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Gender and Schooling: Levelling the Playing Fields

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Abstract—*School is perceived as a social system responsible for the socialization of girls and boys. It not plays an important role in imparting education but also has a significant role in reinforcing roles and identities based on gender. School system lays down the norms that structure the socio-cultural and political lives of students. Through the transaction of academic curriculum, co-curricular activities in the form of art education, health and physical education and various overt and covert mannerisms; gender socialization of boys and girls takes place in the school environment. The current paper begins with an introduction to the school system as a powerful social institution and also as a primary socialising agent. It further delineates the role of school in laying down gender based norms and cultural expectations among boys and girls within a manner that appears as completely natural thereby reinforcing gendered beliefs through itsovert and covert practices and the larger school philosophy. Last but not the least, the paper attempts to present eclectic strategies to create a gender friendly environment in the school system.*

Keywords*: Gender, school, socialisation*

Introduction

Schools are one of the society's most powerful socializing forces that foster and support societal stereotypes for imbibing gender behaviour. School as a social institution tends to instill the cultural labels and values into which individuals have been socialized at the family and community levels(Kangethe et al, 2018). As a powerful socialising agent, the school systemlays down the norms that structure the socio-cultural and political life of an individual.Considered as the 'rules of the game' in a society (Kabeer, 2004), institutional rules, norms and conventions have powerful impact on people's lives. They lay down rules that may be written or unwritten, explicit or implicit, codified in law, mandated by policy, sanctioned by religion, upheld by convention or embodied in the standards of family, community and society. Playing a powerful role in shaping human behaviour, schools provide a structure, and hence a degree of norms and values that provide a basis for the day to day patterns of life. As a societal institution, schools tend to reduce uncertainty, make certain forms of behaviour more predictable and create an environment to co-operate with others to produce results that they would not be able to achieve on their own. At the same time, however- and whatever their official ideologies-institutions rarely operate in egalitarian ways. Rather they tend to support hierarchical relationships (Anand, 2010b).

School System as an Institution

School system as a primary institution of society has gained a paramount attention in the contemporary society. Viewed as a progressive and proactive institution that enables children to learn values and ethics considered important for their overall personal development, schools have gained greater responsibility in the present-day era. While the family system in India is undergoing rapid transformation, there is an increased psycho-social and economic pressure on the school system to not only fulfill its role as an academic institution but also provide a positive, pro-social environment for children. Schools are also being viewed as 'corrective institutions' that play a major role in re-socialisation of the child who has already acquired some understanding of 'do's and don'ts' from his/her family (Anand, 2010a).School is a societal pillar that performs the tasks of individual acculturation through prescription, suggestion, expectation (example) and through punishment. Gender differences are constructed and may be reinforced through schooling through staff and pupils consistently associating or attributing certain behaviours and characteristics to one gender over the other and then acting accordingly.

Gender as a Social Construct

Cultural ideology about gender or about being a man or a woman is conveyed through a gendered socialization of boys and girls. All the societal institutions beginning right from the family, school, religion and mass media; portray men and women as 'opposite sexes' thereby reinforcing gender. Gender is not a women's issue; it is a people's issue. "Femininity" does not exist in isolation from "Masculinity". The construction and power of one determines the construction and power of the other. Gender relations are neither "natural" nor

given, they are constructed to make unequal relations seem "natural", and can be naturalised only under the duress of socialisation. Thus, there is undue pressure on boys and girls to live up to the established "norms" of masculinity and femininity. While girls endure unwarranted social control, discrimination and domination, boys too suffer from the stereotyping that exists in a patriarchal culture. Discouraged from being emotional, gentle or fearful they are thrust into the role of breadwinners, protectors, and warriors. Thus – unequal gender relations stunt the freedom of all individuals to develop their human capacities to their fullest (NCERT, 2006). Thus, in congruence with gendered expectations, men are expected to be independent, bold, assertive and aggressive, women are projected as dependent, passive, nurturing and gentle. The gender role system has also assigned distinctive activities, spheres of action or work which is commonly called as sexual division of labour. The crucial aspect of sex role system in the different valuation by cultures and societies of the two sets of traits and activities described as males and females (Kumar, 2005).

Different institutions draw in and reproduce norms and beliefs about gender, caste and class in intersecting ways and determine/explain how resources get distributed, who gains and who is excluded. In this context the question of power and authority is critical to the understanding of whose meanings and interpretations will prevail. Understanding gender inequality through such an institutional perspective helps in identifying the complex ways in which organizational rules, cultural norms and routinized practices from different institutional sites intersect to produce and sustain such inequalities. Interests and needs of women and men may not be always be neutrally interpreted. Even if these institutions are neutral, they help to generate and perpetuate gender based inequalities in society. Let us unveil the some of the factors associated with schooling from a gender perspective:

Unveiling Gender Socialization in Schools

School is perceived as a social system responsible for socialization of girls and boys. Through the transaction of academic curriculum, co-curricular activities in the form of art education, health and physical education and various overt and covert ways; gendered socialization of boys and girls takes place in the school setting. This leads to the reinforcement of masculine and feminine identities among boys and girls respectively as they imbibe the gender biases and stereotypes dominant in the larger cultural practices (Anand, 2014).

School system lays the foundation for children to develop perceptions about self and others. As children spend about fourteen years in the school, they are impressionable during these years. The overt as well as the covert messages given to them by school teachers, gender based reinforcements provided to them, the professional aspirations nurtured by teachers around, appreciation of conformity towards the masculine and feminine behavioural attributes expected leave long lasting images in their minds. Thus, children develop a

clear cut understanding regarding the sex based expectations from them and the do's and don'ts they are expected to follow during the formative years of schooling (Anand, 2017).

The qualitative concerns with respect to gender socialisation within the schools have caught attention worldwide. An analysis of trends with respect to gender and education in the Indian context over the last few decades reveal the paradigm shift in the focus of research on education. During the decades of 1980s and early 1990s, the attention rested primarily on the issues related to primary education. Issues such as enrolment of girls in schools, their retention and factors associated with their dropout rate gained a lot of importance. However, the last three decades have witnessed an increased thrust to integrate qualitative aspects of education such as importance of teacher's attitudes, their expectations, teacher's behaviour towards boys and girls, parental motivations, aspirations etc. The current focus of action in the area of education reflects the efforts towards analysis of schools as social institutions and enhancing the quality of their outcomes. According to Chanana (2003), schooling reinforces the gendered inequality of socialization across all divides. Schooling is essentially embedded in the societal context and ensures the reinforcement of gendered expectations from boys and girls. It ensures conformation of boys and girls in to the stereotyped expectations. It ensures that women remain passive actors in the process of schooling and do not question the patriarchal ideology and do not transgress the social boundaries and work within the accepted societal values. Infact, schools and schooling become active instruments of cultural reproduction and social control without seeking to alter the informal and formal processes of socialization. It tends to create hierarchies between the two sexes, form the structural and cultural contexts in which gender is enacted in everyday life, thereby fragmenting gender into multiple masculinities and femininities

Role of School Teachers

Within the school system, teachers are the key persons in the transaction of school curriculum through classroom teaching. The teachers have a primary responsibility not only towards children's education but also towards their overall development. Teachers exert a major influence on how children acquire norms and acceptable behaviours (Anand, 2014). If the teacher provides the students a gendered perspective during classroom teaching, through direct and indirect means, these go a long way in impacting the beliefs in the young, impressionable minds of children. In other words, the children are likely to develop cognitive images/ information that contain the gender stereotypes transmitted through the teachers. Gender, therefore, emerges and is reproduced during social interaction within the school system where the school teachers play a key role.

Thus, an analysis of differentiation among boys and girls in the assignment of different roles in the classroom by the teachers, differentiation in co-curricular activities; differential

expectations in terms of hobbies, professional aspirations; system for rewards and punishment etc.is likely to unveil the role of school system as larger contexts to reproduce and transmit gendered ideology.

Class Rooms as Microcosms of Society

Classroom is a little society that exerts a powerful socializing influence on the children. In a classroom set up, children do multiple tasks- studying, playing and taking part together in different classroom processes and activities. The role of schools in reinforcing gender identity through various classroom processes and the larger school practices has been an issue that has gained concern. Classroom environment interacts with student's personal characteristics and affects their learning attitude and behaviour. Teacher often acts as the *leader* and the role model in class. Therefore, classroom processes are seen to have an impact on transmission of expected behaviours and traits from boys and girls. Seating arrangement, role allocation, class leadership are some of the areas where gender based analysis can unveil gendered distinctions (if any) between girls and boys.

Subject and Professional Aspirations

A gendered analysis also would inquire into the explorations of subject career preferences among the school teachers for male and female pupils. Girls are often encouraged to take up humanities, arts as subjects whereas boys are motivated to pursue mathematics and sciences. Similarly, while academics, nursing, secretarial work, beauty cultureis preferred as careers for girls; medicine, armed forces, engineering, plumbing, electricals. astronomy is preferred for boys (Anand, 2014a).

Masculine and Feminine Traits

The notions of masculinity and femininity are deeply entrenched in our society. Masculinity generally means having qualities like strength, assertiveness, fearlessness, independence, authoritarianism and ambition. Femininity on the other hand is deeply related with beauty, passivity, tenderness, subservience, nurture and motherhood. Girls and boys are socialized by teachers to acquire differentiated personality traits as per the tradionally accepted gender norms. The personality traits are distinguishing qualities or characteristics of a person that lead to adaptive or maladaptive responses to a various stimuli or situations. Thus, men in order to be *masculine* are expected and encouraged to be rational, strong, smart, outgoing, aggressive, tough and dominating while women in order to be *feminine* are encouraged to be emotional, weak, beautiful, caring, nurturing, introvert and tolerant. In other words, boys and girls are groomed to acquire and identify with certain personality traits that are *in tune* with their sex (Anand, 2014a).

Participation in Art Education

Art education as an integral part of the school curriculum covers a wide range of innovative subjects and activities (music, dance, theatre, puppetry, clay modelling, craft, meal planning and other creative means) to enhance latent talents among children and boast their confidence. Gender based differences in terms of allocation of subjects like art, music, pottery making, crafts needs to be explored.

Participation in Health and Physical Education Activities

Information on gender differentiation in Sports/ Health and Physical Education activities needs to be analysed in order to explore any gender based differentiation being practiced by the schools. It is seen that girls are encouraged to play badminton, hop scotch, athletics, *kho-kho, elastic, gallery, staapu* while boys are given more encouragement than girls to pursue sports especially cricket and football while the same is not considered very significant for girls (Anand, 2014; Chanana, 2003).

The Way Ahead

The ultimate aim of a gender based analysis of schools has to be focus upon developing *human* qualities among children in order to enable them to achieve substantive citizenship. Analysis of multifaceted school practices from a gender perspective is needed to explore the sex based distinctions. **Discriminatory social institutions – social norms, practices, formal and informal laws – have gained prominence as a useful analytical framework to illuminate what drives gender inequalities and development outcomes. Schools provide a social context that is likely to reinforce a patriarchal mind-set among children (NCERT, 2006).**

Teachers' Training: The school teachers play a significant role in shaping students' attitudes towards learning, shows how students' beliefs in their own abilities, in addition to parental encouragement, can significantly influence school performance. It also reflects on how broader norms in society impact on gender differences in student performance. Thus, the learning environments of schools but also teachers' ongoing sensitisation efforts are crucial areas that need more focused attention. More training for teachers to recognise and address any biases they themselves may hold about different groups of students, whether boys or girls, socio-economically advantaged or disadvantaged students or students from different ethnic or cultural/religious traditions will enable them to become more effective educators (Anand, 2018).

Ongoing gender sensitization workshops are needed for school teachers to bring about attitudinal changes and moving beyond sex based preferences particularly with respect to academic performance and professional aspirations for students. In addition, Gender may be added as a compulsory component in the in-service training of all teachers across all categories of schools.The teacher's trainings must clearly discredit the issue of gender as a women's issue and should take it up as a *people's* issue. The linkages related to the impact of masculinity on boys/ men with their risk taking behaviours, restriction on expression of emotions, HIV/ AIDS must be

taken up. This would enable bringing about a wholistic understanding on gender, seek male involvement towards gender equality and train both boys/ men to confront themselves and their patriarchal values.

Gender Friendly Class Rooms: There is a need to create a gender friendly social context within the classroom and bring a 'deliberate' change to adopt innovative strategies in order to do away with the stereotypical compartmentalization of boys and girls into two separate categories. Every attempt may be made by schools to ensure that each and every art education activity is made available to all children irrespective of their sex. All schools may analyse their prevalent system of offering these activities for girls and boys and make changes in tune with gender sensitivity. There is an imperative need for all schools to make proactive and *intentional* attempts to move beyond the traditional choices in art education for boys and girls based on gendered preferences. Schools may encourage girls and boys to participate in non-stereotypical activities rather than manoeuvring them to conform to conventional sex based segregations.

Developing *Human* Talents: Aim has to therefore focus upon developing individual capacities, bringing about self-exploration among students that would lead to individual empowerment. Such responsible and gainful citizenship would indeed pave way to individuals who would indeed play an active role in transforming the collective life of a democracy with a deepened understanding of, commitment to, and capability to uphold the constitutional values of justice, equality, citizenship and freedom at the collective level.

The need of the hour is to adopt holistic and multipronged strategies that encompass diverse stakeholders ranging from families, communities, teachers' training institutes, school administration, media, policy makers for micro as well macro interventions. Commitment to a critical reassessment of the hierarchical constructions of knowledge would logically translate into more analytical, participatory and pro-active pedagogical strategies in the classroom. Learner cantered, experiential knowledge and reading against the grain become critical aspects of this approach, as do curricular and pedagogic practices, that equally reflect the life worlds of both girls and women, make visible the invisible, and carry within them the seeds of a just social transformation (NCERT, 2006).

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