

# **Towards Gender Equity in Catholic Education (1996)**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) is authorised by, and responsible to the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference for the development and enunciation of policy for the Church's work in education at the national level. NCEC works collaboratively with all Australian educational authorities.

It is intended that this statement from the NCEC will challenge all who work in Catholic education to:

- the pursuit of quality education based upon the human dignity of each person;
- the effective implementation of inclusive and equitable practices in schools and other educational environments; and
- ensure socially just educational outcomes for both females and males.

## **THE DIGNITY OF THE PERSON**

In God's own image, God created humankind. Male and female God created them. God gave man and woman to each other as partners and entrusted to them the care of all creation. God saw that it was very good (cf. Genesis 1:27-31).

Jesus had respectful relationships with people, regardless of their gender, race, creed and class.

He inspired the Apostle Paul to write in his letter to the Galatians (3:27-28). All baptised in Christ, you have all clothed yourselves in Christ, and there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male or female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus. Christ challenged and continues to challenge us to cross the boundaries of limiting gender distinctions which are reinforced by our society.

In drawing upon the riches of Scripture and Tradition, a decree of the Second Vatican Council stated:

With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent, for in truth, it must still be regretted that fundamental personal rights are not yet being universally honoured. (The Church in the Modern World, n29).

This same decree also acknowledged that there is a gap between the ideal and reality in church and society today. Catholic educational communities are challenged to take a critical stance and examine attitudes, actions and social structures which maintain any form of inequality within the human family. This statement summons all in Catholic education to examine both policy and practice in order to realise the ideal of equality of men and women.

## **UNDERSTANDING GENDER EQUITY**

Within a community of faith and learning, Catholic education seeks to promote the development of the whole person, of each individual's talents and gifts so that he or she matures as a well integrated human being. Gender equity evokes a vision of equitable educational access and outcomes for boys, girls, men and women. Through opportunities in families, education and parishes, enlivened by such Christian values as love, justice, peace, courage, forgiveness, compassion and freedom each person becomes respectful and responsible for self and others. Moreover, by taking a critical, reflective stance, students, parents, educators and all in the Catholic Church become active and informed citizens and so work towards building a just and equitable society in which every type of discrimination is eradicated.

NCEC recognises and supports the efforts of parish, school, tertiary, diocesan and State/Territory authorities in promoting gender equity through their policies and action plans. The Commission believes gender equity policies and strategies should be directed towards an increased awareness of and a change of basic attitudes to the equity issue.

## **1. The Construction Of Gender**

God created man and woman equally human but with biologically different sexual and reproductive functions.

Gender, as the socially ascribed characteristics of male and female, is a social construction. That is, through social practice, boys and girls are shaped by the attitudes, knowledge and behaviours that are described as "masculine" or "feminine". Power, authority, action and achievement are named as "masculine" attributes and are generally highly valued across all cultures. In contrast, "feminine" characteristics such as service, caring, nurturing and intuitive reasoning are generally devalued. Through their everyday behaviour, through the influence of the media, and through the example of some parents, teachers and other influential people, boys and girls may develop limited and limiting concepts of "femininity" and "masculinity". These gender constructs largely underpin the social construct of home, school, the work environment, the Church and society in general.

The changing nature and structures of the modern family impacts on the construction of gender. All parents in all types of families need to be supported by other parents, parishes and educational institutions when exploring the limiting gender constructions of traditional family units.

In order to provide a well balanced environment that embraces gender equity, Catholic educators, parents, students and all in the Catholic Church need to be aware of how gender is constructed, especially with reference to:

- religious, social, economic, environmental, cultural and physical influences;
- the role of language;
- self-image-body image ;
- the exercise of and the abuse of power in relationships;
- violence as abuse and domination; and
- the powerful social influences of family, peers and the media in the construction of gender.

Behaviour which is encouraged and supported by current gender construction results in social, mental and physical health issues for males and females. At the personal level, men and boys need to examine the ways their lives and choices are affected by the pressures of masculine conformity. Women and girls need to examine the ways that social constructions of femininity have positioned and prepared them for socially structured "feminine" futures.

Harassing behaviour which exercises power over others because of gender, violates the dignity of the human person and is unacceptable. The Christian vision of Catholic education demands that sex-based harassment and sexual harassment is recognised, identified and attended to in a just manner. All Catholic schools should have in place policies and grievance procedures to deal with and to eliminate sexual harassment and sex based harassment of students and staff.

An inappropriate, dualistic construction of gender which fails to offer an equal range of opportunities is costly to both males and females. The origins and enactment of violence, sex based harassment and sexual harassment must be seriously addressed as educational rather than simply behavioural management issues.

Organisations are generally not "gender neutral". Catholic educational organisations need to examine the allocation of staff by gender to promotion positions. If men predominantly hold the positions of leadership and authority and women are allocated the duties of care, the gender construction of the organisation institutionalises and reinforces gender inequity. Staffing and resource allocation, curriculum choices and other practices will reveal areas that require attention and corrective action.

Educators, parents, administrators and members of the wider community should be encouraged to engage in appropriate programs to assist them in understanding the ways in which gender is constructed. These programs should encourage gender differences to be accepted and embraced as beneficial and useful to society.

## **2. Curriculum**

Curriculum, like the ascribed characteristics of gender is a social construction. Curriculum development requires a fundamental reworking of what knowledge and information is valued in the curriculum, how that knowledge is made available, and how it is taught and presented.

The curriculum should provide opportunities for males and females to learn about the significance of gender in their own lives, in all aspects of Australian life and in global affairs. Education should prepare people for satisfying, responsible and productive ways of living which involve family and household responsibilities as well as preparation for participation as an active member of society.

Educational programs which enhance girls' and women's access to careers will need to be equally balanced by implementing programs to assist boys and men in responding to the needs of others, in expressing their own emotional needs and in valuing and understanding mutuality in relationships.

Teaching styles, assessment criteria and classroom management, affect learning outcomes for males and females. In order to achieve equitable educational outcomes, it is important that

educators are supported and encouraged to develop appropriate pedagogical practices to meet the needs of a diverse range of people.

### **3. Resources**

The ways in which resources are managed and allocated are significant indicators of the practice of gender equality in the schools and other educational environments. The purpose and conduct of celebrations, assemblies, awards, curriculum offerings, sporting and cultural activities and pastoral care, contain a message about the gender construction of the educational community.

Educational communities therefore need to ensure that the way in which resources, services and facilities are allocated will provide a socially just educational outcome for all students.

Gender is a significant factor in shaping knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. Teaching needs to be conducted in a supportive, caring and challenging environment in which males and females are equally valued and their needs are met.

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

Gender equity will be achieved, and given credibility in Catholic educational environments when adult gender relations and practices model and promote partnership between men and women.

People in positions of leadership need to publicly affirm the principles of gender equity, it is the responsibility of all to practice and promote it. Therefore, everyone involved in Catholic education: bishops, priests, teachers, administrators, staff, parents, and students need to be committed to developing and maintaining a culture of respect, mutuality and collaboration.

## **SUGGESTED ACTION**

The true success of a commitment to justice and the principles of Gender Equity lie in such principles becoming a living reality in our schools, organisations and communities. We are called to be witnesses to the good news of the Gospel message. This document could be used to facilitate and support the following initiatives:

- organise a staff colloquium;
- have your educational community develop a gender equity policy;
- discuss the issue at relevant meetings;
- use the document as a basis for staff/student prayer;
- organise professional development courses on the issue for staff;
- disseminate the statement through your publications network; and
- discuss the statement with your family.

## **CHALLENGES**

Gender equity issues challenge us to be witnesses to the Gospel message. We are challenged each day to work for justice. Some challenges are:

- How can educational curriculum address issues of gender equity?
- What organisational structures inhibit gender equity?
- How can Catholic organisations work for gender equity?
- What are the attributes of an organisation which witnesses gender equity?
- What are the barriers to establishing gender equity?
- Why do we need to work for gender equity?

The Commission will encourage ongoing dialogue with educational authorities and the wider Australian society on this important issue.

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