to prepare a facultative course in gender education for the two new programs in our faculty – “History and Western Language” and “History and Philosophy”. I consider this as my personal success. In the second place, I think we’ve established a very good system of teachers’ running qualification – mainly designed for historians, but also for educators, teaching other subjects, as well as for kindergarten and primary school teachers. Our cooperation with the Operational Program “Human Resources Development” and Zlataritsa Municipality resulted in a recent project, which goal was to approbate “Gender Education and European Citizenship” as an educational module of the running teachers’ qualification. After that we tried to approbate it as a module of a distance learning program at EIC. I am not saying that it is already put into practice, but it is at least approbated (also for the schools in Pavlikeni Municipality). Besides all this, the gender module was included in the program of the “Qualification Center” at the University of Veliko Tarnovo, and a few years ago, together with the Center, we organized a training seminar for history, philosophy, and geography teachers from Turgovishte and the region. Their feedback and attitude towards these problems proved that such a module could be an effective complementary qualification, allowing teachers to acquire some competences, different from the skills they had acquired during their university education.

Another initiative of ours: an educational module with experts in history education from the whole country. We also invited Ruth Tudor to give a lecture at the seminars. She is an expert in gender equality and women’s history at the Council of Europe, as well as a teacher in an Irish school. The trainings, as well as our successful cooperation with the Council of Europe, made the Regional Inspectorates of Education (RIE) aware of the benefits of our work and efforts, and now the RIE can enrich the programs for raising teachers’ qualification with this kind of thematic aspects.

We involve many students into our projects, into all our projects – starting with the ones, concerning kindergartens, and ending with these, which deal with high school problems. Some of the students were educated to become trainers, so to be able to educate their classmates. An important element of

the policy of the faculty, where I teach, is to involve students in the projects we work on together with the NGOs. We’ve already had several results. A student of mine – Mariela Georgieva – who was a trainer in gender education, got a job position at the EIC. Now she works for “Europe Direct Network”. Another doctoral student of mine – Ivelina Dimova – joined our recent projects’ team, working on the issues of memory and minorities. The two young colleagues helped for the establishment of the “Youth Club for Equal Opportunities”, created in 2009, in relation to the Youth Program of the Bulgarian Fund for Women. I cannot mention here all the initiatives, but I can submit a detailed list of our activities ...

Have you encountered any factors, which might prevent or hinder individuals’ or non-governmental actors’ activities to promote gender equality in education?

There is a certain lack of correspondence between very good theory and documents on one hand, and the implementation mechanisms, on the other. This is the biggest problem. It should be solved through harmonization between the institutions – an explicit policy on each level of gender mainstreaming.

Nowadays, these issues meet much more positive attitudes in comparison to the situation 10 year ago. Some still existing stereotypes, related to traditional roles of men and women, to disadvantaged people, or to homosexuality, are another hindering factor ...

Many of the girls and young women tend to assume the passive role of housewives, just because they strive for a higher social status and prosperity. In this case we are helpless; the social realities, as well as the new models of prosperity, confirm the stereotypes, which we try to break. This is the problem of the new social class, which formation can be witnessed in the last 20 years. Moreover, the mass media reproduce precisely this stereotype – the “Barbie”-woman versus the woman scientist, the business woman, or the woman, focused on her career. Recently, such kinds of stereotypes have naturally “come to the surface like scum”.

Does national education system, the way it is structured now, provide equal chances for children from different ethnic/religious groups, especially for the girls to study upper levels of education like college, university or start business venture?

The socialist emancipation practically resulted in involving women into different spheres of economics, but at the same time, Roma and Muslim women were restricted in the low-wage labor market. Women tobacco-workers are a typical example. Their husbands worked in the mines, or as construction workers, while women processed the tobacco. It was a kind of home manufacture. It did not count to the length of service. In some cases, neither women, nor their children have any ambitions, related to education. I’m not speaking in general; I just say there were such cases... Though the Socialist idea of popular education had certain influence upon the masses, the relations within family and community were (and still are) very strong.

This is a very big problem for the Roma women. Children giving up school, traditionally early marriages, etc.

– all these play a factor for their low education level. Therefore these women have difficulties to start any kind of business. There are exceptions, of course; there are positive examples of women, who – due to different programs for supporting Roma women’ lifelong education – get the opportunity to overcome the family stereotypes and take care of themselves. Education is like an open window.

Here is an example from Kalugerene village that I have mentioned earlier, is indicative for this situation. The young women who attended the training could hardly speak proper Bulgarian. We are indebted to these economically underdeveloped regions - not only to the women, but to the overall population, which deserves better education. However, this depends on the policy of the Ministry of Education and Science, which has already introduced external evaluation – the so called indicators “ethnic community”, “language”, “gender” ... We send there part-time teachers; there is fluctuation; there is reduction of the schools network, so it cannot cover small or hard of access settlements, etc.

Have you heard of best practices that exist in other countries for raising gender-awareness through education? Do you think they could be applicable to your country?

As I think of foreign experience, the first thing that comes to my mind is Sweden. Good practice of women’ empowerment exists there. I also think of a case, that we came upon, while working on one of our projects: a woman who runs a dairy farm in her own house. There are also different examples from Germany, Ireland, and Finland, USA. For example, the application of the Minnesota principle in the methods of teaching gender in the early 90s. of 20th c. was done by several very important NGOs for our social and political life, such as Open Society Foundation and Gender Project for Bulgaria. Recently the above mentioned Center for Women Policy Studies opened on their website an online educational module on equal opportunities, which targets the students from 5th to 7th grade. Which is a very advanced good practice so we all hope that is going to be kept alive in the future.

According to the projects’ discussions with French and German colleagues, it seems that they are more experienced in communication and integration of members of ethnic minorities and races. It might be because they have a longer history of immigration. Anyway, we could make use of their experience, though here, in Bulgaria, we have a centuries-long tradition of cohabiting with our minorities.

What recommendations can be made in the existing policies in education for improving women’s career choices?

Up to this point I have talked in a very positive way about women’ emancipation, but I think that the feminization of teachers’ or medics’ ... we should not let women teachers dominate the sphere of education.

Men should be stimulated to become teachers, or to apply for the medical colleges ... They strive to get better paid jobs. I personally know men, who started working as teachers, and later changed their jobs. So, I don’t speak just about encouraging women or men, but about raising everybody’s salaries in these spheres or a package of measures which would retrieve the prestige of the profession of the teacher.

Mass media could help a lot in this direction. Anyway, it was mass media that construed the image of the successful woman, who should be either a businessman’s wife, or a model, or a singer. Mass media could build and break stereotypes – that’s why we call it “the fourth power”. We invited experts-journalists, while working on a project, related to students and their attitude toward civil society. Young people asked the journalists: “You make your news, focusing just on crimes, and we want to hear some positive news as well.” Together with business and local government, mass media turns out to be another key partner that can have influence upon education. Mass media is sending messages to everybody – children, teachers, parents. Perhaps future journalists should try to be more tolerant, and to use the empathic concern as a method in their work. I think that media could be really useful by doing this, instead of serving political and economic interests of certain groups of people.

Anmerkung:

- 1 Das Interview wurde von Nadezhda Aleksandrova, Bulgarien, geführt und ist ein Vorabdruck aus der von der Baden-Württemberg Stiftung (Stuttgart) geförderten und im Rahmen eines Forschungsprojektes der Europäischen Donau-Akademie (Ulm) durchgeführten Studie von Nadezhda Aleksandrova: Gender Relation in Education. Policy and Practice in the Danube Region. Experiences, Analyses and Impulses. Ulm: Klemm+Oelschläger 2012.