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Education and Science Workers' Trade Union-Eğitim Sen

### **"We nourished each other"**

Starting in 1978 with my associate professorship thesis on *Sexual Differentiation in Economic Life and the Impact of Education*, I have been working in the field of sociology of education and women and gender in education. Since then, I have worked on introducing courses in the same field and feminist pedagogy into undergraduate and graduate curricula. I was among the founders of academic units such as KASAUM, Women's Studies Department at Ankara University and the Center for Women's Studies in Science, Engineering and Technology at Istanbul Technical University.

It was while I was working at the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Ankara that I participated in Eğitim Sen's activities. When I say that I belong to the '68 generation and that I got to know the opponents of the Vietnam War and the *Flower Children* during my graduate studies in the US, one might think that this crossing of paths was not a coincidence. I was also a member of the progressive-leftist University Assistants' Union ÜNAS, which was founded in the early 1970s, until the March 12 regime shut it down.

Among the activities I worked together with the Women Secretaries of Eğitim Sen, especially Elif Akgül, in the early 2000s, I remember the No to Gender Discrimination in Education Campaign, the formulation of the campaign demands and the preparation of the brochure. We also had organized several gender Equality Trainings for Women Educators.

The importance of the women in Eğitim Sen for me is that they were the representatives of an activism that I always thought was unfinished in myself. Therefore, every time we met, I felt that they nourished me with their courageous and firm stance and the first hand observations they brought from the field. For my part, I wanted to contribute to the creation of common knowledge and memory by trying to trigger their experiences and write about them. Here I will try to convey some of those experiences, which I presented in a paper at the 1st Women's Congress of Eğitim-Sen on July 2-3-4, 2004.

. On April 10, 2003 Eğitim Sen organised a gender equality training program for women members. 31 women teachers participated in the program. In one of the sessions I suggested them to write down their memories, if they had any, that they could relate to gender bias by

reflecting on their own educational and professional lives. The result was a collection of narratives that, although it does not claim to be representative, can be considered a kind of microcosm of our educational life. These narratives helped to see how relations of power and oppression are constituted and how they can be transformed through the microcultures of teachers, students and administrators in schools.

Women trainees said that teachers were the most important actors in this regard. Starting from primary school, both male and female teachers had significant influence over the orientation to occupation and gender roles, the reinforcement of discrimination and the control of sexuality. Gender bias was reproduced again and again by teachers with different areas of expertise, using different legitimizers, whether biological or cultural. For example, one of the participants, Macide wrote: "In the eighth grade, my religious culture and ethics teacher said that polygamy was natural and that a single woman could not meet the needs of a man". In High School, geography teacher of another participant (Nilgün) had said, "No matter what girls become in the future, they should first learn how to work in the kitchen and wash dishes, because that is the most basic job for them."

Whether education took place in co-educational or single-sex schools made no difference in the reproduction of gender bias. Teacher Hale, who had completed her middle and high school education in a girls' high school, stressed that for six years they were constantly indoctrinated to be ladies. Students were divided into *male Fatmas* and *female Fatmas*, and it was the male Fatmas who had the most influence at school. The distribution of domestic roles and duties was reproduced at school and girls were usually assigned cleaning duties. Gender bias was also present in institutional arrangements at all levels. The participants reported that even during graduate study, they could see that lecturers continued to perpetuate gender bias both explicitly and implicitly. At the university, the check-in hours of dormitories were set differently for male and female students. Women were expected to be in the dormitory at 19:00 and men at 23:00. Although teaching is considered a female profession because it best matches caring services, gender bias was also prevalent at the work place in accessing positions of authority and in relations with the environment

However, there were also clues in these narratives to support change. Some female teachers said that they neither experienced any sexism nor recalled such an incident. We might have thought that these examples were related to their level of awareness or that they did not want

to share more unpleasant incidents such as harassment. In this respect, Necla's words were important: "You want concrete examples. In fact, while we experienced many things, we were not even aware that we were subjected to gender discrimination for a long time"

Some women described the gender bias, double standards and discrimination they faced in terms of the educational opportunities and support their families provided for them and their brothers. For some of them, it was precisely at this stage that their awareness and efforts to cope began. For example, teacher Zehra, whose father had told her at the beginning of middle school that she would not be able to continue if she got poor grades, had never forgiven the fact that her brother, who had failed his first year of high school, was given a bicycle so that he would not be upset.

Finally, we could also consider educational and professional experiences as a field dominated by diversity and subjectivities, that is, as a field of possibilities and uncertainties. The testimonies showed that women were not passive recipients, either as students or as professionals. They also illustrated what kind of resistance and coping mechanisms women teachers built and how they were able to invert power relations. Therefore, we could also see how these same teachers could contribute to transformation. I will try to cite one of these examples:

"I wanted to join the executive board of our union," said teacher Ayten. "At that time, this was not very common. To participate at the representative boards of trade unions was perceived as a man's work. When the election time came, I announced that I was a candidate. Until then, there had never been a 'female' executive or candidate in the union branch of the provincial city where I worked. The male candidates came to me a few days before the election. They tried to dissuade me, saying that in such a conservative environment, to be a candidate could harm me. I didn't expect such a thing from my friends, who considered themselves democrats. But I didn't withdraw my candidacy and I was elected. I didn't suffer any harm. In the next election, two more 'female' friends joined the board".

From that day to present, the entry of women into the management of Eğitim Sen and their rise to the presidency of the union has been one of the most important achievements of the union struggle.

I am happy to be a witness of this process.

