

Women's Greater Educational Efforts as a Consequence of Inequality¹

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Abstract

Contrary to Philippe Van Parijs' assumptions, women's greater educational achievements do not indicate that gender inequalities are smaller than assumed or that the efforts to achieve gender equality are overshooting. Being more qualified may be women's best hope to escape poverty, unemployment, or single-parenting, as well as domestic and workplace exploitation. They are thus symptoms of gender inequality, not signs of its disappearance. In addition, they do not translate into greater access to income and wealth, positions of power and authority, social standing, or the chance to have several children, in the same way as they do in the case of men. Having to work so much harder to be rewarded so much less is, as Van Parijs at one point suspects, one of the forms of compound injustice that women face.

Keywords: gender inequality, education, poverty, traditional gender roles, leadership positions

INTRODUCTION

In his second puzzle on gender equality, Philippe Van Parijs draws attention to the fact that, in some places, women are now more successful than men in securing degrees in higher education. This is not true everywhere, but I shall not dispute the trend in some countries and instead note that this already happened in the United States in the mid-1980s (Schwartz and Han 2014: 605). This paper disputes some of the lessons Van Parijs draws from these events.

Van Parijs points out that higher education “has a significant impact (...) on empowerment as citizens and household members” (2015: 84), and so wonders whether “women's emerging educational advantage should then

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be regarded as offsetting (albeit in small part) men's economic advantage" (84). My view is that it is true that education *could* potentially, in some possible world, offset men's economic advantage. In ours, however, it does not. Income and employment gender differentials persist, as Van Parijs admits (84). And, in fact, such inequalities compel women much more than men to achieve higher education. Women's income and employment are much more dependent than men's on qualifications and so, rather than indicating the end of inequality, women's greater educational efforts appear to be just one of the many *consequences* of the pervasive inequality favoring men. Women's greater dependence on extra educational effort is one of the many disadvantages women suffer. It is well known that women, whether they are secretaries or MPs, also have to make a greater effort than men to look good and dress well to avoid mockery. The fact that they try so much harder and sometimes succeed and do look better than men is not a sign of the end of injustice, but just one of the respects in which, as it is often said, women have to "try twice as hard, to be granted half as much." And this makes men like myself wonder why they do persist in trying rather than give up in the face of such obstacles.

1. PROTECTION FROM POVERTY, SINGLE PARENTING AND DOMESTIC EXPLOITATION

One of the most relevant disparities between men and women is what we may call "the poverty risk," which refers to the chances of ending up living in poverty. While in the past there were a variety of reasons why somebody could end up living in poverty and the ranks of the poor were made up to a greater extent of people from a variety of groups, poverty statistics and projections clearly show single (especially, never-married) mothers and their children as making up a large and growing² percentage of people living below the poverty line in developed societies (see Bianchi 1999: 313; Targosz *et al.* 2003: 716). Women's poverty risk is higher than men's. In addition, *poverty* (income inequality) involves additional harms for women because of how deeply and irreversibly it can affect their children and because it correlates with increased risks of violence, harassment, and rape (Whaley 2001: 550), as well as depression and other types of mental disorder (Targosz 2003: 721). In the United States, the poverty risk increased for women relative to

2 In the words of Bianchi, "since the mid-1980s, the percentage of mother-child families in poverty has fluctuated, and the ratio of their poverty rate to that of married-couple families has been higher than in 1984." She also notes that the relative poverty ratio between mother-child families and two-parent families, fluctuated between the 1970s and the 1980s. Nevertheless, in 1984 mother-child families' poverty ratio was still five times that of two parent-families.

men in the period from 1950 to 1980 (Bianchi 1999: 310), precisely the period in which women applied themselves enough to catch up with men educationally. Despite such a great educational effort, however, women's poverty rates still remained higher than men's during the 1990s (Bianchi 1999). Recent data shows that the efforts of European women have also failed to liberate them from a higher poverty risk (see Van Lancker *et al.* 2015: 45-54). Given this explanation of women's educational efforts, the prediction can only be that the trend will remain while sexism remains.

A fundamental factor in explaining women's greater poverty risk is single-parenting, which is strongly connected to their education. Since the chances of finding a co-parent increase for women as they obtain diplomas and degrees, women with higher education reduce their poverty risk, for even if their educational efforts do not secure them permanent employment, they reduce their risk of single-parenting in poverty (Diprete and Buchmann 2006: 4). This offers an excellent deterrence against dropping out of school. Since men do not face the same risk, they do not have the same deterrent.

Education diminishes women's chances of being abandoned while pregnant and giving birth alone, and when the relationship continues, education remains one of the few protections (and perhaps the only protection) women can secure against the man then insisting that since he earns more, she should stay home, cooking and raising the children. This is a risky option for women, as with every pregnancy and every year into the marriage, women become less desirable both in the love and the labor markets, becoming less employable and attractive, not only because of the physical deterioration usually caused by motherhood, but because when children come with the package, women become less attractive both to other men and employers. Meanwhile, the man is promoted, takes senior positions and his stocks in both markets go up. With very poor exit options, the woman then tends to lose her voice and have to accept any deal she is dealt (Okin 1989: 137-8), including affairs or sexual activities she does not want, while living with the fear of being abandoned for another woman, or seeing this happening and becoming poor.

Even renouncing motherhood and staying in paid employment is no guarantee against being expected to do most of the household chores after work (Hochschild 1989: 4). Men need not fear such exploitation, and do not need a degree to gain protection against such fate.

2. PROTECTION FROM UNEMPLOYMENT AND EXPLOITATIVE WAGES

Outside the home, women are also at greater risk of unemployment, underemployment, and unfairly low wages and so need to have more qualifications for these purposes than men. In addition, in the 1980s and 1990s, the value of higher education has been growing faster for women than for men, not only regarding family returns but also the labor market (Diprete and Buchmann 2006). The gap in income between college and high-school educated women increased enormously after the 1980s and remained always larger than that of men (13 and 20). This shows that women's income is more dependent on higher education than men's, for whom high school is often enough to provide adequate earnings. Similar trends appear in relation with access to employment. In the European Union, men's rates of employment are superior to women's in all levels, with the exception of tertiary education (Eurostat 2014). Only at that level are female rates able to achieve men's possibilities to find a job. This provides an additional good reason for women to accomplish higher education: it constitutes an irreplaceable tool for them to achieve levels of employability similar to men's. Becoming well qualified may also be the only way in which women can reduce (rather than eliminate) the rate of patronizing comments, demeaning and intimidating attitudes, and bullying. It seems, then, that educated women are penalized for being women less than less educated women are by all those who select them as either employees or as co-parents or partners. If so, even if female higher educational efforts do not make women wealthier, they are worth pursuing, for it is their protection, and perhaps the only one, against being short-changed at work and at home. Thus, female educational efforts, far from signaling the arrival of equality, are the knotted rope women use to escape the flames of discrimination, domestic and workplace exploitation, and poverty.

Van Parijs doubts there is any inequality "if society gives group B more money and group A better education" (2015: 88). This is misleading because societies do not reserve school places for women or otherwise offer women something it denies to men. To understand something complex we may need to take its simpler constitutive pieces apart and place them together again. But we may mislead rather than contribute to a better understanding if we greatly simplify something and just leave it at that.

3. WOMEN'S LOWLY OCCUPATIONS

Van Parijs admits that “not only do women get paid less than men, but they do so despite studying harder” (2015: 83). He then suggests, however, that this may be because “women choose studies that lead to less lucrative careers” (83). If that is the case, he doubts whether their studying more and earning less could “still be viewed as amplifying the injustice” (83). This speculative monistic explanation, again, stops the inquiry short. We need to ask why women pursue badly paid careers. There are several widely discussed explanations of this phenomenon in the literature. One well-known explanation refers to social conditioning, stereotypes, and the systematic undermining, from a young age, of women's confidence in their being able to perform well in certain occupations. Another theory is that some occupations have low status and are badly paid because so many women work in them. We know, for example, that when women started to occupy the respectable positions of “clerk” and “administrator,” though the tasks remained the same, the position was demoted to that of “secretary” and the salary lowered (see Reskin and Hartmann 1986: 31). A third, extensively documented explanation of why women take such occupations is that other occupations are less compatible with women having to do most of the housework and childcare.

It seems that the three best known accounts do not imply that there is no injustice to worry about, but on the contrary direct us to the existence of other injustices explaining women's actual occupations. Van Parijs would have to show that none of these explanations or any other alternatives referring to some background of unfairness is even partially correct. He would then have to provide a more convincing account which does not ultimately refer to unfair phenomena. It is unlikely, however, that a complete description would not involve elements from all three explanations.

A starting point to analyze the traditional attribution of certain professional pathways to each of the sexes can be the common association between women and childrearing. Regardless of whether women decide or not to have children, most gender differences in employment and economic opportunities are parasitic on the sexual division of labor (Nagel 1997: 318). The assumption of the interconnection between womanhood and childrearing has had the widespread effect of denying women the ability to specialize. The interruption that the need to care for children necessarily generates makes women engage in a whole set of different tasks that involve lower cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic demands, without fully concentrating on any of them (Wilson 2004: 261, 272). Women's work should not be too absorbing or dangerous, as it must always allow them to maintain their socially assumed maternity function (261, 272). Statistical evidence shows that the presence of women in full

time work decreases enormously after the birth of the first child (Paull 2008: F18) and small children at home increase the likelihood that a woman is employed part time (Rosenfeld 1996: 209). The different expectations generally attributed to men's and women's work make it necessary for the latter to choose careers that allow little specialization and great ability to combine childrearing with work outside the household. As a consequence of the assumption that it is them who will have to take care of children, women accommodate their fertility to their labor force participation and vice versa (Brewster and Rindfuss 2000: 289-290).

Consequently, women tend to be overrepresented in fields characterized by their functional or symbolic proximity to the traditional female domestic role, which cover health related careers (nursing), education, and humanities (Charles and Bradley 2002: 581, 590). These occupations provide more poorly paid jobs than those that require specialization, like Math, Science, and Engineering (MSE), which are characterized by the abundance of men (580). The traditional absence of women from MSE domains has also had effects on men's and women's self-perception of their skills. As a result of common stereotypes, women with equal scores in Math tests to men tend to rate their own mathematic skills much lower (Fine 2010: 48). Differences in rating of one's own skills derive also in a different disposition to choose one or another professional path (48), so that, even though women are not necessarily less competent than men for MSE, they will be more reluctant to lead their careers in this direction.

These stereotypes, though, do not only work against women's fitting in particular domains, they also affect their position within different occupations. Both in traditionally male and female spaces, the disproportionate upholding of leadership spots by men hinders women's upwards career mobility (Maume 1999: 1436, 1452). Managers often associate positions of power with the exercise of abilities like aggressiveness and ambition (1436, 1452), which are more commonly coupled with men. There are, however, other abilities, like social and psychological skills or ability to negotiate, which can be more useful in some managerial positions. In contrast, managers' preconceptions about women tend to describe them as 'gentle' or lacking ambition, which creates problems for those who try to climb up the leadership ladder (Fine 2010: 52). The exercise of leadership is simply not seen as feminine, and when women manage to achieve positions of power they are commonly regarded as 'competent but cold' (52). Therefore, the situation of women in access to leadership is hindered by the interplay of first, the assumption of their lack of competence to exercise power and, second, the negative perception of those women who attempt to put leadership-associated abilities into practice.

The traditional exclusion of women both from MSE domains and leadership positions makes it harder for them to fit into those spaces still nowadays. As Radcliffe-Richards (1980: 113) points out, if a group is kept out of a particular area long enough, it is overwhelmingly likely that activities will develop in a way unsuited to the excluded group. MSE careers and the achievement of leadership (both in traditional male and female domains) are currently linked to capacities which are uncommonly associated with women. Men's socially-designed biographies define workplace expectations and successful career patterns (MacKinnon 1987: 36). These long-lasting stereotypes are hard to break for women who, as we have seen, are at the same time regarded as incompetent for leadership and valued negatively when they try to exercise power in 'masculine' ways.

Even if women were truly less attracted than men by MSE careers, that interest is clearly not impervious to outside influence (Fine 2010: 50), so that social stereotypes condition enormously women's predisposition to enter such domains. In addition, the assumption of their lack of competence for leadership blocks women's career mobility both in traditional male and female domains, in which men are commonly 'kicked upstairs' on the belief that they are *too* competent for low-rank posts (50) or that leading is a special talent men have.

Randall Filer offered an alternative explanation of women's lower income. He argued that women are badly paid because they care more about the non-pecuniary aspects of a job and so systematically pick badly paid but otherwise attractive positions (see Filer 1985: 426-37). This did not sound *prima facie* implausible and points to a potential, exonerating explanation which probably helped those who already wanted to do nothing about existing inequalities. However, as J. S. Mill had already argued against Adam Smith, and as contemporary social scientists confirm, the worst paid jobs have a systematic tendency to be the worst jobs in all the non-pecuniary dimensions of job desirability as well. Moreover, women's jobs in particular are worse than men's in twelve of the fourteen non-monetary measures used by Christopher Jencks and his co-authors (Jencks *et al.* 1988: 1352). Thus, "if it is true that women value non-monetary factors more than men, what this shows is that women fair worse than men even in what matters to women most" (Casal 2016: sec. V.b).

Therefore, the fact that women are badly paid, far from being explicable by some exonerating factor, constitutes a clear case of compound injustice. So, the answer to Van Parijs' question regarding whether the fact that women today are both more qualified and worse paid should be seen as "amplifying injustice" (2015: 83) is "yes," because women are worse paid within the same occupation, and the most likely explanations of their being in certain occupations refers to further injustice.

It is also important to note that having an education which those in the opposite sex lack has very different consequences for men and women, regarding non-pecuniary or promotional aspects of their lives. Men with very successful careers in the hard sciences often have several children, while successful female scientists often have no families at all, as they have to compete with men who have housewives that do everything for them whilst lacking one of their own. So a group of well qualified women are childless or even entirely alone. For another group, their qualifications have just brought them additional sadness and frustration in realizing that the price of having children was having to leave their PhD on the shelf and put on their cleaning gloves, while their less qualified husbands pursue their careers. A third group of women lives with extraordinarily high levels of stress as breadwinners who still make sure their children keep medical and social appointments, do their homework, have all they need for school, and either do all the housework or have to chase the man so that things get done to what they consider an acceptable level. For, while getting married does not affect male careers negatively – rather the opposite – (see Wolfinger *et al.* 2008: 394), the weight of housework forces women either to delay their decision to form a family or to forsake it if they want to succeed in the professional world (390-1, 398-402). Having an education, thus, does not bring women the benefits it brings men.

CONCLUSION

Women's educational achievements do not show that the efforts to achieve gender equality are overshooting. Being more qualified may be women's best (or sometimes only) hope to escape poverty, unemployment, or single-parenting, as well as domestic and workplace exploitation. It is thus a symptom of gender inequality, not a sign of its disappearance. In addition, it does not translate, in the same way as it does with men, into greater access to income and wealth, positions of power and authority, social standing, or the chance to have several children. Having to work so much harder to be rewarded so much less is, as Van Parijs at one point suspects, one of the forms of compound injustice that women face.

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