

## EDUCATION FOR A 'GENDER' JUST SOCIETY

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### ABSTRACT

*Gender is the most used word but at the same time most misunderstood among the community. It is not about one's sex i.e. male or a female but the notions of femininity and masculinity to a particular sex attached by the society. Researches are done in the field of gender and education and how to make curricula gender sensitive. When gender is studied in the context of institution; it becomes important to review the co-education which promises a gender, equal environment. There is a need to see whether it is doing or not and then researching what happens in Single-sex settings. The article brings in the research done in the three types of schooling i.e. All girls', All boys' and co-educational school where various dimensions are seen related to gender.*

**Keywords:** Single-sex and co-educational schooling, gender, patriarchy, masculinity, gender 'just' society, curriculum, teacher-student interactions, stereotypes, beliefs, expectations, gender intersection with class.

### INTRODUCTION

The role of education in changing the lives of people was affirmed when right to education was exalted as a fundamental right. When Dewey (1897) said, "Education is not a preparation for life, but life itself"; that meant, it is education that defines a life of a person and not just aids it. No doubt, it has the ability to change the life of a person for the better. In today's scenario, education and schooling have this ability but are they fulfilling this role for the future generation of the society; is a big question. Are they helping to create a just society wherein everybody has equal rights not just on papers but in reality? Reproductionists (Apple; 2000, Bourdieu; 1990) do not think so. According to them, schooling as well as education replicates the categories in which the society is already divided into and make sure

that it is maintained through its economic and cultural processes. Besides caste, class, ethnicity; India is a 'gendered' and 'patriarchal' society in which resources are divided into men, women as well as 'other' genders unevenly or an unequal way (Walby;1990). Here the status of women is considered inferior to men attributing it to their 'biology' and 'nature'. Intersecting that, there are categories of caste, class and ethnicity which make the situation worse by putting such children in a position where quality of education and schooling become more grim.

Bringing gender equality in society till now meant bringing girls to school and retains them in the education system. The enrollment of girls in schools has undoubtedly increased and more and more parents are sending their girls to schools but, one has to ponder; is enrollment the only category for improved standard of education as well as the quality of life? Also is gender equality achieved only by enrolling girls in the education system? When gender intersects with other dimensions of the society; the picture is not so simple. Although we have increased the enrollment ratio of girls, their education still cannot be considered as 'gender just'. Once they are a part of the education system in schools, processes that are prevalent there are not gender neutral or promote equal opportunities for all the genders.

Scholars in the field of gender and education have observed various processes that operate in the school are responsible for the development of differentiated gender identities of children. It is observed that though both the genders are brought together in a co-educational setting; they both receive different cues about their learning. Boys are observed to get more attention in the class as compared to girls as they remain more active in terms of giving responses or being mischievous in the class in order to get the teacher's attention. On the other hand, girls are seen as quiet, 'sincere', 'obedient' and often act as 'quasi teachers'. Teachers, who are themselves socialized into gender stereotypical roles and a thinking system characterizing patriarchy, intentionally or unintentionally have differential responses towards the two genders and have different ideologies towards them. Researchers have proved that how teacher's biases, stereotypes, expectations and beliefs towards girls and boys affect their self-worth, confidence in themselves as well as in various academic subjects. Girls are encouraged to take part in dancing, decoration activities etc. and boys into drama and quiz/debates. This results into the reproduction of gender roles from society to the school.

Different observations are also made to see how playground and other spaces in the co-educational school are occupied by boys and girls differently. Where on one hand boys play

organized sports such as cricket, football; girls usually roam in the corners in pairs chatting with one another. They are not encouraged to play in groups or they themselves fear to invade spaces that are occupied by boys. Also there are cases of physical and verbal as well as sexual abuse of girls by boys which too results in marginalization of girls to the extreme. Due to all these reasons, parents in India are pressurized to put their girls in single-sex settings or all girls' school where they are in safe haven. On observing an all girls' school; it was noticed that the environment there, was very different as compared to the environment in a co-educational school. The playground was occupied by girls and they played various games although not the organized sports played by boys in the co-educational institutes. Girls were found to be roaming in the premises more confidently, playing freely in the play areas, doing work which is not done in co-educational school- lifting things, gardening and soil work. In co-curricular activities, they were doing theatre-doing different types of roles, dance, extempore etc. In classroom too, girls were seen answering the teacher's questions and getting the teacher's attention.

Separating girls also leads to separating boys in all boys' school where too the story is different. It can be said that the condition is worse as compared to co-educational or all girls' school where there are issues of teacher absenteeism, less number of teachers, unprofessional teaching atmosphere, disobedience of rules and disobedience of teachers by the boys etc. Studying about masculinities is a rare phenomenon in the Indian scenario as until now there is an increased focus on bringing girls in parity to boys by providing them certain privileges strategizing policies for them. However, looking at the condition of boys' school, it is clear that gender is not as simple as it is thought of when it intersects with other dimensions like class and ethnicity. This is because one cannot ignore boys when talking about gender as it comprises of both boys and girls; men and women as well as the 'other' gender and relationships between them (NCF; 2005). One should not forget that all genders are a part of the patriarchal system where if girls are thought of to be sensitive, inferior, weak and passive; boys too are pressurized to be strong, brave, independent and bread-winners. In such cases, those who don't belong to either of these categories are further pushed into margins.

Boys are never into the focus while making policies for gender equality as the policy makers feel the need to bring girls on to the equal plane as boys. Considering the safety of the girls; boys' schools are shifted in the evening slots in the government sector which is inhabited by boys who come from a low socio-economic background. If one sees the condition of these all boys' schools, it is in a dismissal condition. There is a situation of chaos where there is dearth

of teachers teaching and boys who want to study. Most of the boys either bunk the school or disobey the teachers who often beat them and give corporal punishments. Boys are said to be unruly in the school, fighting with each other or the teachers, threatening them, bunking classes, roaming around the school premises in groups/ 'gangs'-having a laugh, chatting, using foul language etc. Such boys tend to get involved in substance use and various crimes as it was observed that police used to visit such schools and enquire about the past history of students. This is a vicious circle as it is difficult to find the root cause of such situation where boys who don't study, implicitly assume that their studying and getting education is not fruitful in a society which only values the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu; 1985) of the rich and where the teachers too have zero or low expectations from them as they belong to such community. It was observed that teachers of the all boys' school look down upon their students and believe that they will end up performing jobs either done by their parents or they would indulge in crimes etc.

Therefore, where co-educational schools are still grappling with the issues of different constructions of identities in children based on their gender; single sex schooling, although proving to be beneficial for girls, are not doing much good to the boys particularly from the lower socio-economic backgrounds. The aim of such discussion and observation is not to decide which category of schooling is better as India will have all types of schools catering to different sections of the society; but to bring to the focus various issues that are affecting our schooling system with special reference to gender in intersection with other dimensions of class as well as ethnicity. Also, there is an urgent need to see gender as a 'system' that affect all genders of society and that restrict them into certain boundaries of 'right' and 'wrong' in terms of roles that they should fulfil, characteristics and traits that they must possess etc. There is a need to understand that not all boys and men are same just the way all girls and women are not same. Not all men are oppressors and not all women are the victims. Instead, there exists a power relationship between genders not in exclusive terms but in various forms of hierarchies where women are also the agent of the patriarchal system (Connell; 1987, 2000). Gender inequality exists in our society not because girls are born inferior to boys and they are 'naturally and biologically weaker'; but because boys and girls are stereotyped in a way that a power relationship is constructed between them with the help of preconceived notions of society. It is the society that creates images of women who is meant to be restricted to household work (private sphere) or is the source of eroticism for men. There is a hierarchy not just between men and women, but among men and among women too, between stronger

men and weaker ones etc. This is because there are boys too who get physically and sexually abused by the stronger and 'hegemonic' boys in schools as well as the society. Due to this, these are boys and men, who are bound to prove their masculinity everywhere and every time and construct an 'identity' accordingly. There are many cases when there are cases of suicides due to ragging etc. in schools and colleges which is harder for boys and men. These are men who ultimately have to become 'breadwinners' of the family as they are taught to be and protect their family against everything. They are also told by the patriarchal system that since they are physically strong and a superior gender; they have the power and control over the other gender which is inferior to them.

Therefore, it is not the people but the ideology or the mindset which controls the society. The role of education here is to change this ideology. This is the responsibility of the teachers and the policy makers who should be self-informed and sensitized towards what is called a 'good education' which makes the lives of people better as well as the society a better place to live in. Education is empowering as it frees an individual from the shackles of ignorance and unreasonable restrictions or obstacles for the development of oneself as a rational individual. It empowers us to question the already existing knowledge; which can be overarching and dominating or creating inequalities in the society. The need of the hour is to develop the critical faculties of mind of children so that they can decide what a 'good' is. They should ask questions such as-what a society is, how and why it functions like it is now and was it the same in past. Who are the victims of this unjust society and in what ways? Therefore, education makes us realize that what is deemed natural in a society or existing since it's creation, can be questioned. What does one mean by social justice as every member of the society be it a girl or a boy, poor or rich, of any caste, color or creed or religion has certain rights in the society as a human being besides belonging to any other constructed category of the society.

There is a need to build a society where every human being whether it is a girl/boy or those belonging to marginalized section live happily and securely in the society and realize their full potential without social evils or stereotypes, perpetuating in the society. Gender sensitivity is not about pitting women against men. On the contrary, education that is gender sensitive benefits members of all sexes. It helps them determine which assumptions in matters of gender are valid and which are stereotyped generalizations. It opens up the widest possible range of life options for both women and men. Therefore, there is a need to sensitize the whole curriculum at all levels in order to sensitize the new generation towards gender

sensitive issues in order to make them empowered citizens who can further create a just society by socializing the coming generation in gender sensible ways.

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