



**ASSOCIATION OF  
WOMEN EDUCATORS**

*Submission to the House of Representatives  
Standing Committee on Employment,  
Education and Workplace Relations*

**INQUIRY INTO  
THE EDUCATION OF BOYS**

# Contents

**1.0 Introduction**

**2.0 Gender Justice**

**3.0 Curriculum**

**4.0 Construction of Gender**

**5.0 Social Justice and Educational Equity**

**6.0 The Teaching Profession**

# **Association of Women Educators**

## **Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations**

### **Inquiry into the Education of Boys**

#### **1.0 Introduction**

- 1.1 The Association of Women Educators (AWE) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the House of Representatives Standing Committee Inquiry into the Education of Boys. The AWE represents some 1400 female educators in both government and non-government educational institutions in all states of Australia. There are also a small number of international members.
- 1.2 AWE through its National Council, Branches and State Executives work actively to further the participation of women and girls in education.

The Association:

- works to eliminate all forms of discrimination in curriculum in institutional practices and in policies;
- encourages and supports women, so that they can effectively pursue careers in education;
- encourages and supports women in the decision making processes at all levels in the education system;
- responds to issues of concern for women both in education and the community;
- lobbies for further reform and change generally to enhance the position of women in education and society.

- 1.3 AWE is committed to ongoing research in regard to gender equity matters particularly strategies to enhance learning outcomes for all students.

#### **2.0 Gender Justice**

- 2.1 AWE rejects the populist “What about the Boys?” refrain, which argues that boys are the new disadvantaged in the schooling system. Alternatively it supports the notion of “Gender Justice” as a goal for schools to assist both boys and girls, in examining alternative constructions of gender, which in turn will assist in alleviating the problems experienced by some boys in schools.

The widely held perception that all girls are out performing all boys as a consequence of gender equity policies aimed at girls, and the pro-feminist agenda generally, has fuelled the argument for the pendulum to swing back in favour of boys. The proliferation of media reports on the under-achievement of boys in testing results has added to this perception.

However, the generalisations found in the popular press ignore the vital questions; “Which boys?” “Which girls?” Factors such as social class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and disability profoundly affect the performance of both boys and girls and should be taken into account in any measure of performance.

School based policies and procedures and the role of staff play major roles in influencing both boys and girls in the construction of gender. Young people are actively involved in reshaping themselves, their behaviour, language and attitudes through interaction with adults, with peers and with media in a variety of contexts including, significantly, the school.

The whole school experience will play a major role in what it means for them to be a boy or a girl.

While school performance can be measured and influences such as social class can be factored into the results, it is undisputed that some boys dominate the statistics in issues such as:

- High incidence of punishment in school;
- Dangerous and destructive behaviour;
- Abuse and assault of females and other males;
- Homophobia;
- Drug Abuse;
- Suicide;
- Road deaths;
- Dominance of teachers' time;
- Dominance of linguistic and physical space in the classroom and playground;
- Dominance in the use of sports facilities and resources;
- Dominance in the use of computers and technology; and
- School suspension and expulsion.

These examples reflect the worst aspects of hegemonic or dominant masculinity and provide the reason that schools need to take action in order to provide alternatives to the currently held narrow view of what it is to be masculine and the restrictions associated with that view in terms of educational opportunities, life chances and quality of life.

As well as creating many problems for some boys, dominant masculinities powerfully impacts on the school experiences of girls and perpetuates imbalances of cultural and economic power between the sexes, resulting in the abuse of women.

Schools and teachers need to provide both boys and girls with a positive, flexible and equitable sense of being male or female to which they can aspire. Teachers have a key role to assist young people to examine alternative constructions of masculinity and femininities and to affirm a range of identities. All teachers have a responsibility in making schools supportive learning environments for all students and especially those practising marginalised masculinities and femininities.

- 2.2 AWE notes with concern the failure of the present “what about the boys” debate to address issues related to boys’ sexual behaviour and sexual responsibility. In addition to the well-documented dominance of young men in crimes of sexual violence, and the alarming prevalence among them of attitudes which pre-dispose young men to violence against women and girls, recent research both in Australia and Great Britain reveals that many young men fail to accept responsibility for their sexual behaviour. Evidence strongly suggests low levels of responsibility in regard to using contraception and practicing safe sexual behaviour, and to supporting children they may father. Meanwhile, young mothers are left not only to raise a child/children single-handed, but also to suffer the continuing social stigma attached to teenage pregnancy and parenthood.

### **3.0 Staffing of Schools**

The AWE believes that the curriculum promotes narrow portrayals of masculinities and that narrow subject selection by boys is not effectively addressed by secondary schools. While much of the curriculum continues to be dominated by stories of masculine achievement, many boys are observers only and some boys, most notably indigenous boys, boys from non-English speaking background, working-class and homosexual boys see little representation of their experiences in the curriculum. Dominant images of masculinity and a narrow focus on employment opportunities predispose many boys to chose maths and science whether they have an interest or aptitude in these areas or not. Many boys whose talents lie in the arts, literature or humanities can lose out by

choosing subjects from a limited range. Changing employment patterns, such as the rise in the service and financial sectors, mean that career options may be better served by other subject choices.

#### **4.0 Construction of Gender**

There has been, in recent times, an increasing awareness that it is the construction of gender in society and in schools which disadvantages girls and also creates problems for boys. While the curriculum in schools often presents a world view seen through the eyes of males, such a view also frequently constructs a masculinity which can be dysfunctional for many boys and young men.

Dr Cherry Collins' research on harassment and bullying published by ACER in 1996 also highlighted the gendered nature of schooling and problems created by narrow definitions of masculinity for both boys and girls in the classroom and in the playground.

#### **5.0 Social Justice and Educational Equity**

The notion that "it is now the boy's turn" is totally rejected. Instead policies and strategies arising out of this inquiry should be underpinned by a commitment to social justice and educational equity.

A broad brush approach which aims at solving the problems experienced by some boys is not the answer. Likewise not all girls have succeeded as a result of policies and practice of the 1970's and 80's. Factors such as

- social class
- geographic location
- race and ethnicity
- aboriginality
- sexuality
- disability

must be taken into account when measuring the performance of both boys and girls.

#### **6.0 The Teaching Profession**

One popular theory suggests that it is the feminisation of the teaching profession which is to blame for the poor performance of some boys in schools.

AWE totally rejects this notion. Although over 70% of teachers are women the vast majority of administration positions in schools and systems are held by males. It is at this policy making level that decisions are made in relation to curriculum content and structures in schools.

A simplistic approach which deduces that male teachers produce high achieving motivated boys must be rejected outright.

Both male and female teachers must be made aware during pre-service and later in-service courses of the vital role they play in providing a classroom environment in which a variety of teaching and learning styles are evident and that their styles need to extend into a general acceptance of ways gender is constructed. A narrow view of what it is to be a boy or a girl does nothing to