



## Gender differences, complementarity and equality

### Thoughts on Scouting from a sociological perspective

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While browsing the programme of this Congress, I became particularly curious about the presentation text of the workshop on gender issues: “Men and women make different and complementary contributions to key areas of the personality and personal development in innumerable situations involving the non-formal education of young people”. The notions of difference and complementarity are used in a descriptive way, as if this was a matter of fact or an observation.

For this meeting, I was asked to present the aspects in which gender studies can offer a specific insight on issues of concern to Scouting today in a spirit of critical dialogue. The terms that I have chosen to speak about are difference and complementarity, given the frequency with which they are used when dealing with gender relations. I will try to show how these notions raise problems from a sociological and historical perspective, and how this is all the more true when they are associated with the another key notion of equality.

Particular attention has been paid to the project of greater equality between women and men, girls and boys in Scouting, which (as is the case in other sectors of society) has been facing increasing demands to eliminate discrimination against women for around thirty years. Just like the theme of the workshop that brings us together here, the large number of documents produced by Scout associations dealing with gender issues shows the concern with offering specific responses to these demands. Moreover, the World Organization of the Scout Movement (WOSM) made it one of its main strategic objectives. With this in mind, in 2003, WOSM commissioned a study of the state of gender relations in different European Scout Organisations. The result was a very well documented report, prepared under the direction of Professor Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen of the Centre for Women’s Studies and Gender Research of the University of Oslo. I will henceforth be referring largely to this report while offering some personal comments of my own, not just because it is part of what I was asked to do, but also because this research offers precious empirical data for sociological analysis.

This report, entitled “One of the Boys?”, straight away highlights a paradox that the author summarises with the following formula: “How can a girl be a ‘real Scout’, when ‘a real

Scout' is a boy?. It is clearly a paradoxical demand, in the sense that young female Scouts see themselves being encouraged to become "One of the boys", but at the same time find themselves constantly reassigned to their gender: "You are a girl", even when they accomplish similar tasks to the boys and in the same way as they do. While this observation is little different from what prevails elsewhere in society, we will try further on to pinpoint what is specific to Scouting. As for the subtitle of the report, *Doing gender in Scouting*, it has the advantage of bringing out the problematic aspect of the simply descriptive use of the notions of difference and complementarity that we are dealing with here. Borrowed from a famous article by Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, the expression "doing gender" is intended to show that gender, i.e. the socially significant differences between women and men (those that pose a problem socially), takes shape in everyday interaction and needs to be explained in reference to this interaction. The theoretical approach adopted here is somewhat different as, even though it is certainly about realising the everyday construction of differences in the interaction between girls and boys, we broach these same differences by also examining Scouting history and social structure in general.

### **Differences, complementarity and social norms**

The issues surrounding the notion of difference start when clarifying the term itself. According to Colette Guillaumin, "être différent-e" (being different), always means "being different from", in the sense of differing from a point of reference. Moreover, when one finds oneself in the field of social relations, this referent is of a normative nature, i.e. it constitutes the position from which one is led to distinguish between what is normal and what deviates from the norm. In gender social relations, this normative referent is based on the masculine position (even though it is often hidden) as it tends to be confused with what is "neutral" or universal. The quality of being different is usually attributed to women, as it is their situation in particular that creates a social problem in a world historically fashioned by - and for - men. In this so-called androcentric vision, men and boys are only rarely the object of issues as gender beings, even though they are in fact just as much so as women and girls.

In the light of these initial remarks, it is worth stopping for a moment to look at a document on the web that presents WOSM's strategic priority on gender. It is entitled "Girls and boys, women and men - respecting differences, promoting equality and sharing responsibility". Here we find the use of the descriptive concept of difference; this time with the aim of promoting equality and using the verb "to respect". Here, this term acts as a revealer of the normative dimension (as opposed to the descriptive one) of the concept of difference: "to respect" a difference is to respect the norm. In several places, moreover, the same document insists on this normative function: sometimes it concerns "respecting gender identity", sometimes "respecting each person's pace", or even "respecting the needs and interests of each gender".

When defending a project to promote equality, taking into account existing social differences is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it comes from the necessary desire to avoid discriminating in function of the inherent characteristics of a given social group (in this case women or girls). On the other hand, when one invites others to "respect" these same differences by presenting them in a binary manner ("the needs and interests of each gender"), the risk is to ratify them and thus contribute to their existence as opposed to overcoming them. Each has his/her place and everything will be all right. One can see it: such a position takes the form of a call to order and can have the paradoxical effect of strengthening the inequalities that one is seeking to fight against. As Colette Guillaumin notes, "claiming the right to differences is the expression of the fact that one is defenceless, and further, that one does not wish to defend oneself nor to acquire the means to do so, but that one demands

esteem and love. In fact, this amounts to demanding the right to be weak. But can demanding the right to be dependent and weak eradicate dependence and weakness?" This question needs to be taken seriously: does the fact of demanding the right to be different and calling on others to respect it not risk leading (in the end) to defending the status quo, or even leading to counter-productive effects? In addition, for an institution committed to seeking equality, not asking this question would amount to avoiding questioning its own contribution to the production of these differences. If the social differences are always "already there" and a given, they are nonetheless constantly put into play; and that is precisely the concept of "doing gender".

As for the notion of complementarity, this reinforces this reification of differences so as to make them even more concrete. Affirming the complementarity of women and men is, in effect, not only presenting their differences as insurmountable, but it furthermore amounts to giving them a value that is positive and hoped for. In such a perspective, complementarity would be like an invisible hand that ensures that the sum of the differences between women and men, presented as symmetrical, would result in the satisfaction of the interests of everyone in a project to establish equality. However, the above leads one to think that things are not that simple. If there is a tension between difference and equality, there is therefore also one between complementarity and equality. Of course, it is not the words themselves, nor the theory of this tension that needs to be analysed at the end of the day, but everyday practices. In this respect, the "One of the Boys?" report offers us a very good empirical basis on which to develop some answers.

This report clearly demonstrated two of the phenomena that have just been described in theory. On the one hand, it shows that the problem that Scout Associations are trying to respond to (as well as their umbrella organisation) only centres on girls. On the other hand, it shows that, in the Associations studied, boys occupy a greater proportion of room and receive more attention. And the fact that Scouting today only has one girl member for every nine boys is evidently not without significance. However, numbers alone do not help to measure this phenomenon. In order to do so, one should look at Scouting history, which has been (and still often is) a Movement that exalts and encourages manliness. The boys are sort of the "neutral" referent, the standard against which the skills and performance of the girls who enter mixed patrols are measured. This is not without practical problems. As the report shows, the issue of segregation only arises when it is a matter of meeting the specific needs of girls. Otherwise, the fact that they take part in the same patrols as the boys is seen in a positive light as it enables them to learn things that are considered positive. The report comes to the conclusion that if girls can – and even should – learn alongside boys, the latter seem to have nothing to learn from the girls. Moreover, while both boys and girls prefer to be in separate patrols, it is nonetheless the boys who seek to distinguish themselves from girls far more than the girls do, and they are more reticent than the girls to be in mixed patrols.

### **Constructed and unequal social relations**

These considerations enable us to put a finger on a central mechanism of gender relations, namely learning about domination and hierarchy within a group of men and boys. In this group, manliness acts as a principle that distinguishes them from the world of girls: it is a matter of proving that one is a man, "a real boy". To paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir, just as "one is not born a woman", one is not born a man, one becomes it. And in this undertaking to make boys manly (to which Scouting has explicitly contributed), for them, becoming "real men" requires avoiding being associated with what is feminine or is associated with it (men who are effeminate or homosexual, to start with). However, the opposite does not exist. As we have already seen, girls are encouraged, in Scouting and more generally in society, to

carry out the same tasks as men. There is a fundamental asymmetry in this that can also be seen in the respective ways of sanctioning deviations from the norm. If one accepts the hypothesis that, today, demands to be manly are being increasingly addressed to women as well, the nature of the sanction, on the other hand, is not the same as when addressed to boys. A feminine identification serves both as a deterrent and as a sanction in the social construction of masculine identities, whereas a masculine identification is tolerated (and often even encouraged for girls) provided, however, that they know their place as girls. Here we find a practical effect of the paradoxical demand mentioned earlier: on the one hand, female Scouts are called upon to carry out a certain number of tasks that boys traditionally do, and they are judged on their ability to do so. On the other hand, when they do manage to succeed in these tasks, they always run the risk of being discredited by the boys because they are girls: "A real Scout is a tough boy, while even a tough girl at any time can be reduced to a sex object or just a ridiculous creature." This virtually unbearable double standard, connected to the fact that the girls are permanently exposed to the arbitrary judgement of the boys, is expressed by one of the young Danish girl Scouts interviewed in the study: "It is almost like boys don't dare or don't want to know you as a person. They judge you from what you look like (...) It was a bit odd. I don't know what they think of me." In its own way, this testimony illustrates the asymmetrical and hierarchical nature of gender relations. The differences are then closely connected to inequalities, and this necessarily raises issues when affirming a project of equality based on respect for gender differences and complementarity.

In the same vein, undertaking to "meet the specific needs of each gender" poses two kinds of problems from an equality perspective. On the one hand, it leads to presenting these needs as if they were natural and a given, which has the effect of masking the fact that these needs are socially constructed and that the Scout Movement has itself taken part in orientating them in a determined direction, which is that of virility and heterosexuality. On the other hand, it implies that there are two kinds of clearly identifiable needs depending on the gender category to which the person belongs, with these categories being defined in a binary way. According to this logic, the group of boys has specific needs and the group of girls has other specific needs, with each of the two groups being considered as an entity. However, reality is not that dichotomous, as the author of the report points out in her comment on what a Danish Scout said: "Toughness in the troop separates the sheep from the goats, Henrik said – and the goats seem to be the competitive boys, whereas the sheep are female plus some weak boys who are not 'real boys'". One can see the mechanism that leads to gender-based divisions and that it even separates boys between the "real boys" and those who are not. As mentioned earlier, the negative sanction for the latter finds its source in the feminine symbolic register. Scout Associations, which emerged in the context of the beginning of the 20th century and wanted to make their boys more manly again, themselves stem from the historical Movement consisting of putting boys who were considered too effeminate back "on the straight and narrow". In so doing, it contributed – and still does so if one is to believe the results of the "One of the boys?" report – to give strength to the representation of a false homogeneity of the "men" category; thus feeding the development of a modern form of homophobia and sexism. The fact that groups of boys have more competitive games and challenges than girls' groups signifies that this mechanism, whose function is to sort the category of boys, leads to the creation of a hierarchy amongst men. This manliness, which is far from being an expression of some kind of masculine nature, is well and truly a social project (an educational one as it happens), long defended by Scout Associations and by many other institutions in charge of the socialisation of young men. Presenting this manliness as a natural need of boys to which one needs to respond thus amounts to changing nothing and abandoning questioning the deeper structures of inequality.

## The need for structural change

Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen's report also comes to the conclusion that in order to progress in the direction of equality in practice, it is less Scouting objectives that need to be changed than its "symbolic culture", i.e., its very structure. According to her, this structure is the product of a hierarchical division between activities and relations. This distinction is described as follows: while girls feel appreciated when they manage to create an atmosphere based on intimacy and confidentiality in the company of others, boys place more importance on ensuring that others watch and admire their activities as much as possible. In other words, if - for girls - relationships are a prerequisite for common activity, many boys use their (competitive) activities as a way of establishing a relationship. Here again, it is important not to make the basic mistake of thinking that they act in this way because they are boys: they do so in order to become boys recognised as such; and this recognition is a constant challenge. Even if this observation may seem pessimistic, being recognised as a boy involves denying the value of girls. Evidently, this observation is not specific to Scouting, but as one institution among others that plays a role in the primary socialisation of children, it cannot avoid such questions. One can thus but share the conclusion of the author's report: as long as such issues are not taken into consideration, girls will remain "Scouting second sex".

As is the case for all structural changes, it involves not only a clearly determined will, but also a question that is generally avoided, namely who has an interest in preventing change. When dealing with discrimination affecting a category of people, it is also worth pinpointing the privileges of the other category; the notion of inequality being by definition a relationship issue (even if this is often forgotten). In this respect, we have seen that it is boys who are the most reticent to be in mixed groups and who most seek to distinguish themselves from girls. We have also learned, through reading the report, that groups of boys are characterised by greater internal competition, composed of challenges in terms of succeeding in spectacular activities requiring physical strength and courage. Thus, it is reasonable to think that they are the ones who have the greatest interest in making sure that things do not change. Their feeling of belonging to the category of boys or men and the need to prove that they belong must constantly be reiterated and are a matter of honour for them. One can thus understand that when this is threatened, it is felt as a humiliation. Moreover, this shows that boys really do have something to lose, as masculinity is something that is never permanently acquired.

A Scout game invented by Lord Baden-Powell, Scouting founder, illustrates this process particularly well. It is part of the framework of serving others strongly encouraged by the Movement, and is known as "The Game of the Knights Errant". "Scouts go alone, in pairs or in patrols, to town to find women or children who need help, and come back later to tell others, on their honour, what they did; (...) One can transform this game into a race: "the service to others race". When examining this, one can understand that the function of this order, which appears as a game, is in fact to construct an image of girls/women as weak and in need of help, a necessary condition in order to construct the shell of the image of boys/men as strong, chivalrous and always gallant. This construction is necessarily fragile as it is arbitrary, and it is regularly threatened when girls' real performance contradicts the weak status that they are meant to have. Clearly, the "One of the Boys?" report shows us how such a process still occurs today. The report's author indeed notes that in order to be admitted as Scouts, they should not be too feminine, but at the same time they must remain feminine enough so as not to make the task more difficult for boys to prove that they are men in the making. Thus, the most highly performing girl will be reduced to her gender position by the boys, and therefore discredited as a Scout. Faced with the threat that competition from girls constitutes to their manhood, boys use sexism as a defence strategy so as to preserve the illusion of their superiority. Here again, as this is an asymmetrical relationship, the game cannot be evenly balanced: "...and this is a trick that the girls cannot use against the boys."

## Evaluating performance: a structural asymmetry

This inequality in terms of evaluating performances can be seen more broadly in the gender-based division of labour as observed by the social sciences related to work. One of the main discriminations faced by women in their activities is that they tend to be judged less often than men in terms of what they do (their work), but more in terms of who they are (their presumed nature). Their activity thus tends to become confused with who they are, and the consequences of this injustice are especially harmful when in an assistance relationship, whether it is the work of a male nurse or relations promoted in Scouting: it appears invisible and natural when the initiative comes from a girl, but helping others tends to be given excessive attention and praise when boys do so. Here we find the hierarchy that Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen observed between activities and relationships. However, rather than seeing it as “underestimating” the performance of girls, it seems more appropriate to call this mechanism a tendency towards the non-evaluation of work that is discredited when undertaken by women or girls.

If female Scouts are consequently more devoted to “relationships” than the boys, as the report invites us to believe, the roots are not in some kind of “feminine nature”, but need to be understood in terms of relationships and dynamics as being a strategy in response to the behaviour of boys who define the rules of the game (which, in fact, have been defined on their behalf). The report points out four types of strategy used by the girls in the face of the frustration that they feel. The first is the girls’ internalisation of the submissive status assigned to them, which leads them to adopt attitudes of modesty, meekness and self-devaluation. The second consists of seeking boys’ appreciation through caring for, and serving, them. The third strategy consists of corresponding to the norm and playing the game of dominance. Here, according to the report’s author, the cost is that it heightens competition between the girls (those who tend towards the masculine norm denigrate the girls who are considered to be too feminine) so that some of them can compete with the boys, with - yet again - the same risks as those mentioned earlier. The final strategy identified in the report is for the girls to express their anger, but the consequence, in the end, is that those who choose this route most often opt for one of the first three strategies or leave the Movement.

The point of referring to the respective strategies of the boys and the girls here is to show that the issues that Scout Associations face in terms of gender equality are worth being understood in the dual sociological and historical perspective. The differences between them, which are far from complementary, are the main feature of the inequalities that need to be overcome. Moreover, the concern about distinguishing between boys and girls is at the very origin of Scouting, which provided a significant historical contribution and – like every other socialising institution – continues to take part in constructing these differences. In the mind of Scouting “founding father”, to whom this morning’s presentations largely referred – it was a matter of drawing boys away from the domestic sphere (or their mothers’ skirts to put it more bluntly), so as to turn them into manly citizens, workers and soldiers. In other words, Scouting explicit project was to train “real men” in an increasingly competitive world characterised by the development of capitalism, the Nation-State and by the preservation of colonialism, and this in a context of the growing construction of structures and hierarchies in industrial societies.

## **Scouting: between innovation and conformity**

The desire to make boys more manly was closely intertwined with the new ideas of education defended by Lord Baden-Powell and his fellow thinkers, and went hand in hand with the project of the moral development of boys that Scouting was called upon to work towards. The logic of passive inculcation that, in their view, characterised the formal education system was thus seen as a danger for the boys. The issue was thus to expose them as fast as possible to experiencing nature and peer interaction, rather than leaving them to sit around all day in classrooms that were considered to soften them and were “good for girls”. It should be said that this was at a time when the question of whether boys should be obliged to sit in classrooms was still being debated. In this respect, it is very interesting to note that in Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen’s report, she notes that even today, intellectual qualities are often devalued by boys and more easily attributed to girls. It is not so easy to get rid of history’s heritage.

Scouting’s entire non-formal educational proposal revolved around this desire to make boys more manly so as to fight against the danger (in the eyes of its founders) of the feminisation of boys and men, and this fear was an echo of that of the “decline of the British Empire”. This Movement stemmed from the desire to have strong men to lead the Nation and industries, yet who would not be too aggressive, however, as this would lead to being assimilated with working-class men who were considered brutal and lacking self-control. “You shall be a man, my son”: this famous conclusion of Kipling’s poem, the epitome of this form of paradoxical order addressed to boys and men in the capitalist industrial societies, cannot be understood without its opposite, namely, those amongst them who were considered insufficiently civilised or too effeminate, and women as a whole. From this point of view, Scouting’s educational proposal, in its original attempt to train individuals who were free and autonomous, turned out to be in great conformity with the interests of the powers in place; a Movement that went hand in hand with conforming to a dominant masculine type.

As for the integration of girls into Scout Associations, this is an issue as old as Scouting itself. Scouting included girls very early on and largely gave them the same educational objectives as the boys, although in separate patrols. As the report points out, this enabled girls to acquire leadership and organisation skills, which would have been impossible if they had been integrated into boys’ patrols. In addition, such an educational proposal for girls must have appeared almost revolutionary in the context of Victorian England. One can see this in the astonishing similarity between “Eclaireurs” (Scouting for Boys) and its equivalent for girls, the latter inviting girls to carry out the majority of the activities envisaged for the boys. However, and this is an important fact, they were additionally educated to carry out activities that prepared them for their roles as wives and mothers. Scouting therefore does not escape the contradictions of society as a whole in terms of gender equality; “girl Scouts” (in their own way were) a precursor to the contradictions of the double day that so many women face today.

Today, women are expected to perform a growing number of tasks and functions that were traditionally left to men. They are increasingly encouraged to become productive workers, leaders, and – why not – soldiers. However, in addition to that, they are the ones who continue to carry out three quarters of household work in society. Men, on the other hand, have not evolved in the same direction and are generally reticent to carry out tasks perceived as being feminine and experienced as beneath them. Maintaining this gender-based division of labour needs areas for socialisation that continue to fulfil the function of distancing boys from women and all things feminine. In the “One of the Boys?” report, several distancing operators, such as a pink soapbox or dishwashing, or the stigmatisation of effeminate boys, show that boys – here and elsewhere – develop resistance at an early age to equality in terms of gender and between themselves.

### **Towards a “feminisation” of Scouting?**

In its “Renewed Approach to Programme”, WOSM chose to highlight the emotional development of young Scouts (boys and girls), and no longer just their moral development. Doing so places it in a process sometimes characterised as a “feminisation” of society, of men and boys. For the latter, it is then a matter of “recognising their feelings” and “expressing their emotions”, inclinations traditionally attributed to women and devalued by men. They are also encouraged to become more involved in relating to others, to develop empathy and caring as “self-fulfilled individuals”, “someone who is able to make his or her own decisions and manage his or her life; someone who actively cares about and for others”. While this can no doubt be considered as encouraging from the perspective of developing equality, one should remain cautious in the face of the risk (that has already been discussed) of these new so-called “feminine” values becoming turned around so as to benefit boys and men. Even if this kind of discourse is relatively new, there are studies from the world of work that show that women can find it difficult to recognise themselves in such a configuration and again abandon this kind of game that is supposed to be tailor-made for them, but in which men tend to redefine the rules to their advantage. At the same time, it seems that Scout Associations are shifting their concept of service to others. The “Game of the Knights Errant” is no doubt out of fashion as it is too explicitly sexist, and it is now a matter of “creating a better world” by coming to the assistance of those who, throughout the so-called “post-colonial world”, are bearing the costs of an increasingly competitive society. In this respect, if there is a lesson that a gender analysis can provide in terms of reflexivity, one may always run the risk of making them the weak people.