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A Gender Perspective on Educational Facilities

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A gender perspective on educational facilities

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This article explores the planning and design of educational facilities from a gender perspective, with a view to guiding future research and policy analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Students' economic and social realities are very different across the globe, and there can be noticeable differences in enrolment figures according to gender in almost all countries. In most OECD countries much evidence points to higher drop-out rates for boys in upper secondary education with a 78% completion rate for males and 87% for females. In addition, the number of women students has been increasing, especially in tertiary education, and in most countries girls now outnumber boys. The picture is very different in developing countries, where girls can be severely under-represented.

Results from international studies show that higher rates of female enrolments in education equate with higher levels of economic productivity, lower infant mortality, lower fertility and longer life expectancies (World Bank, 2009). Nevertheless, a myriad of factors can make attendance more difficult for girls and, particularly in the poorest countries, their education is still largely ignored (UNESCO, 2003).

This article does not aim however to articulate differences between developing countries and OECD countries. It explores an issue that concerns us all in some way or another. Yet few studies have been conducted in the area of gender and educational facilities (UNICEF, 2009). This article explores how to adopt a gender perspective in the analysis of educational facilities. It argues that social relations are influenced by the physical environment, and that social and physical aspects are often interlinked. Although difficult to measure, including a gender perspective in international research and other projects on educational facilities would help to explore this relationship further.



To do so, it briefly describes current work on gender and presents three challenges to gender equity in the context of educational facilities. The paper then reflects on how men and women use educational spaces, drawing on examples of completed school projects. It then explores gender-related issues and related research, and considers how to incorporate a gender perspective on educational facilities.

SOME PROGRESS IN THE INTERNATIONAL STUDY OF GENDER

The OECD's work on gender mainstreaming gained momentum following the OECD/Nordic Council Ministerial Meeting on Gender Mainstreaming, Competitiveness and Growth in November 2000. At the meeting, ministers stressed the need for gender mainstreaming to enhance economic productivity and competitiveness (OECD, 2002). In 2008, the OECD report *Gender and Sustainable Development. Maximising the Economic, Social and Environmental Role of Women* (OECD, 2008a) described women as one of our most underutilised resources: better use of women's capacity could increase economic growth, reduce poverty, enhance societal well-being, and help to ensure sustainable development throughout the world. The report also suggested that focusing on women in development assistance could lead to a more rapid and pro-poor economic growth than "gender neutral" approaches, where individuals rather than women are the target group. This issue has also been highlighted by the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Network on Gender Equality, in reference to the gender issues enshrined in the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the 2008 Accra Agenda for Action (OECD, 2008b).

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OECD and other international organisations are currently undertaking new studies of the role and impact of gender in various policy areas, including in education. A study of gender differences in student performance at age 15 has presented evidence of the different ways in which boys and girls learn and progress in education (OECD, 2009a) and a study of equity in education has looked at policies to improve student performance of different groups. It is therefore relevant to study how educational facilities may cater to differences in gender in order to improve performance.

CHALLENGES RELATING TO GENDER EQUITY IN EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES

The built environment can be seen as a cultural artefact that is embedded in the process through which individuals build and form their identities. Facilities embody cultural values and imply standards of behaviour (Rendell *et al.*, 2000). These standards are transmitted to designers through decision-making authorities such as planners, architects and surveyors.

However, there are three significant challenges to implementing a gender-neutral approach in educational facilities. The first challenge is that the decision-making professions are traditionally male-dominated, and few women have a voice at the design or policy levels.

A second challenge relates to the greatest dilemma in feminist theory, *i.e.* the struggle to articulate the multiple voices of women simultaneously deconstructs the concept of gender. The implication for planning and design is that spaces must be designed in such a way that the different needs of men and women are articulated, but at the same time present inequalities and power relations are not re-established (Eduards, 2002; Scott, 1996).



A third challenge is that few studies have been conducted on the issue of gender equity and educational facilities. This is despite a growing interest in the subject over recent years among researchers and policy makers, especially in the areas of sustainable development, health, safety and access. Another related field of research is architectural theory (Larsson, 2006); this will be explored in greater detail below.

HOW MEN AND WOMEN USE SPACE

Men and women use space differently because they have different responsibilities and experiences (Anthony, 2001, Bowlby *et al.*, 1986; Matrix, 1984; Wigley, 1992). An educational space designed only for girls or women would differ from that designed for boys or men, and space would therefore be utilised differently. There are many examples of sex-segregated educational institutions that are designed to meet the supposed different gender needs of students (Boxes 1 and 2).

Nevertheless, there is a danger in perceiving men and women as each having different needs, for this can lead to expectations based on norms that will continue to produce and re-produce gender roles. It can also lead to exclusion of those individuals who feel that they do not fall into either of these two categories (Blaise, 2005). Therefore it may be more appropriate to adopt a gender-neutral perspective and look at differences between individuals instead of between men and women (Blaise, 2005; Davies, 2003a, 2003b).

Adopting a gender neutral perspective does not, however, ensure that everyone's needs are treated equally. The "one size fits all model" does not always seem satisfying (EOC, 2005). Teachers, administrators and students might report that there is no gender disparity at their school or university, but this is because we rarely question these norms in our daily lives. And it is only by seeing and acknowledging these norms that change can be brought about. It is therefore useful to consider social differentiation in any planning model, rather than focusing solely on gender differences (Becker, 2009).



Box 1. Community centres in Turkey

Multi-purpose community centres were established to help overcome considerable gender disparities in south-eastern Turkey. Although Turkey mandates 8 years of compulsory education, this policy has not increased female participation in this region. Community centres have therefore developed alternative teaching methods and learning opportunities for female students. At the Sanli Urfa Centre, for example, focus groups have been used in an effort to understand how the schools could better serve the needs of its female students. Students underlined the importance of female-only spaces (Harris and Atalan, 2002).

Box 2. The return of the single-sex school

Brisbane Girls' Grammar School in Australia is a single-sex secondary school with 1 150 female students. The building was designed to provide an environment adapted to teenage girls and their ways of learning and interaction. The school was designed by Michael Banney, who used a student-centred approach to develop a sustainable design (Bell, 2007).



Studying how children use the physical environment can help us to understand how children conceptualise gender inside and outside the classroom, thus identifying themselves as girls and boys. There are however many competing and contradictory discourses on how children struggle to define and redefine themselves as gendered beings. To see the physical environment as a container for these kinds of social structures can inform boys' and girls' use of space and then lead us to question why they interact with the environment in certain ways (Alloway, 1995; Davies, 2003a; 2003b; MacNaughton, 1996; 1998).

GENDER-RELATED ISSUES

The next section of this paper explores a number of related areas of research that may inform the question of the relevance of educational facilities in a gender equity discourse.

Architectural theory

Architectural theory analyses the influence of gender on the planning, construction and use of buildings and cities (Pepchinski, 2009). This demands a broad knowledge of gender discourse between men and women over the course of history, which has been carefully examined by feminist theory. There is large body of literature analysing how gender structures are produced and re-produced in society (see Further Reading section).

Sustainable development

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In recent years, environmental sustainability has been mainstreamed into all spatial policy areas (Greed, 2000). Some in the planning field have perceived this environmental focus as a threat, drawing attention away from gender issues. However, sustainability as defined in the 1992 Rio Declaration includes economic viability and social equity, two components which could be used to draw attention to gender issues. In Scandinavian countries, gender considerations have been integrated into strategic level planning and sustainability programmes, which illustrates how gender issues can be an integrated part of sustainability (Greed, 2005; Folkesdotter, 1997; Horelli, 2000).

Safety

In his background paper for the *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2008*, Baudino (2007) raised the issue of school and classroom environments in relation to gender equity. He concluded that in African schools, the "parlous state of school facilities", as well as the high cost of attending schools, are significant obstacles to girls' enrolment.

Mixed gender classes are one of the most reported problems by parents, who are concerned about their children's safety. Schools are intended to be places of learning, growth and empowerment, yet they can often be sites of intolerance, discrimination and violence, in which girls are disproportionately the victims. Closing the gender gap requires confronting the sexual violence and harassment that leads to underachievement and high drop-out rates among girls. Gender-based violence in schools exists in all parts of the world. Where school authorities have failed to acknowledge its existence, it has often flourished and become institutionalised. Efforts are needed to empower girls and women and to sensitise men to the needs and rights of girls and women (UNESCO, 2003).

Another safety-related issue is the need to improve access to schools for girls. When schools are located far away from home, students cannot attend because of safety issues and economic reasons. Therefore educational planners must find new strategies to bring schooling closer to the students. This has led to experimentation with multi-grade classrooms, double-shifting and satellite schools. Another way

to address these concerns is by building boarding schools, which can motivate parents to send their daughters to school. This would allow students who have completed primary school to continue their education. Safe housing for female teachers is also important, particularly when countries are struggling to recruit and retain teachers (World Bank, 1988; 1989).

Health

Some parents refuse to allow their children to attend school due to inadequate sanitary facilities. Often toilets are unusable, there may not be separate lavatories for males and females, and there can be inadequate privacy. Furthermore, sanitary facilities may be located outside the main school compound. Students may therefore be at risk of bullying and sexual violence, which is especially a concern for female students. When constructing new sanitary facilities, it is important to engage students in the planning process and to conduct sex education courses to inform students about physical changes during puberty (INEE, 2009).

Another factor affecting girls' participation in education is the cost and availability of sanitary materials. Schools should be able to dispose of solid waste, have proper drainage and there should be adequate water for personal hygiene and toilet cleaning (INEE, 2009). Lastly, evidence suggests that girls with disabilities are less likely to be catered for than their male counterparts, and less likely to be provided with medical support.




INCORPORATING A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES

Acknowledging that gender structures are embedded in the physical environment and that a gender perspective can be implemented in the planning process is the first step towards addressing gender disparities. The next step is to develop strategies about how to best meet the educational and other needs of today's and tomorrow's learners (Becker, 2009; SOU, 2004). There are different methods of including gender awareness in the planning process: by simply "adding" a gender perspective or by incorporating a gender-aware perspective. Adding a gender perspective, however, implies that the gender-neutral approach is being questioned (Larsson, 2006).

Gender researcher Caroline Moser examines two approaches to incorporating a gender perspective into the planning process for educational facilities: **strategic gender needs** and **practical gender needs**. **Strategic gender needs** seek to address the big changes needed in society's attitudes and expectations in order to achieve equal rights. This demands more knowledge exchange and gender-related discussions and should be undertaken in conjunction with a more **practical approach to gender needs**, for example, by providing educational spaces and practical tools to enable women to access education. This can lead to long-term strategic changes in education. This perspective can be especially useful in the context of developing countries (Moser, 1993).

To develop an effective plan, gendered and disaggregated data are needed. It is true that many of the issues related to gender are cultural, qualitative and sociological in nature; nevertheless, their impact can be seen and observed spatially, and can to some degree be measured quantitatively. To be able to identify the problems associated with gender bias, it is essential to develop comprehensive statistics. **Gender auditing** can be defined as the process by which gender mainstreaming is achieved, which involves establishing indicators and standards, and checking outputs, policies and priorities (Greed, 2003a). These kind of data are needed for all stages of planning, especially the early ones, to identify problems, develop and guide policy and monitor progress (Greed, 2003a; Larsson, 2006).



Although in many countries architecture remains a male-dominated profession, according to international data, the proportion of female graduates in the field of architecture and building in OECD countries increased by nearly 10 percentage points between 1998 and 2007. In two OECD countries, Greece and New Zealand, more than 50% of students graduating from architecture and building courses are women (OECD, 2009b). However, studies show that the presence of women in the planning process does not guarantee gender awareness. It rather depends on personal perspective, age, family and other factors (Beynon, 1997; Greed, 2003b; Larsson, 2006). While architects and planners can be seen as a fairly homogenous group, the people for whom they plan are far more diverse. The importance of involving users in the planning process is very well documented (Larsson, 2006).

Checklists can also assist in incorporating a gender perspective in the planning process, especially in the early stages. Although few studies have assessed the use or effectiveness of such tools (Cavanagh, 1988; Whitzman *et al.*, 2009), such an approach could encourage participation and ownership of the project among stakeholders and improve the strategic development of the planning process. However, if checklists are used at the end of the planning process, the risk of reinforcing established viewpoints increases (Larsson, 2006). The first step is to explore the usefulness of a gender perspective on a specific project (Greed, 2005) by asking a few simple questions, such as:

- What is the gender breakdown of people involved at each stage of the project?
- What are the implications of the project for women and men, and how and why are they different?
- Are men or women likely to be the main beneficiaries of the project?
- Is there any evidence that there are any gender inequalities?

CONCLUSION

Incorporating a gender perspective does not mean seeing the world from a female perspective. By exploring men's and women's use, needs and experiences related to educational facilities, expectations and perceptions can be expressed and explored. This in turn allows us to probe deeper into questions of why there are differences and if design can support or hinder gender equity. Although there is a dearth of literature and research in this area, studies do indicate that gender structures are embedded in the built environment. Quantitative and qualitative research methods should be used to collect data on how and why men and women use space differently, and to further explore how gender relates to issues of sustainable development, health, safety and access.

Gender issues need to be discussed at an international level, and always in relation to the local context. To successfully mainstream gender issues in any public policy area requires long-term policy planning, commitment, time and resources. This is no less important in the context of educational facilities. Exploring these issues in greater depth will help to improve educational access, equity and participation for all learners.

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