

Gender Equity: How far have we really come?

Women's issues continue to be an area of focus and measurable progress depends on the statistics you look at. The following stats make it look like we have come a long way:

In 1998, 58% of university graduates were women (*Statistics Canada*).

A 1995 Canadian Federation of Independent Business Study reported a 97.8% increase in the number of women owning and operating their own businesses from the early 1980s to the early 90s.

There are other stats that suggest we have a long way to go.

29% of Grade 9 girls ... felt unsafe at school partly due to sexual comments and unwanted looks or touches; 27 % of the girls in Grade 11 admitted to being pressured into doing something sexual that they did not want to do; 14 % of the females reported being harassed over the Internet. (*Safe Schools Panel Report*).

Canadian women working full-time, full-year, earned \$33 494 in 1997, compared with \$45 841 for men. (*Survey of Consumer Finances, Income Trends in Canada, 1980-1997*).

In 1998, less than 10% of directors at Canada's top 200 industrial and service companies and top 100 financial institutions were women. (*Women Board of Directors in Top Canadian Companies: The 1998 Corporate Women Directors International Report*).

Women seeking financing were refused 20% more often than men, and they were regularly charged a higher rate of interest. (*Women Entrepreneurs: Geared Towards Success*, Business Development Bank, 1997).

What does this tell us as educators? It tells us that we need to continue finding ways to challenge stereotypes in the classroom. We need to expose our young children to texts that highlight characters in non-traditional gender roles. Older students should lead the younger generation thought activities that encourage them to explore the limitations that are placed on us based on our genders.

A closer examination on the traditional notions of masculinity (strength, aggressiveness, lack of vulnerability and emotion, heterosexuality, etc.) and femininity (submissive, nice or sweet, expectations of beauty, etc) can help to understand attitudes and behaviours. An increased awareness of how masculinity and femininity continue to dominate our society and affect our experience of the world can potentially increase understanding. Education and emotional support are necessary tools for students to transcend gender expectations.

* Many of the statistics in this article are taken from the Equitable School TDSB Gender Equity document.