



In Education Gender Difference, Major Issue

Satish Kumar Singh

Research Scholar, Department of Education, RKDF University, Ranchi

ABSTRACT:

Gender is not a women's topic; it is a people's matter. "Femininity" does not exist in isolation from "Masculinity". The establishment and power of one determines the putting up and power of the other. Gender relations are neither "natural" nor given, they are constructed to make unequal relations seem "natural", and can be naturalized only under the duress of socialization. Thus there is undue pressure on boys and girls to live up to the established "norms" of masculinity and femininity. While girls abide 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. Therefore it is in the interest of both men and women to liberate human beings from existing relations of gender. The National Focus Group on Gender Issues in Education started work with genuine appreciation of the fact that, with the setting up of a specific focus group devoted entirely to this issue, gender had been accorded significance in the current curriculum review process. However, there was also discomfort and apprehension. Discomfort that the members of the group were all women. And apprehension that gender concerns could be excluded by other focus groups from their areas of concern to be relegated solely to this group that once again gender could be marginalized as a "women's issue". Fortunately, beginnings do not always foretell the end of the story, especially not if it is a thought-provoking one, which is what we hope the story of gender issues in this curriculum review will turn out to be.

Key Words: Gender, Femininity, Masculinity, naturalized, determines,

Introduction:

In our view, gender cuts across all disciplines, is basic to the construction of knowledge and has pervasive and wide-ranging implications for human relations in general and education in particular. So we came ready to bear the characteristic "double burden" – this time of doing our work on the home ground of our own team, as well as of interacting constantly with the groups working on other aspects of society and culture, and on various disciplines. It has been hard work: from the nine page concept note on gender that we sent out to all the Focus Groups and the Steering Committee in the first month, through the specific recommendations relating to the concerns of each Focus Group that went out in the second, to the persistent discussions at an NCERT meeting in Delhi, and with chairpersons of Focus Groups and Steering Committee members at their meet in Hyderabad, as well as the sustained engagement with the drafting committee in the third month. All this was done in addition to holding three consultations of our own that included sessions with local academics, activists and teachers, at the NCERT, Delhi, the Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education in Mumbai, and the School of Women's Studies at Jadavpur University, Kolkata; reaching out to scholars and activists across the country who have experience in issues of gender in a wide range of fields and disciplines, requesting their written inputs; and finally compiling a paper written by over 25 people, with verbal inputs from at least 30 more.

Sometimes, during our most exciting interchanges regarding contemporary challenges and possibilities, we would find a colleague, with experience of the workings of rural schools in Uttar Pradesh, sitting tense in the throes of a deep contradiction – the expression in her eyes signaled her intellectual involvement in the discussion, but her tight lipped silence sliced right through our impassioned exchanges. "What is the point of envisioning any of these possibilities, when I know that there is not even one classroom per class in the government schools I know in my area? How can you expect the teacher to teach, or a student to learn anything in such a context?" would be the grim question at the end of our discussion. Or, "Do you know that there are hundreds of TV sets gathering dust in educational institutes in Uttar Pradesh, because they have not even been connected?" Or a schoolteacher colleague would intervene, "Do you know how many girls in rural areas drop out of school because it is too far, or because the teaching is so poor in the free government schools that it is impossible to pass without getting private tuition? Most parents try to pay for their boys to attend the better private schools, and won't fork out private tuition fees for girls even if they manage to spare enough for boys – after all boys are seen as the future breadwinners, so must be educated. So where do the girls go? To the religious schools that circumscribe them further within repressive gendered mores."

Gender Division:

Another important concern that also emerged in the context of institutional provisions was regarding the isolation of educational research and training institutes from the significant research done in Women's Studies centers and schools in universities, as well as from the impressive scholarship on gender that is now at the forefront of almost every discipline of study in academia, internationally, and in India too. It is a matter of serious concern that virtually none of this research finds any place in disciplinary education in schools. Work on gender sensitization and awareness building has acquired certain complacency, given that it circles around issues of enrolment, the relative absence of females' figures or removal of gendered stereotypes in textbooks. Such work has proved to be inadequate and as some have argued just skimming the surface of a problem rather than addressing these concerns with greater depth.

Traditional meanings regarding masculine and the feminine persist and continue to be reaffirmed. It points out how girls are not simply a homogenous category; by virtue of their sex, they are also differently impacted by heterogeneous contexts of class, caste, religion, as well as the rural urban divide. In addition, there are other forces and trends, such as those of globalization and the privatization of schooling, the declining standards of government schools, communalization of education, and the impact of public and domestic violence, that pose major challenges in relation to gender issues in education. A review of policies and existing realities reveals that these challenges are clearly not being addressed. Knowledge, as it has been shaped in every discipline, and through language itself, normalizes, and establishes as "natural", the inequalities of gender. The critical challenge is of deconstructing such paradigms, and of redressing the inequities in the very construction of knowledge. Contemporary scholarship in virtually every discipline is now marked by significant research on gender issues. This has had deep implications for what is seen as knowledge, and how learning is viewed. School education should be updated in keeping with such research, and incorporate the critically gendered dimensions of knowledge in each discipline to transform the ways in which all subjects are approached and taught in schools.

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 centered, 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. Such a pedagogical approach would be greatly enhanced by teachers' needs too being viewed in relation to those of learners'. Critical reassessment of their own socialization would be an integral part of developing their own abilities as teachers if they are to be sensitive to the life-worlds of learners coming from diverse contexts. Innovative pedagogies have to be grounded not just in learning new games, songs and activities but developing in the teacher a conceptual and lived understanding of all that experiential knowledge and learning has to offer. In the final run it is not in monitoring teachers, but in enhancing training, and encouraging them to contribute to the shaping of critical, imaginative and innovative curricular and pedagogic process, that the real hope for transformation lies.

Girls with disabilities – doubly discriminated:

Girls with disabilities are generally not on the radar screen either of those committed to the issues of education of the disabled or to education of the girls. Those committed to gender equity, by failing to consider disability, and those committed to disability equity by failing to consider gender, have unwittingly rendered disabled girls invisible. This marginalization of girls is evident in the disability legislation that does not address the problems of women and girls in any of its chapters. In a culture where any deviation from normally accepted archetypes is seen as a marked deviation, the impaired body becomes a symbol of imperfection. The myth of the beautiful body defines the impaired female body as unfeminine and unacceptable. Being a daughter marked with a disability is considered a fate worse than death and thus leads to cognizing the birth of such a daughter as punishment for past sins. Nevertheless, the number of girls with disabilities is substantial enough to underscore the double discrimination faced by them in terms of gender and disability and multiple discriminations if they also belong to the socially disadvantaged sections of society. Girls with disabilities are commonly stereotyped as sick, helpless, childlike, dependent, incompetent and asexual, thus greatly limiting their options and opportunities.

Concerns Specific to Education:

Girls with disabilities form a heterogeneous group in terms of the type of disability and associated needs, the socio-economic background, whether they live in the urban or rural habitat and their caste, ethnicity etc. This heterogeneity has a number of implications for education. For example, girls with mobility disabilities may face physical access barriers to school while girls with visual and hearing impairments may face access barriers to curriculum. The prejudice surrounding their ability and value continues to perpetuate the view that educating them is futile. Opportunities for girls with disabilities to receive education or to attend training courses are available to only a few. They are generally segregated and excluded from society by the practice of sending them away to residential schools which are very few in number³³. This often masquerades as a response to their educational needs but is in fact often a response to a) the failure of so called mainstream schools to cater for all their local population and b) parent's difficulties in coping with looking after children with significant support needs and/or difficult behavior in the context of inadequate and/or inappropriate support. The cultural bias against women, intertwined with economic factors, restrict the girls from poor families from gaining access to the limited resources that are available; hence they cannot participate in educational settings on an equal footing even with boys with disabilities. The need for assistive devices and transportation makes education of girls with disabilities a costly proposition, that affording parents are willing to invest in even less than they may do for boys.

Conclusion:

We must address the issue of silence in women's speech and writing. Women are silent because adequate words do not exist, because society censors certain forms of women's articulation, because silence can sometimes also be subversive. Yet paradoxically women are stereotypically characterized as garrulous and gossipy. But their speech is disparaged. Also women are associated primarily with certain kinds of speech like private confessional outpourings (letter, diaries etc.), story – telling etc. Most of these genres too are not taken seriously. They are “private” forms of language, confined to the home, family or the community. Women are rarely associated with public communication like religious rituals (there are taboos on women being ordained as priests, articulating prayers or preaching publicly), political rhetoric, legal discourse, science, poetry. Female voices and concerns are absent from high culture. But they are equally excluded from sub-cultures. It is considered inappropriate for women particularly from the upper and middle classes to indulge in swearing, joking, or using slang. There is a need not only to make women's silences heard, but also to break them by questioning taboos and dogma against women's speech within the existing structure. Textbooks should not replicate this system of silencing and exclusion and teachers should sensitize students to be aware of them in language and culture.

Not only in the realm of the spoken language have women been silenced, the written language has also been monopolized by the powerful. Women are not the only group affected by illiteracy, but gender differences in literacy rates are striking. Where education is a scarce resource it is thought more profitable to educate boys. But besides economic compulsions there are political ones too. Powerful groups fear that education can empower the powerless and incite them to protest. In this context the divide between written and oral communication becomes crucial. In modern societies the language of permanence and authority is the written language and it is privileged over the oral. This is problematic because the oral is the means of communication most easily accessible to the powerless. Perhaps both in our text books and also in classrooms we need to be a little critical of the written word in general and learn to challenge the dogmatic authority of the book. While the students should learn to value the text, the power of the written word should not overwhelm them or deafen them to the possibilities of other forms of communication.

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