

Women and Holistic Education

The role that women can play in building an holistic education system.

Women have been involved with educational processes since the known beginnings of the human species. Together with men they have been passing accumulated knowledge and experience to younger generations and to other members of their group. However, patriarchy invented the distinction between private and public spheres with women excluded from the latter. Their ways of knowing and ways of doing became increasingly concentrated within the private-home domain. They were increasingly considered irrelevant, trivial, and marginal to the mainstream course humanity was heading toward. The educational process as well became divided into two main, often, conflicting arenas: official "education" (taught in schools, courses, or, recently, through public educational programs on television), and much wider educational processes which comprise of all other influences (learning from others, inter-generational learning, informal education). While official education, schooling, has gained respect, it has become increasingly narrow about what is taught, focusing largely on either fragmented scientific knowledge or problem-specific technical knowledge with no links between the many different ways we know the world. Power and knowledge The dominant schooling systems in most parts of the world reflect the interests and ideas of those with power (identified as male, white, rich, or Western). In addition, among other excluded perspectives, women's perspective has been systematically ignored, erased or distorted, as women all over the world lack the power within institutional settings to be authentically heard. However, in the last several decades women's voices have come into the open. These voices have accused the man-made world of creating many evils, among them the modern era of violence, fear, pollution, and poverty for most of the world's inhabitants. The dominant educational process has been under attack as well. It has been pointed out that, for example, we learn a history comprised largely of hate, murder, competition and greed. We know little about much more important issues such as health, personal relationships, love, and grief: as well as some more concrete ones such as how to prepare food and what to do with our waste. Feminists have pointed out that even knowledge which was within women's domain for thousands of years, like contraception or childbirth, has become increasingly alienated from us. Moreover, women's experience often has been labelled "old wives' tales", signifying prejudice, superstition and inadequacy. The result of this has been that formal male institutions such as the medical profession and the legal system have taken over women's knowledge domains. At this point of history (Western) it has become obvious that women's knowledge has to be included as a part of our effort to achieve wisdom (as opposed to simply gathering information) and holism (as opposed to the particular and segmented). Holistic education would be education for survival and ecological sustainability (for future generations) instead of education for linear progress in terms of the accumulation and expansion of material goods. Changes in curriculum should be brought up by the many different and, until now, excluded groups and perspectives. However, to regain the balance we may have had once, we cannot simply return to old ways and only teach our children how to survive in the jungle without teaching them how to use personal computers. As P.R. Sarkar has argued, science and technology properly used can be of great benefit to humanity. Our world is rapidly changing and we need education that can accommodate these transformations. Among many of the recent changes we will have to negotiate as we move forward is how gender roles have changed within modern patriarchy. While women have officially entered the public domain--and this is in itself an important process--however, women have done so within the terms and paradigms of the (male) founders of this world. In many ways we have become increasingly alienated from our indigenous ways of knowing. If this is the case, on what ground can women claim to contribute to bringing the holistic perspective into clearer focus? Education by women or women's education It is important to distinguish education by women from women's education. While the first usually means that the teacher is of female sex it does not necessarily follow that what she teaches differs from mainstream formal education. Women's education, on the contrary, consciously tries to incorporate both perspectives. Without completely rejecting what we have achieved and learned so far, it brings into perspective some neglected sides of our lives. That is why women (as well as many other marginal groups) are sometimes considered to be the so called "epistemological elite", people with (or at least with some possibility of) dual vision. Through this double vision, women have numerous suggestions on how to improve our curriculum. Central to this is trying to achieve gender balance. Curriculum suggestions for holistic education What is taught in schools corresponds to our needs and values, to our ideas about the present and the future world and to what we see as our priorities. Since the world has changed so has our present curriculum. Almost all subjects have had to be rewritten. Some new ones should be introduced as well. As Joanne Santa Barbara points out, we cannot continue to hold to our ethnocentric values in the times of nuclear weapons and should move forward to seeing humanity as one. Therefore, history books should be completely rewritten to exclude all the butchers, murderers and rapists--dynastic and warrior history--while including soft and gentle people who dedicated their lives to trying to achieve a peaceful and just world. Among those people great focus has to be put on past and present women who so far were generally excluded from collective remembrance. The "great" people (scientists, writers, artists, even cooks and children's storytellers) have been in most instances male. Girls and boys should stop being taught that men are superior to women in all areas of knowledge, that there are "feminine" and "masculine" subjects, or that to compete and do things as an individual is superior to collective achievement. I would personally like to see schools with classes on feelings and personal relationships; schools in which subjects such as biology, physics, or chemistry would be more practical and life-relevant instead of focusing solely on abstract theory. I would also like to see schools using new technologies and media, for example, teaching about different people from different geographic areas through CD-ROM or virtual reality, which would be internalized much better than memorizing data on corn or oil production. The way subjects are taught is as, if not more, important than the actual subject. For example, although

many would like our schools to become more spiritual, we must not forget that spirituality taught as religious doctrine can rarely be fun and can often cause rebellion and resentment. Among newly introduced subjects, it would be important to see children having weekly lectures and discussions with naturopaths, homoeopaths and medical doctors, considering health and general well-being, prevention of diseases, and yes, basic knowledge on contraception, pregnancy, childbirth and child rearing (for boys and for girls). It would be interesting to teach our children how to cook, for example, including in their curriculum the task of learning one new meal each month, encouraging food practices from different cultural traditions and in that way preparing them to be self sufficient and real "world citizens". Other courses on "domestic engineering" should include discussions on budget planning, cleaning and arranging the household, the best way to shop, what to buy and what not to buy (for example: environmentally dangerous products or those tested on animals). Real holistic education of course cannot limit itself to a classroom. It is the task of environmental groups to point out how to teach children to live peacefully within and together with nature. In our preparation for "partnership" societies, we should create education which teaches us how to achieve non-exploitative and non-hierarchical relationships among parts of our bodies, among our selves as humans, as well as among us and our surrounding environment. Women as more spiritual than men Taught appropriately the spiritual can be an inspiring part of holistic education. It is certainly central to most women. Some authors claim that the nature of woman is "spiritual and expansive" whereas man is "more physical, condensed and active". Others believe that "all women have an intuitive understanding of Infinity, especially when they bear children". Within the feminist discourse there tends to be two streams: the one view which believes that women's spiritual superiority over men is mostly due to biological factors and the other view which believes that differences between women and men are best explained by different socio-cultural experiences. Whatever the reason for the dissimilar degrees of spirituality between women and men, be it in genes, hormones, or due to socialization, most sociological research shows that women in general tend to be more spiritual and religious than men. It is interesting to note, that the dominant cultural code of our times, modernity, tends to regard both women and spirituality as irrelevant. Women, on the other hand, have within patriarchal societies ambivalent status with regard to spiritual issues. Secluded from spiritual and religious rites and functions, women are at the same time considered closer to nature and more "spiritual" in a sense of more emotional and involved human beings. The spiritual for women is largely about relationship: caring for others and developing an intimacy with the Infinite. Being spiritual in most traditions is defined as serving humanity and doing consciousness-expanding practices. Women have no problem with serving others, as they are expected to, and require this from themselves, to give up their needs and respond first to the needs of the other. This response can be considered one of the main goals in our efforts to try to achieve self-realization. For women, the reduction of ego and identification with the Supreme is exercised through taking care of other human beings, through service to humanity. Women are already involved in this first part of spiritual life. The second part of spiritual practice (prayers and meditation) is more difficult for women because of their daily chores and because of patriarchal routines which do not help women find space for such efforts. However, through their ability to expand themselves and listen to the needs of the other, women have developed certain skills and capacities which are urgently required in our troubled world. These are listening, nurturing, thinking about others, altruism, patience and flexibility. These attitudes can lead to more open and spiritual ways of knowing, teaching and learning, and communicating in general with others and with the divine. This can help create what Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar calls coordinated cooperation and macrohistorian Riane Eisler calls the Partnership Society. Listening to the other Women's perspectives have to be included in the future education for many reasons: first, because it is unjust to exclude half of humanity from deciding what is important and what should be taught to the younger generations; second, because certain attributes of women can help us expand and transcend many boundaries (which is a constant effort within human race, the attraction to the Great); and third, because women's ways of knowing can help us acquire balance within many sides of ourselves and of societies. Women can only achieve this in close cooperation with (progressive) men who recently have started to develop one of the most urgently needed requirements for a healthier future: listening.

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