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Because they're girls. Overcoming inequality

Consuelo Flecha García

L'istruzione delle donne ha subito cambiamenti quantitativi e qualitativi negli ultimi due secoli, ma senza influenzare tutti i paesi. Qui si comincia con l'analfabetismo e la disuguaglianza, di cui soffrono ancora migliaia di donne in tutto il mondo, nell'accesso a una formazione che offre libertà e autonomia. Affonda le sue radici in una concezione dello status femminile all'interno del pensiero secolare di tutte le civiltà, che l'Occidente convertì in legge quando si disciplinarono i sistemi di istruzione nazionali nel XIX secolo. Questa procedura rallentò il cambiamento di mentalità e proseguì giustificando la scarsa scolarizzazione delle bambine nei paesi con i più bassi livelli di sviluppo. La volontà da parte di diverse organizzazioni internazionali di invertire queste dinamiche, è evidenziata nelle relazioni e nei documenti che versano sulle misure e gli aiuti al servizio dell'istruzione per le bambine e le donne.

The education of women has undergone quantitative and qualitative changes for over two hundred years, but the pattern has varied widely across countries. Illiteracy and inequality still affect a huge number of women throughout the world, with access to an education providing freedom and autonomy often encountering difficulties. The roots of this lie in a conception of the status of women within the secular thinking of all civilizations, which the West turned into legislation when regulating national education systems in the nineteenth century. This slowed down the change of mentality and continued to justify the low rate of schooling of girls in countries with lower levels of development. The will of different international organizations to change these dynamics is demonstrated by reports and documents which insist on measures and programs for the education of girls and women.

Parole chiave: educazione, sviluppo, storia, agenzie internazionali.

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The medievalist and lecturer at Sorbonne University Paulette L'Hermitte-Leclercq reflected some years ago that “one of the central questions in the history of women could be formulated as follows. A girl has been born. Of all the factors which are going to determine her life here and now, what is the importance of her sex?⁴⁸”. The answer will vary depending on the age and area we are referring to, but the content will basically be the same, transversal and still apply to a majority of women throughout the world. To help us put detail on that we are guided by indicators such as social mentality, economic context, family conditions or the personal characteristics and expectations which have accompanied the growth of each girl through history.

⁴⁸ Paulette L'HERMITTE-LECLERC, *La mujer en el orden feudal (siglos XI y XII)*, in Georges DUBY-Michelle PERROT, *Historia de las Mujeres*, Taurus, Madrid, 1992, Vol. 2, p. 252-253.

These circumstances continue to play a part in the present day, as in many countries the present and future for girls is worse than for the boys growing up with them. Periodical reports published by a range of international bodies remind us that being born a girl still means receiving less food if there is a shortage; having limited possibilities of attending school on a regular basis; knowing that her real home will be the family of the man designated as her husband; having very early pregnancies, etc. This explains why girls and their education have featured prominently in social improvement programmes because they are the first to suffer the consequences of having been born female. This fact has just been brought to our attention and consciences by the Taliban's attack on Malala Yousafzai, in Mingora, Pakistan, on 9 August 2012. This adolescent publicly defended the right of girls to go to school, to receive an education; she claimed her right to want to learn, to be taught, and she had been receiving threats for this attitude for some time before the attack.

This is something that is repeated all too often, despite the fact that we are currently witnessing with a mixture of curiosity and expectation the course of events involving women in different societies of this globalised world. A wide range of new lifestyles are emerging, conditioned by factors such as cultural heritage which feeds the customs, traditions and values of each society and its capacity for progress, and the impetus made by the women themselves and the support of legal regulations⁴⁹. Interest has grown in acquiring a better understanding of the direction of these changes which are observable in our daily lives, which happen around us, due to the repercussions they are having on our personal lives and on the collective dynamics of relationships and coexistence. This interest is not restricted by geographical barriers: it extends to the lives of women in other continents, in spite of the thousands of kilometres which separate us. Laying bear this reality has not just led to the will to contribute to more dignified living conditions for the entire female population, but also to the desire to discover the course of their lives in the past, the daily activities that have occupied the majority, the exceptional facts of some of them and the outstanding achievements in the case of a few; a journey through the successive stages of history up to the present-day.

This wealth of experiences reveals barriers and renunciations, but also freedom and achievements. It has not always been subjection in women's lives. The information uncovered demonstrates the value of their contributions over the centuries in the domestic home, where they developed their skills and knowledge to make this a place of shelter, affection, care and growth of the people living there, the same for dependents – in childhood and old-age – and autonomous people – adults – who relinquished that condition in the family setting to care for

⁴⁹ Simonetta ULIVIERI, *I silenzi e le parole delle donne*, "Historia de la Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria", 26, 2007, pp. 169-180.

others. These experiences are also useful for underlining the consequences of the absence of women in those roles which they should have occupied; among these, and with that double perspective, we refer to education and teaching. Grandmothers, mothers, servants, wet-nurses, teachers, etc., always educated each new generation of girls and boys with the purpose of transmitting attitudes, knowledge, skills and behaviours that the socio-cultural and economic surroundings had distributed dichotomously in the group on the basis of sexual difference⁵⁰. Not all women obediently mirrored those mandates which educational action was making them assimilate; we know about women who tried to introduce less uniform indicators, when it was possible, when it came to thinking for themselves in the area in which they lived and in relation to the future they dreamt of.

IT IS NOT INDIFFERENT BEING A GIRL

In these early years of the twenty-first century, close scrutiny of the statistics describing living conditions in the world reveals the great disparities which exist within the same population group, and which affect both rural and urban settings. Poverty and marginal groups are a source of disadvantage for many girls and boys due to the lack of community social services, or through difficulties in gaining access to those offered to everyone in countries and cities of different continents. One of those services is education. Evidence of this is provided in *The State of the World's Children 2012* with an analysis of the barriers and obstacles which come between them and a dignified life⁵¹.

The lack of equity affects girls and women more, because of customs and norms which limit their exercise of the rights that correspond to them. The most basic of these is the right to attend school which is often hindered and conditioned by the lack of family resources, having to help with domestic work, the distance separating home and school, or harassment or sexual violence, etc. But this lack of equity also permeates classroom culture, where girls must learn material selected on the basis of androcentric criteria.

We live in a world of stark contrasts where in one part girls are guaranteed a place at school from the day they are born, attending school for an ever increasing number of years and with all the resources they need for an effective and socially valuable period of learning; while elsewhere, the majority live surrounded by circumstances which interfere with their dream of a systematic education.

⁵⁰ Consuelo FLECHA GARCÍA, *Genealogía*, in Anna María PIUSSI, Ana MAÑERU MÉNDEZ, *Educación, nombre común femenino*, Octaedro, Barcelona, 2006, pp. 46-65.

⁵¹ UNITED NATIONS CHILDREN'S FUND, *The State of the World's Children 2012: Children in an Urban World*, UNICEF, New York, 2012.

The persistence, and even increase, in the situations of inequality which they experience, despite successive recommendations and intervention programmes organised by international organisations, have recently led the United Nations to dedicate each 11 October to the *International Day of the Girl Child* to raise awareness about girls' status throughout the world⁵². It was commemorated for the first time in 2012, with its theme being child marriage which conditions crucial aspects of a child's future, starting with relegating and/or interrupting the educational process. In turn, the premature ending of schooling raises the probability of early marriage in many countries. The aim of this agreement is to convince governments to end this unfair practice by introducing laws raising marriage age to 18 years⁵³. The intention was also to accompany this decision with measures and resources to eliminate the gender gap in primary and secondary education; encouraging the abandonment of prejudices leading to dismissing girls and offering them fewer opportunities; reviewing a culture in which the transmission of that produced and made by men prevails, in which a male value hierarchy forms the criteria for success.

This was not the first time this proposal had been made; it had already formed part of previous decisions, such as those included in the document entitled *A Human rights-based approach to Education for All: a framework for the realization of children's right to education and rights within education*, in which UNESCO urged states in 2007 to review their legislation "eliminating laws that allow girls to marry before the compulsory school-leaving age or allow differences in school-leaving ages or numbers of years of compulsory education for girls and boys"⁵⁴. The focus was here and particular emphasis was laid on questions conditioning gender equality.

Its figures offer a positive image of the effort that has already been made in this area. They underline the general increase in educational opportunities for both sexes over the last four decades, with a particularly important increase in rates of access, sustained attendance and progression of girls in primary, secondary and higher education. But they also highlight significant differences in the rate of positive development, not just between different regions in the world, but also between countries in the same region. The analysis shows that the profiles of parity between sexes at all educational levels are determined by factors such as

⁵² On 19 December 2011 the General Assembly of the United Nations approved Resolution 66/170 which declared 11 October as *International Day of the Girl Child*.

⁵³ Coinciding with that celebration there have been press reports that several Salafist members of Egypt's Constituent Assembly are proposing a change in the law governing minors to reduce marriage age from 18 to 16 years, or even less when, according to declarations of one of them, the bodily maturity of the girls allows it.

⁵⁴ UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION, *A Human rights-based approach to Education for All: a framework for the realization of children's right to education and rights within education*, UNESCO, Paris, 2007, p. 53.

national wealth, geographical location, areas of study or the place that women occupy in each society. It also highlights that, despite many girls continuing to encounter obstacles over access to education, when they *do* enter the education system they tend to remain at school for longer and obtain better academic results than boys.

In countries where schooling is universal, the difficulties we find refer more to the androcentric model which is generalized and propagated through curricular content. The price for reaching this level of equality is an excessive standardisation of women with male needs, interests, styles and aspirations; references which have to be assimilated and copied to be accepted into the male world – activities, spaces, social positions, etc.- they are being allowed to enter⁵⁵.

In one way or another the progress, paralysis or regression in female education, lives side-by-side in all countries with different types of obstacles related to varying levels of rigidity of gender mandates. This calls for an increase in the number of women teachers in certain contexts and the elimination of doubts over the capacity and roles of women; it requires an end to male indifference, or even opposition, to the promotion of women, and an end to physical and sexual aggression. And in all countries, teachers need to be trained about what it means and requires to encourage opportunities for an equality which does not cancel out sexual differences or personal and cultural diversity.

TAKING PART IN INSTRUCTION. A LOOK AT THE ORIGINS

The secular education of girls, and also boys, did not include the learning of contents that were for centuries considered as basic literacy: the command of reading, writing and basic mathematical operations. Although the reasons for this omission were different for the two sexes: in the case of girls, it was because they were female; while for the boys, it was because of the social group they belonged to or the skills required for their future occupation. To undertake the tasks that occupied the majority, this type of knowledge was not required, so the idea of spending time, effort and economic resources on the acquisition of knowledge with no practical application did not even arise or merit discussion in family settings.

However, when at the start of the nineteenth century the ruling classes began to assume responsibility for public instruction as one of people's rights that the French revolution had brought to the fore, they understood that this way of proceeding –which for women meant upholding traditional education-, was vital to enable more equal social relations between men. Thus, in the wake of the events

⁵⁵ Carmen RODRÍGUEZ MARTÍNEZ (Comp.), *La ausencia de las mujeres en los contenidos escolares*, Miño y Dávila, Madrid, 2004. Rosa PEÑALVER PÉREZ, *¿Qué quieres enseñar?: un libro sexista oculta a la mitad*, Instituto de la Mujer de la Región, Murcia, 2003.

and projects that filled those years with ideological and social effervescence, nation states decided to confer on the entire male population, because they were male, the condition of citizens, of subjects with rights and obligations. As a consequence they embarked on the design of a system of public instruction to prepare the new generations to make viable the desired and urgent political, social, economic and cultural transformations, as proclaimed and disseminated by the Enlightenment⁵⁶. By virtue of this agreement, for example in Spain, *universal male* schooling became a principle approved in the Constitution of 1812. The same pattern was repeated in other Western countries.

School instruction was not just seen as far removed from the formative needs of women, public authorities also saw it as inopportune, because it would divert them from their natural feminine social condition. To justify this, they focused clearly and rationally on the biological justification of the functions that had been assigned to them and on the vital service that, complying with them, they contributed to that liberal and progressive society –the direct recipient of the benefits expected from this and other political decisions. This was the reason for which an instruction in cultural contents was not appropriate, according to intellectuals and governors. It was the responsibility of families to initiate girls in specific female learning, as this could be acquired within the domestic setting.

However, despite this approach adopted for the female population, it was not long before they had to listen to opinions which underlined the social benefits of study and knowledge for the women who wished to learn. This was probably due, amongst other reasons, to the contradictions inherent in the assignment according to sex of more erudite cultural opportunities, without taking into account abilities and interests. As a good which had to be accessible and shared, the subject of female education became the focus of much debate and formed part of the range of measures which governments, and not just families, had to take.

During the nineteenth century, the possibility of opening schools up to girls was included in the legislation regulating the education system; but as they were perceived as a risk, the objective of their education was limited to little more than the development of sewing skills, to a practical, useful knowledge that would prepare them for the family responsibilities they would assume in adult life⁵⁷. With delays in the creation of schools, and half-hearted attention to girls, a gradual introduction of literacy contents took place. These skills became habitual in a growing number of Western countries as the twentieth century progressed, ac-

⁵⁶ Barbara CAINE, Glenda SLUGA, *Genero e historia: mujeres en el cambio sociocultural europeo, de 1780 a 1920*, Narcea, Madrid, 2000.

⁵⁷ Pilar BALLARÍN DOMINGO, *La escuela de niñas en el siglo XIX: la legitimación de la sociedad de esferas separadas*, "Historia de la Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria", 26, 2007, pp. 143-168.

accompanied by a gradual increase in the academic and cultural content taught in the classroom.

This school programme highlighted the underlying domestic purpose, the family life horizon for which its contents were designed, the social structure which legitimized the agreement for female education, and the social needs it tried to address. This all revolved around two axes which accentuated, firstly, the maternal destiny of their bodies and their dedication⁵⁸, and secondly, the aim of guaranteeing the acceptance of a family hierarchy of male lineage. The emphasis on convincing each woman that by acting in this way, she was contributing to the greater effectiveness of men in the most important affairs, paid off for a long time, as too many women have had to submit to these impositions as the only possible way of staying alive.

A biased planning that continues to work in different parts of the world, while in other countries women, either individually or in groups, dared to break the appearance of unanimous acceptance that had prevailed until then. The entry into secondary and university education in the second half of the twentieth century illustrated the desire of some young women to obtain a broader cultural background and prepare themselves for professions reserved for the middle classes, the social group which these women came from. These decisions caught the education authorities off guard and led to strict measures of control for those women who wished to attend classes, reaffirming with this stance that the real purpose and use of instruction that they had to receive did not lie in the university classrooms⁵⁹. These messages have been reiterated with more or less intensity across different stages, moments and cultures, and have led to tremendously unequal learning opportunities over the last two centuries⁶⁰. The living conditions of the majority of women in the world have not favoured their access to or the time they remain at school for long enough to acquire basic learning. Too many girls have left and continue to interrupt their education to attend to family needs or go into early marriages.

⁵⁸ Irene PALACIO LIS, *Consejos a las Madres*: "autoridad, ciencia e ideología en la construcción social de la función materna. Una mirada al pasado", "Sarmiento. Anuario Galego de Historia da Educación", 7, 2003, pp. 61-79.

⁵⁹ The first female university student in Spain registered in 1872-1873, with others enrolling in the following years; but the authorities prohibited the entrance of new female students from 1882 to 1888. When they recognised the right of women to enroll once more, their presence inside universities was controlled to guarantee order in the areas where they attended classes. Consuelo FLECHA GARCÍA, *Las primeras universitarias en España*, Narcea, Madrid, 1996; Ídem, *Women at Spanish Universities*, en Elisabeth de SOTELLO (ed.), *New Women of Spain*, Lit Verlag, Münster, 2005, pp. 397-409.

⁶⁰ Consuelo FLECHA GARCÍA, *Education in Spain: Close-up of Its History in the 20th Century*, "Analytical Reports in International Education", 4, 1, November 2011, pp. 17-42.

INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENTS

The fact that societies, through tradition or as a result of decisive political changes, have privileged the educational opportunities of boys, has marked organizational tendencies and social practices which make it difficult to bring inequality between sexes to an end. This mentality has progressed in some countries, but it continues to apply in others, compounded by the economic conditions affecting a high percentage of the world's population. The scope of this problem has been focusing the concern and commitments of multinational institutions over the last two decades. In 1994, the Action Program approved at the International Conference held in Cairo on *Population and Development*, included among the basic conditions for improving the quality of life of mankind as a whole, a sustained effort to wipe out discrimination against girls⁶¹. This priority was reiterated one year later in Beijing, at the Fourth World Conference on Women, whose debates contributed decisively to the consensus needed among the international community to work towards gender equality in education⁶²; it underlined the important repercussions that this objective would have for girls' education. The figures provided by UNESCO in its World Report on Education in 1995 showed that the probability of girls registering for school was lower than it was for boys: in the 6 to 11 age group it was estimated that a fourth of the world's population of girls, 24.5%, did not attend school, while this figure was only one sixth, 16.4%, for boys. However, literacy rates had been rising gradually, being 71.2% in women and 83.6% in men in that year⁶³. The report recognised that "international political commitment in favour of education for women, young people and girls has never been as strong as it is currently. Today most countries accept that female education has to be a priority in their education policies"⁶⁴.

These positions are supported by a reality loaded with traditions, varying across different civilizations, cultures or countries, but with common meanings when we observe them from the consequences that they lead to in the life of the female population. These secular prejudices are used to deny girls opportunities that *are* offered to their brothers. The connotations of gender in social, cultural and religious uses, in norms within the family, in language and in games, frame them within a closed profile of themselves and what they can expect of their lives.

⁶¹ *Los derechos de las niñas en la Conferencia de El Cairo*, "FEM", 157, Abril 1996, p. 16. Also at the World Summit for Children held in New York in 1990, the needs of girls were seen as part of a long-term program to improve the overall condition of women.

⁶² The declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year by the United Nations, gave rise to a series of initiatives including the World Women's Conferences held in Mexico in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980 and Nairobi in 1985.

⁶³ *World Report on Education*, UNESCO, Paris, 1995, p. 19

⁶⁴ *Ivi*, p. 46.

This explains why increasing attention is being paid to the obstacles posed by social customs which are unfair for women, and a political culture that, by denying the priority of female literacy, incorporates girls with restrictions into the classroom; it does little to ensure they remain at school or other aspects which prevent this initial learning, thereby ignoring and undervaluing the limitations stemming from their social condition.

The United Nations has also felt the urgent need to attract attention towards the problems and solutions related to the *advancement of women* in the context of peace and development processes which are needed in many countries⁶⁵. Successive sessions have had the chance to share and compare the effectiveness of the initiatives undertaken in different countries and, as a result, the possibility of changing or reaffirming the commitments undertaken; to analyze – an analysis not always sufficiently critical and rigorous – the barriers encountered, and highlight the good practices which must serve as a reference for those becoming involved in improvements⁶⁶.

EQUITY, A PRIORITY OBJECTIVE

School education must remain a priority for the millions of women who still do not have access to it, due to its decisive repercussions on different aspects of personal growth and well-being of society in general. Health, self-esteem, family management, participation and assuming responsibilities of a public nature – economic, social and political – provide the freedom and autonomy that continue to be denied to many women. It has to be understood that the availability of all educational mediations is vital for girls to be able to develop their lives and follow more human biographical itineraries.

The *World Declaration on Education for All* which the Conference held in Jomtien (Thailand) launched in 1990 to commemorate *International Literacy Year*, mentioned an education of quality at the service of all people without any form of exclusion. This represented the start of international action to support the education of girls on an equal footing with boys. Efforts were made to ensure the will and commitment of countries to achieve access of the entire school-age population to basic education, in conditions of quality, specified in terms of the resources invested and results of effective learning, both of which are the fruits of imperatives of justice and fulfilment of equality.

The real picture became clear over time –there was an assessment in Amman (Jordan) in 1996-, showing that the rate of progress was too slow, with there still

⁶⁵ In 2000, the title given to one of its special working sessions was *Women 2000: gender, equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century*.

⁶⁶ Inés ALBERDI, *Temas y desafíos de la igualdad entre los géneros. El liderazgo de las Naciones Unidas*, “Revista Pensamiento Iberoamericano”, 9, 2011, pp. 263-280.

being 900 million illiterate people in the world at that time, of which two-thirds were women. The domestic tasks in which girls had to collaborate continued to weigh heavily, and they continued to be seen as the only important learning for the future.

This asymmetry in the exercise of the universal right to education, besides denying equal opportunities, became a way of limiting the contribution of educational processes to development.

Illiteracy and poverty do not just go together, they feed off each other, as UNESCO pointed out in 1995⁶⁷ and has reiterated on several occasions; they affect the respect of human rights recognised in the overall population of women where this relationship is more frequent. Today we are particularly aware of the benefits arising from female literacy. We know from well-documented experiences that beyond the level of individual development that it encourages, its repercussion when women become adults, in their interpersonal, occupational, family and social relations, the results of literacy affect their society as a whole, generating progress and collective well-being.

Ten years after the *Fourth World Conference on Women* held in Beijing, a UN session for the review and appraisal of the *Beijing Platform for Action*, approved in 1995, emphasized the importance of member states periodically reviewing the application of these agreements, because many countries were falling behind in compliance of the objectives set and difficulties had been encountered when putting them into practice.

Eliminating inequalities between boys and girls in primary and secondary education again focused debate and conclusions in 2002 during the UN Special Session on children. Once more, contributions reflected the belief that educating children was an essential element in making a world fit for girls. Parity at school was included in the Millennium Development Goals: promoting equality between genders and the autonomy of women by making primary and secondary education universal. The date set for its achievement was 2005, with the assessment in that year showing that the goal had not been achieved; making it necessary therefore to continue denouncing the unjustifiable differences in primary school enrolment between boys and girls⁶⁸. It reiterated a goal for 2015 which, given the reality, appeared too ambitious: access to all levels of teaching in equal conditions of entrance and continuity.

These highly optimistic projects encapsulate the capacity to raise awareness about a problem which is so conditioning for the people who suffer it, girls, to whom UNICEF has dedicated several annual reports analysing *The State of the*

⁶⁷ Ivi p. 47.

⁶⁸ This assessment was made in a technical consultancy meeting of the *United Nations Initiative for Child Education*, which was presented in 2000 in Dakar (Senegal) during the World Education Forum. UNICEF published the information in *Gender Achievements and Prospects in Education: The GAP report*, 2005, 100 pp.

World's Children. In 2004, with the title *Girls, Education and Development*, it underlined the close links of educational processes with other indicators of individual and collective development. From a firm conviction about the role that women play in their surroundings of coexistence and productive activity, this report stated that investing in girls' education assured, at the same time, not just their own rights, but also those of boys, and gave impetus to programs of qualitative growth of any country, insofar as many aspects of growth depend, to a great extent, on the actions of women⁶⁹.

The publication *Progress For Children: A Report Card on Gender Parity and Primary Education*, by the same organization in 2005, recognised that while in some places parity in access to school had been reached, concerns existed about its real effect on "equality between genders and the empowerment of women"; the fact that these effects were not always observed in those countries which had a high number of girls at school, raised doubts about its efficacy. And for good reason, it is not enough for there to be a growth in the number of female enrolments, as illustrated in countries which have introduced universal schooling, because a wide range of variables influence opportunities for equality and enhancing self-esteem and personal autonomy. We see, for example, how girls do not find in their study materials women whose important contributions may be identity references for them; nor do they find recognition of the activities performed by mothers, carers, and all those who sustain life and affection. At a later stage, they find how the best levels of education do not necessarily mean greater employment opportunities or equality when they enter the labour market. And even in places where this bias does not exist, to the awareness provided by wisdom and knowledge, we have to add political actions, institutional support, and recognition from the surroundings.

THE EDUCATION OF MOTHERS

Even in societies with a long tradition of schooling, there are adult women who in their early years did not attend school, or did so in a very precarious manner, or received a very deficient education. Thus, today, when we ask older women about their education, the information they give and the memories they have, point to the domestic purpose of the teachings they received, either at school, or in the transmission of knowledge and skills from their mothers.

The testimony of these women when they are asked to talk about their childhood depicts a real scenario in which the process of learning took place. They

⁶⁹ *The State of the World's Children 2004. Girls, Education and Development*, UNICEF, New York, 2003, p. 147 pp. In previous reports it had highlighted how illiteracy in girls had a greater knock-on effect. *The State of the World's Children 1999: Education*, UNICEF, New York, 1998, p. 132 pp.; and *The State of the World's Children 2002 Leadership*, UNICEF, Nueva York, 2001, 104 pp.

come from different generations with their dates of birth ranging from 1910 to 1943. While this is a long period of time, there are clear similarities in relation to their educational experiences. In the voices included here of women born in Spain between 1910 and 1920, when they were asked about their early education, they recall that this was performed by their mothers. Legislation at that time stipulated a period of compulsory education from six to twelve years⁷⁰, but even if they did go to school they scarcely remember this. They are in no doubt that they learnt the important things from their mothers alone: *"My mother educated me, I learnt everything I know from her"*. B. C. *"My mother taught me many things, and she also taught me many things that were useful for when I got married"*. A. B. *"We girls were always with our mothers, to learn our domestic work; I stayed with my mother until I got married, and my brothers were with my father learning to work the land"*. B. L.

In some cases, this maternal education also included the first basic skills of learning; those which a literate person had to know. This was the case for one of the older women: *"My mother taught me; I knew how to read when I was five and I used to read the back of the calendars"*. A. F.

Another two interviewees who were slightly younger, born in 1928, gave the same reply: the direct involvement of their mothers in the education of their daughters and also their sons: *"My mother took charge of my education; I was always with her"*. B. D. *"My mother took charge of educating all her children"*. G. C.

This learning for adult life came from those blessed with wisdom and the necessary skills; from those whom, at the same time, had the greatest interest and put love into this task, guaranteeing real quality of learning for life. This knowledge and style of education whose origin and genealogy was female, was passed down from mothers to daughters with experience being the main guarantee. In other words, this was knowledge born primarily from practice, which is why it was not uniformly repeated in the passage from some women to others.

Aspirations of equality between men and women, recognising this principle as a social good, went on a very slow and turbulent journey towards acceptance by individuals. Women, individually and as a group, are proof of how difficult it can be to benefit from the opportunities that modern societies have put within the grasp of the population. The resistance that has come between objectives and achievements has been justified basing themselves precisely on the set of responsibilities added to biological maternity; keeping themselves to these roles meant limiting the areas in which they moved and the possibilities within their reach. The importance of being mothers had to serve as a compensation for the distancing from any other personal activity they hoped for.

⁷⁰ A Law of 23 June 1909 modified one of 1857, extending compulsory schooling for boys and girls from 6 to 12 years, which meant doubling the number of years compared to that stipulated in the previous Law, from 6 to 9.

When today we hear opinions about legislation approved in several countries to reconcile personal and family life with work, we realise how a mentality we thought had evolved still persists because it points to women as the natural beneficiaries of this sensible project, because they still suffer the burden of overlapping working days: the domestic one, which they have not been able to give up, and the professional one which they do not want to renounce.

Time has revealed the importance that a better education can also have for women, thinking about the benefits that it could provide, firstly, to children and husband at home and, in addition, in the labour market into which they could be incorporated. The half-hearted conviction and commitment of governments and authorities, together with the lack of resources or resistance of some families, slowed down this progress. The issue of literacy was not the same in cities, where occupational opportunities were more diversified, as it was in the rural world where traditional duties still remained. It also depended on the existence or not of sufficient close references reporting the benefits of instruction and, of course, a vital reference, especially in the case of girls, was the action of women teachers with the girls and their families.

A woman born in 1930 told her grand-daughter that she had not been able to go to school for long, but she believed that she had made the most of that fleeting time, because she thought it had given her the opportunity to learn, apart from needlework, "a bit of reading and writing". *"I didn't have time to go to school for long, but I remember that they taught me work and some letters, so I managed to learn to read and write a little"*.

Several women mentioned that their time at school was very brief. They were not able to go for longer because they had to help their family, either in their own home, or outside in another job to help the family economy. That is the case of B.D. who was born in 1928: *"I left school when I was 8 because I had to help them in the fields"*. The recollection of B.L., who was born in 1916, points in the same direction. She could not remember the exact dates but she reconstructs what happened by recalling what she understood to be a very generalized behaviour at the time: *"I don't remember when I left school, but it would have been when I was needed by my family, because when we were a bit older they took us out of school to put us to work"*.

M.G., who was born in 1915, admits that she was not able to go to school and never learned to read and write. She spent her childhood years and youth helping at home, first with the chores her mother gave her, and later with a job which allowed her to contribute economically to the family livelihood: *"I cannot read or write because I wasn't able to go to school when I was little; I had to stay at home to help my mother. And when I was a bit older I had to go out and work to help my parents, to take some food home"*.

Things did not change in the experience of A.B.M. who was born in 1942. Despite being younger than the others, she endured the same circumstances of

little schooling and early work in a difficult time in the history of Spain, during Franco's dictatorship: *"I started school when I was six, but I had to leave soon afterwards because I had to work to help my family"*.

An insufficient period of literacy has consequences in people's lives and it has been suffered and is still suffered mainly by women. That is why they have been forced to accept a style of life and presence that they have not chosen: one marked by dependence. It has deprived many of the possibility of autonomy, of a more erudite culture, of greater self-esteem, of a different status in their family and social surroundings⁷¹. The wide range of levels of literacy is a reasonable indicator of the level of inequality between men and women which societies have generated consciously and which is still reproduced in millions of women round the world.

The comment made by C.B., born in 1930, and who appears to have attended school for longer, is highly explicit concerning the objective underlying the education she received: study to "attend to my husband adequately"; an objective on the horizon of her biographical itinerary to which the school contributed with its teaching: *"I went to school, that's where I learnt what little I know; they also taught me housework so that when I got married I would be able to attend to my husband adequately"*.

This formed part of a fairly generalized social mentality, although it was not the only one. While these attitudes were widely extended they did not stop some families from having other plans for the education of their daughters, although the content of what they studied suggests it did not reflect a very complete programme. That is the recollection that S.V., born in 1920, has of her father: *"My parents wanted their daughters to study. Of course they did, it was important; my father used to say to me: I'm going to get you to learn the piano. I'll talk to a friend and ask him to teach you the piano. And he said to my sister Mercedes: and you the violin, because she loved the violin. Choose the one you want, and as I wanted the piano... but then the war came along and that was the end of it"*. This was an education for young middle-class girls, less obliged to do domestic work but, in any event, its purpose was to please other people, it served as an adornment to make them more attractive and useful.

THE PLEASURE OF LEARNING

At girls' schools they did not neglect the service they had to provide to the model of coexistence of that time. From their classrooms they contributed to disseminating and training in what was supposed to be the female contribution to a society which had opted for the central role of domestic affairs in the lives of women of all social classes. This responsibility was put before any other differences between women such as available economic resources, cultural level or

⁷¹ M^a Guadalupe PEDRERO, Concha PIÑERO (coords.), *Tejiendo recuerdos de la España de ayer: experiencias de postguerra en el régimen franquista*, Narcea, Madrid, 2006.

social and family circumstances: “*In relation to the education of my grandmother Isabel (I. M. M., born in 1927) –says her granddaughter-, and the priorities they had, my grandmother received something like individual classes in housework. She told me that she had a female teacher, but outside school, they taught her to darn, embroider, etc. She speaks very well of that, as if she gave it more importance than what she learned at school. In fact, she remembers it more clearly. That teacher was a linen dressmaker, and she says that when the teacher had a lot to do she told the girls to help her*”.

The education that schools gave to girls is revealed by the memory of those who experienced it. Their memories of the years they spent in the classrooms, or their absence from them, gives us an idea of what was important at the time of their childhood and adolescence. They bring us closer to what happened in those years, and particularly to the meaning and purpose that it had for those attending.

The steady incorporation of girls to this proposal for literacy, in the context of the mentality of many families little given to changing the opportunities for women, was accompanied by the fear of its repercussions on the model of relations between women and men, which was clearly more beneficial for men if these educational objectives remained in place. That education was the framework which guaranteed the stability of the social system it served.

This interest may have been responsible for the slow rate at which girls' schools were opened by the authorities, together with families' lack of financial resources, besides not seeing the use of keeping daughters at school when they had work waiting for them at home. There was a lack of awareness of the future value of learning in a context of economic transformations which also required a more qualified education for women.

This wide range of reasons slowed down the increase in female literacy rates, either due to the lack of schools for girls, or due to the lack of continuity of attendance where they were created. Thus in 1950 in Spain illiteracy rates – people of ten years or over – were 22% for women, and 12% for men. Ten years later, this rate was still at 18% for women, but had dropped to 9% for men. In 1970 it was reduced to 12% and 5% respectively, and by 1981 it was at 9% and 4%⁷². The difference between women and men dropped in those three years, but female illiteracy continued to be twice that for men; although the age distribution of these figures showed that illiterate women were concentrated in older age groups.

In a parallel development, many young people entered secondary and university education; female students preparing for occupational settings requiring

⁷² Mercedes VILANOVA, Xavier MORENO, *Atlas de la evolución del analfabetismo en España de 1887 a 1981*. [*Atlas of the development of illiteracy in Spain from 1887 to 1981*], CIDE, Madrid, 1992, pp. 315-345.

higher educational levels became increasingly visible, and this in turn encouraged others who wanted to study, who had the will, but were not always able to do so.

That is the missed opportunity mentioned by a woman born in 1925, A.G.N. She was an intelligent girl and the school said she had potential, but she was not able to continue learning as long as she would have liked. Asked whether women studied university degrees at that time, she gives an answer which involves herself personally: *“Well,... there were a few women who managed to study degrees, but there weren’t many, because we didn’t have the economic means and furthermore, in my case, I had no mother and so I had to stay at home to attend to my father, because he worked; I had to do the cooking and keep the house tidy. But in my time men studied more than women. At school I was very clever, and the nuns said I was a girl who could study, but the circumstances prevented me from doing so”*. Helping the family and the financial costs of studying kept many young women away from higher education programmes.

We asked P. L., who was born in 1917, whether she had been to university. Her answer reveals the same limitation for doing so – money –, despite her interest in and dedication to studying that she demonstrated. She had conserved and cultivated that attitude over the years by learning the subjects her children were studying to be able to help them: *“No, for financial reasons; in those years money was scarce and there weren’t many opportunities for going to university. I learnt everything I know because to educate my children I would read the next lesson they were going to learn, and that way I learnt many of the things I know today”*.

Longer and more generalized educational processes in Spain had to wait until the economic development of the 1960s. The authorities tried to rectify the previous deficiencies and gaps with more persuasive and effective measures which were supported by families. The General Law on Education in 1970 and the arrival of democracy in 1975 marked a watershed⁷³. Women and their will to make the most of this new situation played a decisive role in this change. They contributed to the acceleration of this process with a raised awareness of the situations of injustice in which they were made to live, with a more outspoken defence of their rights, with higher levels of education reached by new groups of women, with the proximity of each opportunity which could not be missed.

This movement of renewal also involved those adult women who had not been able to study in their childhood or adolescence or who had forgotten what they had learnt. They returned to the classrooms to make the most of the culture they were owed. And they did so with satisfaction, constancy, and effort. The opinions expressed by some of these women provide a range of feelings which are rich in nuances. L.T., born in 1930, says: *“I would have liked to study and have more freedom, but life is not what one wants; I had to live in a time when you had to work; and life wasn’t like it is today. Although it’s never too late to learn. You know that I have gone*

⁷³ Gloria NIELFA CRISTOBAL (ed.), *Mujeres y hombres en la España franquista: sociedad, economía, política, cultura*, Editorial Complutense, Madrid, 2003.

back to the adult school and I do my homework; I also really enjoy it and my teachers help me a lot. If my husband could see me, I'm sure he wouldn't approve; he was very sexist and thought that a woman's place was at home".

The pleasure of studying and its relation with freedom is confessed with yearning, and with composure they accept that that was the moment they had to live. But after all this time, and convinced that age is no impediment, she is grateful to learn what she recognises would have been impossible in the presence of her husband. The illusion to learn, to make up for lost opportunities, makes them go to school overcoming the obstacles that sometimes surrounded them. This is reflected in the experience of A.B.M., born in 1943, which she comments on in detail: *"Yes, I've gone back to study. After I had grown up I was given the chance of obtaining the secondary school certificate and right from the start I was interested in the idea, because one of my illusions was to learn to read and write, and not feel that I was illiterate. I thought a lot about it before enrolling because I was ashamed about what everyone might think, but in the end with the help of the teacher who pushed me on I did finally do it. To begin with a lot of people laughed at me, but I'm really glad I put my name down and I'm pleased, and I think it has been one of the best decisions I have ever made. I would like to have the chance to go to higher education but in this village there aren't many opportunities of that type. What is more, whenever they propose some activity it takes a lot for people to take part and put their names down, and sometimes the project does not take place. Another problem is that sometimes the timetables coincide with working hours and means we can't do the courses they are offering".*

Life is not like one wants it to be, and it is never too late to learn. Furthermore, they really enjoy themselves; they fulfil their dream to learn to read and write, and no longer feel that they are illiterate. That is why they are convinced that returning to study has been one of the best decisions they have ever made. Those circumstances are very different to the ones experienced by C.M., also born in 1943, for whom studying was not something that interested her in childhood, and she feels no different about it now: *"I would not like to continue my education, I'm not interested in studying; I didn't want to when I had the chance and there's no way I would now".*

WITH AMBITION AND HOPE

Women's movements revolving around feminism which over the last century have raised awareness about the imposed condition of women have provided the humus which in a more or less conscious manner has led to the germination of more ambitious desires and projects in many women, and to discover and denounce inequalities. Of those who have benefitted, few have felt externally united to those who, with sometimes excessive actions, have fought for rights and spoken out within the restricted area in which they had to move. But the echoes of those voices taught them to look at themselves, think for themselves and little

by little open the blinds which came between them and getting to know and relate to the world.

The protagonists of these testimonies, who have told us experiences of their lives, bring to their family, social and occupational duties, a feeling of unequal treatment of women and men that they have endured. That was how A.G.N., born in 1925 expressed herself, about the superior value granted to men and of her chances of having more freedom. About this she stated; *“Men had more possibilities of studying, they also had more freedom, they could go out on their own, go to bars, go out with friends... But we women couldn’t do any of these things; I even remember that on our first dates with our boyfriends, someone had to go with us so we weren’t left alone, to make sure we didn’t do anything we shouldn’t”*. Distinct lives, designated spaces, different care, have fed the consciousness of the women who, on the basis of that perception, have chosen less habitual routes for the female population. These young and adult women are seen as a reference of what is now possible, their actions marking the collective subconscious, and re-emerging in the raised expectations and projects for the much more highly qualified women of today.

The journey made by the female population is not the same in some countries as it is in others. Barriers have been passed skilfully in some, while they remain insurmountable in others. The available resources have conditioned the level of achievements in very different ways, and the momentum of the surrounding context has not always been in a forward direction. But all effort is worth it, all solidarity generates new energies, each illusion removes obstacles. Women must remain vigilant, and persist in their attempts to bring about change to the lives of millions of others throughout the world.

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