

# **GENDER EQUALITY IN SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION**

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## **Abstract**

Gender equality and sustainability in the use of natural resources are two of a side of the same coin. Claims of sex-based superiority reflect the same mentality as hostile approach that humanity has taken toward nature which has led mankind to subjugate and exploit nature to satisfy human needs instead of comprehending that as part of the greater whole. Humanity must seek to live in harmony with nature. Proposing a shift in paradigm, the paper discusses the need for new methodologies and approaches in education to achieve the goal of harmonious co-existence between sexes. This paper examines a number of issues surrounding cultural change, proposing the implementation of a liberating approach to socio-environmental education based on equality in gender and a balance between "masculine" and "feminine".

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**Keywords:** Gender equality, socio-environmental education, social relations

## **Introduction**

What does the end of violence against women have to do with achieving sustainability on our planet? Does women's participation in the decision making process at all levels have an impact on the protection of natural and patrimonial resources? How is gender equality related to sustainable governance? Although these and many other issues have been the focus of debate for many years, they are still not sufficiently integrated within the daily agencies of people or organizations that work to address socio-environmental concerns. A few occasions that are commemorated world-wide, e.g. International Women's Day (8 March) and World Environment Day (5 June), call to mind two other, much larger social movements that arose owing the second half of the 20th century: the environmentalist movement and the feminist movement both relate directly to sustainability, a subject which in recent years has come to

occupy a prominent place on the agenda of the diverse forums and international conferences of the United Nations and other international organizations (Moema, 2011).

Until the second half of the 20th century, women in most societies were denied some of the legal and political rights accorded to men. Although women in much of the world have gained significant legal rights, many people believe that women still do not have complete political, economic and social equality with men. Schulthesis (2009), opined that throughout much of history of western civilization, deep-seated cultural beliefs allowed women only limited roles in society. Many people believed that women's natural roles were as mothers and wives . These people considered women to be better suited for childbearing and homemaking rather than for involvement in the public life of business or politics. Widespread belief that women are intellectually inferior to men led most societies to limit women's education to learning domestic skills. Well-educated, upper-class men controlled most positions of employment and power in society.

### **Gender Equality**

World bodies have defined equality in terms of human rights, especially women's rights, and economic development. UNICEF describes that gender equality “means that women and men, and girls and boys, enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities and protections. It does require that girls and boys, or women be the same, or that they be treated exactly alike. The United Nations Population Fund has declared that women have a right to equality. “Gender equity” is one of the goals of the United Nations Millennium Project, to end world poverty by 2015; the project claims, “Every single Goal is directly related to women's rights and societies where women are not afforded equal rights as men can never achieve development in a sustainable manner. Thus promoting gender equality is seen as an encouragement to greater economic prosperity. For example, nations of the Arab world that deny equality of opportunity to women were named in 2008 United Nations – sponsored report that this disempowerment is a critical factor crippling these nations' return to the first rank of global leaders in commerce, learning and culture (United Nations Report, 2008).

### **Efforts to fight inequality (Historical Perspectives)**

The movement towards gender equality, especially in western countries began with the suffragette movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then there was a change in relation to women's property rights in marriage. In the 1960s, a more general movement for gender equality developed based on women's liberation and feminism. The issues were women's rights. The idea was the women should have equal rights with men. However, actual changes in attitudes continued to focus on specific issues. The movement resulted in anti-

discrimination laws-changes to attitudes to equality in education opportunities for boys and girls have also undergone a cultural shift. Some changes came about by adopting affirmative action policies. The change has also involved changes to social views, including “equal pay for equal work” as well as most occupations being equally available to men and women, in many countries. For example, many countries now permit women to serve in the armed forces, the police force and to be fire fighters. Also, as increasing number of women are active in politics and occupy high positions in business (Amoros, 2005).

Conversely, men increasingly are working in occupations which in previous generations had been considered “female occupations”, such as nursing. Also, in the home, while acknowledging the biological differences between men and women, most notably in relation to child bearing, the role of child rearing is not as widely considered to be an exclusively female role. Another manifestation of the change in social attitude is the non automatic taking by a woman of her husband’s surname on marriage, as well as a wife being free to pursue her career after marriage (Adegboye,, 2009).

### **Gender-based Social Relations - A Definition**

Gender-based social relations according to Reginal (1999), emerged as a focus of sociological analysis in the 1970s, when a number of feminist scholars in the Subordination of Women Group, a project supported by the British University of Sussex in Brighton, re-examined the theories of Max and Engels which assert that the production of goods and services forms the sustainable base for society. This group turned a spotlight on the importance of reviewing the existing imbalance in the interrelated processes that synthesize two major aspects of human life: production and reproduction. According to her, in the course of analysis it became evident that the natural and logical order behind human life has been reversed. Goods and services are no longer produced for the sake of reproduction - to nourish and recreate life. Human resources are no longer invested in the services of life. It is rather the case that the reproduction and sustaining of life has become adversely affected by and subordinate to the production of goods.

Amoros (2005), corroborated this by stating that over the last few millennia, the social roles prescribed for men and women have one element in common: men have remained in charge of producing goods and services, with the result that the exercise of power over the economy, government, policy-making and religion have been defined as masculine domains, while women have been relegated to the role of biologically reproducing human life and society while performing all the other domestic functions involved, mainly household chores such as cooking, cleaning, taking care of the children, the elderly, and the sick, and attending

to the needs of their husbands. Not being recognized as "work", these duties have not been ascribed any value.

This perception of the relationship between women and men has had a direct impact on the structures of society. Women have been regarded as inferior to men, including in a legal sense. Under the laws of ancient Rome, women were considered to be the property of men. According to the Napoleonic Code, they were no longer regarded as property, but were considered intrinsically dependent on their fathers and later on their husbands. In the absence of a father or husband, a woman was subordinate to the men of the house who were responsible for maintaining the family reputation: brothers, uncles, or grandfathers. It was not until 1988, with the ratification of the present Constitution, that the principle of equality guaranteeing equal social and human rights for both women and men was explicitly recognized in Brazil (Moema, 2011).

Benhabib (2012), opined that in recent centuries, the social roles designated to men and women have created new differences, reformulating and deepening social disparity between the sexes. The advent and gradual rise of science in opposition to the wisdom of humanity -knowledge to a large extent accumulated over the course of history by women - had the consequence, among other things, of excluding women from scientific endeavours for many years, preventing them from being officially recognized as scientists, inventors, or artists. The arrival of industrial technology divided the household unit by creating the concept "worker" and "housewife", the latter being socially recognized in her identity as 'the worker's wife'. This reinforced the idea that only work performed by men was of value, and that women-specific domestic labour was not.

With the mass inclusion of women in the labour market, their dual role became more apparent. They not only contributed to society as reproducers of the human species, but also as workers involved in the production of goods and services. As such, they had a vested interest in economic, social, and political issues. This recognition brought about the need to rethink the traditional roles which society assigned to women and men. Masculine roles concentrated almost exclusively on the sphere of production, without any obligation to perform the activities associated with the reproduction of life that women had assumed for thousands of years, and without the consideration and respect that we owe to the cycles of life.

Significant social changes have been taking place against this background. The situation has even influenced the development of new laws to formally define new behaviour patterns. The presence of women in today's world who exist alongside men as equal human

beings with full citizenship rights is progress that cannot be reversed. As observed by Reginald (1999), revealing socio-economic, cultural, political, and environmental reality in this manner changes the old paradigm and has a bearing on the construction of knowledge. It influences the use of technology and the practices of social organizations.

### **Gender Balance and Socio-Environmental Sustainability**

In challenging the hegemonic paradigm “development at any cost”, the second United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (Eco 92 or Rio 92), was without doubt, a momentous occasion in that it opened up dialogue on socio-environmental sustainability.

But what does it mean in the sense of the Treaty on Environmental Education to make our societies sustainable in the context of global responsibility? The following definition aptly describes what this entails: A sustainable community is one according to Freire (2000) that:

- does not waste financial resources;
- does not exhaust natural resources or degrade environmental resources;
- value and protects nature;
- leverages local resources to satisfy community needs;
- value domestic work and recognizes gender needs and the different roles of men and women in the implementation of public policies;
- increases livelihood and income-generating opportunities for everyone;
- seek to diversify local economies;
- protects the health of its inhabitants, placing emphasis on preventive medicines;
- promotes universal access to housing and environmental sanitation services (water supply, sewerage, drainage and vector control, refuse collection and disposal);
- guarantees universal access to public transportation;
- ensure food security and supply for the population;
- guarantees and improves education, training and recreation opportunities;
- preserves historical patrimony and local culture; and
- guarantees society’s participation in decision making processes.

To ensure all the relevant dimensions of sustainability – ecological, environmental, demographic, cultural, social, institutional, and political. It is absolutely necessary to secure balance and harmony in relations between women and men while at the same time cultivating difference in order to fully ensure equal human rights. An implicit assumption in this

paradigm is that balance is necessary between masculine and feminine in all living beings, and that this has direct implications for equitable relations between women and men.

Capra (1993) summarizes the basic principles that characterize this paradigm as follows:

- **Interdependence:** the “web of the life” is a network of relations in which the success of the whole depends on the success of each individual, and vice versa;
- **Energy flow:** relations between men and women in search of sustainability are directed in the sense of permanent co-evolution, both of the human species as well as of humanity with other species, in the same way in which solar energy controls the ecological cycles;
- **Association:** women and men, as well as all species, realize a subtle interaction through cooperation and competition which aim at the search for balance;
- **Diversity:** appreciation and respect of the differences between women and men enrich the level of the relations that permeate the web of life;
- **Co-evolution:** men and women, as well as all other species, evolve by means of constant interaction between creation and mutual adaptation.

### **Gender Equality in Socio-Environmental Education**

The world view that guides our thoughts, behaviours, languages, and our individual as well as our collective practices, is reflected in all our programmes and educational materials (Trajber and Manzochi, 1996). According to Moema (2011), the new paradigm of relationships between human beings and other living things evokes the need to integrate gender education into socio-environmental education. By introducing the gender perspective when examining similarities and differences between women, and the implications thereof on the relationship between humans and other natural species, it becomes possible to distinguish the natural from the historical.

To respect and cultivate human rights while respecting and cultivating human diversity is the condition sine qua non for making the qualitative leap that will permit us to develop a balance between the feminine and masculine dimensions inherent in all living things. In this sense Amoros (2005), opined that the basic issues dealt with in environmental education are always the same: what vision of the world do we share? What are the beliefs, principles, and values that guides our actions? Recording to her, learning to conduct gender analysis and propose affirmative environmental education initiatives means learning to reframe man/woman relations that were created by society thousands of years ago. These concepts that still impact the two important spheres of life: production and reproduction.

Learning of this nature requires us to use unique approaches and methods, and to adopt new practices in daily life.

### **Summary**

Education as most of adults experienced it was not based on the values and principles of sustainability and the notion of equality between masculine and feminine. And even today it is common to find educators, including socio-environmental educators, who still adhere to the domination/subordination ideology in the relationship between men and women and between humans and nature. It is consequently crucial that we introduce gender analysis and affirmative gender action into education, and that we make socio-environmental communication part of the agenda of learning communities. Issues pertaining to gender and the environment must figure in every topic that concerns us, whether it be the culture of water, sanitation, agriculture, sustainable consumption, biodiversity, selective harvesting, or any other subject.

### **Recommendations**

To effect any significant change with respect to social relations and the environment, we must begin by using appropriate words and by sending non-verbal messages that reaffirm equality between the sexes and that value socio-cultural, sexual, and racial diversity. If we hope to forge new relations between and among people and with the rest of nature, we must necessarily include these parameters in materials that are used to teach environmental education. The following list of recommendations by Viezzer & Moreira in Trajber & Manzochi (1992), is intended as a guide to foster analysis and affirmative gender action in the media.

1. Avoid sexist language (writing, audio-visual electronic) sexist language reflects the patriarchal structure of society. One of the most prominent examples is the use of the word man as a collective word for all human beings, while the word woman only refers to the females of the species. A number of international and national initiatives have contributed significantly toward building awareness about sexist language. UNESCO issued a set of guidelines entitled *Redação sem Discriminação* (writing without discrimination) (1996). On 8 March 1996, the National Council for Women's Rights and the Brazilian Ministry of Education signed a Declaration of intent in which the Ministry undertook to identify and combat sexism in language used in educational materials, and to make this procedure the norm for all publications geared to primary school pupils. In 2004, as a result of the First National Conference on Public Policies for Women, special emphasis was placed on the subject of "inclusive and nonsexist

education” in the Action plan adopted by the Brazilian presidency’s National Secretariat of policies for Women. These documents serve as a basis for examine the language we use. Our task now is to learn new forms of good practice. This includes, among other things:

- Eliminating all expressions containing or conveying a disqualifying or discriminatory message to the effect that women are inferior, absent from public life, and defined and identified in relation to man. There is no justification for maintaining expressions such as “history of man”, “modern man”, and “man who has reached the moon”, which are so common in educational books, and especially in books on natural history. Discriminating words and expressions of this nature must be replaced by more interesting and respectful terms such as “humanity”, “human species”, “men and women”.
- Promoting the inclusion in texts and illustration of images that represent equality, cooperation, and partnership between men and women – adults, young people or children of different racial and ethnic groups, age groups, religious affiliations, and social positions; and eliminating those containing disqualifying or discriminatory stereotypes.
- Depicting situations in which both men and women are portrayed in turn as heroic figures, acting in defense of nature and demonstrating a positive relationship with nature.

2. Address complex themes without making them complicated.

Issues connected with environmental education are generally complex, but this does not mean that texts about them have to be complicated. To translate ecological vocabulary, expressions, and terminology-obviously without resorting to reductionism is an obligation of communicators and a demonstration of respect for the readers and learners. It is an art to make difficult subject matter understandable by using short sentences, simple words, and constructions that are as tangible as possible for the people to whom the material is directed. The use of analogies facilitates understanding, stimulates visualizations, and aids the memory process. The idea, above all, is to engage the attention of the learners, to make an impact, and to bring them new information that will improve their vocabulary and enrich their world. And to generate a climate that leads to mobilization instead of to apathy and inaction. Working with information that generates a negative feeling of powerlessness in the face of environmental problems is part of the old paradigm.

3. Be constructive instead of just denouncing.



Countless solution exists. The key is to make them visible. Denunciation is an important vehicle of transformation, but unless it is accompanied by proposals for new ways of dealing with reality, it amounts to empty rhetoric. The emphasis therefore must be on achieving a balance between denunciation and constructive proposals, solutions, and ways to overcome the problems we are facing. One of the main problems in many educational materials and teaching aids is the fact that they generalize the destructive action of “man”, without specifying that said “man” is white, western, part of a predatory civilization, and an unquestionable driving force in the phenomenon of globalization. It is always important to understand destruction in the context of its agents. One of the most distinguishing characteristics of patriarchal thought is confrontation, combat, the lack of cooperation, and competition. This either translates into aggression or results in the opposite reaction, namely indifference and apathy. In end effect, corrupt language serves to drain the vast universe of insight open to those who embark on the search for more harmonious relations with their environment.

For instance: before saying that rivers are dying, why not show how life flourishes in rivers that are still alive, and in rivers that are being rehabilitated? This does not mean that we ought to ignore the reasons behind the death of rivers. On the contrary, the truth of this fact will have greater impact if learners can comprehend the processes and connections behind life in rivers and how it benefits countless species, including the humans. In addition, there is a great deal of experience with river management that is not generally known. Why shouldn't we call attention to such cases, describe them, and bring them into public focus and in doing so transform the “media” into “channels” of “educommunication” (Viezzzer and Rocha, 1992).

At the same time, there are entire societies and cultures that live in harmony with nature. There is much to learn by way of “demonstration”, especially when we are acquainted with societies and cultures that identify with nature in a positive sense. Essentially, environmental education is an affirmation of life.

#### 4. Reconstruct the links in the chain of life

According to them, it is not about utilitarian values in the sense that doing better job of preserving the environment will allow us to reap more of its benefits, both now and in the future; nor is it about human pleasure and satisfaction about not destroying what is beautiful because it is natural. It is because we are part of the chain of life, the flow of life, because we are links in the chain of life that has always existed. That is the point for us. Being in “the lap of mother nature” makes us part of something greater. It places us in communication with nature on a different plane, and makes our relationship with other living species one that is

not based on hierarchy. It is a leap from the status of “master of the world” to “brothers and sisters of the universe”. This, by the way, is what makes all the difference.

5. Encourage the desire to share rather than judge

For a long time now environmental education has been synonymous with rules and norms of the type “keep off the grass” “No smoking”. “No littering” “Don’t destroy the plants” “Hunting prohibited” “Keep our forests green” warnings and admonitions of this nature are infinite in number. The extremely normative approach makes it difficult to generate the kind of empathy which is so necessary for environment learning. Environmental education must prevail not by imposing obligations to protect life, or by taking a legalist approach to the environment based on concepts of blame and duty. Instead it should underscore the pleasures of being alive. It should kindle a deep sense of fulfillment in living and in sharing life in a system that integrates all living things in the spirit of wisdom and solidarity.

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