

GENDER BIAS IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Gender Bias in Education is an insidious problem that causes very few people to stand up and take notice. Over the years, the uneven distribution of teacher time, energy, attention and talent with boys getting the lion's share, takes its tolls on girls. Whatever be the cause there is a gap in enrolment. The social barriers standing in the way of girls attending schools-poverty, compulsions of older girls in family having to look after the home and siblings, the conceptions or misconceptions that girls don't need education and that what is taught in the schools is irrelevant to them, parents seeing limited economic benefits in educating daughters, lack of women teachers and separate schools for girls, supportive facilities and transport facilities, all these inhibit parents from getting the girl child enrolled. There is also a gap in retention of girls in schools even if they enrol at the primary stage. The gender discrimination in schools is an extension of what we think in the family, in society and the community in which we live. The gender bias in education reaches beyond socialization patterns: bias is embedded in textbooks, lessons, language and teacher interactions with students. This type of gender bias is a part of the hidden curriculum of lessons taught implicitly to students through the everyday functioning of their classroom. The present paper intends to highlight these issues and challenges which need attention and suggests appropriate strategies so that the gender positive environment is reinforced in educational system.

Keywords: Gender socialization, sexist hidden curriculum, gender biased texts and gender biased language.

INTRODUCTION:

This paper attempts to discuss the issue of gender bias in education with main focus on the bias embedded in the textbooks, lessons, and language, curriculum and teacher interactions with pupils. The paper also looks at the changes can be made to create a more equitable learning environment for all children. Gender and education, from a sociological perspective, refers to the idea that the educational system does not offer the same type of opportunities for upward mobility to both genders equally. This is a type of sex discrimination being applied in the

education system affecting both men and women during and after their educational experiences. Worldwide, men are more likely to be literate, with 100 men considered literate for every 88 women. In some countries the difference is even greater; for example, in Bangladesh only 62 women are literate for every 100 men. In India, the constitution guarantees equality of opportunity before the law for both the sexes and therefore, the de jure position is that girls and boys have equal access to education. But what is de facto position? Today the total number of girls enrolled in upper primary education are much better because of many policy interventions on behalf of the girl child, such as the report of National Committee on Women's Education (1958-9), the Kothari Commission Report (1964-5) and above all the National Policy on Education(1986), which stressed the need for empowering women, that is making them capable of guiding their own destiny and becoming self reliant through exposure to education and survival skills, including income generation. Whatever be the cause, there is a gap in enrolment. The social barriers standing in the way of girls attending schools-poverty, compulsions of older girls in families to look after the home and siblings, the conception or misconception that girls do not need education and that what is taught in schools is irrelevant to them , parents seeing limited economic benefits in educating daughters, lack of women teachers and separate schools for girls, supportive facilities (like adequate and clean toilets in schools) and transport facilities to travel to school and back, all these inhibit parents from getting their girls enrolled. The girls have to stay at home once they attain puberty and must be protected till they are married. Add to this commonly held belief that marriage is the be all and end all for girls, leading to early marriage and pregnancy. So naturally the son is sent to the schools, not the daughter (Ramachandran, 2001)

FORMS OF SEX DISCRIMINATION IN EDUCATION: sex discrimination in education is applied to women in several ways.

- Formal and informal school processes: First, many sociologists of education view the educational system as an institution of social and cultural reproduction. The existing patterns of inequality, especially for gender inequality, are reproduced within schools through formal and informal processes.

- Course taking: Another way the educational system discriminates towards females is through course-taking, especially in high school, which leads to different educational and occupational paths between males and females. For example, females tend to take fewer advanced mathematical and scientific courses, thus leading them to be ill-equipped to pursue these careers in higher education. This can further be seen in technology and computer courses.
- Cultural norms: Also, cultural norms may also be a factor causing sex discrimination in education. For example, society suggests that women should be mothers and be responsible for the bulk of child rearing. Therefore, women feel compelled to pursue educational pathways that lead to occupations that allow for long leaves of absences, so they can stay at home as mothers.
- Hidden curriculum: A hidden curriculum may further add to discrimination in the educational system. The concept of the hidden curriculum refers to the idea that teachers interact with and teach each of their students in a way that reinforces relations of gender, as well as race and social class. For example, teachers may give more attention to boys, thus encouraging them to speak up in class and become more social. Conversely, girls may become quieter and learn that they should be passive and defer to their male classmates.
- Expected socialised adult roles: Students may also be socialized for their expected adult roles through the correspondence principle laid out by sociologists including Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis. Girls may be encouraged to learn skills valued in female-dominated fields, while boys might learn leadership skills for male-dominated occupations. For example, as they move into the secondary and post-secondary phases of their education, boys tend to gravitate more toward STEM courses than their female classmates. (Gender and Education. Wikipedia)

The American Association of University Women published a report in 1992 indicating that females receive less attention from teachers and the attention that female students do receive is often more negative than attention received by boys. (Bailey, 1992) In fact, examination of the

socialization of gender within schools and evidence of a gender biased hidden curriculum demonstrates that girls are short changed in the classroom. The socialization of gender within our schools assures that girls are made aware that they are unequal to boys. Every time students are seated or lined up by gender, teachers are affirming that girls and boys should be treated differently. When different behaviours are tolerated for boys than for girls because 'boys will be boys', schools are perpetuating the oppression of females. Teachers socialize girls towards a feminine ideal. Girls are praised for being neat, quiet, and calm, whereas boys are encouraged to think independently, be active and speak up. Girls are socialized in schools to recognize popularity as being important, and learn that educational performance and ability are not as important. "Girls in grades six and seven rate being popular and well-liked as more important than being perceived as competent or independent. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to rank independence and competence as more important." (Bailey, 1992) A permissive attitude towards sexual harassment is another way in which schools reinforce the socialization of girls as inferior. "When schools ignore sexist, racist, homophobic, and violent interactions between students, they are giving tacit approval to such behaviours." (Bailey, 1992) Yet boys are taunted for throwing like a girl, or crying like a girl, which implies that being a girl is worse than being a boy. Clearly the socialization of gender is reinforced at school, "Because classrooms are microcosms of society, mirroring its strengths and ills alike, it follows that the normal socialization patterns of young children that often lead to distorted perceptions of gender roles are reflected in the classrooms"(Marshall, 1997). Yet gender bias in education reaches beyond socialization patterns, bias is embedded in textbooks, lessons, and teacher interactions with students. In Myra and David Sadker's research, they noted four types of teacher responses to students: teacher praises, providing positive feedback for a response; teacher remediates, encouraging a student to correct or expand their answer; teacher criticizes, explicitly stating that the answer is incorrect; teacher accepts, acknowledging that a student has responded. It was found that boys were far more likely to receive praise or remediation from a teacher than were girls. The girls were most likely to receive an acknowledgement response from their teacher (Sadker, 1994). These findings were confirmed by a 1990 study by Good and Brophy that

"...noted that teachers give boys greater opportunity to expand ideas and be animated than they do girls and that they reinforce boys more for general responses than they do for girls." Gender bias is also taught implicitly through the resources chosen for classroom use. Using texts that omit contributions of women that tokenize the experiences of women, or those stereotype gender roles, further compounds gender bias in schools' curriculum. While research shows that the use of gender-equitable materials allows students to have more gender-balanced knowledge, to develop more flexible attitudes towards gender roles, and to imitate role behaviours contained in the materials (Klein, 1985) schools continue to use gender biased texts.

GENDER AND HIDDEN CURRICULUM:

Sociologists would argue that although there are clear biological differences between the male and female sexes gender roles are heavily influenced by processes of socialisation operating in the family, the school, the mass media etc. With regard to the formal education system it is necessary to distinguish between the formal curriculum of the individual academic subjects and the Hidden Curriculum which is a set of values, attitudes and norms that is implicitly conveyed to pupils by teachers' actions and by the organisational processes operating inside schools. When the Hidden Curriculum operates in a gender specific fashion and is combined with other points mentioned toward the end of these notes, it is sometimes said that a school is operating according to a gendered regime. Functionalist/sociologists who approve of males and females adopting traditional "instrumental" and "expressive roles" respectively would approve if the hidden curriculum reinforces traditional gender roles since these gender roles are assumed to be "functional" society as a whole. Feminists would oppose the hidden curriculum insofar as it contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequality. However liberal feminists might tend to argue that educational reforms are gradually eroding some of the most discriminatory aspects of the hidden curriculum whereas radical and Marxist feminists would argue that despite some reform the hidden curriculum still contributes to the continuation of patriarchy and/or class inequality. The Hidden Curriculum may reinforce traditional gender roles in the following ways.

- In First and Middle Schools the fact that the vast majority of teachers are women may help to reinforce the children's impression that it is women who are especially suited to looking after and teaching young teaching although this may also have had the effect of encouraging girls relative to boys with their reading skills.
- In Mixed secondary schools men are over-represented and women under-represented on the higher teaching scales and women are more often employed in positions which are seen as subordinate seen in subordinate such as dinner ladies and school cleaners
- It has been argued that in the past many teachers supported traditional gender roles and that they were likely to praise girls and boys for so-called "feminine" and "masculine" qualities respectively.
- Girls and boys might be asked to help around the school in gender specific ways for example as when boys move furniture and girls serve coffee at parents' evenings.
- Differences in boys and girls school uniform rules could be seen as emphasising gender differences. For many years girls have not been allowed to wear trousers to school although they are perhaps more comfortable than skirts/dresses in a school environment.
- Although this point is perhaps on the margin between the Formal curriculum and the Hidden Curriculum boys and girls may have been encouraged to opt for gender specific subjects and may have been given gender specific career advice. Thus girls were encouraged towards Arts and Humanities and Domestic Science and away from sciences other than biology and away from woodwork and metalwork while boys were encouraged especially to opt for science, technology, metal work and woodwork.
- There is evidence that some male teachers may flirt with older female pupils and also that they may sometimes identify with "lad dish" behaviour thereby reinforcing gender stereotypes.

The position of female students in schools and in society generally is changing and it may be necessary to modify some of the above points. Teachers are now more familiar with issues of equality of opportunity and are less likely to accept traditional gender roles without question. Subject and career advice is less likely to reflect traditional gender roles. In any case the National

Curriculum in 1988 made sciences compulsory for all students at GCSE level. As mentioned the fact that so many First and Middle School teachers are women may be to the advantage of girls.

VII. What changes can be made to create a more equitable learning environment for all children?

First, teachers need to be made aware of their gender-biased tendencies. Next, they need to be provided with strategies for altering the behaviour. Finally, efforts need to be made to combat gender bias in educational materials. A study by Kelly Jones, Cay Evans, Ronald Byrd, and Kathleen Campbell (2000) used analysis of videotaped lessons in order to introduce teachers to their own gender-biased behaviour. Requiring in-service programs to address gender bias in the classroom will make teachers more aware of their own behaviours: "As a teacher, I was struck by the Sadkers' research on classroom exchanges and was forced to acknowledge the disproportionate amount of time and energy, as well as the different sorts of attention, I give to male students." (McCormick, 1995)

CONCLUSION:

Gender bias in education is an insidious problem that causes very few people to stand up and take notice. The victims of this bias have been trained through years of schooling to be silent and passive, and are therefore unwilling to stand up and make noise about the unfair treatment they are receiving. Over the course of years the uneven distribution of teacher time, energy, attention, and talent, with boys getting the lion's share, takes its toll on girls. Teachers are generally unaware of their own biased teaching behaviours because they are simply teaching how they were taught and the subtle gender inequities found in teaching materials are often overlooked. Girls and boys today are receiving separate and unequal educations due to the gender socialization that takes place in our schools and due to the sexist hidden curriculum students are faced with every day. Unless teachers are made aware of the gender-role socialization and the biased messages they are unintentionally imparting to students every day, and until teachers are provided with the methods and resources necessary to eliminate gender-bias in their classrooms, girls will continue to receive an inequitable education. Until educational sexism is eradicated, more than half our children will be short changed and their gifts lost to society.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

It is recommended that, after decades, it is time to move beyond studies that describe gender bias in textbooks to research that evaluates the level and type of impact of such bias on females and males.

It is further recommended that this impact research can be carried out with varied techniques that measure various types of outcomes at different points in the educational cycle.

- Obvious outcomes are completion and transition rates for primary-secondary and secondary-tertiary education, disaggregated not only by gender but also by other relevant planes of cleavage within a nation (rural-urban, social class, race-ethnicity, religion, etc.).
- There also should be cross-national studies comparing nations at varying development levels as well as degrees of gender inequality.
- “Quasi-experimental designs” (Campbell 1966) and “natural experiments” could be useful, too. A development project, for example, could add an initiative to combat gender bias in textbooks in one site/region. Later, educational impact (disaggregated by gender) could be assessed, contrasting the site that got the component with those that didn’t.

An additional recommendation about research is aimed at content analysis, the main technique used to study gender bias in textbooks. We suggest that measures of intensity of the biases (e.g., the stereotypes, derogatory depictions of women, violence meted out to females for violating traditional gender norms, etc.) also be added to such research. This might be especially useful in assessing progress in a “second generation” study, or in measuring differences between more and less gender-unequal societies (e.g., Saudi Arabia vs. Sweden).

The final research-related recommendation concerns making sure that there is adequate, gender-disaggregated monitoring and evaluation of any intervention designed to ameliorate gender bias in textbooks and/or curricula.

- It is further recommended that donors reach out to researchers and women’s organizations already involved in this content area and incorporate them into the monitoring and evaluation efforts.

The first recommendation without a research component is that donors should reach out to these women's NGOs and researchers in their intervention efforts as well. These are the people who often have developed non-sexist materials and curricula; they could provide their expertise in both project design and implementation phases.

It is also recommended that wherever teacher training includes some form of practice teaching, exercises of the sort designed in such profusion by Kalia (1986) be incorporated into their training. This would mean that even if the curriculum were not changed one iota, teachers would have the ability to "stand it on its head" vis-à-vis gender bias by means of some of the easy exercises she (and others) have proposed.

Moreover, it is recommended that as countries succeed in achieving gender parity in enrolments, i.e., succeed at access, they should be encouraged to tackle – and monitor and evaluate – "second level" problems, such as gender bias in textbooks and curricula.

Since the amount of funding for content analysis studies of gender bias is only a fraction of the funding needed to mount a systematic attack on the problem, and different donors specialize in "different parts of the elephant," it is recommended that there be a donor coordination effort to better allocate the various tasks entailed in identifying/describing vs. ameliorating gender bias in textbooks and curricula.

Finally, it is recommended that reductions in the intensity of gender bias in textbooks be considered as a useful indicator of gender equity in society. Stromquist (2007:36) now calls for using decreases in gender stereotypes in learning materials for this purpose. The combination of both might prove even better.

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