

# VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN TURBULENT TIMES: A NEW PLACE FOR GENDER?

Edmée OLLAGNIER  
University of Geneva

In this paper our purpose is to question the changes through several decades about equality between girls or young women and boys or young men concerning their vocational and professional choices and options. We will mainly refer to a research done in the University of Geneva based on students' files.

## 1. Standards and sectors: pioneers still exist

We could refer to many occidental countries' statistics to show that we find big differences between the school options the boys choose and the ones chosen by girls, but we will restrict our references to the Swiss statistics from the Federal Office's data. The 2008 report on final exams all over the country (O.F.S., 2009) gives some ideas about the situation concerning boys and girls and their choices.

Concerning the C.F.C. (Federal certificate of capacity), which is the first vocational grade to be officially recognised as qualified, we find as examples, the following success rates:

**Number of C.F.C. holders in Switzerland in 2008**

Degrees in:	Men	Women
Trade and administration	3794	6659
Building and construction	5488	786
Nursing	195	1889
Hair-dressing	81	1757
Electronics	1479	34
Engine mechanism	3007	159
Metal mechanism	3423	185

With those detailed facts, we can easily notice the differences between boys and girls. We should have taken the statistics concerning higher vocational degrees as vocational bachelor degrees. We would have found the same type of results, with men investing widely certain fields of vocational education related to specific professions and girls investing others.

But, even with those results, we can find some public institutions doing efforts to change, and most of the time it is related to teachers and counsellors who are convinced that the guidance methods and tools discriminate girls.

### *Guidance tools*

If it is still easy to find books for kids and school books full of gendered stereotypes, we observe that the guidance tools start to show new pictures and discourses to both boys and girls in the French part of Switzerland. First, the language used in the documents includes feminine terminology. The French language implies much more than English to systematise both masculine and feminine expressions for the professions, like: *mécanicien / mécanicienne* (mechanic) or *infirmier / infirmière*

(nurse). Secondly, the official flyers show more and more often young men working in a stereotyped female situation (nurses for example) and young women working in a traditional male job (as mechanic). Third, some counsellors have attended training sessions about gender and therefore changed their attitude and words toward young people coming for help regarding their professional project. But there are still no sessions about gender organised for a whole staff, and we know how some professionals really would need it !

### ***Innovation in Geneva: Cap Egalité***

For years, few counsellors convinced by the gender discriminations at school and for advertising, tried to bring changes in guidance tools, sharing their practices in groups. In 2007 in the Geneva office, they succeeded to create a new specific structure called Cap Egalité (Cape Equality) in charge of pioneers in connection with their schools. The staff has organised a mentoring system with vocational qualified adults, volunteers to help young pioneers in their field (girls in traditional male jobs and boys in traditional female jobs) to increase their self-esteem toward the profession and to share the difficulties they have in the classroom and for their work experience scheme.

## **2. The research: 30 years of students' writings on gender and adult learning**

We had the opportunity to save student's papers related to a course which has been given during 30 years and the purpose of this research has been to question similarities and differences over the years.

### ***From the women's liberation movement to the institutionalised gender studies***

A course called: Women and adult learning has been created in 1975 in the department of adult education of Geneva University by a brasilian researcher who worked with Paolo Freire. Her purpose was to share reflections with students (mostly female) about the liberation of women through educational engagements. At that time, the M.L.F. (Women's liberation movement) was very active in the city and the creation of this course was a link between activists' actions and scientific references.

Then, between 1984 and 1992, a Swiss researcher who worked mostly on gender identities and values with the students has given this course. Between 1993 and 2006, I gave the lecture on this subject insisting on the relationship between training and employment. Those 3 periods of time with 3 different trainers have been marked of course by their different academic and personal backgrounds and personalities, but during 30 years, the students have been able to discover researches and to share ideas about gender and adult education. For about 10 years, other courses on gender have been proposed to students in different departments of our university, and for several years, a Master in Gender Studies is organised through the collaboration between different faculties.

### ***From questions to classified topics***

All the students' papers, almost 500, have been kept in the closets and survived the many removals during all those past years. What are the contents of those writings? Did the students say the same things in 1975 and in 2005? Do the topics of the papers

change? Can we observe evolutions about facts, about their positions? A research has been realised in 2008 to answer those questions and to leave a written document about the story of this course in the institution (Ollagnier, 2009).

The records have been sorted out by categories of topics (titles of the papers and contents after a quick reading), then sub-topics and choices have been done to analyse the material. All the papers have finally been arranged into 4 main categories related to identity and socialisation, ways of knowing, relation to education and relation to work. Few have never been analysed for different reasons (out of subject topics, uncompleted, erased writings).

Today, considering the results of this research, our purpose is to show what kind of evolutions we can observe in the gendered choices toward education, more specifically vocational education and to question the role of turbulent times with contextual socio-economical realities in those choices.

### **3. Obstacles to educational choices: the continuity**

In 2005 as well as in 1975, a lot of obstacles to educational choices are mentioned and they are still the same. We will mention the ones which come back most often in the students writings. We decide here to reproduce their own sentences as mentioned in the book, to give them voice (with our translation) through their interviews' results or with their own opinion.

#### ***Expected roles***

To choose a vocational way which does not look obvious to you and to your environment because it is sexed with the other sex than yours, brings back to the heart of the gender question: a gendered expected role in a society in which male and female roles are clearly defined and determined. In 2003, Jessica wrote:

*“I think that, even with the evolution of mentalities about equality between men and women, each of us is still afraid not to “play” correctly his/her role toward the ones who are close. Evolving in a field defined as the one of the opposed sex might give the impression to people that they are neither man nor woman and that they don't fit with what is expected from him or her”.*

#### ***Socialisation spaces***

A part of the explanation of this fear is related to all the spheres of life to which kids are confronted. First, we find the family as the first space of resistance, as wrote Sabrina in 1997:

*“For a young train driver, this choice has first of all been source of conflicts between her and her parents and brothers”.* Fifteen years earlier, in 1982, Isabelle wrote:

*“In a traditional family, a mother is proud to think and to say that her daughter is “really a genuine little girl” and those mothers don't question their status and their role as housewives.”*

With those words, it is not only the type of vocational choice which is criticized, but also the impossibility to think that a daughter could become something else than a good spouse and mother. Even nowadays, but less than in the eighties, we still find this type of reaction. Other spaces contribute to such ideas. In 1978, Isabelle wrote:

*“Medias, books for children, teachers at school always say that some games are not for girls or for boys. I am shocked by this idea and I would like to know that women will be accepted and considered otherwise than mere housewives”.*

Today, this reality can be perceived even as worse than before as wrote Carole in 2002:

*“In the youth literature, liberation appearances are deceptive. The woman can be a judge, an ecologist activist, a globe trotter, it is always her who prepares family meals and drives her son to his sport activity”.* Do we find this only in the youth literature ?

### ***Differentiated paths***

The sexed choices and the daily realities of pioneers: both young men and young women, has not been mentioned in the papers till the beginning of the nineties, partly because in the seventies and eighties, the pioneers were even fewer than later in many disciplines, and it was not a priority's topic for our students. In 1994, Denise said:

*“Occupations which were before considered as connected with only one of the two sexes are in the process of an opening to the other sex. The fight is at its beginning, it will be necessary to fight a lot, but it is full of promises. I hope they will be fulfilled.”*

Today, we can recognise that the fulfilment is not here in many fields. For example, concerning the educational system and the way male and female teachers are divided up in schools, Aurore writes in 2004:

*“Nowadays, a woman teaching to very young children is a reality, but more the children are growing up, and specially “males”, more the attendance of a woman seems strange to others who wonder if she's strong enough to be respected by “rough” boys”.*

We will come back to those questions later.

### ***Between family and profession***

The students who focused on continuing education questions, have been quite a lot during those 30 years to mention the main problem women have to face: the conciliation between a job and their family. Romaine's words, in 1998 and Alexandra's in 2002, are significant examples:

*“All the burdens which imply the family and the job constitute the main criteria which determinates women's attitude toward continuing education”.*

*“Childcare has not been mentioned by any men, while a third of the interviewed women mentioned it”.*

For young girls, to get involved in a vocational training traditionally opened to men means, even more than for the others, to think about how a future job conceived for men schedules, could be an obstacle to conciliate family and work (Barrere-Maurisson, 2003). Some choices can also be explained by the care of women for others, as wrote Benoîte in 1994:

*“Women don’t look employment security and wages first, their motivations to choose their job is different. They find important to help others through their job and look for relationships and attachments. The teacher’s profession answers to those feminine motivations and so, attracts mostly young girls”.*

Still concerning the teacher’s profession, 10 years later, we can read from Christine:

*“We noticed that the choice of the teaching profession in primary school was related to the wishes to conciliate a professional life with familial and domestic activities which are still widely assigned to them. On their side, men escape or quit this profession to advance with a career project”.*

Those examples, all based on interviews and data, show how some ideas are set in people’s minds, concerning young girls as well as their environment, to face the professional life.

### ***Working conditions***

Concerning the physical aptitudes, we can read in 2005, through Aurore:

*“In a war context, women are hired in the production plants, built machines, boats, arms, and so on. When the nation needs it, women are allowed to replace men. But today, everything tend to suggest that women can not be involved in every kind of job and profession”.*

Concerning psycho-sociological skills in the management world, in 2004, Karina wrote:

*“In an environment in which the rules are established by men, a woman is perceived as intrusive. Men always test her, verify her job and even trap her in specific situations”.*

For whatever type of job, women still have to show and to prove that they are capable to do the same jobs as men on the workplace. The stereotypes continue nowadays to discourage and to exclude women from certain types of paid jobs, from unqualified ones to high level hierarchy’s positions.

## **4. Today in turbulent times: new attitudes, new arguments**

If some writings from the eighties look like recent ones, and if we have to admit that some realities did not change much, we also can observe that new topics are questioned and dealt with the students with many more connections with the limits of educational and employment’s systems. Anyhow, we can notice some optimistic visions of the new opportunities existing for young people.

### ***Educational structures in evolution***

In Switzerland, in 1993-1994, an economical crisis has caused unemployment and a political measure has been taken to develop training offers to unemployed and unqualified young people, as well as some European countries did at the end of the seventies with an increasing number of unqualified young people leaving school without any degrees. From that time, training institutions, as well as the vocational school system, create programs in which young girls are welcome, partly because they express new personal and gendered needs in this end of the 20<sup>th</sup>. Century, as Bernadette explained after interviews of young women in 1993:

*“The motivations consist in the need of wages, the need of certification and the need of autonomy. And they know they will have to face the economical realities within personal potential difficulties like being alone with children and become a single mother with responsibilities, and looking for a challenge driving them to some recognition”.*

At that time, single parents and usually single mothers had to face the difficult employment's realities. For those women, the wish to get a job for socio-affective reasons as Benoîte told us earlier, comes far behind the economical constrains.

In 2010, after a new and more serious economical crisis, it is even more a challenge for some women to obtain a place in the society with an official certification and in perspective of a paid job. But we can find some new opportunities to expect equality between men and women.

### ***Recognition of prior experiential learning***

Aside the traditional way to get vocational and academic degrees, the recent laws and procedures all over Europe allow anyone to apply for a specific degree and to do it through an identification and a request for recognition of corresponding knowledge acquired by the way of experiential skills. In this context, it is possible, more than ever, for women to give some value to their housework as Lucie says in 2000:

*“The society considers as obvious that women might become cooks, accountants, gardeners, teachers and nurses. The housewife exercises all those activities in her home and for her kids, which is finally the only difference. We think that such a discrimination based on the context of the activity is not justified”.*

Amina, in 2004, gave an answer:

*“Even if this recognition of homework is still unusual, we probably enter a new era: the house wives live less in the shadow and the work they do start to be considered as a real job. But they could have fewer obstacles in their daily life if we could observe a better way to share domestic work in between wives and husbands. Men should get the possibility to work part time and to have paternity leaves”.*

Today, if the statistics don't show much differences in comparison of the ones done 10 or 20 years ago and concerning the number of hours spent by men and women to

household or to have part time paid jobs, we can recognise that men are slowly taking a new place in the private sphere, with more concrete attention at least toward their children. In the students' writings, it is interesting to notice that, till around 2000, men were completely absent from the discourses, except if mentioned as representing the patriarchal domination. Today, they are much more mentioned as partners and about the question of sharing activities and taking decisions in the couples.

### ***Girls in male's jobs***

Almost none of the written papers of our corpus before 1995 has been dedicated to the pioneers, either girls or boys. But from then, more and more students focused their reflections on those questions. It is difficult to explain this phenomena except by the fact that there is more information today about those young people who look like heroes as they get implied in the opposite sex way to work. In the students' writings, we still find references to the traditional stereotypes, both related to the classroom and to the workplaces. But there are also some optimistic results as explains Marie-Jo in 2003:

*“The job of abus driver loses a little bit of its “virility” when a woman is also capable to do it. Thanks to the women drivers, women coming to this job opened a door in the masculine myth of the truck driver. For both, women had to prove they could do the job efficiently before being accepted by male colleagues. When interviewed men found women drivers less stressed, with a “cooler” driving and with better relationships with the customers”.*

With the economical crisis and the rate of unemployment, with traditional employers who just started to make efforts to hire women in a context of full employment, we may go back to a previous situation where few women are hired for typical male jobs and employers giving priority to men.

### ***Boys in female's jobs***

The situation is quite different in this case. First of all, the students who wrote about this topic started to do it earlier than for the girls involved in male jobs. We can explain this by the fact that most of the students have always been women and widely directly concerned by work situations in feminine sectors, such as education and health. Secondly, their results usually don't show or prove discrimination against men in traditional vocational training program or work for women, usually because men become or have to become the heroes of the situation very quickly as wrote Marta in 2000:

*“The young men notice that often in the classroom of an infancy school, there are expectations concerning their virility and masculinity, as if, in traditional women's jobs, men had to be and to do masculine things”.*

In the administrative sector, Violette said back in 1992:

*“The young men we met said they realised that after their vocational degree in secretarial work, they would not be able to obtain any promotion in their jobs and they*

*manage to take initiatives to obtain a new status. On their side, women usually keep a frozen conception of the secretarial work”.*

One of the actual questions is to know if the introduction of men into female jobs will give more value to a sector or a profession and if the progressive feminisation of male sectors will be a way to underrate certain jobs.

### ***Between value of work and stereotypes***

In 1980, Doussa wrote:

*“Cultural constraints in each country as well as psychological factors contribute to give to women a self image as having a “natural tendency” for certain types of work like the ones which imply human relationships or service to others. Most of the time, a professional investment is related to familial choices. Even with the feminist protests, this reality still prevails”.*

Since 2000, we have found many questions from students directly connected with specific areas of work, but we still have the same acknowledgement of strong stereotypes (Mosconi, 1994). For example, for men entering the midwife career, the role of their sensitivity is questioned like never before. In companies, the files are written according to male norms and constitute a discrimination against women who have difficulties to get promotions. Some nurses continue to insist on their “nurturing” abilities as women. In a car mechanist’s training, the teacher finds young men aggressive and competitive, and conceiving the car as the following of their ego, the young women being patient, slow and quiet. In a music folk band, instruments are gendered with brasses for men and flutes for women.

### **Conclusion: responsibilities and perspectives**

We could say, as some people easily do, that women are responsible for their attitude toward guidance and careers advising, that it is their responsibility to favour their family role better a career. It is partly true when you consider the messages sent by their environment from their early age. But it is not a reason to accept the situation and we believe that some social actors can play a positive role for more equality between young men and women facing qualifications for the working world.

Most of the time the educational system is blind about gender questions and its organization does not help both learners and teachers to be careful about gender questions. From elementary school to universities, as we saw, manuals, books, subjects or schedules do not help girls and women to feel secure in their learner condition. We even could add that the concrete problem of sanitary installations in vocational schools which are still not done for both sexes. For a few years, in most European countries, we can find specific persons in charge of gender questions in higher vocational schools and in universities, but their status is usually fragile and their room to manoeuvre very narrow.

The teachers and trainers (women like men) are the ones who can play a major role in encouraging girls and young women to get a decent place in our society. With

European researchers and through a gender network in adult education attached to ESREA (European Society for Research in Education of Adults), we try to contribute to a better visibility of lacks and of innovations, which might be done in different educative institutions all over Europe (Dybbroe, Ollagnier Eds., 2003; Ostrouch, Ollagnier Eds. 2008). For now, most of the researches still show that they give more attention to boys than to girls at school, that they encourage young men much more than young women for a career in their field. Some of them even discourage girls to expect a high level position in certain fields of research. All the researches prove that a part of the obstacles to an academic career is related to the professors' attitudes toward young researchers.

Most of those responsible actors are not aware of their own stereotyped views and therefore the potential consequences on young people (Bouchard-Saint-Amant, 1996). To make them aware of gender questions in education has to become a priority for educational institutions and governments, through specific training programs and sessions.

The introduction to the gender questions in the formal program of primary school teachers' education has not been generalized yet. Some European countries start to include it in the teachers' former education; some others include those questions in continuing education programs. In this last case, that means that the ones who attend those courses are usually already convinced by the existence of discrimination between men and women toward education (Solar, 1998). In higher education, both vocational and academic, the situation is even more difficult with trainers and teachers who are often convinced that they already know everything about those questions and convinced that they don't need a specific training.

More widely, the global economic crisis might have huge negative consequences for women all over the world, and more specifically in developing countries (King & Sweetman, 2010). The crisis is pushing women towards the informal sectors of the economy more than ever. The health and nutrition levels could reduce the number of girls going to school, education becoming a luxury in difficult times. Governments have to realise that increasing girls' access to education has beneficial feedbacks on future growth, enhancing women's autonomy to make choices in employment, for their family organization and for their children.

## **Bibliography**

Barrere-Maurisson, M.A. (2003) *Travail, famille : le nouveau contrat*. Paris. Gallimard

Bouchard, P. & Saint-Amant, J.C. (1996) *Garçons et filles: stéréotypes et réussite scolaire*. Montréal. Ed. du Remue-ménage

Dybbroe, B. & Ollagnier, E. (Eds.) (2003) *Challenging gender in lifelong learning: european perspectives*. Copenhagen. Roskilde University Press

King, R. & Sweetman, C. (2010). *Gender perspectives on the global economic crisis*. Oxfam International Discussion Paper. 18 p., Oxford.

Mosconi, N. (1994) *Femmes et savoir*. Paris. L'Harmattan

O.F.S. (2009) *Examens finals en 2008: degré secondaire II et degré tertiaire*. O.F.S., Neuchâtel

Ollagnier, E. (2009) *Femmes et formation : tout change... et tout reste à faire !*. F.P.S.E., Cahier no 123. Université de Genève

Ostrouch, J. & Ollagnier, E. (Eds.) (2008) *Researching gender in adult learning*. Frankfurt. Peter Lang

Solar, C. (Ed.) (1998) *Pédagogie et équité*. Montréal. Ed. Logiques