

## **On the threshold of the public sphere: Mothers, daughters and higher education**

**Steiner, Liliane Ph.D and Gilad Eti Ph.D**  
Hemdat Hadarom College and Ahava College

### **Abstract**

Women have been in the public sphere for several decades. Still, women are confined by motherhood. Motherhood designs their future as well as their choices regarding their careers. This study probes the conceptions of mothers' pre- service teachers regarding their daughters' higher education. The study was conducted in a qualitative method as a case study in order to obtain insights about occurrences in the contexts and actual locations in which they transpired. Central themes in the data were content analyzed. 23 pre- service teachers were asked to interview their mother about their conception on higher education and its importance in the daughters' career development. The findings show that though the mothers broke through prejudices at the time, got higher education, and worked outside the home for years, their conceptions regarding women's careers are deep- seated in patriarchal perceptions of motherhood. The findings demonstrate that the postmodern daughter stagnates in terms of self- realization and chooses to remain on the threshold of the public sphere because of motherhood. Three main models were deduced from the findings: the threshold model, the duplication model and the stagnation model. The research recommendations are as follows: gender issues should be taught and discussed both in schools and in colleges, pre- service teachers should be involved in activities in the external public sphere reserved to men, they should be encouraged to run projects that promote change and advancement of girls and women in society.

**Keywords:** Motherhood, gender, higher education, public sphere, teaching profession.

## **1. Introduction**

Nowadays, women are in the private and in the public spheres. More and more women occupy key positions in society and in the labor market. Yet, there are still gaps in their positioning as an influential professional force in the work market. Society is also still influenced by gender stereotypes that discriminate against women over men. The premise of the article stems from the feminist cultural approach. Years after three waves of feminism, young women studying in higher education are still compelled to choose between career and motherhood. On the one hand, these young women strive hard for their self- realization and aspire to be part of the work force. On the other hand, they are deterred by choosing professions that demand long hours away from the home. Consequently, they choose professions that allow them to combine motherhood and work. The majority chooses the teaching profession out of compromise with the demands of motherhood. Gaining insights about the motives of young women in the teaching profession and their preference to the private sphere or at least go close to the public sphere, will help society and the education system, to think about different creative ways to promote decision- making processes among young women in choosing higher education and career.

The aim of this study is to unravel the attitudes of mothers about their daughters' choice of higher education, as well as to highlight and gain further insights about postmodern young women's reasons as well as prioritization in choosing a profession.

## **2. Theoretical background**

### **Motherhood**

Motherhood is a feminine condition that implies a feminine sacrifice. Being a mother has for centuries undermined the feminine being. The self- sacrifice, the mother is entailed to is a conventional morality (Gilligan, 1982; Crittenden, 2002).

Contrary to Stern's premises (Stern, 1998) regarding the motherhood constellation, maternity provokes a crisis in the existence of every woman. The physical and psychic weight of responsibility on the mother is the heaviest of social burdens. (Rich, 1995) Consequently, mixed feelings reside within the motherhood experience, leading to a life of frustration.

Since Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) and Friedan's waking up call (1963) women have strived for self- actualization within the confines of motherhood. By trying to run other life projects along with motherhood and redefine a self that doesn't reject itself.

Still, motherhood has been looming large over the self, resulting in a deplorable model: maternal over-achievement. Trapped in motherhood women experience a regressive super-selfless mothering (Warner, 2005). Though doing good to themselves, mothers are still feeling bad: they feel guilt, anxiety, stress and exhaustion (Warner, 2005, O'Reilly, 2007). Women came to acknowledge motherhood life's limitations and cut back on their ambitions accordingly.

However, women have claimed for a maternal autonomy. Shields (2003) designed a roadmap for sharing parenting to avoid the mommy trap. Empowered mothering constructs have been offered to and applied by women ranging from looking to friends, and family, to assist with childcare, as well as paid assistance to raising children with an involved community of co-mothers (O'Reilly, 2007).

A more radical approach was set by feminist mothering theory that seeks to transform and abolish both the patriarchal role of motherhood and that of childbearing and redefine motherhood (O'Reilly, 2007, 2010).

### **Gender Stereotypes**

Due to stereotypical perceptions, people tend to assign features and roles characteristic of the male's group versus those which characterize the female's group. The professional literature engages extensively in the processes which entail the formation of gender stereotypes and their impact on both genders. Most researchers concur that socialization plays a central part in the acquisition of characteristics and behaviors suitable for the gender classification of every man and woman. Family, community, communication media and education system constitute socialization agents that perpetuate gender-oriented stereotypes (Chodorow, 1989; Gilad, 2014a).

As far as choosing a profession is concerned, various studies indicate that both women and men view themselves as engaging in occupations which reflect their personal preferences. These preferences are shaped already at a young age through the process of socialization. In that process, certain values are attributed to gender roles characteristic of women and men, leading women and men to choose 'feminine' and 'masculine' functions accordingly. During their initial socialization process at home and at school, women are encouraged to learn a profession which is considered 'feminine' such as teaching, education and office services (Sáinz and Eccles, 2012).

From the aspect of characteristics, studies point out features perceived as typical of men versus those which are typical of women. This distinction between 'feminine' and 'masculine' characteristics is manifested by textbooks and children's literature (Gilad, 2007). Many textbooks and children's stories depict men as heroic, brave, wise, strong, successful, persevering and charismatic. Conversely, women are described as weak, dependent, submissive, easily sobbing, renouncing and unstable. These stereotypical descriptions evoke readers' automatic reaction to the described figure and reinforce overall stereotypical perceptions of woman and man groups (Gera Committee Report, 2002).

### **Gender and Education**

The research literature which deals with inequality in education offers a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches to the description and analysis of inequality in education dimensions and their impact on the shaping of the education system. Nevertheless, despite the gender-oriented changes which transpire in society and in education, there is still inequality from various aspects between boys and girls. This inequality stimulates the public debate on the need for changing the existing situation (Stromquist, 2007; Zameret-Kercher, 2013). Rosenfeld and Dahan (2013) argue that social depth currents have recently become more prominent in the Israeli and other societies. These currents illustrate the importance of maintaining the centrality of the debate on educational inequality, examining the reasons for its formation and devising ways for dealing with it. Moreover, data published by UNESCO indicate that there are still gender gaps in primary and secondary education in various countries. Consequently, there is a collective commitment to achieve equality between the genders and develop the skills of each and every person without any discrimination (UNESCO 2003).

Gender-oriented education is a tool of equalitarian education and it serves for coping with gender stereotypes. Gender studies develop awareness of the formation and preservation of social, cultural and educational patterns which discriminate women vis-à-vis men. Furthermore, these studies promote critical reflection from a gender perspective about everything relating to different socially-accepted values. Hence, it has become necessary to allocate more room for engaging in differentiation as part of the actualization of a just worldview. Gender studies entail an academic and valued discourse on social topics from an

important point of view which is not included today in the curricula of schools and teacher education colleges (Gilad, 2014b).

### **Gender and Education in Israel**

The Israeli education system was initially established as an equalitarian education system whereby the principle of uniform education and equal opportunities underpins the democratic concept. From a formal point of view there are apparently no differences between what boys and girls acquire within the framework of their studies at school. However, in fact there are gaps of equality between the genders (Gilad, 2007). Over the years, adopting the value of equality and granting equal opportunity were attributed interpretations and meanings which have not necessarily narrowed the gaps; rather they have even 'eternalized' them (Gilad, 2014b). Teachers display a differentiated attitude towards girls and boys at school (Schwartz, 1996); textbooks include overt and covert stereotypes (Gera Committee Report, 2002); the communication media transmit stereotypes (Lemish, 2007); and parents have different expectations of boys and girls (Horgan, 1995; Shachar, 1996).

In recent years, the education system has been considering gender studies as a highly valuable issue. It enables learning of topics associated with the building of a personal, professional and social identity in a democratic society which views equality a key value. Moreover, examining the way by which pre-service female teachers perceive the woman's figure in general and the female-leader image in particular leads to an academic and valued discourse about social and educational subjects. This discourse is not included today in the curricula of schools and of teacher education colleges (Ben-Amos and Tamir, 1995; Gilad, 2007).

This non-equalitarian situation is increasingly changing following diverse activities which promote equal education for both genders. The Ministry of Education policy and different intervention programmes implemented on its behalf as well as activities of various bodies and organisations in the Israeli and global society, emphasize the importance of increasing awareness of and granting both genders an equal opportunity to believe in themselves and actualize their dreams (Gilad, 2014b).

### **Gender in Teacher Education Colleges**

The comprehension that gender studies are associated with all areas of life enhances the need for gender studies in general and teacher education in particular. These studies facilitate

learning of subjects that shape a personal, professional and civil identity in a democratic society whereby equality is considered a key value. Moreover, students should acquire wide and thorough knowledge of society and culture studies from an innovative angle. This fact necessitates learning of the gender component as a crucial factor affecting the social-educational construct of structures, institutions as well as social and educational mechanisms. Furthermore, pedagogy and didactics curricula which comprise the gender component are relevant to the college and to teacher education since students are exposed in their daily life to significant manifestations of social inequality. The most significant expression of this inequality is the status of women who are perceived to be the weakest link in the social texture of the Israeli and global public arena. A curriculum including gender aspects, demanding examination of power relations consolidated by historical and cultural contexts, determines that the existing order is not essential and is seeking the way for changing it. In addition to these elements, one cannot ignore the existence of academic frameworks which conduct gender and women studies towards an academic degree. In recent years the Academic College of Education at the south of Israel where the study was conducted, has been promoting gender studies in teacher education programs and teacher in-service training courses. In their assessment feedback forms, those attending the gender courses indicated that the courses allowed self-observation into their world as well as comprehension of gender attitudes and perceptions (Gilad, 2007).

### **The research question**

What are students' mothers' conceptions regarding their daughters' higher education?

### **3. Methodology**

#### **Research method**

The research method of this study was qualitative-interpretive of the case study type. A case study is used in teaching and learning research. One of the important advantages of a case study is its ability to provide insights about incidents in the contexts and physical sites where they transpire. Cultural and social incidents can be fully understood only if they are studied from the participants' point of view and from the way those actively involved see them. Data collected from the participants can in fact be depicted as insufficient. However, they definitely facilitate comprehension and understanding of the thoughts and feelings of a small group as well as of their attitude and approach (Shkedi, 2005; Smolicz & Secombe, 1990).

### **Research population**

The research population consisted of 23 mothers of students, who took an annual course: "Gender and education" as part of their undergraduate studies at a teachers college in Israel. They were 2nd and 3rd -year students enrolled in various specializations for Bachelor's degree. The mothers interviewed by their daughters were Jewish and Arab. Women aged 43-55.

### **Research instruments**

In the course assignment the students were asked to interview their mothers. The interviews were semi- structured. The questions focused on: a. personal background of motherhood, b. the importance of acquiring higher education for girls, c. the contribution of higher education to the development of the girls.

### **Data processing**

The data collected from the Interviews were content analysed as is customary in qualitative research. The content analysis was performed at two levels: a normative content analysis for distinguishing prominent trends and a qualitative-interpretive content analysis for the purpose of disclosing essences, perceptions as well as comprehending different insights (Shkedi, 2005).

## **4. Findings**

From the interviews conducted by the pre- service teachers we find that the majority of the mothers interviewed studied in an academic institution and acquired a profession. However, though the mothers at the time broke down prejudice, acquired higher education and worked outside the home, their conceptions regarding women's careers stagnate, mainly due to old-fashioned conceptions about motherhood. Findings show that the post-modern daughter stagnates in terms of self- realization. She chooses to stay on the threshold of the public sphere because of motherhood. The daughters' mothers perceive higher- education as a means of earning a living (18 mothers), as a means of development (3 mothers), and as a means of self- realization (2 mothers). For the mothers higher- education constitutes a central axis in children's education, and they pushed the daughters to pursue their studies in higher- education. Nonetheless, the expectations on the part of the mothers regarding the fields of

studies "navigated" the daughters to learning teaching. This navigation was done both by mothers who were teachers and others who studied other disciplines.

### **Higher- education as a means of living**

The majority of the mothers in this category, 18 out of 23 mentioned that it is important for the daughter to acquire a profession to be able to support respectfully herself as well as her family. According to these mothers, women and men with higher- education acquire economic security, self- confidence and gain respect and esteem from their environment.

A Jewish mother who serves as a teacher in the educational system noted:

"It was clear to me that I don't want to be like my parents who had no education and consequently had to work very hard and get lower wages, and couldn't advance. As opposed to them, I wanted to be a woman who has chances. A woman with education and opportunities to advance and support myself respectfully and make ends meet, far beyond my parents could afford".

A Bedouin mother claimed:

"Education is for boys and girls. One should demand it for girls. Everyone should find themselves earning a living on their own. At the time, it was not acceptable for a woman to work outside the home, or to get education. Even when women went to work they learned teaching and were teachers. Today, it's different. More and more girls study other subjects. Some go abroad to study medicine, although I fear the influence of the environment on the girls' values, because not everyone is good or can be trusted. However, they go out of "the box", study and support themselves".

A Bedouin mother added:

"Today, I believe that without education one cannot advance or find a good comfortable job, good wages. It is because of the changes the Bedouin society is going through in Israel. Today a person who has education, lives respectfully, the person who has no education looks for hard jobs to support themselves and get low wages".

### **Higher education as a means of self development**

Three out of 23 mothers who took part in this research mentioned that for them higher education is a means of self development. Higher education is seen as a necessary foundation



for progress in life and development. Higher education opens doors for personal and professional advancement, and it allows you to choose your future and even influence it.

A Bedouin mother declared:

"In my opinion higher education is very important to the development of my children and I try my hardest to enrich their horizons. I subscribe them to after school classes, when it is necessary I hire private teachers. My first goal is to know and to be sure that I tried my best because my children's success means a lot to me. The success of my son or my daughter depends on education and academic achievements."

A Jewish mother of two daughters, one of them learns teaching claimed:

"As a mother of two daughters, the education of my daughters was of very high importance. I am quite convinced that education expands horizons. Since their young age I inculcated in my daughters the importance of school. As they grew up it was obvious that both continue to higher education and academic studies. Higher education allows to open to various opinions and domains. It allows to get into contact with diverse populations, exposure to academic milieu, both in terms of academic faculty, students and friends beyond school. Success in studies or receiving the diploma at the end of the process gives a lot of satisfaction and self-worth."

A Bedouin mother mentioned:

"As a student, I loved learning and I was a very good girl, especially in English. I learned to grade 11. In my opinion, education is an essential and vital thing to children's success and development. Both intellectually and emotionally. It is reflected in the skills that education provides people with. Education develops people on a personal level, the mindset changes, and becomes more critical, reflective and meaningful. As a mother, who didn't pursue her studies, and got no higher education, I could not always help my children with their homework. In addition, as a mother who missed a lot, I got married and quit school. At the time, I didn't think I missed a big deal. Especially, my parents didn't encourage the girls in our family to continue studying. My husband too wasn't supportive of studies, the most important thing for him was to get married and start a family, have children and more. But in recent years after my daughters grew up and continued each on her own way and I see them succeed, it really makes me think differently about education. For example, when my little 13-year-old son and I sit to do his homework I encounter difficulties, and most of the times he is the one to manage the subject matter and answer the questions in the best way possible in

such a way that sometimes it adds to my knowledge a lot and I gain a very important and significant information ".

### **Higher education as a means of self- realization**

Only two mothers mentioned that they believe that higher education is important and vital for the process of their children's development as well as for the realization of their aspirations and wishes. Education is an integral part of life and it contributes to one's sense of satisfaction and happiness.

A Jewish mother said:

"I learned to be a nurse. At the time, I loved this profession because it was very interesting and I helped people. I could see the improvement of their health. I was very satisfied. But now in retrospect, I would choose another profession, like criminology, it's something that intrigues me, because working in such a job is like putting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. In addition, one needs to be very sophisticated and always think one step ahead. In my opinion, the issue of education is of paramount importance and crucial in the process of self- fulfillment of children. Education and knowledge are power, with knowledge all you do is advance and get smarter. At home, I always stress the importance of self- fulfillment and making dreams come true. I don't want my children stagnate and remain at the same place they started their lives. I don't want them compromise and live a mediocre life. Besides, when one is satisfied with their path, chances are that they'll experience and will be exposed to new interesting worlds."

Another Jewish mother claimed:

"I think that higher education opens doors for self- fulfillment and jobs. As a rule, an academic worker will be in a higher position and will get better chances to be accepted than a lay person. An academic person today is more appreciated than a worker who has no education of course if he is well- educated as well. Besides, education broadens horizons and develops individual tolerance and openness to different opinions. It is important that a person follows his heart and aspirations and studies the field he likes. Girls and boys alike. Young people should strive very hard to follow their dreams and make sure the choice in their career is really what they dream of. My daughter chose to study physics and engineering, opti- electronics, and we encouraged her because she wanted to and had the ability (although it is

considered a male profession, as it were). But life circumstances have changed, and when she divorced and was a lone parent, she was forced to change the domain of her studies and change it for teaching mathematics. A profession that would allow her to raise her child alone, a profession considered as feminine and shaped to meet the needs of mothers.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings show that though the mothers broke at the time paradigms of thoughts and conventions and got higher education, their daughters have not exactly followed in the mothers' steps and in a sense compared to them the daughters stagnate in terms of self-realization and self- fulfillment. The findings demonstrate three models that reflect the interaction between the mothers' conception regarding higher education of the daughters and the daughters' choice of career:

- a. The duplication model
- b. The stagnation model
- c. The threshold model

Table 1. Models reflecting the mothers' conception regarding higher education and the daughters' choices of studies track

The model	features
The duplication model	The daughters choose a studies track as a result of a natural process.
The stagnation model	The process of stagnation occurs in two plans: 1. Motherhood as a concept 2. Motherhood as an instrumental role
The threshold model	The process of choosing the teaching profession as a default.

The duplication model demonstrates the choice of the daughters who chose their specialization as a natural process inspired by the mothers' choice in a career considered as feminine (Gilad, 2014 b., Hannick, 1998). This model focuses on existential means regardless winds of change and feminism that submerge the Israeli society and despite of the feminist narrative in Israel.

The stagnation model is articulated in two circles: a. motherhood as a concept that hinders a priori the daughters' choice in demanding professions such as medicine and high-tech that would require long work days (O'Reilly, 2007 Steiner & Levi, 2014). Motherhood is conceived as a hinder to women's careers and as such it reduces women's fields of self-realization. b. motherhood as a instrumental role that poses dire straits to mothers in combining motherhood and career. (Steiner & Gilad, 2014, Steiner & Levi, 2014)

The threshold model reflects the daughters' choice in education, or more precisely in the teaching profession as a default. This career diminishes the daughters' self-realization and hinders their professional development (Steiner, in Press). Remaining on the threshold of the private sphere, the daughters choose the comfort zone of the public sphere and adjust to motherhood.

It transpires from this research that daughters of mothers who considered higher education as a means of living belong to the duplication model. Their choice was influenced by gender stereotypes. Though frequent changes characterize the post-modern world, stereotypes regarding career and self-development hinder the self-fulfillment of daughters. They are trapped in gender inequality conceptions and adjust their ambitions to their family and society. The majority of the female students live in an internal dissonance regarding their self-realization. Most of them hold two contradictory conceptions regarding women's career. On the one hand, they aspire to higher education and career. On the other hand, they are pushed back to the private sphere and to the traditional feminine roles. Daughters of mothers who considered higher -education as a means of self-realization belong to the threshold model due to gender-oriented education. Though education is considered as an agent of change, this study demonstrates that changes are very slow and challenging. Nevertheless, other change agents have to be taken into consideration such as the mass media, work places, the representation of women in the society and in the advertisements. Daughters of mothers who perceived higher education as a means of self-development belong to the stagnation model because of motherhood. Motherhood is perceived as a great challenge when combined with career. The tension between the two saps and hinders any aspirations for self-realization in the public sphere consequently compromise sets in (Steiner, in Press). In any case none of the daughters performed a breakthrough in their choice of career, all of them chose motherhood over full self-realization.

Dramatic change is required in the education system. It is of paramount importance to expose educators as well students to feminist thought and to critical thinking. Change in the social climate by the dint of gender education is required. Such a change will instill gender equality and social justice as fundamental social values, necessary for a postmodern world.

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