

## Gender and Secondary Education: Experiences in Bulgaria Overview<sup>1</sup>

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Bulgaria as a member country of the European Union takes into account the European strategies, policies and practices in the domain of education and training in development of its national policy. The Lisbon strategy till 2010, the Lifelong Learning conception, the Education and Training 2010 program, the European Employment Strategy, and etc. are leading for us in this point of view.

The state policy in the field of national education is accomplished by the Council of Ministers. The central body that governs, coordinates and controls the implementation of the state policy and EU-integration in the field of education and science is the Minister of Education and Science. Another key actor with regard to life-long learning is the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, which is responsible for training of employed and unemployed. Training of adults is a responsibility of respective branch ministries as well.

The Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria (1991) enshrines the principles of free development of education (Art. 23) and the right of education for all (Art. 53), which are further elaborated in a number of normative acts. The state encourages education by establishing and providing financial resources for schools, supports talented pupils and students, creates conditions for vocational training and retraining.

The legal basis concerning the system of education established and updated during the last few years includes: *Law of National Education*<sup>2</sup>, *Rules for Application of the Law of National Education*<sup>3</sup>, *Law on the Level of Schooling, the General Educational Minimum and the Syllabus*<sup>4</sup>, *Law of Vocational Education and Training*<sup>5</sup>, *Law of Higher Education*<sup>6</sup>, *Law on Scientific Degrees and Title*<sup>7</sup>, *Law on Encouraging Scientific Research*<sup>8</sup>, as well as secondary legislation (Council of Ministers decrees and ordinances of the Minister of Education) regulating the contents, organization, management and control of the secondary general and vocational education and training.

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<sup>2</sup> Promulgated, State Gazette № 86 / 18.10.1991, last modified and supplemented, State Gazette № 40 / 14.05.2004.

<sup>3</sup> Promulgated, State Gazette № 9 / 11.11.2003

<sup>4</sup> Promulgated, State Gazette № 67 / 27.07.1999, last modified, supplemented and promulgated in State Gazette № 40/14.05.2004

<sup>5</sup> Promulgated, State Gazette № 68 / 30.07.1999, last modified №120 / 29.12.2002, last supplemented № 29 / 31.03.2003

<sup>6</sup> Promulgated, State Gazette № 48 / 04.06.2004

<sup>7</sup> Promulgated State Gazette № 36 / 9.05.1972, last modified №54/04.07.2000

<sup>8</sup> Promulgated State Gazette № 92 / 17.10.2003

Some of the major documents that determine the policy of the state in the field of education are strategies, action plans and national programmes, like: *National program for development of school and pre-school education and training 2006-2015*<sup>9</sup>, *National strategy on vocational education and training 2005-2010*<sup>10</sup>, *National strategy on introducing ICT in the Bulgarian schools*,<sup>11</sup> *Strategy against the Poverty and the Social Isolation*<sup>12</sup>, *National plan against the poverty and social integration 2005-2006*<sup>13</sup>, *National strategy on further vocational training 2005-2010*<sup>14</sup> etc.

The legislative framework in the education and training system in Bulgaria define the basic aspects of modernizing the national educational system. In view of pre-accession requirements, as well as the current characteristics, the following key areas can be defined as needed modernization in the highest degree: improvement of the educational system's structure; giving up education with high quality (improving the quality and effectiveness of the training process, the training methods, the training base and technical equipment, the didactics as a whole, the training contents, the teaching quality of the teachers, trainers, supervisors, and the teachers in the higher schools; ensuring an equal access to education; commitment of the education with the science; development of the system for control of the education; commitment of the financing and the quality of the education; ensuring an access to and quality of VET for adults; modernization of the training base and equipment; ensuring conditions for including greater number of people in LLL forms; improvement of the initial and permanent qualification of the learners; cooperation and partnership on national, regional, and local level; activation of the employers' participation in the learning process; adoption of ICT in the education and training; investing in the development of human resources; mastering of minimum two foreign languages in the high school's framework.<sup>15</sup>

*However, none of these legal or policy documents contains any explicit text, addressing gender equality issues regarding the sphere of education. All legal texts and most of the officially published statistics treat pupils and students as a gender neutral mass. It is only the Law on Protection against Discrimination*<sup>16</sup> that can be considered as a legal instrument, ensuring gender equality and non-discrimination in the sphere of education by setting out means for protection against discrimination with regard to the right to education and training.

Special attention should be paid to Article 35 of the LPD, which is the legal basis for fighting stereotypes in the field of education. By virtue of this article, persons engaged in training or education, as well as the compilers of textbooks and learning materials, are obliged to provide information and to apply training and education methods aiming at overcoming the stereotype

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<sup>9</sup> Adopted by the National Assembly, 2006,

[http://www.minedu.government.bg/opencms/export/sites/mon/documents/programa\\_obrazovanie.pdf](http://www.minedu.government.bg/opencms/export/sites/mon/documents/programa_obrazovanie.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Adopted by the National Assembly in 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Promulgated, State Gazette № 21 / 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Adopted by the National Assembly in 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Adopted by the National Assembly on 10.03.2005.

<sup>14</sup> Accepted by Decision № 38.1 of the Council of Ministers on 14.10.2004.

<sup>15</sup> Education and Training 2010 – Bulgarian Contributions to 2006 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission, National Report, MES,

[http://www.minedu.government.bg/opencms/export/sites/mon/left\\_menu/documents/strategies/edu\\_training\\_Li\\_sbon\\_str\\_EG.pdf](http://www.minedu.government.bg/opencms/export/sites/mon/left_menu/documents/strategies/edu_training_Li_sbon_str_EG.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Promulgated, State Gazette, No. 86/30.09.2003, in force from 1.01.2004. suppl. No 70 of 10.08.2004, in force from 1.01.2005, amm. No 105 of 29.12.2005, in force from 1.01.2006. <http://www.cwsp.bg/htmls/page.php?id=656&category=107>

of the roles of women and men in all spheres of the public and family life. Kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, as well as universities are obliged to prepare their curricula and training programs taking account of the problems of equality between women and men.

We cannot speak of gender-related problems in education in terms of access, students' enrolment or performance with regard to Bulgaria. The data from the National Statistical Institute shows that Bulgaria has already achieved gender parity at all levels of education, a goal which is still a long way off many countries in the world, which is also confirmed by the official statistics of UNESCO.

It is quite obvious that the nature of the problems faced by the education systems in European countries are far from just attaining certain levels of literacy, girls' enrolment and school attendance, girls' achievements etc.

However, there are still other problems that are hidden and neglected by the decision-makers. One of them is the feminisation of the profession. Women among teachers, directors and deputy directors with teacher work, according to the data from the National Statistical Institute, are over 80% for primary and lower secondary education and nearly 80% for secondary education. This imbalance results in the lower pay as well as the lower representation of women at decision-making positions, especially in tertiary education and science. On the other hand, the lack of male teachers at school can have negative effects on the children in the educational process with regards to models of behaviour and different competences.

Another aspect is the contents of the educational materials, curricula and syllabi. Several gender analyses of the contents of the primary school textbooks and the history textbooks conducted in the last few years in Bulgaria clearly show that gender is not only neglected as a concept but the textbooks continue to reproduce traditional gender stereotypes related to the family and the social environment as well as the symbolic perceptions of the child<sup>17</sup>. Thus “the existing stereotypes in society, on which the teachers are dependent as well, and the impossibility these stereotypes to be realized and overcome”<sup>18</sup> become another major obstacle for mainstreaming gender in education.

The lack of adequate addressing of gender in the legal framework and the national policy documents is naturally reflected in the contents of the textbooks, curricula and syllabi. One of the main findings of the analytical research *Gender Inequalities in Primers (1998-2005)*<sup>19</sup> emphasises the fact that “There are no policies for limiting gender inequalities because this issue is not visible and as a result (in particular) – education, on one hand, easily forms them, and on the other – reproduces them.” These alarming facts suggest that although gender equality is a fundamental principle and value, still it is neglected by the educational system.

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<sup>17</sup> *Content analysis of the textbooks for the primary school level from gender perspective*, conducted by Ventseslav Arnaudov, 2003, commissioned and financed by the Open Society Foundation

<sup>18</sup> *Teaching Gender Equality: Teacher's Reference Book*, Violeta Stoycheva, Kina Kotlarska, PIC, Veliko Turnovo, 2006, under the project “To promote gender equality through civic education”, financed by Comenius I Programme.

<sup>19</sup> Conducted by Elena Stoykova and financed by the Open Society Institute, Sofia;  
[http://cwsp.bg/upload/docs/Resume\\_bukavri\\_project\\_2005.pdf](http://cwsp.bg/upload/docs/Resume_bukavri_project_2005.pdf) (in Bulgarian).