

GENDER SENSITIVE TEACHERS: ENABLING PATH TO EQUALITY

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ABSTRACT

Teachers play an important role in the classroom, being a facilitator to all the students and a part of class her/him self. Other than the content, teacher also impact lives and aspirations of students dealing with the psycho-affective domain of students. Recognition of capability and assignment of duties in a classroom is primarily done by the teacher, which affect the confidence among students and in turn identity development of students. All the facets of identity develop during the period of school whether it is their academic achievement and career determination, identifying the social role and social status. This paper makes an attempt to identify the gender dynamics in a classroom and school and identity development. It also argues that teachers' role is of immense importance and small inputs from teachers' side can create a gender neutral environment in a classroom which provides liberal space for each gender to flourish.

KEYWORDS: *Gender, Classroom Dynamics, Teachers Role, Teachers Training*

INTRODUCTION

Society have different institutions which include caste, class, religion, gender is not totally separate from others but each links to others, often extensively. For example, gender and sexuality are intertwined - as are gender and family, gender and work/economy, gender and religion/caste - but so are family and the polity/ state, family and the economy, economy and the polity/state, and education and the polity/state, and so forth (Martin,2004. School is considered as one of the institutions where they are taught and trained to be social. Here, a different view regarding the function of school also exists; which hold the position that schools can be a site of change. A continuous struggle goes on regarding the suitability of both views and it can only be left on time to come to see which functions will serve to the society. History gives enough examples in which schools were established with a certain philosophy and school further perpetuated that philosophy. On the other hand, educated person by means of their action brought a reform in the society and made other conscious of their action.

Education

Education is of utmost importance in the society. It is also a duty of the government to educate its citizen. In independent India, various education policies were introduced having various aims and objectives set forth. First policy in 1968 called for a radical restructuring of education and equalising educational opportunities which foster national integration and greater cultural and economic development. In 1986, it further emphasised removal of disparities and giving everybody equal opportunity of obtaining education, especially for marginalised sections of the society that includes women, Scheduled Tribes (ST) and the Scheduled Caste (SC) communities. On the way, recently New Education Policy 2016 has been brought, which talk about same basic things that have been set by earlier policies and attempt to take few new steps to accommodate the changing socio-economic-political-global-

digital scenario. It acknowledges that original targets of bridging all gender and social category gaps and universal retention at elementary level are yet to be achieved with all efforts.

It has also been stated in released document of NEP 2016 that “as a party to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2000, India was committed, inter alia, to achieving universal primary education, in terms of both enrolment and completion of primary schooling for all girls and boys, by 2015. It was also committed to eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education, “preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015.” Unfortunately, these goals remained unrealised. It is imperative now to work seriously to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030”, which indicates the state of education in official documented which are presumed to be better and smoother than ground reality that exists in our schools and society.

Education is being transmitted in ‘school’ as schools are the institutions meant to educate people. School has many ‘students’ coming from their respective ‘families’ which have their particular ‘caste’, ‘class’, ‘Religion’, living in a particular village or area of their society. So, on broader scale a student has a societal identity and on micro scale a student can either be a ‘girl’, ‘boy’ or a ‘third gender’. While teaching we need to consider child as an individual. As Dube (1990) also pointed out so aptly that an Indian usually carries several identification tags. The context determines how he or she has to identify him or herself. Religion, place of residence (locality), or family name may be enough in some contexts. But in others one may have to spell out one’s jati, Gotra and Kula. Using this backdrop, I want to make an argument that no policy or school can educate a child in its holistic term by cutting its chord from society but school content, curriculum and teacher must form a smooth connection between the content and child to make a child fully aware of his/her society, an active and critical thinker.

All these duties, now, has to be fulfilled inside the classroom where, it is usually thought that, most of the learning takes place. Inside the classroom, teacher and students plays key roles in the process of teaching and learning. It creates a situation where sole responsibility of students is on teachers’ shoulders. A teacher fully connected to the society and immersed in its ideology tends to inculcate existing social norms in the students and end up perpetuating the stereotypes and prejudices. So, a teacher must connect content to students’ lives but able to put forth a critical perspective in front of students with a legitimate argument and attempt for open-mindedness of students which may later decide for themselves. It poses a challenge for all the stakeholders involved in the process of education to equip teachers with all the competencies to fulfil their role.

Gender

Gender is another form of social identity. More than a identity, it is used as a means to segregate and differentiate people. Gender is the most pervasive form of inequality, as it operates across all classes, castes and communities. Gender inequalities all over the world are exhibited in many aspects of education, including access, retention, success, and career choices and opportunities. This is both a cause and a result of gender stereotyping and systemic discrimination. Gender is not a women’s issue; it is a people’s issue. Gender relations are neither “natural” nor given, they are constructed to make unequal relations seem “natural”, and are naturalised only under the force of socialisation.

Language and meaning-making are the important ways of instilling gender differences Harrigan & Lucic,1988; Menegatti, 2017; MacArthur, 2020; Lewis & Lupyan, 2020). Each word also has a meaning which is different from the meaning shown in dictionaries, it is contextual meaning. This process of socialisation starts in the early childhood phase

even when new parents give gendered compliments to their kids. Compliments about being ‘beautiful’ girl and ‘strong’ boys carry loaded messages about what girls and boys should be. These very usual compliments are the day-to-day gendered messages that have a profound and long lasting impact on child conception of gender- the way child learn and internalize the concept of gender. According to Hendrix and Wei (2009), early gender biases that children encounter can shape their attitudes and beliefs related to their development of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships; access to education equality; and stifle their physical and psychological well-being (2009).

Gender biases also pose problems to us a nation also. With progressing economically, alarmingly high rates of female foeticide, low survival rate, low literacy rate, child marriages, violence against women and discrimination are some of the challenges that India is facing today. Gender issues indeed highlight the structural inequalities and unequal gender relations that place men and women in binary opposition (Dominelli, 2002). Girls are usually denied of education in most rural parts of India. Gender-specific barriers to girls attending school on a sustained basis involve economic, social and cultural elements which are interconnected, and mutually reinforcing (Rao and Sweetman, 2014). In households, it is usually preferred not to send their girl child school at first place. If they decide to send their daughters schools, they expect them to become good wives and not to spoil their feminine nature by taking up subjects and sports which are mainly manly. In poor households, parents wish to spend money on boys for their schooling while for girls it is saved to get them married.

Representing nearly half of the Indian population, women are outnumbered by men (933 women per 1,000 men), suffer from poor health and nutritional status, and get low education and opportunities for overall personality development. Studies done in the Indian context have shown that a strong associations exist between inequitable gender attitudes and perpetration of violence against women (Achyut et al., 2011; Verma et al., 2006; Das et al. 2014). Students growing up in homes where violence is being enacted without receiving any anguish from its members, their personality gets a hue from that. Unequal equations being displayed at home have impact on their identity which many a times result in school behaviours. School violence must be considered as developed within contexts that are simultaneously historical and political, cultural and economic, that include neighbourhood, community, family and nation.

Gender and Education: Role of a Teacher

Schooling is the time when children are in the phase of identity development. Here girls and boys get different perception about themselves, their body, ability, opportunity and carrier plans. This experience and exposure have a long term impact on them. Here once learnt takes long time and much effort to unlearn, so utmost concern is needed regarding the arenas which mould child’s identity and behaviour. Hence school and educational setting play a key role in process of socialisation by reinforcing it, legitimising and authenticating it by perpetuating the stereotypes relating to roles, responsibilities and opportunities. Researches done on textbook also show stereotypical representation of male and female characters (Collins, 2008, Mattu & Hussain, 2003; Good, Woodzicka, & Wingfield, 2010). They show females as weak, dependent and shy whereas males as strong, independent, confident and able to mitigate the outer world. These printed words of book further get legitimised by the teacher in the class. Assessment system and school milieu also plays important role in formation of gender stereotypes as it allows certain agreed upon answers and behaviours while show disapproval towards non-conformity. Thus schools are disseminating stereotypes favouring the patriarchal system in society (Bowles and Gintis, 1976).

But schools are the only place where we can see hope of change and scope of initiating the process of achieving equality (Durkheim, 1897; King, 1971). To make it happen, all the processes involved are needed to be looked upon using a lens of critical thinking and equality. This will consist of means of providing equal access involving good infrastructure which include accessible classrooms, clean toilets; a healthy school environment involving all the stakeholder of school which treat students in a equal and non-discriminatory way (amit & Singh, 2014). To improve retention and success rate, what happens inside the classroom becomes an important factor to study. Classroom dynamics has to be observed and analysed closely to find out subtle differences that students face on day-to-day basis as it makes up for the most part of the day spent in school. Pedagogy is also an important key to students' success as other than the basic facility, interest in school and subject can keep the students involved. Here, teacher plays a very important role as students spend most of their school time with teachers. Indeed, teachers do not come into classrooms as gender-neutral persons. They also have internalized a patriarchal gender ideology during their upbringing and socialization in both formal and informal settings. Teachers' worldviews which is predominantly patriarchal impact on the hidden curriculum that is often as significant in classrooms as the official curriculum. Frequently it is the hidden curriculum which affirms that gender discriminatory practices, procedures and processes occur in classroom spaces and school structures even where gender-friendly policies and curricula already exist (Alsubaie, 2015).

Teachers' teaching style and their attitude towards students' impact students' way of thinking and beliefs. All the issues and complaints among students are brought to the teachers first. The way teacher perceives students' issue and how do teacher decide to resolve the issue influence students. In case, teacher is judgemental and have prejudice against any particular gender, this attitude will be imparted to students. And, if the attitude shown by teacher is in sync with the attitude students, perceive at their house (usually discriminatory for girls) then that particular attitude gets legitimised by the authority of teacher. In this case teacher has to be very cautious of his/her action and to make this happen teacher should be accompanied with proper training and support.

Examples from the Field

A very extreme and concerning case was obtained during a pilot study done by researcher, when students were asked about attitudes of teachers towards them group of girls of 9th class gave a very shocking response. They share that they have a male teacher who teaches mathematics, has some kind of problem with girls and perceive them as a problem. He does not allow girls to stand near him even if they want to understand something about the remark given in their notebook. He does not even return notebook in their hands but throw it to their seats. This allows boys to make fun of them and show the same kind of behaviour during other activities as an act of mocking maths teacher. They explained that this behaviour is very annoying for them but they can't complain about it and they are losing their interest in the subject eventually. In their words "maths wale sir ko ladkiyo se kuch dikkat h, kahte h ek hath door khade ho, copy check karke b faink dete h, kuch poochna ho to b bhaga dete h... kahte h ladkiya to bala hoti h. Unko dekh k ladke b majak udate h abd bla kahte h. sir ki to class me hi jaane ka hi man nahi karta.. parents se kaho to kahte h ki bas padh rajha h maths" (written in hindi language using Roman fonts).

This, though an extreme case and should be looked at by school management, but gives an insight into the matter that teachers should be sensitized at the first place towards gender stereotypes. This is to show that how an insensitive teacher can create havoc even inside the ordered class which are welcoming to at least the existence of other gender.

I would like to share another example from the field which can also be observed very easily in our surrounding. When primary students were asked about their ideal image of a boy or a girl, every respondent provided with the stereotypical images that a boy should be smart, bold, brave, powerful, should earn etc and a girl should be beautiful, obedient, home-maker etc. These gendered image were present even at the primary level and if remained unquestioned, they last throughout life as a 10th class boy gave a similar kind of response while saying that he would like any girl who is just like his mother. While elaborating, he added that his classmates are very cunning and they usually do not agree with him or do not offer him any favour but his mother prioritize him even above herself and offer to do everything he wish for. Deep inside the tender love of mother, he was talking about a woman who sacrifices her for the need of others and never stands up for her existence. The boy wishes to remain in the comfort zone offered by patriarchal arrangements where women are subordinate to men and are for men's service. As JS Mill express it that in the process of expecting the ideal women for him, men make that women ideal for all women themselves. It is done by controlling their mind and using their education as a tool.

“Women are in a different position from all other subject classes in this: their masters require more from them than actual service. Men want not only the obedience of women but also their sentiments. All but the most brutish of men want to have, in the woman most nearly connected with them, not a forced slave but a willing one, not a slave merely but a favourite. So they have done everything they could to enslave women's minds. The masters of all other slaves get obedience through fear, either of themselves or of some religious punishment. The masters of women wanted more than simple obedience, and they turned the whole force of education to get what they wanted.”

This kind of thinking also prevails among women at their later ages if it remained unquestioned for the whole of their life. Women, here, are used as means of propagating the stereotypes to their children while nurturing them. So both men and women are involved in giving gender differences its final shape and disseminate stereotypes.

To challenge these attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices, developing a critical consciousness is very important. As the process of socialisation start as early as child start conversing communicating with its surrounding, the process of sensitizing him/her also start as soon as he is able to make sense of his/her surroundings. Although this process of sensitizing cannot be limited to school but school can be an effective place to start with. In schools teachers have the key role they play in the transmission of values, knowledge, and the development of human potential and skills, so sensitizing them first would enhance the magnitude and efficiency of the results.

Gender Sensitization

There is need to understand gender in order to overcome its imposed limitations on various dimension of the life. Several agencies have developed modules for gender sensitization but sad part it is that they come into action/ practice or news followed by a bad incident only. In India, after the nirbhaya case gender sensitization was all among news but it shut down soon on official terms.

UNESCO (2010) clarifies certain meaning associated with gender in a module designed for teachers. It is necessary to learn these to understand the concept of gender. Earlier title of this paper was emphasising on 'gender neutral approach' but keeping these terms in mind, it has been changed to 'gender sensitive'. UNESCO put gender as learned behaviour which changes over time. It differs between culture and within culture. It is relational, institutional, hierarchical and context specific.

- **Gender:** Refers to the socially constructed relations between men and women. Gender is about relationships that may change over time and place. While sex tends to be fixed, gender is amenable to change over time depending on circumstances. Gender relations between men and women may vary between classes, races and cultures. Institutions may have cultures that determine the executive, administrative and service positions of men and women. Students' specializations are also being shaped by gender.
- **Gender Bias:** This exists when inequitable or discriminatory thinking, activities, interventions and actions that discriminate against one gender are apparent in programmes, projects and policies. Gender bias may result in discriminatory and harmful effects and consequences for the gender treated in an inequitable or discriminatory manner.
- **Gender Blind:** A TEI will be described as gender blind when no effort is made by institutional leaders and managers to become aware or sensitive to mainstream gender in the TEI's mission, vision, policies programmes and everyday operations at all levels. More often than not, gender blindness is reinforced by historical, cultural, traditional and religious factors, requiring more effort and advocacy.
- **Gender Disparity:** The differential in status held by men and women in society with regard to opportunities, successes and possessions. Gender disparity also refers to differences in income, status, opportunities and power that exist between men and women in given settings. In many societies, men and women are conferred different roles, opportunities and statuses. These gender differences tend to be systematic and institutionalized, requiring concerted action to eliminate them, and bring men and women to parity. Devices and programmes for affirmative action are used to bring about gender parity in many societies.
- **Gender Equality:** This ensures that women and men enjoy the same status and have an equal opportunity to exercise their human rights and realize their full potential to contribute towards political, economic, social and cultural development, and to benefit from the results. It is the equal value attributed by society to both the similarities and the differences between women and men, and the different roles they play. Gender equality can be promoted when resources, opportunities and support are availed to men and women without regard to biological sex.
- **Gender Equality in Education:** This ensures that female and male learners are treated equally, have equal access to learning opportunities and benefit from education equally. They become empowered and can fulfil their potential so that they may contribute to and benefit from social, cultural, political and economic development equally. Special treatment/action can be taken to reverse the historical and social disadvantages that prevent female and male learners from accessing and benefiting from education on equal grounds.
- **Gender Equity:** This refers to a stage or strategy in the process of achieving gender equality. Targeted measures are often needed to compensate for historical and social disadvantages that prevent women and men from otherwise being equals. These measures, such as affirmative action, may require a different treatment of women and men in order to ensure an equal outcome.
- **Gender Mainstreaming:** This refers to the process in which gender equality perspectives and considerations become the norm and not just the responsibility of specific individuals (often women) or departments in isolated

and unsustainable ways. Gender equality mainstreaming addresses gender equality concerns in legislation, policies, programmes and activities to ensure that all development initiatives integrate the concerns of both men and women, and that their needs are considered equally and equitably with the aim of attaining gender equality.

- **Gender Neutral:** Gender neutral approaches, programmes and policies do not disrupt existing gender relations and may just sustain and/or reproduce them without any change. They may recognize the presence of gender equality issues but may not desire or aim to change or disrupt existing gender relationships.
- **Gender-Sensitive:** Acknowledging that the differences and inequalities between women and men require attention. A gender-sensitive policy incorporates and translates actions into programmes, strategies and activities in order to improve gender relations and reduce gender inequalities.
- **Teacher Education:** This refers to the policies and procedures designed to equip prospective and practicing teachers with knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and skills required to carry out their mandate. Teacher education is a continuous and life-long process because new techniques, knowledge and skills are necessary to remain relevant in the teaching profession.

As already explained in the discussion and defined by the module, gender sensitization has to start with acknowledgement that gender differences and biases exist in the given setting followed by the need of action to eliminate it through gender sensitive pedagogy and policies, culminating into gender mainstreaming.

A teacher must connect content to students' lives but able to put forth a critical perspective in front of students with a legitimate argument and attempt for open-mindedness of students which may later decide for themselves. A teacher needs to first change his/ her perception about gender and then become aware of its existence into the classroom processes. A critical thinking and effort to bring each students voice about their experience into the classroom. It will also need to examine the connections of experiences with the larger power equations existing in the society and then try to make students aware about their biasness, enabling them to question the existing norms. Teacher as a facilitator, rather than a dictator will be able to bring out students' real experience into their conscience. A conscious teacher would certainly be able to raise the conscience of the student making a gender neutral environment and a gender sensitive attitude,

CONCLUSIONS

Differences in education exist in terms of numbers, participation, learning opportunity and success. But there is complex socio-cultural-economical-political structure which helps these inequalities persist. Gaps in terms of numbers in education can easily be done away but the real process, quality remains unaffected. To have a qualitative change in life of boys and girls, we need to move beyond numbers and focus on our thinking and attitudes.

Gender Sensitization is a small but necessary step to the gradual annihilation of gender biases and to reduce the harassment and abuse across the country (while increasing reporting). Through collective efforts of people, organizations, and with the cooperation of schools and parents, we can hope to keep our children safe by keeping them informed. Through activities in all the sectors and concerns of an institution, gender equality can be routinely and systematically realized. Thus, a gender-sensitive institution will include gender as a parameter together with other attributes such as age, qualifications, skill level.

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