

International Seminar:

" Gender-Specific Aspects of Nutrition Education"

Cologne, 6 to 9 June 1993

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FEDERAL CENTRE
FOR HEALTH EDUCATION



WHO-COLLABORATING CENTRE
FOR HEALTH EDUCATION

**International Seminar:
"Gender-Specific Aspects of Nutrition Education"
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**International Seminar:
"Gender-Specific Aspects of Nutrition Education"
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Introduction

An international seminar on the topic "Gender-Specific Aspects of Nutrition Education" was held in Cologne from 6 to 9 June 1993. The event was prepared and staged by the Federal Centre for Health Education (FCHE), in cooperation with the Regional Office for Europe of the World Health Organisation (WHO/EURO), Copenhagen. It is the second international meeting to deal with gender-specific aspects of health education.

The nutrition education of the FCHE will concentrate on young people as the target group in the coming years. Of particular interest in this context is the question of whether gender-specific behavioural differences among young people are relevant as regards education work. Corresponding knowledge from the field of drug prevention makes this seem likely.

The seminar was preceded by an investigation into the current status of research in Europe. On this basis, consideration was given as to which scientific disciplines can be used as a vehicle for approaching the subject.

The objective of the seminar was to analyse the nutritional behaviour of young people with experts from various specialist fields, such as nutritional scientists, psychologists, sociologists, teachers and consumer researchers, and to develop action strategies based on the results. Review papers served as the basis for discussion in an intensive exchange of experience between the experts in the working groups.

The paper by Dr. Helmut Oberritter (German Society for Nutrition) described, inter alia, the current situation as regards nutrition in the old and new Federal Länder. The focus of his presentation was, in particular, the change in the nutrition situation and eating habits over the past 40 years, and its significance for the nutritional behaviour of young people.

Prof. Ibrahim Elmadfa (University of Vienna) then presented information dealing with nutrient requirements and coverage of these requirements in boys and girls. The basis for his presentation was a study on this topic conducted in Austria.

The social influences on the nutritional behaviour of boys and girls were described in a cultural comparison by Prof. Jadwiga Charzewska from Poland (Warsaw Institute of Nutrition) and Prof. Veikko Aalberg from Finland (Helsinki Psychiatric Clinic).

Aspects of the topic were elucidated from the point of view of developmental psychology by Lauk Woltring (for boys) and Dr. Cornelia Helfferich (for girls).

Dr. Henri Dirren (Messrs. Nestlé) described the current consumption and purchasing patterns of young people from the consumer research angle.

The presentations given in the plenary session were supplemented by two working groups which tackled the two intervention fields "School/Career" and "Family/Leisure time". The goal was to analyse the nutritional behaviour of young people on the basis of practical examples from nutritional science and health education, and to develop possible action strategies. The results of the working groups were presented in the plenary session.

Scope and purpose

The question of whether boys and girls differ in relation to their nutrition behaviour and motives is a subject which has seldom been discussed to date. However, differences in socialisation, the influences exerted by society and the phases of puberty suggest that there are also gender-related differences between youths as regards their nutrition. In the field of nutritional disorders, for example, it has long since been proven that boys and girls have a different affinity for certain illnesses.

One explanation for the lack of interest could be that young people are a target group which receives little attention anyway when it comes to matters of nutrition education. If at all, the subject is only discussed from the point of view of "covering nutrient requirements". Therefore, in the next few years, the FCHE will focus its nutrition education work on young people as the key target group. However, if they are to be successful, prevention concepts must be geared to the motive and everyday situations of the target groups, and there are differences between boys and girls in this context.

In order to make the gender-specific aspect of nutrition education among young people a topic of debate for the first time, we would like to discuss the subject with specialists from related fields. The central question of the seminar is to what extent the gender-specific characteristics of young people need to be taken into account in nutrition education, and what preventive action strategies can be derived from the answer to this question.

International Seminar on the subject:
"Gender-Specific Aspects of Nutrition Education"

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P r o g r a m m e

Sunday, 6.6.1993

Arrival of participants
Informal meeting

Monday, 7.6.1993

Plenary session:

09.00 - 09.30 h

Welcome of participants
Günther Welsch, FCHE
Dr. Isabel Loureiro, as representative
of WHO

**Introductory paper: The tiny difference:
a subject for nutrition education today?**

Reinhard Mann-Luoma, FCHE

09.30 - 10.00 h

**Subject: Change in nutrition conditions
and the nutrition situation**

Dr. Helmut Oberritter, Deutsche Gesellschaft
für Ernährung, Germany

10.00 - 10.30 h

**Subject: Nutrition requirements and their
coverage in boys and girls**
Prof. Dr. Ibrahim Elmadfa, Vienna University,
Austria

10.30 - 11.00 h

Coffee break

11.00 - 12.00 h

Plenary session:

**Subject: Social influences on the eating
habits of boys and girls**
Prof. Dr. Jadwiga Charzewska, Nutrition
Epidemiology Department, Poland
Prof. Veikko Aalberg, Helsinki University,
Finland

12.00 - 12.30 h

Discussion

12.30 - 14.00 h

Lunch

14.00 - 16.00 h Working Groups:

Subject: Analysis and international comparison of the situation - in the family and during leisure time
chairperson:
Lauk Woltring, Netherlands

- at school/work
chairperson:
Eva Callmer, Sweden

16.00 - 16.30 h **Coffee break**

16.30 - 18.00 h Working Groups (continuation)

19.00 h Dinner in "Zur Malzmühle"

Tuesday, 8.6.1993

09.00 - 10.00 h **Presentation of the results of the Working Groups**

10.00 - 11.15 h Plenary session:
Subject: Aspects of developmental psychology as regards the formation of gender-specific eating habits
Dr. Cornelia Helfferich, Freiburg University, Germany
Lauk Woltring, Hogeschool van Amsterdam University, Netherlands

11.15 - 11.30 h **Coffee break**

11.30 - 12.00 h **Subject: Gender-specific consumption behaviour in youth in relation to nutrition habits**
Henri Dirren, Nestlé, Switzerland

12.00 - 13.00 h Discussion

13.00 - 14.30 h **Lunch**

14.30 - 16.00 h Working Groups:

Subject: Action strategies for gender-specific nutrition education - in the family and during leisure time
chairperson:
Lauk Woltring, Netherlands

- at school/work
chairperson:
Eva Callmer, Sweden

16.00 - 16.30 h **Coffee break**
16.30 - 18.00 h Working Groups (continuation)
19.00 h **Dinner in Pullman Hotel Mondial**

Wednesday, 9.6.1993

09.00 - 10.00 h **Presentation of the results of the Working
Groups**
10.00 - 10.30 h **Coffee break**
10.30 - 12.00 h **Round-table discussion on the subject:
"Necessity of gender-specific nutrition
education"**
Participants: Seminar speakers
Moderator: Reinhard Mann-Luoma

12.00 h **Departure**

Location: **Pullmann Hotel Mondial
Kurt-Hackenbergs-Platz 1
D-50667 Köln**

Tel.: +49/221-20630
Fax : +49/221-2063522

Opening statements

Günther Welsch, Head of the Department "Basic Issues and Coordination", opened the seminar on behalf of the Federal Centre for Health Education and welcomed the participants from eleven European countries. The seminar, planned in cooperation with the WHO, was part of a series of events concerning gender-specific aspects of health education within the framework of the cooperation agreement between the FCHE and the WHO. A seminar on the topic "Gender-Specific Aspects of Drug Prevention" had already taken place in 1992.

In his opening address, Günther Welsch expressed the expectations of the organisers for the meeting. The extent to which gender-specific aspects needed to be taken into consideration in nutrition education was to be clarified, as well as which preventive action strategies could be developed therefrom. He welcomed the great interest in the topic, particularly in the light of the fact that this specific question meant breaking "new ground" as regards nutrition education.

Dr. Maria Isabel Loureiro welcomed the participants on behalf of the WHO. She emphasised the importance of exerting an early influence on the nutritional behaviour of children, in order to shape their health-related behaviour. To this end, it was necessary to impart timely cognitive and affective skills for dealing with nutrition. Programmes aimed at changing nutritional behaviour should incorporate the situation of the target group. Dr. Loureiro stressed the need for gender-specific research. It had to be taken into account in this context that gender per se did not constitute a criterion for nutritional behaviour but that it was significant for the most diverse possibilities of exerting social influence.

As Director of the FCHE Section "Prevention of Nutrition-Induced Diseases, Nutrition Education and Consumer Protection", Reinhard Mann-Luoma welcomed the attending experts and explained the background of the topic, its significance for the education work of the FCHE, and the expectations for this seminar. The question of the "small difference" had, to date, only been researched to a small extent, also in the case of nutritional behaviour. A project started by the FCHE in 1993, dealing with the topic "Youth, Nutrition and Sport (YNS)", revealed a deficit as regards the specific handling of young people when dealing with their gender-specific roles.

Young people are already the target group of nutrition research when it comes to requirements and coverage of requirements. However, there is only the **assumption** that the nutritional behaviour and awareness of boys and girls differs greatly. Data concerning eating problems (bulimia and anorexia), for example, which occur far more frequently in young females, could provide pointers in this context. Furthermore, the results from other fields of research, which relate to the life and world of young people, reveal differing motivational patterns. There is, however, hardly any **knowledge** of whether the motivational patterns of girls and boys differ as regards their nutritional behaviour.

With this background in mind, it was the wish of the organisers of the seminar to provide a forum for experts from various disciplines, with the purpose of elucidating the social and psychological impact of eating habits. In addition to the expert presentations, the topic of the event was to be dealt with on a more detailed level in the working groups.

To conclude the opening addresses, Margareta Nilson-Giebel, Head of the FCHE Section "International Relations", welcomed the participants. She moderated the seminar together with Dr. Isabel Loureiro.

Summary of the review papers

Change in nutrition conditions and the nutrition situation

(Dr. Helmut Oberritter)

The nutritional behaviour of a population is substantially determined by the foodstuffs offered and their economic availability. This is clearly confirmed by the post-war development in the Federal Republic of Germany, where the nutrition situation has altered radically over the past 40 years. While the main problem in post-war years was to overcome the lack of food, we are today confronted with the consequences of an overflow. The traditional eating habits sired by a food shortage offer little in the way of orientation when dealing with the current surplus. Young people are particularly affected by this. While their parents' eating habits were mostly shaped by the maxim of covering their nutrient requirements, different nutritional trends have formed today. The significance of food has become multifaceted: terms such as enjoyment, health or conviviality reflect this fact. Confronted with the diversity of this eating culture, young people are exposed to a multitude of influences on their nutritional behaviour. In this context, it is necessary to intensify the positive trends which have arisen in recent years. Young people, in particular, should be made more aware of various topics in the field of eating and drinking. One obvious possibility is to address young people via various spheres of experience in which food plays a role and to motivate them to consider their nutritional behaviour and, for example, structure it in a healthier manner.

Nutrition requirements and their coverage in boys and girls

(Prof. Dr. Elmadfa)

The Institute for Nutritional Science of Vienna University (IJEV) conducted a study of the eating habits and nutritional status of Austrian children and young people aged between 6 and 18 years, in order to obtain statements concerning nutrient requirements. 8,000 pupils were questioned. The results were examined according to gender, behavioural patterns, consumption and nutritional preferences. On this basis, recommendations were drawn up which take the special features of growth and physiological requirements into account.

The weight of the youths questioned was determined by means of weighing records:

- Extreme underweight was not found
- Moderate underweight: girls 8%, boys 3%
- Normal weight: girls 67%, boys 74%
- Moderate overweight: girls 16%, boys 18%
- Extreme overweight: girls 9%, boys 5%

As far as the self-assessment of body weight was concerned, the boys were generally satisfied with their body weight, while the girls, even when objectively slim, tended to be unhappy with themselves.

Gender-specific differences in nutritional behaviour were also revealed in the preferences for various foods. Thus, on the whole, boys are more attracted by fast food and consume more white bread, meat and soft drinks. Girls prefer dairy products, wholemeal and vegetables. Nutritional awareness is greater in girls than in boys.

The relationship between leisure activities and body weight was also examined using "TV consumption" as an example. It became clear that overweight children spend more time in front of the television than do children of normal weight. Therefore, overweight children are less active. Added to this is a relatively high consumption of crisps and sweets in these children.

The following ideas for nutrition education were formulated against the background of the empirical findings:

Nutrition education is an element of public health, but knowledge alone is not enough. Although the theoretical knowledge needs to be improved on the basis of knowledge gained in nutritional science, the educational principles of "learning by doing" and the course system should also be taken into account when disseminating this knowledge. To this end, "nutrition education" should be begun as early as possible, even in nursery school.

Social influences on the eating habits of boys and girls

(Prof. Jadwiga Charzewska, Poland, and Prof. Veikko Aalberg, Finland)

Nutritional behaviour is influenced by a multitude of social factors. Probably the most obvious influence is exerted by the economic and social system. In **Poland**, for example, the transitional phases from a planned to a market economy were accompanied by a change in nutritional behaviour. Food supplies were scarce, but inexpensive, at the time of the planned economy, and the choice of foods was limited. Through state control and rationing of foodstuffs, the nutritional behaviour was determined by the state. In the transitional phase to a market economy, both supply and consumption increased.

Although supplies continued to improve after the transition had been completed, prices rose disproportionately in comparison with the average income.

While the political system defines the general economic conditions governing nutrition supplies, the family situation and other social influences, as well as the "standardised" concept of an ideal physique, particularly in the industrial nations, affect nutritional behaviour. It appears that girls attempt to attain an ideal physique characterised by slimness to a greater extent than boys.

A substantial influence on eating behaviour is exerted by a change in the identification with gender-specific roles.

The social structure in **Finland**, for example, has changed drastically as a result of the migration to the cities in the 60s and 70s. The patriarchal structure is undergoing a metamorphosis. 80% of women now work outside the family. As a result of this, the nutritional requirements have also changed. The effort for preparing foods is limited to a minimum. Thus, industrially manufactured foods have gained significance. "Frozen food" and "microwave" are symbolic of this attitude towards nutrition, as well as the rapid growth of fast-food chains. While food was considered solely from the perspective of satiation in the past, the aspects of culinary delight and health occupy the foreground today.

An indication of the social significance of eating habits is the frequency with which meals are taken with the family. While 70% of all young people in Poland eat with their families, the figure in Finland is very low and still dropping.

The type of school represents an additional factor influencing the nutritional behaviour of young people. Thus, the quality and choice of the food offered in all-day schools is, in general, predetermined. The pupils seldom have a say.

Attempts have been made in Poland and Finland to influence the nutritional behaviour of young people by imparting knowledge via education programmes. The success of these programmes receives a mixed appraisal. Generally, boys are harder to reach than girls. Although the latter may know more about nutrition, their nutritional behaviour is not necessarily correspondingly healthier.

Advertising also influences the eating habits of young people. The encouragement to consume is generally brought across by creating a physical image based on stereotyped ideals.

Even if only a small number of young people can identify with this ideal image, it is predominantly the girls who strive to copy it, and this can lead to problematic and even pathological eating habits. The number of patients with eating disorders has increased in recent years, particularly in the West.

Aspects of developmental psychology as regards the formation of gender-specific eating habits in young people

(Dr. Cornelia Helfferich, Lauk Woltring)

The development of children and young people is accompanied by a process of family and social education. The tutorial behaviour of parents and their function as role models has a pronounced influence in childhood, while the role models and expectations of young people are mainly provided by society.

The individual phases of the process proceed in almost opposite directions in boys and girls. No significant gender-specific differences exist in the infant phase; the children are purely "focused on their own world".

With increasing age, children start to differentiate between their own world and the "outside world". They have to face up to the influences of the outside world, their feelings differentiate, and their behaviour begins to be shaped by role models. Boys are generally insecure during this time, as their role model is usually a woman (their mother), with whom they can only identify to a limited extent as far as accepting the role of their sex is concerned. Girls are more secure during this phase, as they can identify with their mothers as "partners of the same sex".

The more the outside world gains in significance, the greater the extent to which the gender-specific role model changes. The patriarchal role pattern established in society demands a more offensive and aggressive behavioural pattern of young males. The social image of women, in contrast, is characterised by subordination and modesty.

The phase of puberty is characterised by role uncertainties and personality crises, particularly in the case of girls, which are often expressed in their nutritional behaviour. Investigations into the nutritional behaviour of girls showed that over 50% of all girls under the age of 18 already have experience with diets, and 2% have experience in using appetite suppressors and laxatives. Nutrition is primarily viewed by girls under the aspect of physical attractiveness. Girls are more frequently confronted with the predominant beauty ideal of an exaggeratedly slim figure, and are less able to dissociate themselves from this image than are boys. Girls know a great deal about nutrition, but their consumption behaviour is characterised by constantly repeated diets, with the result of major and frequent weight fluctuations (yo-yo effect).

In this context, there is a twilight zone between diet, underweight and eating disorders. There are few scientific studies concerning normal eating behaviour, but there is abundant material concerning eating disorders, with approx. 90% of all cases involving girls.

Development during adolescence consists of various phases, in which certain tasks have to be overcome. The self-identity is formed by gradual "dissociation" from the parents, re-orientation takes place through the development of a personal system of

values, adoption of the role of adults and the sexes, development of personal sexuality and acceptance of one's own body, as well as growing into the working world.

This process is very complex for girls, and fraught with difficulties, because dissociation from the parents is hampered by the fact that girls are subject to a greater degree of control and bonding by the parents. A strained relationship arises between the social role expectations on the woman as mother, as well as the desire for vocational orientation.

The girl subjectively experiences a situation of extreme loss of control. Anorectic nutritional behaviour may be an attempt at compensating for this - at countering the associated existential fears.

By practising ascetism, girls experience control over their weight, and they equate this with control over their bodies and themselves. Furthermore, anorectics can, for all intents and purposes, remain in their childhood due to their unfeminine body and thus avoid developmental demands. After all, the acceptance of sexual identity is closely associated with the acceptance of one's own body. Being concerned exclusively with eating or "not eating" also suppresses other topics in adolescence.

Anorectic girls were frequently unable to develop their personality fully during childhood and, therefore, are not in a position to overcome the development tasks involved with puberty.

Although anorectic eating behaviour can be observed in boys, the frequency of occurrence in comparison with young females is statistically irrelevant.

The social role image of a man is primarily characterised by strength and achievement. Against this backdrop, the male body is regarded as having a certain function to fulfil and nutrition is reduced to the value of providing energy. Thus, for young males, nutrition primarily has purely functional attributes and is far less an expression of the personal situation. In the family socialisation of the child, nutrition has a more complex function. It is used as a means of discipline and reward, or takes on a communicative value.

Gender-specific consumption behaviour in youth in relation to nutrition habits

(Henri Dirren)

The "food economy" has only recently discovered youths as a consumer group in their own right. One of the main reasons is that young people in the Western industrial nations have considerably more pocket money at their disposal. As a result, the food industry is attempting to win-over youths as a consumer group.

The consumption behaviour of young people is influenced by biological/physiological, social and economic factors.

Within the complex framework of social influences, the family system takes on a particular significance. Thus, parental habits determine eating behaviour to a considerable degree. The majority of young people prefer foods which they know from home. The nutritional behaviour of young people in the non-family environment is primarily influenced by the values of the "Peer Group". It essentially determines which foods are acceptable and "in". This includes, for example, the consumption of snacks. Snacks represent roughly 40% of the total food intake (similar values for both boys and girls). Approx. 30% of the total energy requirement is covered by snacks. The annual turnover for snacks in Europe is approx. 900,000 tonnes (2.5 kg per capita).

A big disadvantage of "snack food" is that it is unbalanced and has a high calorie content. A long-term American study shows that the proportion of overweight children aged between six and eleven years is constantly rising.

The consumption behaviour of young people is governed by their personal views in relation to their physical image and their concept of themselves.

Advertising has discovered youths as a target group. It contributes greatly to shaping the ideas of ideal weight and lifestyles. Thus, products and brand names are developed specifically for young people and adorned with the image of slimness, fitness and being "in".

Young people prefer simple, fast food. This has the result that boys represent the major consumer group for fast-food chains and tend to develop irregular eating habits, while girls lead the field in the consumption of soft drinks.

The role of young people as consumers has, in the meantime, acquired economic significance for the food industry as the purchasing power of adolescents has increased considerably. The pocket money of American youths aged between 6 and 15 years, frequently boosted by small jobs, has a purchasing power of 25 to 30 thousand million dollars. These children and youths are thus increasingly independent and self-sufficient as regards the selection and purchasing of foods. In addition, the young people are increasingly given more say when it comes to shopping with their parents.

The decisive factor in the choice of foodstuffs is not so much the ingredients, but far rather the brand. 22% often read the label, 41% only occasionally. Studies have shown that many young people have become independent when it comes to buying and preparing food, but attach little value to the actual quality. A particularly interesting development for the fast-food chains is the constantly increasing proportion of young people who eat out on a daily basis. Currently at 20%, this figure is relatively high. On the basis of this development, a trend can be observed whereby eating habits are becoming increasingly removed from the family circle and shifting to the fast-food and junk-food sector.

Results of the working groups

In the two working groups "School/Career" and "Family/Leisure time", all data and knowledge acquired by the experts present in connection with gender-specific differences in the nutritional behaviour of boys and girls were collected and hypotheses formulated therefrom. The differences and similarities between the individual countries and cultures were taken into consideration in this context.

In contrast to the review papers, the following presentation of the results of the discussions essentially deals with the subjective experience of the working group participants. The facts gathered thus do not make any **claim** to being complete or scientifically founded.

ANALYSIS OF THE SITUATION

Albeit to different extents, the same determinants govern the nutritional behaviour of boys and girls. Eating habits, role models, physical image and quality influence the choice of foods in all young people. In an international comparison, the behaviour-determining factors, such as role model, attitudes towards foods and choice of foods are very similar.

Determinants of eating behaviour in girls and boys

Role model

When compared in Europe, girls and boys essentially experience similar socialisation. Only the emphasis in respect of the gender-specific expectations of the role of girls differs somewhat along the North/South axis. In southern countries, the expectations of female and male behaviour are clear-cut and traditionally differentiated. In the Northern European countries, this division of roles is becoming increasingly diffuse; lifestyles are no longer so extensively determined by gender.

In general, the role expectations ascribe girls defensive social behaviour. The mother, generally being the main teacher, passes on this restrictive model to the daughter as a partner of the same sex. Advertising takes advantage of this and intensifies the effect.

In terms of nutritional behaviour, it can be proved, for example, that young females have more knowledge concerning nutrition, but use this to achieve an ideal of slender beauty propagated by advertising, and not in the context of healthy nutrition. Intensive occupation with this topic leads to intensive communication in respect of this subject in girls - as opposed to boys - and to a greater capacity for physical expression.

The role image of boys is more likely to expect offensive, aggressive behaviour, with achievement being the prime factor. Therefore, the model for boys is not reduced to an ideal figure. Vocational success becomes the decisive criterion. The body is not

used to express mental and spiritual shape, but is considered in terms of functionality. The same functionality can again be found in the nutritional behaviour.

Attitudes towards nutrition

The attitudes of girls towards nutrition are formed to a large degree by notions of an ideal figure. Girls are mostly unhappy with their figure. Every second girl already has experience with dieting. The desire to be slender leads to permanent control of the body weight. The permanent effort required to achieve the control stipulated by diets cannot be achieved perfectly. This leads to a constant, tangible clash between "heartly eating" and "asceticism", which can turn into disturbed or pathological eating behaviour. For girls, the aspects of "attractiveness" and "health/healthy nutrition" are inseparable. Young males connect health less with nutrition than with sport. Nutrition serves to build muscle and as a pleasurable self-reward. As a result of the less physically-oriented role model of young males, the majority of boys are happy with their figure.

Choice of foods

Girls and boys differ considerably as regards the choice of foods.

Girls prefer fruit and vegetables. They also eat more sweets, but avoid drinks containing sugar. Furthermore, increasing numbers of young girls consume "light" products. Because they are very much guided by slender ideals of beauty, they differentiate between "permissible" and "forbidden" food, and thus limit their choice of foods.

Furthermore, feelings of repulsion, calorie-consciousness and aesthetic aspects are also limiting selection criteria.

Boys are less subject to these limitations. Their "food spectrum" is broader and their portions are larger. They drink more alcohol, eat more junk food/fast food and prefer food containing meat, protein and fat, as opposed to a vegetable diet.

Problematic nutritional behaviour

Disorders in the eating behaviour of young people are confirmed by the growing number of overweight boys and girls, as well as by increasing numbers of juvenile anorectics. The female role image and a defensively-oriented concept of themselves cause eating disorders in girls despite a higher degree of nutritional awareness.

Problems regarding nutrition in young males primarily result from the functional relationship they have with their bodies. They are less concerned with the health implications of their nutrition and their interest in nutritional questions is correspondingly lower.

ACTION STRATEGIES

The aspects compiled reveal a need for action. It appears necessary to devise action strategies. Methods oriented towards educational goals must be developed which deal with the life and world of young people and take gender-specific socialisation into consideration.

Nutrition education

The goal of nutrition education for young people should be formulated on a gender-specific basis.

In order to sensitise girls to the relationships between female socialisation and problematic eating behaviour, it is particularly important that self-confident and constructive awareness of one's own body be promoted. Girls should be aware of their own physical requirements and accept these, in order to develop a higher degree of self-confidence when dealing with themselves.

In the case of young males, the implementation of "nutritional interest" is the primary task. Boys should be better able to assess the consequences of their nutrition for their own health, and structure their nutritional situation and select their food more consciously.

Boys should be taught how to cook and deal with food via practical nutrition-specific work.

In addition to the "nutrition-oriented" goals, youths need to be made more aware of the social role models. Young people should be provided with the necessary skills to view traditional, patriarchal behavioural patterns from a critical distance and to become familiar with new, lifestyle-oriented alternatives.

Action strategies for schools

An international comparison shows that there are major differences in the school concepts and, thus, in the catering concepts (all-day schools, half-day schools).

Because school plays an important and long role in the life and experience of children and youths, it is sensible for a large part of the responsibility for health education to be located there.

Furthermore, a big advantage of the school as a system is that the pupils can be addressed directly and immediately. One of the main goals of health education is to provide knowledge and competence to act. For the nutrition education field, this means that children must be enabled to make the correct nutritional choice. As regards all-day schools, health education must be brought to bear both in class and in free periods (special field: school catering).

Classes

The quality of health education essentially depends on the competence and model behaviour of the teachers, particularly the female teachers. A fundamental knowledge of nutritional science and suitable, methodical teaching techniques, such as learning by doing, need to be imparted. It could prove helpful to give teachers easier access to local experts in counselling centres.

Furthermore, corresponding didactically prepared information material must be available for use in class. In terms of content and organisation, the school must offer a framework which enables the pupils to act and to experience sensuous activities. An example of such are projects which are performed self-responsibly under the motto "learning by doing".

However, classroom work must also incorporate and consider family nutritional behaviour, not just that of the school. The inclusion of the parents would, therefore, be beneficial.

Free periods

The educational content and the food offered at schools must concur with one another. In order to create an acceptable eating culture at schools in which meals are offered to pupils, the choice of food must be geared to the taste preferences of the pupils. A pleasant, relaxed and communicative framework should likewise be enabled.

In order to make nutrition education in schools as realistic as possible, the nutritional situation and ideas of the pupils must be recorded on the basis of the previously mentioned aspects and then taken into consideration.

Action strategies (family/leisure time)

Nutrition education and teaching in the family and leisure-time sphere is very complex and, for the most part, only indirectly accessible. Educational publications in the mass media, such as TV, women's and girl's magazines, are suitable vehicles for achieving sensitisation and a change in nutritional behaviour. One possibility for exerting a direct influence on eating behaviour within the family consists of nutritional counselling and courses.

In the sector of leisure-time behaviour, it is possible to incorporate nutrition education in youth work: examples of this include sports clubs, youth centres, recreational clubs, discotheques or dancing and ballet schools.

While leisure activities and, as an element of these, youth activities are extensively shaped by the respective situation in a country, comparable leisure-time behaviour and similar recreational opportunities are developing in most European countries. It would be recommendable to consider possible action strategies in an international framework, particularly for the recreational sector.

Résumé and prospects

Attention also focused on the following topics when elaborating the subject of the seminar in preparation for the event:

- Are boys and girls really subject to different influences which are expressed in gender-specific nutritional behaviour?
- Who are the current models when it comes to the nutritional behaviour of young people?
- What is the current nutritional situation of young people, and what changes has it undergone in recent years?
- What influence do the media and advertising have?
- What (possibly different) motivational structures among young people can be exploited and used in nutrition education?
- What are the reasons for the gender-specific difference in the occurrence of eating disorders?

Attempts to find gender-specific explanations in nutrition education, as well as in nutritional science, have, to date, hardly been investigated as regards their sociopsychological implications and effects on nutritional behaviour. The seminar made it clear that this approach is considered by the international experts to be an important prerequisite and complementary to action strategies for nutrition education, particularly for young people, despite the lack of research results.

Insofar as permitted by the current status of knowledge and the available specialist literature on this topic, the scientists and practitioners represented during the seminar were able to deliberate on the questionnaire presented and specify further questions.

The seminar clearly illustrated the topicality and, at the same time, the explosiveness of the topic. After all, the nutritional behaviour acquired by youths in the transitional phase of puberty manifests itself in adult life. The increasing number of eating disorders in ever younger boys and girls demands that this topic be dealt with.

Nutritional behaviour cannot, however, be considered separately from the living situation, the system of values and, thus, the socialisation of young people. The complexity of the topic necessitates an interdisciplinary discussion. However, every specialist field has its own language and its own understanding of the topic. If action strategies and intervention are, of necessity, to be harmonised and standardised, the lines of interdisciplinary communication must remain open. International seminars such as this, with lots of room for creative exchange of experience, are, when possible, both helpful and necessary.

Given the international participation, a picture of the nutritional behaviour of youths across the whole of Europe could be outlined. Traditional, cultural and economic factors were recognised

as influencing general conditions. In this context, it was seen that an internationally uniform eating culture is increasingly coming into being, particularly among young people. If only from an economic viewpoint, such as the avoidance of duplicate work, discussion on a European level continues to be attractive. It was determined unanimously that a need exists for research in the field of gender-specific differences in the nutritional behaviour of young people.

In addition to the original questions of the seminar, the following new ones also arose:

- Would it not be more sensible to change the conditions under which young people live and, thus, their nutritional behaviour, and so render nutrition education superfluous?
- Is there any kind of motivational structure among young people, particularly among boys, in which nutrition education can be incorporated without appearing artificial?
- The internationally observable "girl phenomenon" indicates that a broad knowledge of nutrition is used in the context of health-damaging nutritional behaviour. Does this not speak against nutrition education?

The seminar fulfilled its function of fielding questions concerning the necessity of gender-specific nutrition education of young people in neighbouring specialist disciplines. By means of the international and intercultural discussion of the topic, general conditions were illustrated that are of significance to all European countries.

The realisation of the need for joint handling of this topic was aroused in the various scientific disciplines.

It was the opinion of all seminar participants that the topic must be granted appropriate attention by means of a continuation of the international exchange, through efforts in the field of research, and through the development of suitable education strategies.

**International Seminar:
"Gender-specific aspects of nutrition education"
Cologne, 6 to 9 June 1993**

List of Participants

Prof. Veikko Aalberg
Helsinki University
Psychiatric Clinic
Tukholmank. 8c

SF-00250 Helsinki

Tel:+358/0/471 5470

Fax:+358/0/471 5471

FINLAND

Patricia van Assema
University of Limburg
Dept. of Health Education
P.O.Box 616

NL-6200 MD Maastricht

Tel:+31/43/88 24 03

Fax:+31/43/67 10 32

NETHERLANDS

Eva Callmer
Tillämpad närringslära
Huddinge Siunksus

S-141 46 Huddinge

Tel:+46/8/746 1264

Fax:+46/8/779 4726

SWEDEN

Prof. Dr. Jadwiga Charzewska
National Food and
Nutrition Institute
Head Department of
Epidemiology of Nutrition
Powsinska str. 61/63

PL-02-903 Warschau

Tel:+48/22/42 37 40

Fax:+48/22/42 11 03

POLAND

Henri Dirren
Nestlé Research Centre
P.O.Box 44

CH-1000 Lausanne 26

SWITZERLAND

Tel:+41/21/785 8624

Fax:+41/21/785 8556

Prof. Dr. Ibrahim Elmadfa
Universität Wien
Institut für
Ernährungswissenschaften
Lammgasse 8

A-1080 Wien

AUSTRIA

Tel:+43/1/402 60 55

Fax:+43/1/42 32 97

Gitte Laub Hansen
Danish National
Consumer Agency
Amagerfaelledvej 56

DK-2300 Copenhagen 5

DENMARK

Tel:+45/31/57 01 00

Fax:+45/32/96 02 32

Dr. Christina Harnisch
Hochschule "Th. Müntzer"
Strenzfelder Allee 28

D-06406 Bernburg

GERMANY

Tel:+49/3471/43 621

Dr. Cornelia Helfferich
Universität Freiburg
Abt. für Medizinische
Soziologie
Stefan-Meier-Str. 17

D-79104 Freiburg

GERMANY

Tel:+49/761/203-41 46

Fax:+49/761/203-41 40

Dr. Edelgard Hermann-Kunz
Bundesgesundheitsamt BGA
Institut für Sozialmedizin
und Epidemiologie
General-Pape-Str. 62-66

D-12101 Berlin 42

GERMANY

Tel:+49/30/78007-219

Fax:+49/30/78007-109

Maria Isabel Loureiro
Escola Nacional de
Saúde Pública
Av. Padre Cruz

P-1699 Lisboa Codex

PORTUGAL

Tel:+351/1/757 55 99

Fax:+351/1/758 27 54

Dr. Barbara Neumüller
Fachschule für
Sozialpädagogik
Prenzlauer Allee 18

D-17268 Templin

GERMANY

Tel:+49/3987/2391

Dr. Helmut Oberritter
Deutsche Gesellschaft
für Ernährung e.V.
Feldbergstr. 28

D-60323 Frankfurt/Main

GERMANY

Tel:+49/69/97 14 06-0

Fax:+49/69/97 14 06-99

Dr. Gerald Penzl
Sporthochschule Köln
Psychologisches Institut
Carl-Diem-Weg

D-50933 Köln

GERMANY

Tel:+49/221/49 82 550

Fax:+49/221/49 95 235

Dr. Evangelos Polychronopoulos
Athens School
of Public Health
Dept. of Nutrition and
Biochemistry
196, Alexandras Ave.

GR-115 21 Athens

Tel:+30/1/64 41 562
Fax:+30/1/64 36 536

GREECE

Mag. Hanni Rützler
Projektgruppe
"Ernährungskultur
in Österreich"
Fuchsthallergasse 3/17

A-1090 Wien

Tel:+43/1/34 54 98

AUSTRIA

Hansjörg Ryser
Schweiz. Vereinigung
für Ernährung
Bernstr. 135

CH-3052 Zollikofen

Tel:+41/31/911-24 23
Fax:+41/31/911-24 77

SWITZERLAND

Dr. Gottfried Ulbricht
Dt. Institut für
Ernährungsforschung
Arthur-Scheunert-Allee 114-116

D-14558 Bergholz-Rehbrücke

Tel:+49/33200/88 338

GERMANY

Dr. Eva Wengle
Connollystr. 22

D-80809 München

Tel:+49/89/35 17 813

GERMANY

Lauk Woltring
Hogeschool van Amsterdam
Fakulteit Sociaal-Agogische
Dienstverlening
Karthuizersplantsoen 2

NL-1015 LS Amsterdam

NETHERLANDS

Tel:+31/20/52 30 359

Fax:+31/20/62 06 671

**Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung (BZgA) /
Federal Centre for Health Education (FCHE)**
Ostmerheimer Str. 200

D-51109 Köln

Tel: +49/221/8992-0
Fax: +49/221/8992-300

GERMANY

Günther Welsch
Abteilungsleiter "Grundlagen und Koordinierung"

Reinhard Mann-Luoma
Referat "Verhütung ernährungsbedingter Erkrankungen,
Ernährungsaufklärung und Verbraucherschutz"

Margareta Nilson-Giebel
Referat "Auslandsbeziehungen"

Judith Kruse
Referat "Verhütung ernährungsbedingter Erkrankungen,
Ernährungsaufklärung und Verbraucherschutz"

Helene Reemann
Referat "Auslandsbeziehungen"

Christine Dorer
Referat "Auslandsbeziehungen"

Franz Galliat
Referat "Veranstaltungen zur Fort- und Weiterbildung in der
Gesundheitserziehung, Erwachsenenbildung, Interventionsprogramme"

Rapporteure
Jutta Schumacher-Annen
Hermann Annen

Dolmetscher/Interpreter
Irmhild Fugger
Jörg Schmirler