

CO-EDUCATION AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Preface
by
IRENE VAQUINHAS

CADERNOS COEDUCAÇÃO

TERESA PINTO

Comissão para a Igualdade
e para os Direitos das Mulheres

FERNANDA HENRIQUES

Universidade de Évora

COMISSÃO PARA A IGUALDADE E PARA OS DIREITOS DAS MULHERES

PREFACE

A The proclamation of universal rights played a crucial role in the history of the fight for women's rights. The revolutionary promise of liberty, equality and fraternity in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, in 1789, has formed the basis upon which women in western societies have demanded their right to citizenship since the end of the 18th century.

The French revolution unequivocally posed the question of woman's place in civil society, having been the starting point for female mobilisation in support of the demand for rights. Highlighting the incoherence of the liberal democratic theory meant criticising above all the discrepancy between what was propounded in principle and what happened in practice, that is, the incompatibility between the abstract individualism which declares the universal right to equality and a reality in which, based on the specific right to difference, women were prevented from using those rights. Feminism grew precisely from the opposition to this exclusion and the growing awareness of women's ambiguous status in society, which recognised them as subjects with legal rights and yet denied them the chance to participate in politics.

Throughout the 19th century, the search for a more egalitarian and just society would lead to the promotion of female education as a *sine qua non* for obtaining equal rights both in public and private life. The desire for knowledge is an essential element in the access to citizenship, and was raised by all those concerned at the injustice of women's marginalisation in culture and education and aspired to their personal fulfilment, as moral and intellectual beings.

Paradoxically, the banner of the right to education was raised in the name of biological difference – the role of motherhood and the education of children – in Ana de Castro Osório's words "those little plasticine souls who are the citizens of the future". This was a tactical argument, with a strategic aim, and proved immensely effective in practice. As a first step, during the 19th century, came the recognition of women's right to education; later came the

introduction to women's education of curricula and course contents on a par with those provided for men, until finally, in the 20th century, women were allowed to apply their new-found knowledge in paid work, although the duration of each stage and the timing of them varied greatly from country to country.

Female education came about, on the one hand, as a logical consequence of the ideals of the 18th century Enlightenment and the principle of respect for basic human rights propounded by philosophers such as Condorcet, but also as a means of consolidating the modern state, in which the "Three Rs" are considered a fundamental part of moral and civic upbringing.

The democratisation of education propounded by republican ideology, based on the establishment of a system of compulsory, free and non-religious elementary education (Fernando Catroga), implied for women a set of useful and practical skills, appropriate for their sex, but, at the same time, firmly based in male study programmes, in order to nurture a strong national sentiment. Co-education makes its appearance precisely in this context, in which the role of the school is to develop new social attitudes as a means of bringing cohesion to a society of individuals and defending the nation. According to some republicans at the beginning of this century, school was - the "citizen's workshop". The question that remained was whether women were to be included as potential citizens.

Teresa Pinto and Fernanda Henriques strive to answer this most pertinent question, offering a retrospective view of the history of co-education and equal opportunities, a subject that to date has received scant attention, while at the same time providing suggestions to help turn them into reality in the context of the world of education as we know it.

Allaying their experience as teachers to the *desire for knowledge* the authors present, in a study of exceptional quality and scientific rigour, a critical reflection on the *archaeology of our teaching system*, providing us with the keys for its understanding, examining the constraints within which it functions, bringing into the open the debates which surrounded the introduction of mixed schools. By comparing the experience of different countries – which is always useful in works of this nature – they have broadened the scope of their analysis, highlighting the specific experiences of different countries and the variations in chronology. And they show us that, in the history of education, the phenomenon of discrimination against women has only recently been recognised and that, behind the apparent neutrality of the classroom, there are hidden power relations defined by the man/woman dichotomy. And, with the serenity of those who know that co-education and equal opportunities in Portuguese schools is still an

unmarked path whose course will have to be determined as we go, they leave us a message: to denounce you have to know; only by acknowledging gender questions in pedagogical practice can you qualitatively transform it. Let's join them along that path...