In 1913, Moscow schoolteacher E. Kirpichnikova declared that her coeducational school “does not have the goal of eliminating the difference between the sexes, but instead seeks only to assist the natural development of the positive features of young people of both sexes.” Drawing upon her nearly 20 year effort to increase girls’ access to the schools, Kirpichnikova described how male and female pupils studied and played together. Yet, distinct patterns of behavior were still evident. During recess, boys ran around the courtyard while girls talked in small groups. In class, girls “conscientiously and punctually completed all assignments” yet boys “evaded subjects in which they had no interest.” Recognizing these persistent differences, Kirpichnikova concluded that by allowing pupils to engage in “simple and comradely interactions,” coeducation taught boys and girls to see in each other “not only a man or a woman, but also a human being (не только мужчину или женщину, но и человека)” (Kirpichnikova 1914, pp. 75–88).

Kirpichnikova’s argument thus embraced two seemingly contradictory beliefs. On the one hand, coeducational schools challenged gender roles by encouraging girls to participate in previously exclusive institutions. On the other hand, the experience of coeducation tended to confirm, perpetuate, and even reinforce “the difference between the sexes.” Embedded in the stated goal of teaching pupils to see each new person as “not only a man or a woman, but also a human being” was the implied assertion that gender meant difference (“a man or a woman”) as well as (“not only . . . but also”) the overcoming of difference (“a human being”). For Kirpichnikova, however, any sense of contradiction was resolved through “simple and comradely interactions” that educated girls and boys on the basis of common interests even as they prepared for their different roles as adults.
A quarter-century later, in 1939, Moscow educator A. Savich declared that the decision by the new Soviet revolutionary government in 1918 to make all schools coeducational had “torn out by the roots one of the most ridiculous prejudices from the past about the inequality (neravenstvo) of the mental facilities of a man and a woman.” Reaffirming a common theme of Soviet discourse, Savich declared that only communism allowed for “real equality (deistvitel’nogo ravenstva) and mutual respect among men and women.” But Savich also criticized educators who believed that coeducation was achieved simply by assigning male and female pupils to the same school. In fact, Savich asserted, coeducation was not intended to provide “an identical and equal education (odinakovoe, ravnoe obuchenie)” to boys and girls. If an “identical education” was the goal, this could just as easily be accomplished by mandating an identical curriculum for gender-separate schools. The real value of coeducation was “to develop real, friendly, and comradely relations between boys and girls based on the mutual recognition of full equality (priznanie polnogo ravenstva) first in school and then in life.” The ultimate goal was to produce more acceptable, yet still gendered, patterns of behavior:

Coeducation enables boys and girls to cooperatively influence each other, so that the more clearly expressed softness and emotionality of girls smooths out the certain sharpness and at times even rudeness of boys, while the liveliness, vivacity, and enterprises of boys is transferred to the girls. The features of the two are converging, but this will not deprive either boys or girls of the characteristic and peculiar features of each sex. (Savich 1939, pp. 23–24)1

Writing at a time when coeducation was by law and in practice compulsory for 30 million Soviet pupils, Savich’s article is strikingly ambivalent in its articulation of a form of equity that promises to overcome as well as preserve gender differences.

The tension between achieving equality and maintaining difference illustrated in these articles by Kirpichnikova and Savich suggests the need to examine schooling in terms of gender as a form of identity and a structure of relationships. In this context, gender refers to the meanings associated with perceived differences between the sexes and to the influence of these perceptions on behavior. Attention to gender thus requires moving “beyond” structural issues such as access and enrollment in order to examine “social relations” within and around the school (Heward 1999, p. 3). Rather than assuming that boys and girls in coeducational schools do and should receive the same education, this approach asks how the underlying assumptions made by advocates of coeducation actually perpetuate a gendered model of schooling. While focusing on two specific texts from the early-twentieth-century Russian and Soviet context, this chapter makes a broader argument about the limits and the potential of gender equity as a revolutionary strategy that connects directly to global patterns in this new millennium.

The terms “equity” and “difference” contain embedded tensions when used in reference to gender. In a highly influential argument, Joan Scott has