

In between cultural traditions and reactionary threats: is gender education possible in Ukraine?

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Is there any sense in the isolated gendered innovations (for instance, in the isolated themed school classes carried out four times a year)? Or will only a large-scale complex reform be able to really assert a model of gendered (or gender sensitive, non-sexist) education? The questions are rather rhetorical.

It is quite apparent that the educational system is in need of profound deconstruction of its patriarchal traditions while such tasks as shaping the skills of non-sexist teaching in the pedagogical community, gendered expert assessment of the schoolbooks and curricula seem to be apparent but do not exhaust the essence of the process.

Such reform was never initiated in Ukrainian education. Even the progressive gendered transformations undertaken in the late 2000s were hardly revolutionary. A number of indisputably important, even fundamental steps have been taken then, for instance, the Law of Ukraine “On Ensuring Equal Rights And Opportunities of Women and Men” and the State Program of ensuring gender equality in Ukrainian society for 2006-2010 have been adopted and the relevant ministry has initiated an order “On implementation of the gender equality principles in education” and has even approved use of the schoolbook *We Are Different, We Are Equal. Fundamentals of Gender Equality*, edited by E. Semikolenova, in the 9-12 grades of the comprehensive school. That was also the time when the NGOs became more active while the UN Development Program has organized a cascade of mini-trainings for several thousands of teachers.

However, a number of criticisms were voiced against those innovations, primarily due to their openly ‘mainstream’ nature, factual reduction of gender to sex with all ‘restrictive outcome’ deriving from that (for instance, Gender Information and Analytical Center *KRONA* published a special issue criticizing the State Program and making the recommendations to the development of its ‘successor’). The UNDP, however large its project was, was more concerned with the coverage of the target teaching community and paid less attention to the quality and methodology of the training process. As a result, individual four-hour trainings were no more than introductory sessions.

Nevertheless, what clearly was there were the tendency and political will to carry out gendered reform of education. As well as faith that through the methodological discussions it is possible to find the alternative, not ‘mainstream’, scenarios for the reforms.

The critical 2010 when illusion dissolved fast marked the beginning of “backlash” in gender transformations. Change of the political elites resulted in rolling up of the state democratic strategies chosen earlier. At the same time anti-gender sentiments efficiently warmed up by the extreme right and religious organizations have been mounting in the society. At first, the gender community clearly has underestimated the danger. Only after this environment had give a rise to a wide range of movements and unions involved in open and often aggressive anti-gender propaganda that it had become clear: well-planned ideological opposition to the gender innovations has been launched.

One of the prime examples is the All-Ukrainian Parent Movement, a union of the non-governmental organizations and private persons with its educational activities, “Parents’ Readings”, forums, brochures and newspapers promoting the so-called ‘traditional family values’ and supporting the related upbringing system. What is particularly well-known is the book *Unembellished Gender (Gender bez Prikras)* with the following subtitle speaking for itself: *Through Gender Policy to Dictatorship of Homosexuality (Cherez Gendernuyu Politiku k Diktature Homoseksualisma)*. This movement allegedly produced yet another odious book for teachers and parents, *Gender ‘Education’, or How They Will Make Homosexualists from Your Children (Gendernoye ‘Vospitanie’ ili Kak iz Vashih Detey Budut Delat Homoseksualistov)*, published in Ukrainian with no identification data. Big numbers of both books were sent out to the state departments for education, schools and preschool institutions in the country.

To briefly characterize their content, they are an ‘explosive mixture’ of distorted facts, references to non-existing data, numbers game and quotations wrenched out of their context. The goal is to spread moral panic: “*Your children are in danger! The question is scurvy propaganda of homosexuality in the Ukrainian society. Everything is happening secretly and is mostly taking root through the gender policy, sexual education, anti-discrimination laws, juvenile laws, laws on ‘the rights of children and women’, propaganda of tolerance and under the pretence of struggle against AIDS, children trafficking and contrived family violence*”. ‘Know-how’ of one the brochures are the submission letters, for instance, to the directors of the educational institutions, with the requirements to prohibit attendance of such ‘maiming’ classes as related to ‘gender’, ‘homosexuality’, ‘HIV/AIDS prevention’, to name just a few, by a child. Such form letter can be easily pulled out the brochure, signed by a parent and submitted to the educational institution.

Judging by the Internet forums which provide an opportunity to track responses of the parents and teachers, anti-gender propaganda has not passed unnoticed. At the same time, we probably should not perceive it as the main factor of slippage of the gender reforms in Ukrainian education since the innovations offered were not widely supported among those who should be implementing them, or teachers, even prior to that. We should not be surprised by that since the teachers are the same ‘rivets’ in the ‘mechanism’ of the gender regime as the ‘average citizens’. Moreover, their perception is additionally burdened by the essence of the educational system of which they are a part. French sociologist P. Bourdieu compared the institute of education to a ‘rusty device’ capable of burying any new practices. Traditions of the Ukrainian education system are a proof of this image since the state represented in the vertical of the regulatory bodies is the only legitimate initiator of the innovations and imposes them from top to bottom in accordance with the applicable legislation. Any more or less significant and at the same time controversial novelties are met by a majority of teachers at dagger point, are implemented formally, especially if they have their own ‘opinion’ (which is probably the case when it comes to the gender issues). When ‘the vertical’ is silent, the affiliated structure is in ‘lovely dormancy’. And probably it is them unable to implement the full-scale gender reform.

Another question is whether it makes sense at all to integrate such a critical component as gender theory in such conservative mechanism, primarily fine-tuned to hidden reproduction of the patriarchal gender regime and to function of disciplining and control through its educational process? Or should we look for the alternative approaches to gender awareness-raising in other areas of the educational field?

For over 10 years GIAC *Krona* has been actively developing such alternative gender education trying to use all the potential of informal education. I would like to tell about two major projects that we have recently implemented together with the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Ukraine.

Beginning with 2010, we have organized and carried out 5 gender schools for teachers working in pre-schools and general education schools. The following were the specific characteristics of these training programs:

- Participation was voluntary.
- The gender competence and sensitivity training system we have developed included three following stages: the *basic* (in 3 years, 39 persons have successfully completed it) – *advanced* (11 per-

sons) – *expert* (7 persons) stages. We focused not on a number of participants but on steeping in the subject.

- Each school lasted for 3-4 days and as a rule was conducted ‘outside’ (organized not in the educational institutions but outside the city), in a different environment and informally.
- Social-constructionist approach was selected as our methodological and ideological framework. This made our work much more difficult due to unavoidable large-scale deconstruction of the worldview of our audience.
- We worked no less than 10 hours a day and that was a training indeed (not a workshop or the lectures), very active and diverse in its content.

The second project (launched in 2011) is the only distant online school in Ukraine and in the neighboring countries for journalists and students studying at the Departments or Schools of Journalism. As of today we have already carried out three *basic* level schools (approximately 60 persons have successfully completed them) and one *advanced* level school (10 persons).

To take part in the training it is necessary to have access to Internet and to register at the special web-site based on *Moodle*, a popular international distant learning platform. Here for one and a half to two months our students study the texts of the modules (there are 5 modules at the *basic* level and 6 at the *advanced* level), graphic, video- and audio files, complete the creative tasks and communicate with the team of tutors via skype. The distant form makes it possible to study on-the-job (the required study time is only 4-5 hours weekly under a flexible schedule) and the week cycles when students work with one module and do not have access to the next one make it possible to adapt to the ‘revolutionary’ topic and to understand the materials better.

Both awareness-raising projects proved their high efficiency. For instance, some graduates of the journalistic online-schools have produced a number of articles on the gender issues (published in the *Ya (I)* magazine, too) while their articles covering other issues have become more gender correct (we are trying to follow up on that). There are numerous examples demonstrating that the teachers who took our trainings succeeded in non-sexist teaching methods, changed the habitual approach to the educational events and even have successfully initiated creating a completely different ‘poster space’ of the schools.

Besides, in October 2013 we have completed a new book on gender education in kindergartens and schools. With the expert support provided by *KRONA*, this project has been carried out by the teachers who have completed all levels our gender schools.

Referring to the accumulated experience we believe that it is informal space that is ideal today for the development of gender education and its potential is huge. Not least because the training is voluntary and is organized in a different, non-sexist, environment, radically different from what dominates in the formal educational institutions.

Naturally, *KRONA*’s activities were noticed by the anti-gender movement. Besides the ‘standard’ accusation, in November 2012 an attempt was made to obstruct international conference *Gender Revolutions*, the site of the organization was attacked four times and the last attack has wiped it out completely.

We have restored the site, updated it and made it stronger. *KRONA* itself is becoming stronger. That means that the new revolutionary projects on gender education are yet ahead of us!