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## **Generating Female, Male, and Conjugal Norms in French Schools: Gender, Class and Sexuality Among Students**

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### **Abstract:**

This article attempts to emphasize the production of heterosexuality in the French schools, which implies to stress the perceptions and practices underlying the production of acceptable femininities and masculinities as well as their intersections with social class. Our analyses start from Connell's thesis that the existing gender system varies across institutional contexts. As a specific institutional context, school produces a gender-specific configuration of the heterosexual norm. The discourses of two kinds of educational “street-level bureaucrats” will be analyzed: the secondary schools directors on one hand, the actors of a sexism-prevention program on the other hand. Firstly, the discourse differentiating girls from each other refers

explicitly to their gender— being or not being a proper heterosexual girl – whereas for boys, it is class membership that constitutes the explanatory principle underlying differences between them. Secondly, the politicized discourse about the fight against sexism sets a division of girls into two groups: the "dominated" and the "victims of violence" on one side, and the "liberated" on the other. As far as boys are concerned, they are divided into good and bad partners from the standpoint of the ideal heterosexual, egalitarian, and non-violent couple, which reproduces a class-based division of masculinities.

## **Introduction**

The effects of the joint presence of girls and boys in French schools has been a topic of debate since the 1960's, when coeducation became a widespread practice in France's public and private schools (before becoming mandatory in 1975). Several studies on this topic have pointed out the ambiguity of the principle of coeducation (in the sense of "equality in teaching" based on the premise that girls and boys are taught the same thing, in the same learning context), which does not mean gender equality (Rogers, 2004). It has been widely shown that, as a whole, girls do better in school than boys at all levels of education, but the scholastic success of females does not translate into better academic or occupational careers for women than for men (Duru-Bellat, 1990; Marry, 2000, 2004). Very few studies, however, have looked at the prevailing gender representations and perceptions – referring to gender as a power category (Scott, 1986) - held by different actors in the educational world. On the one hand, an amount of works have emphasized the gender bias at play in the management of the classroom by teachers (Mosconi, 1989), which contributes to the making of gender norms and gender-based deviances in terms of educational goals. On the other hand, the upcoming issues of gender-based violence (Saltmarsh, Robinson & Davies, 2012) and the sexualization of girls in youth culture (Ringrose, 2013) highlight that gender at school must be considered beyond the mere educational issues.

Drawing on this scientific context of a broaden scope of issues regarding the making of gender at school, this article attempts to emphasize the production of heterosexuality in the French schools, which implies to stress the perceptions and practices underlying the production of acceptable femininities and masculinities as well as their intersections with social class. Our analyses start from Raewyn W. Connell's thesis (Connell, 1995) that the existing gendered social system varies across institutional contexts. Moreover, in Connell's

definition of masculinities, class, race and sexuality are intersected with gender. As a specific institutional context, school produces a gender-specific configuration that is based on a particular mode of organization of the heterosexual norm, as the outcome of a historical process that includes sexuality (social models of sexuality, representations and perceptions of sexuality, sexual practices, etc.), procreation and child rearing, and social conceptions of sexed bodies.

If Connell has shown how gender deals with power, she has recently brought into light new insights to the concept of “hegemonic masculinity” that she had previously coined (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). For instance, she has set up that a new way to define what is currently hegemonic regarding gender could be to stress the social features of being “a good partner”. This statement will be a core issue at stake in this paper, as we will emphasize how different educational actors contribute to convey the heterosexual couple as the background of gender equality and to define classed features of the “right partner”.

Indeed, starting from the fieldwork data collected about policies against gender-based violence at school in France, our analysis looks at sexuality through the prism of representations and perceptions of gender and love-related norms in two kinds of “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky, 1980) views. Teachers have already been studied as “street-level bureaucrats” taking part into the policy-production process at school, whereas secondary schools directors have not yet been studied as gender norms producers in a context where gender equality is a political issue. Nonetheless, they are the ones who define the boundaries between what is authorized and what is forbidden regarding clothes-wearing norms and flirtation between students. Their representations will be analyzed in the first section of the article. This section presents the norms that dictate the categorization of young people, detected in the discourse of educational actors in the schools, in relation with the students' class membership. The second section examines the categories generated by a sexism-prevention program used in France's secondary schools. In both cases, "femininities" and "masculinities" are not approached differently in the categorization system at play in gender representations and perceptions. The discourse differentiating girls from each other refers explicitly to their gender— being or not being a proper girl – whereas for boys, it is class membership that constitutes the explanatory principle underlying differences between them. Secondly, the politicized discourse about the fight against sexism sets a division of girls into two groups: the "dominated" and the "victims of violence" on one side, and the "liberated" on the other. As for boys, they are divided into good and bad partners from the standpoint of the

ideal heterosexual, egalitarian, and non-violent couple, which reproduces a class-based division of masculinities.

Making the case for this intersectional perspective on class and gender supporting normative heterosexuality, we also draw on the analysis of key feminist researchers such as Skeggs (1997). Skeggs' work is of specific relevance to stress the moral and symbolic value of respectability for young working-class women. In our study, all female students are classified according to these criteria, in opposition to boys who are more directly classified according to their class belonging.

Here our analysis stresses intersectionality between class, gender and sexuality, but it does not mean that we have not included race relationships (Crenshaw, 1991). At previous stages of this research, we have emphasized the pregnancy in general educational discourses of what Hamel (2005) called "racialization of sexism" in France, i.e. the representation of male Arabs, Africans and Muslims as more sexist than the average of French men. If educational actors can share this discourse about sexist behaviors in general, when they talk more specifically of their management of students' in everyday life, they refer to class-culture features: the way students talk and dress, or their learning process about sexuality are clearly related to their class belonging, which can be explained by the invisibility of race relationships in social sciences as well as in professional trainings in France until recently.

## **Methodology**

Our analyses are based on a research project dealing with gendered practices and violence among peers, and the socioeducational implications of day-to-day coeducation. The purpose of this multidisciplinary study is to analyze gender-related violence among adolescent students in a school setting. The project has five facets: 39 semi-structured interviews with school principals; analysis of a corpus on the political and institutional treatment of sexism in the schools; an ethnographic inquiry (900 hours of direct observation in four schools); a study of a program devoted to the struggle against sexism in the schools; and an analysis of the press on sexism. The analyses reported here mainly concern the interviews with the principals and the inquiry into the struggle against sexism.

The criteria used to compile the interview corpus were designed to obtain data from schools in a variety of sociogeographic areas and from various levels and branches of study

(middle schools, general-education high schools, vocational/technical high schools, both public and private). The interviewees were the principals of fifteen middle schools, eleven general-education high schools, and twelve vocational/technical schools. Among the middle schools, five had students from working-class families (two of which were located in a rural area), nine had students from the middle or upper-middle class (three of which were private), and one school had students from a mixture of social classes. Among the general-education high schools, seven had students mostly from the working class (two in a rural area) and four had students from the middle or upper-middle class or a mixture of social classes (two were private schools). Among the vocational/technical high schools, ten were public and two were private. The topics addressed during the interviews pertained to day-to-day coeducation, the practices it engenders, the interviewees' problems and difficulties related to perceptions and representations of coeducation, the youth culture, the school atmosphere, violence, relationships between girls and boys, within-gender relationships, and the educational context of the school.

Our analysis of the implicit gender norms detected in the educational program for the struggle against sexism is based on an ethnographic inquiry regarding a middle-school prevention program implemented by the Observatory on Woman-Directed Violence in the Seine-Saint-Denis Department of France. This program is one of a number of others set up by the Observatory, which is considered exemplary in the fight against woman-directed violence and the precursor of the current inter-ministerial mission against such violence. The Woman-Directed Violence Observatory was created in a department<sup>1</sup> with highly specific characteristics. Indeed, Seine-Saint-Denis is located the small ring around Paris that has become a center of attention in the media for its urban violence (Beaud and Pialoux, 2003; Mucchielli, 2002). The high proportion of immigrants in the population of this department promotes an "ethnicizing" interpretation of violence in the media, in certain political circles, and in people's common representations (Collovald, 2001), whether urban, school-related, or sexist. In addition to these features, it is a department with a young population and a very high unemployment rate.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it is a communist stronghold in which the Socialist Party has

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<sup>1</sup> The "department" is one of four administrative levels in France (national, regional, departmental, and municipal). There are 96 departments in metropolitan France. In terms of educational policies, the middle schools are managed at the departmental level. Hence, the Seine-Saint-Denis department sets up prevention policies for its middle schools.

<sup>2</sup> In 2011, the Seine-Saint-Denis department had the highest unemployment rate in the Parisian area (11.3%).

been gaining ground for about ten years. Created in 2002, the Observatory is the fruit of a political leaning that takes a structural approach to what is called "gender violence" rather than an approach that assigns such violence to a "culture" or a social class. The first original aspect of the Observatory lies in its view that woman-directed violence is gender violence that spans the private and public sectors. This view can be considered innovative in comparison to the local safety and security policies analyzed by Marylène Lieber (2003, 2007, 2008) in nine French cities. Here, we will look specifically at the role of prevention already assigned by the Observatory to the middle schools in the early 2000's. The Observatory was supported by networks of local actors, at a time when the prevention of sexist violence was appearing in documents such as the Inter-ministerial Agreement for the Equality of the Sexes in the Educational System<sup>3</sup>. The program we will analyze here, "Youth Against Sexism", makes use of ordinary methods of education: a theater-forum on relations between the sexes established by local family planning bureaus, followed by creative art workshops headed by artists. The program is aimed at undoing sexist stereotypes, an objective now included in the Code of Education<sup>4</sup> We conducted our inquiry via interviews and documentary analyses, and also by observing the student presentation session, orchestrated by the Observatory in the presence of its institutional and political partners.

## **1. Girls as a "Gender" vs Boys as a "Class"**

### **1.1 A Fine-Grained System for Categorizing Adolescent Girls**

#### **1.1.1 "Negative" Aspects of Being a Female**

In their discourse, the principals and teachers seem to agree on the idea that girls and boys are different in terms of their rapports with the opposite sex, sexuality, and love. Another common idea expressed by our interviewees, both men and women, was that in girls' flirtatious behavior, they act out things that they would not be able to handle in reality, that they "don't realize what they're doing" when they go out with boys or "tease" them. Some also

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<http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/document>

<sup>3</sup> In France an interministerial convention for gender equality in the educational area was established in 2000, and renewed in 2006 and 2013.

<sup>4</sup> The Code of Education contains an article on the prevention of sexist violence (Article L312-17-1), created by Law 2010-769 of July 9, 2010 (Article 23). This article extends the Law of July 9, 2010 regarding violence towards women.

talked about how "innocent" some girls are when they wear "enticing" clothes in order to excite the boys. For example, the principal of an urban middle school talked about why visible thongs and falling straps are forbidden in her school: "Why don't we allow certain ways of dressing? [Because if we did] we'd end up with total vulgarity. You know, the, the thong you can see, the, well, so, that, but it's like we, we put a stop to that on the spot and then things fall quickly into line, yeah. Or straps that nonchalantly slip down, but that's quite rare and it's often the youngest girls who are really into provocation, etc. So they obviously attract our attention, and, but fem... dress that you can actually call 'feminine', conventional, nice-looking, cute, well, there isn't much of it, you know. There isn't any."

One public high school principal told us that if the girls are "all fixed up in the morning", you should not try to prevent it but simply make sure that "it stays within certain limits." However, here again — as in the discourse of staff members of schools with students from the middle or upper classes — girls' "unsuitable" clothing is not seen as "vulgar" or "enticing" but simply "awkward". We also find arguments stressing the "dangers" that "indecent" female apparel can incur in a coed school, where, as one of our interviewees (a man from a private school) said, "The boys go crazy when they see a thong showing above a pair of slacks".

All of the principals we interviewed spoke in this manner about what girls do. Girls' ways of being, doing, and behaving, combined with seductive or flirtatious talk, stand out as clearly problematic for them. On the other hand, in the area of love and sexuality, doubt was seldom cast on the boys, even though girls' behavior was assessed in the light of its effects on boys. For several interviewees, coed schooling indeed poses problems because certain "dress boundaries" implicitly linked to the kind of "modesty" boys are expected to display towards girls were not always respected.

This moral, institutional, and political sanction regarding the social expression of femininity grounded in negative cultural models of women of "ill repute" is not new. Firstly, one of the foundations of the symbolic and physical dominance of men is rooted in their control over women's bodies (clothing, body hexis, possibility of going places, motricity, strength, fertility, sexuality, etc.; see Tabet, 2004). Secondly, as Michel Bozon (2001a, 2012) showed, in the 20th century we have gone from a more or less negative view of youth sexuality grounded in the sex-based "double standard", to the idea that youth engagement in sexuality is normal. However, social expectations regarding girls and boys are still different. While girls may now have access to sexuality, formerly forbidden, the norms governing that sexuality are fundamentally different from those instilled in boys, and they are dependent



upon the norms of male sexuality. The idea that men respond to "drives" that women must take into account — in every gesture and facial expression, as they get dressed and prepare to go out, regardless of whether they are moving or still — is thus the keystone of the sexually differentiated socialization of girls and boys in the schools.

Added to traditional perceptions of lustful femininity in most of the interviews, we found the no-less multiseccular idea that girls compete with each other within a kind of sexual rivalry. The principal of a suburban high school in a middle- and lower-class neighborhood told us that coeducation problems in his school were rooted in relationships among the girls, not among the boys or between boys and girls: "The funny thing is that, is that, we see girl-to-girl behaviors too. Girls who fight like boys, among the girls, about the guys, for stuff like that, because ... I have two of them who... one or two weeks ago, were pulling out each other's hair on ... on the way out of the high school, just outside the parking lot, because there was some argument about boys, I don't know exactly what; before, that didn't happen, I mean before... in other social classes, things happen in a different way (...) But when you're, you're here, it's girls from the underprivileged classes, uh. (...) You also realize that there are girl-girl quarrels that are frightening."

Girls are not only perceived and classified according to their relationship to flirtation and seduction, they are also the object of a relatively fine-grained classification based on other criteria, including their way of dressing, their appearance in general, and their behavior with other girls. The symbolic establishment of categorizations of teenage girls based on these criteria obviously does not encompass classifications grounded in the more direct link with their tactics for seducing members of the opposite sex (same-sex flirtation was never brought up by our interviewees).

In one of the interviews, a physical education teacher from a general-education high school talked about the exclusion "logic" he saw reigning among students in his school. He explained it in terms of negatively connoted categories for labeling adolescent girls from wealthy homes: "Now that, it has always existed [certain students are left out]. (...) Well, uh, that always makes me think of those movies with cheerleaders [interviewer laughs], the nasty one, the blond broad, you know, the dumb blond who's constantly yelling, it's a horror story. There's that. I don't think it's as awful as all that. (...) In the meantime, if you're neither rich nor pretty — for girls, I mean — or if you don't have some special little thing, uh... It's hard to be a teenager, you know. [And the boys? Would you say it's basically the same? The codes of conduct are the ones set up by the rich and the ...?] Yeah, the codes; less attention is paid to clothes if you're a boy; you can wear a grimy sweat suit or look like a wreck if you're funny,

or athletic, or the handsome kid, or if you go out with a pretty girl — that'll count a lot, uh, the guy who manages to get the pretty chick, he'll get points anyway, uh [interviewer laughs], or then there're others who are jealous of him, but in our school, that counts a lot. There's an admiration side to it among the boys (...) Yeah, there's that side of things, I think. 'He did it, so he must have something we don't know about'. There's got to be some sort of thing like that. I know that that's what worked in my days too. (...). A nerdy girl [snicker] is typically a small, homely, withdrawn girl who's a really good student, super serious, unlike the cheerleader, the blond."

The stereotyped figure of a "vamp" or "femme fatale" (Grandordy, 2013) as an unscrupulous woman who uses her charms to manipulate others, thus seems to apply solely to girls from working-class homes. This stereotype is related to the idea of female rivalry. The interviewees' discourse about heavy makeup, sexual provocation, and fights between women does not pertain to female students labeled as being from well-to-do homes. Added to "vamp" and "girls that fight with each other about conflicts between themselves" (it is important to note that physical violence among girls was reported to exist only in regards to typically female issues) as well as "bimbos" and "nerds", there is another negative female figure, albeit not as strongly condemned, that of a "victim".

Indeed, in the discourse of our interviewees, not all girls are perceived as "loose". Some are seen as victims of a "need to be loved" whose strategy is to get more boyfriends by trying to attract boys. These girls act in an indecent manner but are not really aware of what they are doing (morally speaking or in terms of their well-being and personal development).

The principal of a public middle school in a wealthy suburban area expressed this idea: "These relationships [between boys and girls]? As for me, I've spoken up at various levels: when I'm doing write-ups of groups of teachers, during an administrative board meeting, sometimes in meetings outside the school, etc. In the area of teacher training, even in staff meetings, I've expressed my concern, particularly about the image that girls have of boys, and sometimes that girls have of themselves. And it's very troublesome to see how this disastrous image of a woman has become commonplace among teenage boys, I mean, it's true. [And among teenage girls?] Sometimes girls perpetuate that image, they're in there, they can't step back, and they're incapable, they're young, yeah, but they're incapable of analyzing, and in some ways they're victims, I mean, they make themselves into victims of the female image."

### **1.1.2 "Positive" Aspects of Being a Female**

Alongside the relatively negative female figure, there are two positive ones. The first can be called "the girl who's in love but is decent". According to our interviewees, love in this model of femininity is experienced in a romantic mode and does not lead to excessive sexual activity. Sweet talk and handholding are rarely criticized. The second figure holds that girls "complement boys". We found this second idea, not in the interviewees' discourse about love-based relationships, but in their talk about coeducation, particularly in interviews with persons working in schools where the majority of students are boys. In this setting, the presence of girls is seen as positive in that it "channels" the drives or violent tendencies of boys. Some principals of technical high schools with a mostly-male student body often expressed the desire to have more girls, in an attempt to balance the sex ratio, which in turn is thought to promote more balanced boys.

The presence of girls, then, is seen as a positive thing because it channels male energy and violent drives. We found this idea especially for the interviewees who wanted more girls in their school. The key idea in this frame of mind is to create "equality through difference". This representation of the gendered organization of the social world, which was constructed through an ongoing masculinity-regeneration process that emerged with the advent of industrial society, advocates the "complementarity" thesis, which revolves around the difference between home life and work life, between the "passive" and the "active", between the "private" and the "public". In the academic institution, this ideology — which crosses over the various spheres that make up the social universe — has taken on its own forms, including accountability for girls in the prevention of student violence, and valorization of the heterosexual couple as the norm for love-based and sex-based relationships. In short, the discourse on this topic was implicitly based on a traditional model of gender in which girls, through their attitudes, whether "virtuous" or not, are the ones who guarantee the civility of boys and more broadly, "social peace".

## **1.2 Masculinity, Sexuality, and Social Context**

Let us now turn to the interviewees' discourse about boys. Note first of all that boys were not categorized in a systematic manner. Also, their corporeality was not always seen as a potential source of "problems". The following remarks made by a principal of a regular high school in a working-class neighborhood are a testimony to this: "Now, as for the boys, I find them rather childish here, really, that's what I think. But very nice. I mean, they joke around, laugh a lot. They get into mischief sometimes. So obviously, after a while, luckily, sometimes there are boys who know when to be serious. But they like it here. They kid around a lot.

They get rowdy, etc., a little more than I've seen before in other high schools that have another type of profile, I was going to say." Boys from schools located in working-class neighborhoods are the only ones to be called troublemakers. But these behaviors are not ascribed to the male sex. They are explained in terms of the living conditions in the home, "the culture", and "the way teenage boys are raised".

In addition to talking about masculinity, the interviewees also mentioned the sexuality of boys from working-class homes, which was almost always perceived as violent and linked to the pornographic culture. We can see this in the following remarks made by a middle-school principal located in a housing development: "Uh, at the same time, you have to understand that many, I should say some of the students are avid consumers of pornographic movies. So they have a very precise and crude knowledge of sexuality, and as a result, they project that on, on their relationships too (...). There is also a sort of very brutal sexuality with no talk of love. Of course, we have students who are a thousand miles away from all that, even ones whose rapport with sexuality is very distant in the end (...). It's a very brutal form, fellation in the lavatories, in a park, for example."

The ordinary manifestations of flirtation, love, and sexuality also depend upon the social context in the school. While most of these manifestations are disapproved in schools located in the wealthier downtown areas of cities (kissing and holding hands, for instance, are prohibited), in schools where flirting and sexual activity do not appear to take place, the teachers regret this fact and are more tolerant of the few expressions of desire and feelings that occur between students. This state of affairs is no doubt related to what we have found for boys from working-class homes, who seem to be unable to express their feelings. As we shall see in greater detail in the next part when we focus on sex education in working-class contexts, boys from this social class are encouraged by educational actors to verbalize their feelings, to have egalitarian relationships with girls, and to refrain from using verbal or physical violence.

## **2. Can Adolescents Be Freed from the Dominant Gender Order? Categorization of Girls and Boys from an "Antisexist" Angle: the Seine-Saint-Denis Observatory**

### **2.1 Girls, a "Dominated Class" That Must Be Emancipated**

The "Youth Against Sexism" sessions were set up by the Woman-Directed Violence Observatory of Seine-Saint-Denis in view of preventing sexist violence in middle school. In effect since 2008, these sessions were instituted recently by a convention signed between the General Counsel of the Department, the Departmental Head of French National Educational

Services, and Family Planning Services. The goal of the convention is to refine the middle schools' pre-existing education-for-all programs, which include "X=Y" theater-forums that call regularly upon Family Planning Services, and various workshops on slam, videos, etc. All ninth graders in about fifteen schools attend the theater-forum staged by Family Planning, after which students can volunteer to participate in artistic creation workshops aimed at elaborating antisexist messages.

"Youth Against Sexism" is a guidance program that has gradually been instituted in the school system after initially being a reaction to the widespread use of sex education. It is not surprising to find a family planning association participating in the effort, since the statutes of this association align directly with the feminist and education-for-all movements. Created in 1956, the French Family Planning Movement is a confederation composed of relatively independent departmental associations. The French Ministry of Education authorized this movement to take action in the schools and to hold sex-education training sessions. The Seine-Saint-Denis Departmental Association's decision to promote a theater-forum as a critical reaction to "traditional" sex education was put into effect by Danièle N., activist and actress. She was trained in the practice of "Theater of the Oppressed" in the 1980's by Augusto Boal, the Brazilian activist, actor, and theorist of this type of theater. A. Boal was inspired by P. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, according to which "the goal of education is not [...] to make 'ignorant' persons acquire knowledge, but to trigger in them a 'coming to awareness' about their current situation, and notably, to perceive themselves as members of a social milieu whose conditions of existence can be changed" (Mathieu, 2002). By the 1970's, this pedagogical approach was taken up by activist groups and began to resemble the practices of feminist "awareness groups". The theater-forum is one of the forms of Theater of the Oppressed. Its goal is to elicit debates and proposals for alternative reactions, by way of skits that bring out common conflicts between the sexes. To illustrate, a scenario might show a boy putting his hand on a girl's behind in a P.E. class, and the girl reacting by slapping him and then getting reprimanded by the teacher.

Maëlle F. (age 30), actress and family-planning host, tells us about the beginnings of the theater-forum:

"We went to see some young people in middle schools and chose four stories. The stories have changed in 14 years but without really changing since the problems are the same. What may have changed is the style, the expressions, the manifestations of sexism. But the scenarios are the same: the scenario about the hand on the behind; about boys and what it means to be handsome, tall, strong, virile; the scenario about dating

rules and thus sexuality and the prevention of sexist violence; and, by way of this, conjugal violence and sharing of household tasks, for the fourth [story]."

Little by little during the forum, questions and solutions arise under the leadership of Danièle N., who leads the debate:

"When an oppressive boy in the room says 'She's a whore?' we tell him 'Come here and say that, come talk from the viewpoint of the oppressed', 'Me, I'm an oppressed person', 'So you're an oppressor, but there are surely some oppressed people in the room — what do you think?' Because I continuously direct the discussion. 'Yeah, the girls say she's a whore. What does that mean? Prostitution? No, it means a slut, she sleeps with everybody. And him, he sleeps with everybody, yeah but he's allowed to. Oh yeah, he's allowed to but not her."

In the materialistic feminist view<sup>5</sup> defended by family-planning activists, the oppressed persons targeted by the theater-forum are girls, as a "gender class", and they can be liberated by becoming aware that they are dominated.

Danièle N. thus makes the distinction between being subjected to assigned roles and being subjected to oppression:

"This can help boys say to themselves, 'Me I don't want that. I want an equal relationship with a girl', to be freed of assigned roles but not oppression. There are no two ways about it, it's not the same thing. Women are subjected to male dominance; that doesn't mean that I'm against boys. This can help boys break away from their group and the roles they are assigned, and to have peaceful, fulfilling relationships with women and men."

According to Maëlle F., successful preventive actions do not trigger the same effects on girls as on boys, which is a consequence of their unequal positions in the gendered rapport:

"For boys it's about their own assigned roles, so it's more individual. It's hard to relate it to some non-existent collective thing. 'I'd like to have the right to' let my girlfriend drive, cry, send kisses on the phone in front of my friends. This would mean that they

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<sup>5</sup> Materialistic feminism emerged in France in the 1970's under the iron rule of sociologists like Christine Delphy, Colette Guillaumin, and Nicole-Claude Mathieu, who showed that women are a "dominated sex class", over and above their class differences, insofar as they are collectively and individually appropriated by the "class of men", notably *via* marriage and unpaid domestic tasks.

recognize the existence of girls in the area of sexuality, that there is pleasure for girls too."

While family-planning efforts are aimed at triggering the undoing of gender roles or even male dominance, the rest of the "Youth Against Sexism" program tends more to valorize forms of femininity and masculinity that are deemed positive: "the adolescent girl who frees herself of conjugal violence" and "the sentimental boy" who respects women and is masculine without being virile.

## **2.2 Girls and Boys "Freed" From Male Violence: Positive Figures in Antisexist Discourse**

After participating in the theater-forum, the middle school students who volunteer attend creative art workshops aimed at generating antisexist messages. Monitoring the artistic productions of middle school students is a fundamental dimension of the Observatory. Claire B. (an employee in charge of prevention for the Observatory who had already worked in the area of student health) acknowledged a less ambitious objective than that of family planning programs: she wants male and female students to be capable of retaining a few basic ways of thinking and acting that can be put to work whenever a violent situation arises, whether involving themselves or others around them. In line with this, she explains how students' artistic creations should also serve as prevention tools. With this goal in mind, the creations are examined, and modified if need be, about ten days before being submitted to a group of representatives from all participating bodies, ranging from the General Board of the region to the Magistrates' Court of the department. In the following example (after the partial viewing of a video on forced marriage), the Observatory was able to "improve" the students' work and make the message come across as clearly antisexist:

"For example, a year ago at the last minute, we got a school video about a forced marriage that ended in suicide. It wasn't possible to show it to the students — one cannot say that the only solution to forced marriage is suicide. That's unthinkable. We had to hurriedly cut the film in the middle, so ... frustration, explanations, it's quite complicated. It's better to start 10 days early, even if it means having to talk the students into changing their productions. One must not say that the only way to be freed of violence is suicide; it's unthinkable. What one *can* say is that there are ways out, possibilities, but you can't finish like that.

Was it the students who proposed this ending?

Of course. But they had worked with people who focused on the artistic side and were in tune with the students, not ones who worked *with* the students. It's not about wanting a particular happy ending, or making something that looks good; the goal is to get the students to work on finding a way to get out of a bad situation. The first door you knock on might not be the right one, the second or third might not be so either, but the fourth door might be the right one, and there, you'll be heard. The goal is to make all the objects created by these youths into prevention objects. You cannot end a prevention tool with a suicide; it's unthinkable."

Teenage women who are victims of forced marriage or violence was a recurring theme in the Observatory's productions. When put on stage, the women always managed to free themselves from their situation and rebuild themselves, sometimes by finding a new non-violent, respectful husband.

Slam ("Youth Against Sexism", May 23, 2011)

I am

I am that woman sitting over there  
I am that woman who gets beaten by her husband  
I am that woman whose husband will cheat on her  
I am that woman the world will abandon  
I am that woman, and self-confidence I have not  
[...]  
I am that man who charms women [...]  
With my beauty as a weapon  
I score time after time  
My style always makes a hit  
No gazelle can resist me  
I never hesitate to bite  
[...]



I am someone else  
Someone who respects women  
Someone who respects his mother [...]  
Hunting is not one of my passions  
Love, I see it my own way  
I am sentimental, yet a true kind of boy

Woman prisoner,  
She'll find a way to get out  
Agreeable predator,  
He'll break many new hearts  
Kind gentleman,  
He'll keep on respecting women"

In the program studied, next to the recurring figure of the young woman freed of a violent partner or a forced marriage, emerges the figure of the antisexist husband. The coexistence of these two models of masculinity divides boys into "good" and "bad" potential partners in love. Boys seen as violent are labeled as "deviant". And it is both the girls' and the boys' task to learn how to choose antisexistism, implicitly based here on the notion of "respect for girls": girls have to choose partners who "respect" them, and boys have to "respect" girls. In this approach, antisexist boys are not multi-partner seducers: they exhibit a kind of nonaggressive masculinity grounded in moral values. As François de Singly (2013) showed about France, this kind of masculinity is valorized in the upper social classes. The ideal figure of a non-sexist boy is rooted in a conception of masculinity opposing "violent masculinity". In this view, at the same time as boys are sentimental, they remain "true boys". In this respect, the program's educational goal aligns implicitly with a symbolic struggle against the kind of masculinity found in the youth of working-class neighborhoods, as it is perceived by the educational actors.

Indeed, masculinity is "plural" (as is femininity), and "two versions of male identity coexist, one that places greater emphasis on bodily expression and one that stresses moral qualities" (de Singly, 2013). In this view, there are qualities ascribed solely to men that vary in their mode of expression and in the ways in which they are socially imposed.

It is interesting to note that "non-virile" boys have something in common with girls, namely, they are also victims of sexism, according to the Observatory employee. She

illustrates this remark using the peer-rumor phenomenon that stigmatizes girls called "sluts" and boys labeled as homosexuals:

"We did a blog with a young journalist. There are two interviews with ninth grade students: the girl who talks about the yoke that forces her to worry about her looks and says, 'When I enter the school, it's ongoing anxiety for me. Do I look all right?'. And the boy who says 'They tell me I can't cry, come on now ...', and the yoke of this boy too. These are very good testimonies. And here, you can see that in terms of rumors, it's exactly like that too. They're not going to be the same type, or are they? For example, they didn't work on rumors that way, but the first year some of the young people explained that because they didn't dress like everybody else, not with T-shirts but with little tight-fitted shirts, because they greeted boys with a kiss on the cheek, they were completely rejected. They didn't explain this on posters. Anyway, for rumors, the idea is especially to get them to not participate in that rumor. Whether it's girls or boys. There were also a lot of skits that were not very good, that were very bad, but the basic idea was interesting: I take pictures, I fight with my girlfriend, and I can easily find all kinds of faults in her and say it outright. The boys said this, the girls, it was more about what it could do. It's also about how to say you're responsible too. Just getting that across involves a responsibility that is reproachable."

If girls and boys are re-classified using "antisexist" categorizations, then the question becomes: "To what extent do these femininities and masculinities defy the gender system or provide alternatives to it?"

### **2.3 "Alternative" Femininities and Masculinities: Defying Gender, But in the Heterosexual Couple**

According to the activists, middle school students' productions must act as prevention tools and be elaborated or even reworked for that purpose. In this sense, we can interpret the productions as messages validated by the Observatory that carry the ideas the Observatory wants to convey. The small amount of feedback gathered suggests that although middle school students do not always adhere to the discourse they hear, they are strongly urged to do so. The following observations made on project-presentation day (May 15, 2012) point out the framing or even orchestration of the middle school students' reactions:

"The presentation begins with slams from the Barbusse middle school, the last of which is criticized by a boy in order to denounce 'men who have their wife wait on them'.

The president of the Observatory asks the people in the room: 'What did you learn from this? Does this ring a bell to any of you? Then let's say bravo.'

[...] Then a teenage girl reads the interviews of a boy and a girl who are in training for opposite-sex occupations. Reading by a girl on the theme: 'Do occupations have a gender?'

The president of the Observatory asks the teenage girl: 'So, in the end, do occupations have a gender?' She replies: 'No, of course not.'<sup>6</sup>

According to our analyses, the middle school students' productions in 2009, 2011 and 2012<sup>7</sup> implicitly contained two main messages: (1) freedom to choose one's gender identity, irrespective of gender stereotypes about occupations, and freedom to choose one's cultural and sports activities; (2) a *continuum* between gender stereotypes and conjugal violence.

The freedom to choose, for example, can be illustrated by a skit in which the actors are a girl who boxes and a boy who dances. The boy's classmates suspect he is gay until his girlfriend appears on stage. The presumed homosexuality of the young man is indeed only apparent, and it is gender defiance that is brought out more than sexuality. The scene ends with a slogan, "*Beyond appearances, equal in our differences*", which implicitly takes up on the differential scheme of equality in difference. True homosexuality was hardly ever presented, except on the day of May 15th in the projection of a drawing depicting two boys kissing, which elicited some exclamations of disgust from the students present in the room.

The undoing of sexist stereotypes, then, would give rise to a greater range of behaviors than those assigned by gender within the heterosexual couple. It appears in the end that the heterosexual couple acts as both the implicit reference and the locus of violence to be eliminated. The remarks of certain political figures and the Observatory's partners are a testimony to this. In introducing the workshop presentation day of May 15, 2012, the General Councilman in charge of the Observatory saluted the student work accomplished by saying that now, "*in this department, every time a woman is subjected to violence from her partner, her husband, her son, her ex, there is a reaction.*" The female student seated next to me then turned toward another girl and said, "*Or even just her boyfriend.*" Most of the time, only violence occurring in the conjugal relationship is addressed by the program. Forced sexual

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<sup>6</sup> Field book observation made on May 15, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> The document combining the 2010 productions was no longer available at the time of the inquiry.

intercourse or sexual aggression of girls who had already been devalorized and stigmatized as "whores", for example, are questioned. Even though the issue of the stigmatization of girls whose sentimental or sexual life has failed to conform to the single-partner norm is treated from time to time during the theater-forum, the undoing of the gender order it proposes reinforces a gender order within which the "proper morality" of girls and "the right choices" in love are the principal guarantees of "peace between the sexes".

Of course, the program is also aimed at boys, who are encouraged to become "good husbands". Antisexist education in the schools thus focuses exclusively on making youth in working-class neighborhoods aware of the predominant norms of contemporary conjugality, that is, "respectable women" and "men who respect them" as equal complements of each other. It is based on the combination of a model of conjugal sexuality that incorporates reciprocal commitment, altruism, and a durable relationship with mutual feelings between the partners<sup>8</sup>, and positive perceptions and representations of femininity and masculinity imparted by the actors on the educational scene.

## **Conclusion**

Since the 1960's, the French school system has been working on finding the best way to set up coeducation in the schools. As noted above, several studies have shown that the co-presence of both sexes in the schools and the official pedagogical methods now in effect, which lump all students together rather than distinguishing them according to their age, sex, and social class do not lead to equal success rates across the sexes. In this article, we strove to point out the gender norms likely to be acceptable in the French schools. Connell as well as Skeggs have shown how educational institutions define "hegemonic" (Connell, 1995) or valuable (Skeggs, 1997) manners of embodying one's gender. Drawing on these authors, we showed that "femininities" and "masculinities" are not approached in the same manner in the

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Bozon (2001b) noted three modes of association between sexuality practices and self-perceptions in contemporary France: the sexual network (multi-partner), individual desire (playful and relatively narcissistic sexuality), and conjugal sexuality (sexuality founded on exclusivity and expressing the partners' attachment to each other).

categorization system at play in gender representations and perceptions. Girls' ways of being and doing are classified in a fine-grained fashion based on their physical and bodily features, on how they dress and act, and on their moral conduct. Interpretations of the attitudes, appearance, and behaviors of boys, on the other hand, are grounded in a much more subtle system in which bodily, physical, and dress-related criteria do not enter into the picture. Furthermore, the discourse differentiating girls from each other refers explicitly to their sex, whereas for boys, it is social membership that constitutes the explanatory principle underlying differences between them. In short, the criteria used to classify girls as girls, and boys as boys, are not the same. First of all, while the female body in a school setting — no matter what social class of students is at stake — is seen as a "problem in itself", the presence of the male body is never questioned in the educational actors' discourse about coeducation. Secondly, girls are subject to a fine-grained categorization on either side of a symbolic boundary that separates girls seen as immoral, from the rest of the girls. On each side of this separating line, girls are classified on the basis of how far their appearance and behavior are from the kind of femininity deemed ideal in the school. This ideal is characterized notably by a certain amount of moderation in dress and in the flirtatious behavior girls display towards boys, which allows them to be clearly identified as "proper girls". On this last point, gendered non-differentiation did not show up as something desirable in the educational actors' discourse.

Looking now at the politicized discourse about the fight against sexism, we see a division of girls into "dominated" and "victims of violence" on one side, and "liberated" on the other; we see a division of boys into good and bad partners from the standpoint of the ideal heterosexual, egalitarian, and non-violent couple. In both cases, the complementarity of the sexes and the binarity of gender are stressed, which raises the issue of the ongoing production of the gender system in the academic institution, both at its core — i.e. in its daily practices under the guidance of its educational actors — and in the periphery — i.e., in the management of relationships of love and flirtation between students (a marginal dimension of the institution's educational goals). In sum, the femininities and masculinities proposed as "alternatives" by the program for the struggle against sexism cannot compete with the prevailing definition of gender identities. As Butler has shown it (1990), the heterosexual norm prevails in feminism itself.

Moreover, the discourse and practices of a school system oriented toward gender equality strengthen a division of masculinities grounded on the one hand in class membership, and founded on the other on a dominant conception of love and sexuality in which conjugality and complementarity of the sexes are norms that cannot be overridden. A good partner is a

proper girl on the one hand, and a non-sexist boy on the other hand. As we have seen, these representations rely on class-based criteria for boys. As such, the gender system is (re)produced in and by the academic institution via a system that classifies students on the combined basis of their sex, social class, and sexuality and thereby reinforces gender stereotypes.

In addition to the fieldwork that we have led, studying how girls and boys incorporate or resist to these norms is necessary. Moreover, intersections between class and race should be studied by subtle observations in order to specify how race relations can be hidden behind what is interpreted as class relations. If challenging “gender stereotypes” has become an educational policy goal in France, sociological attention has to be paid to those who produce gender equality policies at school at “street-level” and reproduce power relations. In this sense, focusing on educational institutions teaches much about the making of gender and power relationships with regard to sexuality, race and class.

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