

Participants said - More Attention Should Be Given to Gender Issues in All Kinds of Training

In February the two of us were asked to work as trainers for the 'Gender in Leadership' seminar organised by the European Youth Forum. Fulfilling the request of the editorial team we will share with our readers our ideas and experiences on gender differences.

We chose a different starting point and approach to that of Ulrika Eklund's article, published in Coyote issue # 2. We know for certain that trainers hold different and sometimes contradictory opinions on gender issues. We would like to invite you, dear colleagues, to contribute to this debate on gender in training through Coyote, in order to learn from one another and so further advance existing concepts.

by Erzsébet Kovács
and Paul Kloosterman

Gender training with or without male participation?

'The dilemma in talking about gender difference is that we might end up widening the gap instead of decreasing it. But if we do not talk about male dominance it will continue.' As Ulrika Eklund wrote in her article in Coyote, issue 2: *'This is the dilemma for feminists concerned with issues of gender and education.'*

These statements raised a lot of questions. Is this the real dilemma? Does talking about differences widen gaps? Why is male dominance the central topic when talking about gender differences? Is this a typical dilemma for a feminist or should it be an issue for every trainer working in a field where differences play an important role?

One of the main reasons for organising a training event on 'Gender in Leadership' for the European Youth Forum was also the issue of male dominance. There is gender imbalance in the participation of young women and men in leadership positions and a dominance of men on the boards of most youth organisations.

Obviously women are more involved in the discussion of gender issues than men, which can freeze the problems rather than decrease them. Men do not seem to consider this topic as their problem too.

One of the challenges of working on gender issues is how to motivate men to participate in discussions on equal opportunities. It could lead to widening the gap if men were confronted with statistics reinforcing that they talk too much, that their listening skills are very undeveloped, that they have too much power and that women suffer feelings of inferiority towards them. What can an individual man do with this picture presented to him by women? Is there any other option for him than to just shut up?

Our aim was to run a training course without this frustration, without having the female and male participants in opposing roles, to avoid their starting a fight, and going into the trenches.

Gender equality is also an intercultural learning process

Since the European Youth Forum has been working for several years to ensure that gender equality remains a high priority on its agenda and in the organisational culture of its member organisations, they wanted to go beyond the above-mentioned phenomena in order to attempt to build a longterm problem-solving strategy.

This approach to gender equality helped us to get away from the 'trainers' routine' that sometimes exists in dealing with the gender aspect in training. You are probably aware of this approach: it is one





of great empathy towards the nice and/or weak women, empowerment training for them - no attention to, or special methodology for, the men's problems apart from the fact that they are kindly asked to change their irritating behaviour in the next session. Calling this practice of trainers into question does not mean that we do not want to support and motivate participants who have problems with others, in sharing their experiences and recommendations with the group in an assertive manner. Of course trainers should pay attention to the latter as this remains an essential value of any training.

We decided to focus on the specific cultures: what are the main characteristics, especially the main values of the female and the male culture?

What kind of expectations and social roles do boys and girls acquire through their very different socialisation? Our aim was to create an atmosphere and training programme which helped the participants to understand and respect these different cultures in a way in which they could benefit from the coexistence of these differences. In other words, we believe that raising awareness of gender roles in non-formal education is part of the intercultural learning process.

It can be an integrated part of very different training activities and/o it can be a selected theme of training courses.

Challenges for trainers

Taking more advantage of existing possibilities

On a training course, in which the main subject is not the gender issue, but where there is a good chance of integrating the question of gender coherently, the task of the trainer is to plan and bring in the gender dimension in a well-balanced way.

The latter does not necessarily need extra training hours and methods. As Ulrika Eklund emphasised in her article, most of the intercultural simulation games, construction exercises and other methods of experiential learning that we use in our training courses, offer lots of possibilities to draw the participants' attention to the gender cultures. A way to do this would be for the trainers to include relevant questions on differences in the behaviour, communication and actions of men and women during the reviewing (debriefing) of these games and exercises.

Innovation and time is needed in gender issues

If gender equality or gender differences are the selected themes of a training activity, then the task of the trainer is,

in our opinion, more challenging than it seems: how to avoid repeated trivialities, one-sided approaches and superficiality? The training programme needs to be well developed and innovative and of proper duration, otherwise we cannot fulfil the high expectations participants usually have regarding the gender issue. To be aware of, and to exchange ideas on, different gender roles that manifest themselves in different cultures, countries, generations and social classes, is an essential dimension of any training in gender cultures. We prefer the personalised approach in bringing the issue to awareness, such as making a comparison of the social and family situations of e.g., a Dutch eighteen-year-old female student, and a Roma girl of the same age in Hungary, and drawing a similar parallel between the situations of their boyfriends. Such a personal focus, which people can easily relate to, can help create an improved understanding of the importance of the changes in gender identity.

Unfortunately, due to financial reasons, we only had three working days for the training course with the group from the European Youth Forum. The available time was clearly too short to go very deeply into the question and to let the participants explore the complex situations of both women and men. But, what we did was give some 'impulses', ideas and sources for a longer process, which could include further training events for the group-learning process, and new approaches for an individual informal learning process. The European Youth Forum has a plan for further training activities based on the experiences of the 'Gender in Leadership' training and we hope they can complete what we only had time to make a start on.

Encounters in changeable roles

In our training both women and men were represented, although there were more female participants (65%) than male (35%). We realised that those men who had made the decision to take part in such a seminar probably made the choice of finding new ways of understanding the gender issue and of broadening their options on how to act in social situations concerning gender. Their open-minded, attentive and active participation brought a new dimension to our training. The female participants were also very open and were motivated to look again at the actions that they had already experienced from a different angle. One of the methods which we developed for this group to approach the different perceptions of gender cultures, was role-play. Typical female and male behaviours in board meetings were addressed through a decision-making situation. This offered an opportunity to the participants to identify different priority-orientated roles and also to see the strategies of these roles, and their impact and effectiveness.



Looking back at the activity now, we share the opinion of the participants that it might have been more effective to run the role-play in different versions: to give the 'female role descriptions' not only to women but also to men and visa versa. Through this kind of exercise the participants could experience the driving values, 'comfort zones' and also the frustrations behind the known roles of the opposite sex, especially behind the dominant and non-influential roles. They could study the on-going interference of female and male cultures as well as playing or observing a role without knowing from the role description if it belongs to a man or a woman.

Responses to the social expectations: comparison of the socialisation of boys and girls

Another important element of this training was an input on the socialisation of boys, which offered an opportunity for deepening the understanding of both female and male participants, of why men behave in the way they do. Understanding this socialisation opens up new ways of dealing with 'male behaviour' and for men to explore alternative behaviour patterns. This approach was very much appreciated by the participants, but they expressed regret that there was no input on the socialisation of girls. We think they were right about this; however, due to the time limitation we only made reference to it offering a 'spotlight' comparison without a deeper analysis. Inputs on both girls' and boys' socialisation can be a good

starting-point for a training event on gender issues. It presents opportunities for reflecting on personal roles, for understanding the other and for exchanging ideas on these roles in different cultures, social classes and countries.

We also used statistics other than those on male dominance, such as an analysis showing that men are not doing very well in the social field. A look at the average age of men in Central and Eastern European countries and at the population of men in prisons; a comparison between the results of boys and the achievement of girls in schools, and a study of the gender characteristics of so-called 'problem groups;' all go to show that these issues are also gender-related. The fact that 95 % of the population of prisons is male tells us that there is something wrong in the way we raise boys. This also means that the gender issue is not only a topic for women but also concerns men, especially those working in the field of youth work and training.

We realise that maybe we have raised more questions than we have given answers. As we said, we wanted to start a discussion through this article and we really hope you are going to respond positively to it. This new approach to gender issues is thanks to the participants in the training course, many of whom stated in their evaluation forms that there should be more attention given to gender issues in all kinds of training activities.

Contact addresses:

Erzsébet Kovács
Kanizsai u. 4/C.
H-1114, Budapest, Hungary
e-mail: e.team@matavnet.hu

Paul Kloosterman
Geernoutstraat 3
NL - 3813BV, Amersfoort, The Netherlands
e-mail: pauklo@globalxs.nl

