

CONSIDERING THE CASE FOR SINGLE-SEX SCHOOLS FOR GIRLS IN SOUTH AFRICA¹

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ABSTRACT. This article considers current international debates about single-sex schooling. It examines the reasons for the recommendation of the South African Gender Equity Task Team that single-sex schools for girls be established. It argues that the specific circumstances of schooling in South Africa, particularly the violent conditions that prevail in many schools, require that the desirability of single-sex schooling for particular constituencies continually be debated.

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article traite du débat international actuel sur la scolarité unisexe. Il se penche sur les motifs de la recommandation du groupe de travail sud-africain sur l'équité entre les sexes préconisant la création d'écoles unisexes pour filles. L'auteur de l'article soutient que les conditions propres à la scolarité en Afrique du Sud, en particulier la violence qui prévaut dans de nombreuses écoles, commandent un débat ininterrompu sur le caractère souhaitable d'une scolarité unisexe dans certaines circonscriptions.

INTRODUCTION

Education for girls in South Africa has followed two racially distinct courses historically. For black, particularly African, girls, provision came in the form of state coeducational schools. For white girls, the experience was either of single-sex schools (state and private) or of coeducation. In the late 1990s the newly elected democratic government of South Africa appointed a Gender Equity Task Team (GETT) to make recommendations on the schooling of girls. Amongst these recommendations was that single-sex schools for girls be established.

Single-sex schools have historically been associated with elite education. British public schools (for boys and girls) were invariably single-sex. South Africa, as with most of Britain's colonies, developed its schools according to the British model in the mid to late nineteenth century. Effectively from inception, schools were racially segregated. In the first decade of the twentieth century, schooling for white children became compulsory. This meant that at Union (1910), the following situation pertained. English-speaking boys and girls in urban secondary schools undertook study in single-sex

environments. Afrikaans speakers were largely in coeducational schools. Few Africans were in school at all, but those that were (mostly boys in mission schools) were in coeducational institutions.

This situation changed little in the next half century. Most African children received little or no schooling. Of those that did, very few were in single-sex institutions. In 1953 the newly elected National party passed the Bantu Education Act, one of the many laws that were to contribute to apartheid. By this Act the state provided compulsory, ideologically loaded, schooling for all African children. This left Africans with virtually no choice in the type of schools they attended. Coeducation was the only form of education delivery for African children.

For forty years Bantu Education remained in place until in the 1990s the newly elected ANC government replaced it with an integrated education system via the 1996 South African Schools Act. A major aim of the new system was to address racial inequality. Even before the ANC came to power, attempts had been made to reduce inequalities in expenditure, which in 1975/6 saw only R42 spent on an African child while R644 was spent on a white child.

TABLE 1. *Per capita expenditure (all levels of education) (Rs)*

	AFRICAN	COLOURED	INDIAN	WHITE
1987	444	1255	1763	2323
1991	1991	2416	3142	3961

While government continues to attack these racial inequalities, it has also begun to address gender inequalities. One of the measures advocated by GETT in 1997 was to establish single-sex schools for girls.

In recommending support for single sex schools for girls, this report is advocating that such schools be supported where there is an active policy for developing excellence in girls' education, provision for security for girls from harassment and violence and where such schooling provides affirmative programmes designed to equip girls with a high level of consciousness about women's and girl's human rights. (Wolpe, Quinlan and Martinez [for the Gender Equity Task Team, Pretoria, Department of Education], 1998, p. 91)

GETT's call was based on a position of gender equity and redress. It wanted to improve the prospects of African girls in the schooling system. Elsewhere, single-sex schooling is sometimes seen as conservative. It is often the means by which class, race or gender privilege is preserved. The call for single-sex schools for boys, for example, is made most stridently by the middle class

using 'crisis in masculinity' arguments as a justification. In South Africa this lobby also evokes 'dropping standards' in support of its call.

Not all educationists agreed with this recommendation. Many saw the retention and extension of single-sex schooling as a way of allowing the privileged middle-class, primarily white, elite to avoid change. There is no space in this article to examine the way in which gender, race and class have rivaled one another for attention on the policy agendas of the Department of Education. Suffice to say that thus far, no single-sex schools for African, township (working class) girls have been established, though a limited number of African middle class girls have gained access to existing single-sex, formerly white schools.

THE DEBATE

The debate about single-sex schooling remains undecided. While there are advocates for single-sex schools, both for boys and girls, critics are equally vocal. A roundtable workshop amongst educators in the US in 1997 (Office of Naval Research, 1998) came to the following conclusions:

- there is no evidence that single-sex education in general **works** or is **better** than coeducation;
- single-sex educational programs produce positive results for some students in some settings;
- the long-term impact of single-sex education on girls or boys is unknown;
- no learning environment, single-sex or coed, provides a sure escape from sexism.

These are not conclusions that have been arrived at lightly. Over the last thirty years feminists interested in promoting the interests of girls in schools have looked, from time to time and with varying degrees of optimism, at single-sex schools as one way of making a difference. But these conclusions do not close the debate. Before considering key areas of the debate, I briefly discuss how feminists came to be associated with the cause for single-sex girls' schools.

In Britain, the introduction of comprehensive schools effectively meant the extension of coeducation to girls. This development occurred "even though there had been no policy debate on the advantages of mixed as opposed to single-sex schools. The concern expressed by mainly women teachers about the possible negative effects on girls' education of mixed-sex schooling in the 1920s and thereafter had been ignored" (Arnot, David & Weiner, 1999, p. 69).

This was the backdrop to feminist agitation, spurred particularly by the encyclopedic survey of schooling conducted by Dale (1969,1974). His con-

clusion that coeducational schooling was basically good for all, spurred feminists to take issue.

Four kinds of objection were made. Coeducational schools were boys' schools with girls in them and thus either ignored the interests of girls or forced them to conform to a masculinist ethos. Secondly, coed schools were characterized by high levels of sexual harassment. Thirdly, girls did not perform well academically in coed schools. They were disadvantaged in terms of subject choices. Particularly in the "boys" subjects – sciences and vocational subjects – timetabling and peer and teacher pressure discouraged them from participation. Feminists also argued that girls were domesticated and set on the path of marriage and motherhood, that they were denied the chance to experiment with forms of sexuality other than heterosexual ones and that their career opportunities were deleteriously affected (Arnot, 1983; Mahony, 1985; Sarah, Scott & Spender, 1989; Shaw, 1980; Shaw 1982; Spender, 1989).

In the US coeducation was and remains the predominant form of education. The popularity of single-sex institutions steadily waned in the twentieth century with only Catholic schools continuing to organize along single-sex lines. In the late 1980s and early 1990s the issue came to the fore with single-sex girls' colleges fighting for the right to retain their single-sex status (Mael, 1998). Although single-sex schooling was hereby brought into the arena of public debate, it remains a very small section of the US schooling system. Only 1.5% of students are in single-sex schools (Baker, Riordan & Schaub, 1995). In the last few years single-sex schools have been set up for disadvantaged minorities (e.g., inner city boys and girls) as a mechanism of redress, but such steps have been controversial. Even more controversial has been the continuing existence of boys' schools (e.g., military academies). These have in many instances been forced to accept girls.

Opposition to single-sex schools was, in another context, a reaction to the well-documented problems of single-sex schools for boys. In his prize-winning novel *The Ogre*, set in Europe during the rise of fascism, Michel Tournier gives these words to his central character, scarred by his experience of being educated in a boy's school:

It's impossible to express the harm done in our childhood by the segregation of boys and girls. Men and women are so foreign to each other, it's difficult for them to arrive at a life in common, that it's stupid and criminal not to accustom them to sharing everything from childhood. And yet it's well known that a cat and a dog will live together in peace only if they've been reared on the same bottle! (1997, p. 96)

The issue of masculinity in schooling has become a significant area of study. Some proclaim boys' schools as the answer to falling levels of academic performance and rising suicide rates (Biddulph, 1997). But feminists are critical and advocate engagement in integrated contexts that are not as

likely to generate misogynistic, hyper-masculinities (Connell, 1996; Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Mills, 1998).

By the 1990s important research was beginning to suggest that single-sex schools might not be the answer to feminist concerns. Findings suggested that the claims made for single-sex schooling were poorly founded. Ian Smith (1994), for example, examined two schools in Sydney, Australia, which had changed their status from single-sex to coed. His conclusion was that the form of schooling (single-sex or coeducational) did not negatively affect self-esteem, achievement or teachers' perceptions. A finding that came up with similar results was conducted by Harker and Nash (1997) in New Zealand. They found that where differences between coeducational and single-sex institutions did exist, these were due to class factors: middle class children attended the elite single-sex schools.

FOUR KEY AREAS

The value of single-sex schools in promoting the interests of girls can be measured by looking at four key areas: influence on academic performance and subject choice; the ethos of the school including staffing and decision-making processes; sexual harassment; and role models, the self-esteem of learners and post-school performance.

Academic performance and subject choice

Critiques of coeducational schools centre on the drop in academic performance by girls at secondary school level (compared with primary school level where girls tend to outperform boys). They show how gender-segregated curricula and the subject choices of girls meant that boys historically tended to take science and math in far greater numbers than girls do. In single-sex environments, girls tend to take "boys" subjects more readily and perform better. In Germany a study found that female students attending girls' schools more often go on to study natural and technical sciences while those in coeducational schools conformed to gender stereotypes in choosing subjects (Giesen et al., 1992). A comprehensive Irish study also found that in math and science, girls do better in single-sex schools and that their performance generally is better in single-sex than coed schools. However, the study also concluded that "the coed effect is substantively very small" and often is due to "differences in the social background and ability of their pupil intakes" (Hannan, Smyth, McCullagh, O'Leary, & McMahon, 1996, p. 196). Two studies conducted in the US concluded that single-sex schools were not successful in improving girls' academic performance. A study of Catholic single-sex schools found that they did not provide advantageous academic environments for girls (LePore & Warren, 1997) and a comparative study of girls in coed and single-sex schools found that there were no

significant differences in performance in math, science and English and in overall academic achievement (Shmurak, 1995).

Ethos of the school

Male teacher and boys in the student body dominate coed schools. The result is that coed schools generally have gender regimes which are characterized by misogyny, homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality (Mac an Ghaill, 1994). Men generally make decisions and the ethos of the school reflects this. This situation differs in single-sex girls' schools. In these schools the teacher body is predominantly female and women teachers consequently feel (and are) more influential (Lee et al., 1995). Moreover, the ethos of the school is more girl-friendly. Three studies (two in the US and one in Australia) found that classroom interaction was more cooperative, inclusive and caring and that "femaleness" was more esteemed in girls' schools (Bauch, 1989; Brody et al., 1998; Dorman, 1997).

Sexual harassment

Amongst the strongest motivations for single-sex schools was the aggressiveness of boys and the harassment of girls. This line of argument is seldom heard though there is no shortage of literature on the violence of schooling and the prevalence of sexual harassment (Stein, 1995). Mael's review (1998) of the US literature concluded that "single-sex schooling reduces options for such harassment; moreover, exposing adolescent males to female peers on a regular basis increases sexual tensions that many youth lack the maturity to control" (p. 115). In subsequent sections this will be considered in the South African context as a major consideration for developing single-sex schools.

Role models, self-esteem, and post-school achievement

Single-sex schools provide girls with positive role models (successful, autonomous, independent women), allow the development of healthy self-esteem away from the competitive and heterosexist environment of coeducational schools and result in more confident women entering and succeeding in the workplace (Lee & Bryk, 1986; Riordan, 1985). This justification for single-sex schools is not unanimously supported by research. One study found that girls actually disclaimed and devalued their achievements and learnt to be silent (Spalding & Ziff, 1997) while another found no difference in the career performance of girls in single-sex and coed schools (Shmurak, 1993).

THE DEBATE CONTINUES – THE CURRENT SITUATION

One of the reasons for an ongoing critique of coeducational schools is the slow pace of gender change. Despite the narrowing of the gender gap, the

world of work is still dominated by men. Feminists therefore are continuing to ask what can be done in education to promote the interests of girls.

In 1986, Lee and Bryk asked the question: "Is secondary education in America enriched or impoverished by the gradual disappearance of the single-sex school?" (p. 394). This remains an open question and continues to be debated. A number of studies show that the decline of single-sex schools has been to the detriment of girls (Bauch, 1989; Hanafin & ni Charthaigh, 1993). Others show that single-sex schools offer girls some market-place advantage (Ball & Gewirtz, 1997) but at some cost to their personal development. Similar complexities emerge where cultural and gender factors collide as with the demand by Muslims in Britain for single-sex schools (Haw, 1994). Single-sex schools are not a simple panacea and many factors have to be taken into account when considering their value in striving for gender equity. This being the case, it is not surprising that the borders of the debate have moved. Emphasis has recently shifted to examine the way in which gender inequalities occur within schooling generally and how better outcomes can be achieved (Baker, Riordan, Schaub, 1995; Connell, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982; Hansot & Tyack, 1988). The understanding now is that monitoring and intervening in gender practices including the explicit and hidden curriculum may offer a better way of ensuring gender justice than packaging education into either a coeducational or single-sex format.

Yet some form of sex segregation remains an option exercised to achieve gender equity. In Denmark, for example, the strategy of (gender) polarization (single-sex classes) has been in use since the early 1980s. The rationale for this programme is that "a person is better qualified to participate on an equal footing with the opposite sex, if that person has had a chance to develop according to her/his own terms" (Kruse, 1996, p. 190). In Australia, however, this approach has been criticized. Confirming the finding of Baker and Davies (1989), Kenway and Willis (1998) argue that single-sex math classes for girls result in inadequately prepared teachers being part of the production of "new and unfortunate knowledge about gender relations" (p. 201). Segregated classes allowed boys to reinscribe girls "within traditional modes of femininity and sometimes girls used single-sex classes in this way too" (Kenway and Willis, 1998, p. 203). Overall, Kenway and Willis warn about the difficulties of gender reform and particularly about the dangers of any formulaic, quick-fix approach to gender equity.

SINGLE-SEX SCHOOLING IN AFRICA

Education on the continent of Africa is marked by low levels of access by girls. In attempting to address this, UNESCO in the early 1980s endorsed coeducation as a major instrument for gender equity.

Of all the factors contributing to the advancement of women's education and training and subsequent participation in economic and social development, co-education undoubtedly takes prides of place because. . . once boys and girls have been brought up together on an equal footing from a very early age, vocational training for girls cannot thereafter become a specific problem. In co-educational schools, moreover, there is a clear trend towards eliminating the differentiation of courses and options according to criteria based on sex. (UNESCO, 1983, p. 37)

The goal of providing education for equality, however, ignored what happened to girls inside schools. Despite UNESCO's emphasis on the importance of peace, its recommendations simply assumed that schools were themselves peaceful.

Schools are not infrequently unsafe and girls are frequently assaulted, raped and murdered. While no quantitative study exists on violence within schools in Africa, there are a number of studies that suggest that it is a widespread problem. Rebecca Hallam's (1994) study summarized this:

Many observers in Africa believe that recent years have indeed seen a sharp rise in sexual violence in educational institutions, reflecting a general rise in violence against women. This is not only a serious problem in its own right, but has very important implications for women's ability to pursue their studies. (p. 2)

In recent years a number of horrifying events and trends have emerged. The St Kizito mixed secondary school massacre in Kenya in 1991 saw boys attack a girls' dormitory, killing 19 girls and raping 71. A study of rape in Senegal found that 60% of rapes were inflicted on school girls with an average age of 15 years (Hallam, 1994). Hallam's study points out that youth clubs and cults are often responsible for group assaults on students, but that teachers are also culpable. Across the continent, male teachers use their positions of authority and material power to take sexual advantage of girls (Hallam, 1994). Recourse to the law or any form of redress is limited because of retaliation, victimization and further threats and acts of violence against those initially attacked. The level of violence goes far beyond the concerns of feminists about sexual harassment expressed above. Schools in Africa are dangerous places, particularly for girls. But it is not just a question of physical danger – schools in many instances are also places of intense sexual interaction. The problem of pregnancy is continent-wide. Frequently, pregnancy results in the termination of a girl's school career. In Kenya it is estimated that 10,000 girls drop out each year because of pregnancy (Hallam, 1994). There is, of course, a close connection between safety, stability and academic performance.

While single-sex secondary education may facilitate female achievement and promote greater female participation where adolescent physical safety is an issue, the evaluation of the relative effectiveness of coeducation

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compared to single-sex schooling may be confounded by male-dominated school populations. (Lee & Lockheed, 1990, p. 210)

Existing research suggests that in Africa, single-sex schooling has many of the advantages which feminists hoped for in first world contexts. In Nigeria, for example, girls participate and perform significantly better in math than in coed schools (Lee and Lockheed, 1990; Mallam, 1993). In Nigeria too, single-sex schools appear to have played a significant role in promoting girls into science and technology professions (Erinosho, 1997). In the Muslim countries of North Africa, girls' schools have played a positive role under certain conditions. Female teachers and administrators have operated as positive role models and drop out levels and absenteeism have been below average (El-Sanabary, 1989).

In many parts of Africa, girls' schools, often set up by missionaries, continue to exist and to offer education that appears to better prepare girls for an independent life. It may be asked whether their success is due to the fact that they are single-sex institutions. A range of other factors might be important – calibre of intake, wealth, nature of the school's resources, support of the parents may all be significant. In the next section, the role of single-sex schools in South Africa is discussed.

Single-sex schools for girls in South Africa

The earliest schools for girls established in South Africa in the mid to late nineteenth century were by and large single-sex. Their position in colonial society and the racially exclusive nature of their student intake meant that they were elite schools from the start (Randall, 1982; Vietzen, 1980). With the elaboration of the education system, the numerical importance of these schools declined. Today, single-sex schools (for boys and girls) form a very small proportion of the 32,000 schools within the education system. In terms of overall numbers, single-sex schools provide education to only a very small percentage (probably between 1 and 2%) of the 12 million school-going population. Only 1996 figures (the most recent available) could be obtained for the two most populous provinces, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. In Gauteng, of the 1,528,371 pupils in school, only 34,874 were in single-sex institutions which equals 2.2% of the province's school-going population. Significantly, the percentage of matriculants in single-sex institutions was higher – around 5% for the province. In KwaZulu-Natal, only 1.2% of the 2.7 million pupils were in single-sex institutions. If anything, the percentages may be declining since most of the new schools established are coeducational and many of the former white single-sex schools are converting from single-sex to coeducation, following an international trend (M. Henning, personal communication, April 29, 1998; Walford, 1986).

The single-sex schools that do exist, for the most part continue to occupy elite positions within the education system. For example, in the survey of the top 100 schools in the country in 1999, 32 girls and 24 boys schools appear. This is a massive overrepresentation in terms of their limited presence in the schooling system as a whole (Edusource/Education Foundation, 1999).²

Up until 1990, with few exceptions, the elite single-sex schools were white schools. Since that time in a process of formal desegregation of the education system, a large number of black children have moved from township schools into formerly white schools, many of which are single-sex. By the end of 1995 there were approximately 200,000 African students in Coloured, Indian and formerly white schools (Naidoo, 1996). Yet the class feature of this migration is significant. The former white suburban schools charge relatively high fees (around R6,000 per annum compared to R100 for a township secondary school) and thus the black students who now enjoy single-sex education are by and large drawn from the new black middle classes. There is still effectively no public provision of single-sex schools for black working class girls.

Historically there have been very few single-sex schools for black girls. Most mission schools established in the nineteenth century were coeducational, although they had sex-segregated hostels and curricula. One of the few all-girl institutions was Inanda Seminary established in 1869 by American Board missionaries. Despite the argument that it produced girls ready for home-life (Hughes, 1990), it was an elite school and its alumni occupied and still occupy important and visible public positions (*Independent on Saturday*, 14 August 1999; MacDougall, 1990; *Natal Witness*, 18 November 1997). Amongst its old girls are famous author, Ellen Khuzwayo; Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri, former premier of the Free State; Barbara Masekela, South African ambassador to France; Baleka Kgositsile, deputy speaker of Parliament; Manto Shabalala-Msimang, Eileen Nkosi-Shandu, Stella Sigcau, and Nozizwe Rontledge-Madlala – all ministers or deputy ministers in provincial and national government. This is an astonishing list given that the school has only 450 students and historically has suffered from very limited resources. The independent and forceful nature of the school's products can be contrasted with those of a local neighbour, the renowned Adam's College established in 1853 just south of Durban. This coeducational institution was an elite school with a long list of famous alumni. But despite the mixed student body, the famous alumni are all men. Lily Moya, who attended Adams College in the early 1950s, offers some explanation for this stark difference. She described coeducation at Adams as "abominable" (Marks, 1987, p. 25) and was so unhappy that she ran away.

Despite policy recommendations to extend single-sex schooling to African girls, there are real dangers that existing institutions will close because of

financial pressure. Most single-sex schools for African girls were and remain independent (i.e., privately-funded) and many are faced with bankruptcy. It was only the intervention of Nelson Mandela who in 1999 helped raise R1 million that has ensured that Inanda Seminary will continue to function – and it is one of the better resourced schools of this kind.

In South Africa, the major gender challenge is not getting African girls into schools – they already attend in large numbers (Truscott, 1994; Unterhalter, 1990). The major challenge is to convert the comparative advantage that the access to schooling gives to girls into something palpable like an improvement in their earning capacity or greater independence and public visibility. One of the major obstacles, as already indicated, is the violence that girls face and the effect that this has on their ability to act autonomously.

The problem of violence in schools

Although Lily Moya never stated it explicitly, her experience at Adams College was made unbearable because of the sexual attentions of boys. In Shula Marks's commentary on Lily's sad life, she suggests that maybe it was Lily's naivete that was the cause of her unhappiness. While this may well have been the case, research and the testimony of my students are now suggesting that the problem was (and remains) systemic rather than personal (Morrell, 1998).

In Africa there is a growing literature on the effects of sexual harassment in school. Girls are frequently raped, assaulted or harassed, resulting in them becoming pregnant (and leaving school forever) or living in fear and leaving of their own volition. Little seems to have been done to stop this. Frequently, the offenders are teachers or fellow students (Hyde, 1997; Mudhai, 1997). If anything, the situation in South Africa is worse. The worsening economic conditions in the country have produced a horrifying organizational phenomenon, the South African Rapist Association, which parallels the organized jackrolling (gang raping women, frequently schoolgirls) campaigns by township gangs in the 1970s (Mokwena, 1991). A member of this association, a former "comrade" said, in 1994: "We rape women who need to be disciplined (those women who behave like snobs), they just do not want to talk to most people, they think they know better than most of us" (Goldblatt & Meintjes, 1997, p. 14). This is probably an extreme position but it should be seen against the backdrop of a large black urban youth population, parts of which historically have manifested an assertive, and at times aggressive, masculinity in relation to turf, authority, women and rival members of the group (Glaser, 1988/89; 1992, 1998). The feminist journal *Agenda* cites police figures to suggest that there were one million rapes in South Africa in 1995 – which works out to one rape every 35 seconds (*Agenda* fact sheet, 1998). In a study of 24 relationships between young

adults (many of whom were school-going) in a Cape Town township, Wood and Jewkes (1997) found that in 23 of these relationships assault was a regular feature. In a follow-up study by Jewkes, 45-67% of women surveyed spoke of themselves as "abused," economically, physically, emotionally, and sexually (cited in Bennett, 2000, p. 21).

In a 1998 survey, where 1500 youths (aged 12-22 years) in black residential areas of Johannesburg were interviewed, a quarter of the boys said that gang rape was "fun;" 16% said gang rape was "cool;" 43% of girls said that sexual violence was "very common," while 33% said that they had personally experienced it at school. In another study, 75% of all learners at 6 Soweto schools testified that they had had "direct experience of a rape attack" (Edusource, 1999b, p. 15) but only 36% had reported these attacks.

We do not have figures on levels of sexual violence in schools, but all indications are that such violence is widespread. In a recent review of relevant literature, Jane Bennett (2000) came to the following conclusions:

Interviews with nearly all organizations identified school environments as places in which girls are very vulnerable to gender-based violence from male peers and from men staff. Women and schoolgirls were also found, in KZN, to be the main victims of violence in areas where gangs operate. Women are "property" of men gang members, and are also targets of rapes and abductions. There are very few support services available in schools, and there remains a deep culture of gender inequality.

Girls, particularly in coeducational township schools, have to contend with the constant risk of sexual harassment (Truscott, 1994; Wolpe et al., 1997). This is one of the major reasons why parents over the last half century have chosen to remove their girl children from township schools and place them in rural boarding schools and single-sex schools like Inanda Seminary.

To give the reader some sense of this problem I include some extracts taken from African students at two Durban universities. These are not unusual testimonies:

We all knew that some girls had been taken advantage of, but I couldn't believe it when it actually happened to me. I felt so embarrassed and cried. I told one of my friends but I didn't want to report it at school out of fear of revenge. I think the teachers knew that those things happened frequently but they too were powerless. (Suransky-Dekker, 1996, p. 6)

I was at boarding school and some of the teachers lived in small rooms on the school property. We all knew that this teacher romanced some sweethearts. Some girls were honoured but others were embarrassed or scared to reject him. (Suransky-Dekker, 1996, p. 6)

Another Durban teacher working in a township school confirmed the above:

The corrupt teacher will send a girl to his cottage for any particular job. He will then follow the girl. . . will ask for sexual favours from that girl.

Others even grab and rape the girls. . . . This problem is endemic in such a way that it has even got a codename. . . . They call it 'send and follow method.' (Personal testimony, B.Ed student, University of Natal, Durban, 1998)

As a pupil herself, this teacher remembers:

I was proposed by an old boy of about 30 years. I was only 13 and doing std 6 and he was doing standard 10. He was older than my class teacher. He will threaten of raping me if I don't accept his proposal. I was afraid to report this to the teachers because they will make it a joke. During intervals he will not leave me alone. I was then forced to hide in the toilet so that he cannot find me. I was too young to take this and it affected me so much. My results in that year dropped down because I was always terrified and inconsistent. (Personal testimony, B.Ed student, University of Natal, Durban, 1998)

Sexual harassment by teachers is a particularly sensitive issue and there has been no survey of the problem. Only a few studies testify to its nature. In a recent study of schooling in schools for rural Africans, male teacher/female student sexual relations were found to be widespread as well as the source of violent contestation between male students and teachers. "Teachers regularly victimized the girls who refused to accept their proposals and the boys with whom they were involved. One teacher proposed love to Rose Khosa, but after she refused him, he started beating her whenever she could not reply to his difficult questions" (Niehaus, in press, p. 9). While male students contested the right of teachers to have sex with the female students, they also implicitly claimed these students as their own sexual property.

An exploratory study in Durban found high levels of sexual abuse by teachers in local schools. The researcher examined 25 cases of abuse which were actually reported. Despite the gravity of the charges, only 8% of the cases resulted in dismissal and 4% in criminal charges. To avoid embarrassment, the official position was normally to allow the teachers accused to transfer to another school (Pillay, 1992).

In Durban, Richard Griggs (1997) has shown that gang violence is widespread in schools; 90% of schools investigated experienced it. A local case study by Vusi Mahlobo (2000) confirmed these findings. Of all students interviewed, 80% had experienced violence on the way to or from school or in the school grounds.

Poverty, participation and performance

Around the world the issue of poverty strikes women hardest. In South Africa 56% of women over 15 years are without income of any sort. These are mostly black women (Taylor, 1997). Joblessness also falls more heavily on female-headed than male-headed households (EPU, 1996). When you

consider that there is a correlation between access to education, certification and earning power, the difficulty of girls getting quality education remains a problem, despite the relatively high proportion of African girls in school and their relatively high success rates. Explanations for this state of affairs can be found by examining the labour market. Historically, black men could escape poverty by seeking wage labour in the cities and in the mines, but these opportunities were denied to women who were prohibited from entering urban areas (Bozzoli, 1983). The difficulty women found accessing any but the most exploited and poorest paid unskilled jobs was paralleled in the higher echelons of the labour market where they were confined to nursing and teaching (Marks, 1994). Apartheid may have extended mass education to African girls, but the quality of education and the context of that education continue to prevent girls from converting this advantage into a major improvement in their positions and in gender relations more broadly (Unterhalter, 1990). While white English-speaking girls were learning in the privileged, protected and esteem-producing environments of single-sex schools, African girls were enduring the intimidatory and authoritarian teaching in coeducational schools. One possible consequence was that they did not develop the confidence to put themselves forward, to take the initiative, to challenge the gender prescriptions that required timidity and subservience.

In terms of girls' participation in school governance, the rise of Student Representative Councils (SRCs) and the emergence of democratic school governance have not afforded girls the opportunity to become more visible or involved in decision-making. Politics remains in schools primarily an area of male activity. Female students tend to be excluded or marginalized from participating in SRCs (Morrell, 1992).

The academic performance of girls, particularly African, still falls behind that of boys. In the 1998 matriculation examination, 52% of all girls failed, compared to 46% of boys (Edusource, 1999a, p. 5). Girls were outperformed by boys in math, physical science, biology and even English second language. In math, for example, 38% of girls who took the exam passed, compared to 47% of boys, in physical science the figures were 61%-70%; biology 55%-60% (Edusource, 1999a, p. 7). Interestingly, in absolute terms, more girls write "matric" and more girls than boys pass and get matriculation exemptions. Access therefore is not the problem. Rather the problem is one of achievement and this is one of the major arguments used to advocate single-sex schooling for girls.

Another striking difference lies in sports performance. In the last decade or two, the participation of African men in a range of sports has taken off. African men dominate distance running, boxing and soccer and they have a significant presence in many other sports. It is striking that the obsession with sport is confined to African boys and men. School sports facilities

generally cater for boys only. Soccer gets all the attention and support. Girls do play netball but this is not given much recognition within schools. It is the case that virtually no African woman has achieved success in sport at a national or international level. The nature of the current schooling system has much to do with this. Girls are not encouraged to compete or participate (Africa, 1998).

DISCUSSION

As already indicated, there is a need for the academic performance of girls to be raised. This is particularly the case with black African girls. Out of 10,000 black African students who enter the school system, only 27 will qualify for university acceptance and only one will qualify in either math or science according to 1997 figures. This figure, taken with gender skewed performances amongst Africans and the fact that in 1988 only 15% of the country's university population were female Africans, can be accepted *prima facie* as a reason for considering girls' schools for Africans (Financial and Fiscal Commission, 1998; Truscott, 1994).

In South Africa "gender bias in the curriculum is hard to see or collect data on" (Truscott, 1994, p. 44). Formally, there appear to be only small differences, for example, in the number of boys as compared to girls taking math. Beneath the surface, however, it is clear that subject choice in schools is not easily made. Girls are discouraged from doing "boys" subjects. The discriminatory nature of the situation is more evident when one exposes the processes associated with, and effects of, subject choice.

A 19 year-old young woman, Zodwa (pseudonym), who recently matriculated from a township school, was persuaded to take subjects that imposed domesticity on them [sic]. In 1997, three years after our historic non-racial democratic elections, Zodwa was cajoled by one of her high school teachers to enroll in a Home Economics class. The only students in the class were young women. These young women were taught how to cook, bake and look beautiful. Zodwa describes her typical day in school to have also involved sweeping the classrooms and cleaning the toilets. (Mthethwa-Sommers, 1999, p. 46)

The schools produced by Bantu Education were characterized by extremely authoritarian, patriarchal regimes (Morrell & Moletsane, 2000). The ethos of these schools encouraged girls not to participate or to compete. In schools where boys are either absent or in the minority, a far freer environment is visible. At Mvenyane, a century old mission school in rural KwaZulu-Natal, the closure of the boys' hostels has resulted in girls outnumbering boys by 3 to 1. On a recent research trip to this school with my colleague, Lebo Moletsane, it was striking how animated and confident the girls were. The heterosexist rhythms so common in the normal coeducational schools were absent. And sexual harassment was virtually non-existent. The headteacher

of the school was quite clear about the reasons for the successes of the school – the small number of boys allowed girls to assert themselves and made discipline and teaching much easier. A similar situation seems to prevail in an urban Soweto girls-only school. Orlando Girls' School continues to deliver good results and to have a healthy climate of learning, while all around, coeducational schools are dysfunctional (Edusource/Education Foundation, November 1998).

The violence in schools is a major reason why single-sex schools for girls should be considered. There is a growing recognition that violence is a problem for schools (Kenway and Fitzclarence, 1997) but the literature which deals with this violence (in Australia, UK, and USA) by and large is dealing with a phenomenon which in terms of scale and intensity is very different from that in South Africa. In these cases, violence generally takes the form of feeling, swearing, touching and other types of invasive behaviour (AAUW, 1995; Jones, 1985). Strategies are devoted to dealing with these. But in South Africa the problem is a lot more serious and requires different measures. Of the overseas authors only Devine (1996) tackles the hard edge of "violence" – possession and use of guns and other weapons and the consequent development of a security mindset in schools. In South Africa, the prevalence of gangs and their brazen involvement in-schools, has prompted educators, parents and policy makers to advocate surveillance and security measures. Of course it is important that all schools be made safe, but keeping out the gangs is only one part of the problem. Cases of violence and sexual harassment continue to be common. There are many reasons for this, but the bottom line is that African, working class girls are being denied the chance to excel. Single-sex schools might be considered as one way in which this problem might be addressed.

The absence of research on the importance and effects of role models on the self-esteem of girls forces me to rely on anecdotal and impressionistic evidence. One of the few studies which makes any statement about this is the Masters thesis by Selma Nagan (1999). She found that in girls-only schools, headteachers were inspirational and encouraged girls to assume leadership positions. Whereas in coeducational schools, women teachers were made to feel unskilled and valueless, the girls-only environment allowed them to be more active and to offer a more purposeful role model. As already indicated, the limited evidence available also suggests that African girls stand a better chance in the world of work if they have passed through a single-sex school.

In the field of education, gender issues have remained visible despite a welter of pressing difficulties which have kept policy-makers and bureaucrats concentrated on other matters including bureaucratic rationalization, budget shortfalls, teacher militancy and low pass rates. Yet it should be added that gender has to fight for a place of priority with other agendas such

as nation-building and it is by no means guaranteed that gender equity will continue to be a major policy goal (Enslin, 1993/4). Even if there is agreement on the importance of gender, Anne McLennan warns that without tying educational gender commitments to a broader engagement with wider society on the basis of nonrepression and nondiscrimination, the impact of initiatives (particularly if they are conceived only in terms of distributive criteria) may be very limited (McLennan, 1993/4; Daniels, 1995). In some provinces there have been some steps taken to produce "girl-friendly school environments." Chisholm comments that these steps have involved banning violence, corporal punishment and sexual harassment, but she warns, "where teachers are not safe, and where methods of pupil motivation rely on punishment, there will be resistance amongst teachers to some of these measures" (Chisholm, 1996, p. 12).

Acknowledging the importance of safety in the education crisis, the COLTS (Culture of Learning, Teaching and Service) program was launched in 1998 by the National Department of Education. One of its projects was "Safer Learning Environments." It emphasised "increasing basic safety conditions at the school place and decreasing incidents of crime and violence in and around schools" (UNESCO et al., 1999, p. 20). There are many ways of achieving this, but single-sex schooling would be one of the logical options. In a study of a Durban school, attempts to deal with racial antagonism in a desegregating former white school demonstrated how single-sex schools were suited to this approach (Welgemoed, 1998).

Amongst African students whom I teach at the University of Natal, opinion on single-sex schools has been divided. Few have had direct experience of single-sex schooling and to some it seems "unnatural." Nevertheless there was a significant expression of support for this form of schooling. I quote two opinions expressed in September 1996 which argue in favour of single-sex schooling for girls:

I would have been a better person if I had been to a girls' school. At girls' schools you sort of have this identity – the role models are female and you get this encouragement that maybe one day you'll be somebody in power or *somebody*. Because there it was just like males all over the place and they ran the school – they did everything and we had to follow behind them. (Sinenhlanhla, a woman who attended an elite, coeducational, mission school)

I think single-sex schools are very good in a way for girls, I don't know about socially, but I think those girls who went to single-sex school they benefited out of it. They tend to be very confident, they do well, and they seem to take a good position in the community. I know some who went to Inanda or Montebello, some of them are doctors. But you hardly get any girl from a co-ed school going to those positions, but I don't know what it does for them socially, I mean in terms of relating to males. I've actually taught and I've seen this in the classes, the girls seem to be very passive

unless the class is dominated by girls, if there are many girls compared to boys, they – the girls – would be very active. But if maybe the number is half girls, half boys, or more boys, the girls tend to be very passive. (Nkanyezi, a man who attended a township coeducational school)

One of the dangers of introducing single-sex schooling for girls is the danger of a masculinist backlash. Examples cited above show that girls have been attacked while in their single-sex dormitories. The reasons for this are complex, but an important theme is “getting above their station.”

A particularly disturbing feature from research into violence against women is the possibility of a link between domestic violence and progress towards equality for women. The suspicion is that the risk of violence rises when male partners feel threatened that their traditional position of superiority and control is being threatened. Gender equity can evoke backlash unless accompanied by skills for both sexes in peaceful conflict resolution. (Davies, 1998, p. 100)

In Southern Africa, this conclusion is confirmed. Attempts to promote the interests of girls in school are seen as a direct challenge to the authority of African patriarchs. As a Zimbabwe school principal put it, “educated women in African society do not fare well in marriage” because “the emancipation of women through education has put African manhood in conflict with modern womanhood, tearing asunder African societies and leaving men and women confused on how to chart the future of their children” (Chiurayi, 1996, p. 2). This is not surprising, he argues, because rural women

... serve as labour force for their husbands or other men on the commercial farms, from whom they derive little benefit. Unfortunately in the majority of cases, men would like this situation to continue. (Women) receive very little support from their husbands who may have other wives, very often elsewhere, to maintain. (Chiurayi, 1996, p. 2)

A South African perspective is offered by Zondo who states simply that “the situation in rural areas is such that if you are a female, you do not play any role in the societal debates – the men represent families here” (Zondo, 1995, p. 23).

The intensification of poverty in the poorest sectors of South African society (women living in rural areas) has compounded the situation. It is not only upwardly mobile women who are in danger (for being ‘cheeky’) but it is the poorest that are also at risk. Attempts to escape poverty make women and young girls more vulnerable to being trapped within sexually abusive or harassing situations at home, within educational institutions, and within work places. (Bennett, 2000, p. 9)

Above I have tried to suggest that single-sex schools for girls might assist some to avoid the violent and repressive conditions which often exist in coeducational schools. But any attempt to implement the GETT recommendation must start from a position of humility and an acknowledgement of ignorance. In South Africa, we still know too little about the impact of

schools on girls. As Fred Mael comments, in the US most research “certainly shows a role for single-sex schools (as an option if not a norm) (but) much additional research is needed to clarify which individuals or target populations would gain most from such schooling” (Mael, 1998, p. 121). More sophisticated research is required to find out who would benefit and how. Research along these lines in Botswana has shown how important it is to have a detailed, context-specific knowledge before acting or run the risk of grand policy failing and of generating unwelcome and unintended results (Fuller, Singer & Keiley, 1999).

Single-sex schools are not the answer. They may, however, make an important contribution to transforming the SA education system which still is characterized by gender inequalities. In making this statement, it is important to see schools as having the potential to be sites of change. Despite Harber’s (1997) reservations that schools more often serve to promote stasis and the status quo, they can also make the difference. In the ideal world this would involve bringing both sexes together and working for peace and democracy. In South Africa it may take other, possibly temporary, measures to move towards gender equity.

For gender justice to be achieved, “the necessary conditions to ensure the development of individual capacity” (McLennan, 1993/4, p. 67) must be secured. Historically South African (coed) schools have prevented African girls from: participating actively in school life; breaking down the strict sexual division of labour and gendered patterns of subject choice; utilizing the education to free themselves from dependence on a male wage-earner and enter the labour market – in short, from realizing their capacity. Perhaps for some, single-sex schools could be the answer.

NOTES

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2. The schools are not specifically identified as coeducational or single-sex so it is possible that there are in fact MORE single-sex schools in the list than I have been able to identify from personal knowledge. Furthermore many of the elite private single-sex schools refused to participate in the survey and so were not considered. Schools were selected in terms of matric pass and exemption rates, math participation and pass rates, English pass rate, proportion of learners involved in extra-curricular activity and range of extra-curricular activities offered. Socio-economic contextual factors were taken into account in compiling the list.

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