

Women and the teaching profession

Exploring the feminisation debate in the Commonwealth¹

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Introduction

The debate over women in teaching and the 'feminisation' of the teaching profession has been prevalent for some time in countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States and in some parts of the Caribbean and Latin America. In those countries, majority female teacher numbers throughout much of the 20th century have inevitably led to many attempts to identify the reasons why women have become numerous in the profession, what the positives and negatives have been for education systems, and what trends and issues characterise the phenomenon.

The term 'feminised' in relation to an occupation is generally used to describe one that is predominantly made up of women (Bank, 2007), while 'feminisation' relates to a profession where the numbers of women are increasing (Drudy et al., 2005). A report

commissioned on Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in 2000 offers three approaches in defining the term: (a) calculating percentages of women in a given profession; (b) a meaning related to the effects of the weight of numbers; and (c) the rate of access of women into a profession (Wylie, 2000). However, the vast amount of literature on the topic has offered no officially recognised percentage threshold for when 'feminisation' begins. A further difficulty with the definition is that it is often applied with an aggregate perspective across the education system. This means that the differences between school sectors – most notably primary and secondary levels – are often submerged under one feminised percentage for the whole teaching workforce.

Globally, countries that show high percentages of women teachers are found primarily in North America, Western Europe, Central and



Photo: Commonwealth Secretariat/Victoria Holdsworth

Urban India is fast moving towards more women teachers

Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, Central Asia and – to a certain extent – the Pacific. From a Commonwealth perspective, early examples of high female teacher numbers as early as the late 19th/early 20th century can be found in a variety of Commonwealth countries in the Caribbean, Europe and the Pacific. These include Australia, Canada, New Zealand, St Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United Kingdom (Kelleher, 2011).

The feminisation debate in context

The feminisation debate in teaching is one that resonates particularly in the context of pursuing the education Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA). Historically, an influx of women into the teaching profession has a correlation with the expansion of mass education systems (Carrington and McPhee, 2008). In addition, women teachers have been shown to

be necessary in conservative countries for the education of girls (Herz and Sperling, 2004). This is particularly the case in rural areas (UNESCO, 2000). However, recruiting female teachers is a challenge for countries with low female literacy, with many governments faced with a cyclical impasse of how to meet female teacher quotas without having also addressed the challenge of girls' education.

The feminisation debate also has a bearing in the context of broader gender equality. Literature coming out of countries where women entered the profession in the late 19th and early 20th centuries shows that teaching was a clear source of economic empowerment for women in societies where educated women were often prohibited or unable to enter other forms of employment (Fischman, 2007; Mavrogeni, 2005). However, this influx was not necessarily all positive as it led to limiting societal

Table 1 Global overview

Region	Teaching staff – percentage female			
	Primary education School year ending in...		Secondary education School year ending in...	
	1999	2007	1999	2007
Arab States	52	59	49	51
Central and Eastern Europe	82	80	72	74
Central Asia	84	86	65	69
South East Asia and the Pacific	55	60	46	48
East Asia	55	59	46	47
Pacific	71	75	57	56
Latin America and the Caribbean	76	78	64	60
North America and Western Europe	81	85	56	61
South and West Asia	35	45	35	36
Sub-Saharan Africa	43	44	31	30

Source: UNESCO, 2010

Table 2 Female teacher percentages...

... in selected Commonwealth countries in sub-Saharan Africa

Country	Teaching staff – percentage female			
	Primary education School year ending in...		Secondary education School year ending in...	
	1999	2007	1999	2007
Botswana	81	78	45	54
Ghana	32	33	22	22
Kenya	42	44	-	40
Lesotho	80	78	51	55
Mozambique	25	34	-	16
Namibia	67	65	46	50
Nigeria	48	50	36	38
Rwanda	55	53	-	53
South Africa	78	77	50	53
Uganda	33	39	-	22
Zambia	49	48	27	39

Source: UNESCO, 2010

perceptions of teaching as 'women's work', particularly at the primary level where they are most prevalent (Drudy, 2008; Mavrogeni, 2005). Further, there are equity issues within feminised teaching workforces, with most women not only predominantly found in primary schools but also less likely to be found in managerial positions at all levels in proportion to their numbers (Coffee and Delamont, 2000; Skelton, 2003; Smith, 2004).

Exploring the feminisation debate in developing countries

While the literature is plentiful in Commonwealth countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, less common are analyses of developing countries with high female teacher numbers. One of the reasons for this might be that, overall, developing countries with feminised teaching workforces are fewer and appear almost anomalous within their respective regions. In the Commonwealth, sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are the main cases in point. For example, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and South Africa stand out in sub-Saharan Africa for their high female teacher numbers, as Table 2 demonstrates.

The high female teacher percentages have been consistent since 1999. It is notable, however, that in each of those countries female teacher numbers are more balanced at the secondary level. In South Asia, only the Maldives and Sri Lanka have high female teacher numbers nationally.

However, countries in the Commonwealth Caribbean and Pacific show the converse pattern, with nearly all demonstrating significant majority female workforces. Table 3 shows examples from the Caribbean. Again, while the numbers are higher overall across the region, a similar pattern emerges of significantly fewer female teachers at the secondary level.

New findings from selected Commonwealth countries

A recent Commonwealth and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) study (Kelleher, 2011) looked at feminisation in five countries: Dominica, India, Lesotho, Samoa and Sri Lanka. In India, the focus was on the state of Kerala, which

has high female teacher percentages, with further comparative analysis of the state of Rajasthan, where female teachers are a significant minority. Using statistical analysis² and a combination of secondary data and ground-level research among teachers, pupils and principals, the study looked at the feminisation debate within the analytical framework of the prevalent themes found in the existing literature.

The study showed that the highest female teacher numbers are consistently found in primary education, with all five countries (the state of Kerala, in the case of India) having female teachers in the 70th percentile. However, at the secondary level this pattern did not stay consistent. While Dominica continued to have high female numbers at secondary level, this decreased significantly for several of the other countries, particularly Samoa, where the proportion could not be viewed as 'feminised' at 55 per cent. Feminisation in terms of numbers and percentages therefore appears to be more of a debate within primary education, although as discourse around the 'teaching profession' is often inclusive of both levels, this can sometimes be overlooked.

Access to education, outcomes and teaching processes

The study indicated that where teaching workforces are feminised, access rates at the primary level are generally good, particularly in Samoa, Sri Lanka and the Indian state of Kerala, where net enrolment rates are in the 80th percentile and above.³ Girls' access in terms of gender parity has been achieved. In some of countries, such as Dominica, Lesotho and Samoa, gender parity indicators showed disparity against boys at the secondary level in particular. However, it is worth noting that in all three of these cases women teachers were found in far lower numbers at the secondary level.

Following through from this, concerns regarding the impact of majority female teachers on boys' underachievement were present in the literature and the empirical research in several of the countries. The ability of women teachers to discipline boys and the need for adult male role models in schools was a concern among some of the teachers, managers and principals interviewed in Dominica, although the empirical research conducted among primary school children in that country suggested that they did not perceive that these were issues. In Lesotho, teachers were split over the matter, with many unwilling to offer definitive positions.

Table 3 Female teacher percentages...

...in selected Commonwealth Caribbean countries

Country	Teaching staff – percentage female			
	Primary education School year ending in...		Secondary education School year ending in...	
	1999	2007	1999	2007
The Bahamas	63	85	74	70
Belize	64	72	62	61
Dominica	75	84	68	65
Guyana	86	88	63	57
Jamaica	-	89	-	69
St Lucia	85	87	64	66

Source: UNESCO, 2010

Internal variances within countries

Female teacher percentages were consistently higher in urban centres than in rural areas in each case. The gap was less pronounced in countries with the highest levels of feminisation. Interestingly, urban centres in India – the one country in the study that does not have a majority female teaching workforce at the national level – were fast moving towards statistically high numbers of women in teaching, even in states such as Rajasthan where female teachers are an overall minority.

Other internal variances in the proportions of female teachers could be seen between education providers. A regular pattern was that private providers hired more women than government schools.

Managerial disparities

With the exception of Dominica, all the other feminised workforces reviewed demonstrated that high female teacher numbers did not automatically translate into a similar level of feminised management within the system. Although female principals were often in the majority at the primary level, this was far less than the proportion of female teachers, indicating that while fewer men entered the profession, they were still more likely to rise to management positions. The example of Samoa, where women represent 78 per cent of the teaching force at primary level but 66 per cent of principals, demonstrates this.

At the secondary level, even where numbers of women teachers were still relatively high, female principal percentages dropped even further. Only Dominica bucked this trend, most notably at the secondary level where female principals dominated despite there being virtual gender balance among the teacher numbers at that level.

Socio-cultural associations and gender – teaching as ‘women’s work’

Empirical evidence from the study suggested quite clearly that there is a strong association between primary teaching as a profession and traditional gender roles that align themselves with women’s long-held responsibilities in the domestic sphere, suggesting that while women may no longer be confined exclusively to this sphere, their role in the public one is very much influenced by it. This is manifested at two levels: first, in an assumption within societies that women have a biological predisposition towards primary teaching because children are involved; and second, through the difficulties women experience in finding a balance between work and their family obligations, and the ways in which teaching hours (and holidays) can help them to find that balance.

Female teacher training and teacher recruitment – organic developments or targeted strategies?

A review of growth in female numbers in some countries suggested varied experiences. In Samoa, for example, there appeared to be an organic movement of women into the profession as males sought other opportunities in a growing public sector post-independence. In parts of what now constitutes the state of Kerala, there is evidence of targeted education of women in the early 20th century, which in turn increased women’s literacy (Swaminthan, 1999). Coupled with gendered associations of

women as a ‘moral compass’ (Devika and Mukherjee, 2007) in the education of children, this led to a natural association with teaching that encouraged the recruitment of women.

More currently, Samoa’s educational outcome rates seem to suggest that a core reason why more women are entering the profession overall is the fact that a greater number of girls than boys qualify with the necessary requirements for teacher training courses. But this pattern is not consistent with other countries such as Lesotho, where many female respondents in the empirical research spoke of their decision to join the primary sector in particular as one determined to a large extent by having only the minimal qualifications or by a desire to work with children.

Untrained and ‘para’ teachers – in pursuit of EFA

The need for engaging untrained or para-teachers was evidenced as a necessary development – sometimes targeted policy – to either expand a system or maintain the successes of one that has started to regress for a variety of reasons, such as increases in teacher attrition. In the countries studied, women dominated in this area. In many cases, the growth in numbers of untrained teachers has occurred quite organically at the most local of levels, with communities taking it upon themselves to engage (and sometimes pay) individuals in schools that have been without teachers for substantial periods of time.

Dominica and Lesotho showed the highest levels of untrained teachers within the data available. However, while more untrained women teachers were found overall, men were more likely to be untrained than their female counterparts as a proportion of their sex within the profession. Secondary data from several states in India (with low female teacher percentages, unlike Kerala) showed female untrained and ‘para’ teachers playing a role in bolstering the numbers during chronic and long-term shortages.

Teacher remuneration, career progression and the ‘status’ issue

The issues of teacher remuneration and career progression resonated in the majority of the five countries. Low teacher salary was a key factor in men not being attracted to the profession. This issue is interlinked with women’s and men’s gender roles in society and the expectation on men to be main providers within the family. The perception of teacher pay and its relationship with the teaching profession’s status is mixed: in some cases, there was a clear affirmation that teaching is regarded highly, while in others, the status issue is nuanced, with negative perceptions of primary teaching in particular as ‘women’s work’ (and therefore cheaper and less career-oriented), sometimes compromising the view of the profession.

Conclusions

Understanding the role of women in the teaching profession requires multi-layered considerations both in terms of education provision and gender equality. In the first instance, the evidence remains that the introduction of women into the teaching profession in increasing numbers has been a major contribution towards greater education provision within societies. Having acknowledged this, however, there remains a complex duality within the issues that surround women and the teaching profession

where the workforce is described as feminised. Evidence suggests that there is a strong gender association between primary teaching in particular (where women are actively recruited and consequently are found in greater numbers) and traditional gender roles that align themselves with women's long-held responsibilities in the domestic sphere. This heavily influences both their roles as teachers and the perceptions of them by others.

In going forward, governments (those with and without 'feminised' teaching workforces) would need to take on board the complexities of the issues. For governments seeking to increase their female teacher numbers as a means of achieving EFA, it is important to take a long-term view, particularly regarding the pitfalls of viewing women as a low-wage 'cure all' and the use of limited gender roles to justify targeting women teachers. For countries that already have majority female teacher numbers, it will be important to review and address current equity challenges. Finally, on the recruitment of male teachers into feminised workforces, improving the image of teaching (particularly in primary schools) for both women and men would allow for a more positive and balanced view overall of the profession and arguably for gender equality within society.

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Endnotes

- ¹ This article has been drawn from a Commonwealth and UNESCO Commonwealth study of the same title, published in November 2011.
- ² Statistics compiled from UNESCO, 2010, and District Information System for Education (DISE) data for Kerala, 2008.
- ³ Statistics compiled from UNESCO, 2010; Samoa Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture Planning and Research Division, 2010; Dominica Ministry of Education, Human Resource Development, Sports and Youth Affairs, 2008; Sri Lanka Ministry of Education, 2008; and DISE data for Kerala, 2008.

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