Gender Sensitization and Education

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Abstract

Gender encompasses socially constructed and culturally based roles of women and men with a view to understand how unequal power relations between them are shaped and operate. Gender and its accompanying power relations are built in all institutions of society be it family, educational institutions, work place, religious systems, beliefs, norms etc. Gender relations do not operate in a social vacuum but are products of the ways in whichinstitutions are organized and reconstituted. This paper explains the need of gender sensitization in educational institution and following the process of gender sensitization programs we will be able to bring social change relating to women. Educational institutions like school colleges where teachers are the active players in classroom and has to deal with various gender related issues . This paper also explains what pedagogic strategies teachers should follow to promote gender sensitive classroom.

Keywords : Gender , Gender sensitization

Introduction

Gender sensitivity is not about pitting women against men. On the contrary, educationthat is gender sensitive benefits members of both sexes. It helps them determine whichassumptions in matters of gender are valid and which are stereotyped generalizations.Gender awareness requires not only intellectual understanding and effort but also sensitivityand open-mindedness to change one's views and limited perspectives and values. It opensup the widest possible range of life options for both women and men and builds theircapacities to be more wholesome and humane.

The concern for gender equality in and through education, especially in classroom spaces,is critical because of the negative and far-reaching implications that gender disparities andinequities (reflected through biases, stereotypes and discriminatory practices) have foreducational institutions. Education is a major force that will help trigger change but thiswill occur only when teachers and learners are assisted in adopting classroom initiativesthat reflect new images based on a positive gender equity ideology. Gender equality as astrategy has great potential to create desired change because it has the capacity to addressboth the practical and strategic needs of boys and girls, of nations and the world at large.

In this regard, teachers are strategically positioned to act as agents of change in order toachieve gender equality, especially through what they teach, how they teach and howthey role model their own attitudes, beliefs and practices in the classroom and beyond.Indeed, teachers do not come into classrooms as gender-neutral persons. They are likelyto have internalized a patriarchal gender ideology through their upbringing and years ofsocialization in both formal and informal settings. Teachers' patriarchal worldviews impacton the hidden curriculum that is often as influential in classrooms as the official curriculum.Frequently it is the hidden curriculum which ensures that gender differentiated practices,procedures and processes occur in classroom spaces and school structures wheregender-friendly policies and curricula already exist

Gender is a construct that owes its creation to a number of social institutions. Some of theseinclude family, educational institutions, judiciary, religion, etc. In recent times, the media hasemerged as a powerful constitutive agent of gender-related ideas and notions.

Before we look at the process of how gender is constructed let us briefly focus on the term'gender'. Gender, unlike sex which is based on biological division and is specific in character,is more amorphous in nature and is subject to change with reference to context and time.That is why the concept of gender varies from context to context.Gender

is a political view of sex that is based on the binary division of male and female.This binary division apparently looks natural. The problem with this division, however, startswhen one thing is considered inferior to the other which is regarded as superior. Meaningsare assigned arbitrarily to objects and concepts.

Apart from the literal or dictionary meaning of words, each word has certain connotationsor associated meanings. These are constructed by society. The dominant groups in societyassign positive meanings to what they do and negative meanings to what 'others' do.
The construction of gender is largely done by dominant groups who assign roles and responsibilities and give opportunities to, and have expectations of, males and females —separately. For instance, it is society that suggests that girls should play with dolls and boys cannot and should not do so.

In this process of socialization, education and educational institutions play a central role. Forinstance, stereotypes pertaining to responsibilities, roles and opportunities, to which we areinitially exposed in family settings, are endorsed at educational institutions. So schools areplaces where the socializing process is reinforced and given legitimacy and authenticity. Thesocial knowledge relating to gender is constructed, validated and perpetuated by schoolsthrough textbooks, pedagogy skills, assessment and the academic milieu.

A considerable amount of research has been done on textbooks that represent femalecharacters as weak, dependent and stereotypically shy, and confined to the home whereasthe male characters are shown as strong, independent, innovative, outgoing and responsiblefor the outer world.

The 'authenticity' of the printed word in the shape of a textbook is further enhanced whenthese stereotypes are backed up and legitimized by the teacher in class. The assessmentsystem approves of certain agreed upon answers and disapproves of non-conformity withfixed stereotypes. The school milieu also plays an important role in the formation of certaingender stereotypes. Thus schools are disseminating stereotypes favouring the patriarchalsystem in society.

A large number of families in the subcontinent still believe that there is no need to sendgirls to schools. Similarly, a sizable proportion of the population believes that girls shouldonly be exposed to primary education. The argument given in favour of this, in our society,is that since girls need to be married off there is no need to send them for higher education.This attitude is changing somewhat though and we see a growing number of girls goingto school.

One problem still exists: a number of female professionals, i.e., medical doctors, engineersetc., after successful completion of their professional education do not work. One majorreason is marriage which makes it difficult for them to pursue their profession. In most cases, it is because they are not allowed by their husbands to take up jobs. This goes back to ourearlier discussion where women and men are viewed by society through the lens of genderwhere man is considered as responsible for the world outside and where the woman's rolehas been confined to the home.

Education, which has a strong link with power, has traditionally been a rare commodity forwomen. In Pakistan, we have seen long periods of silencing women and excluding themfrom modern education. That is why women have had to struggle hard to compete withmen and create space for themselves in public life.

In some parts of the subcontinent, the exposure of girls to learning is still confined toreligious education. Modern education, which is the key to economic independence, isdenied to them. The control and hegemony enjoyed by men is largely linked to their role asbreadwinners of the family. Economic independence is generally ensured by the acquisitionof modern education.

Educational institutions have been engaged in perpetuating the existing social structuresof power through the construction and legitimization of a skewed view of women. Evenfemale students are led to internalize gender-biased views in schools. Thus education, thatis supposed to emancipate human beings, is performing the opposite function by creatinga tunnel vision among students. This tunnel vision is designed to favour the powerful anddiscredit marginalized groups. If we are serious about reducing the gender gap in societywe need to revisit some popular stereotypes about women. For this, social institutions ingeneral and schools in particular have to play their

due role. We need to have a thoroughreview of textbooks, pedagogy skills, an assessment system and the school milieu, andaddress areas where improvement is needed.

While we strategize to reduce gender gaps in society, it is crucial to keep in view that genderis not just an idea and concept which should be dealt with only at a theoretical level. Besidesbeing a concept, gender is a tangible factor in our behaviour. We make gender somethingreal in our social interaction, through our attitudes and in practice. So the strategy shouldnot be confined to theory alone, it should also be reflected in our daily life.For instance, it is not sufficient to include concepts of gender equality in the curriculum,it is also crucial that teachers and head teachers show by example that they genuinely believe in gender equality. The fact is that a majority of educational institutions perpetuate gender-biased stereotypes. But it is these same institutions that can encourage students to challenge the stereotypes and resist the hegemonic designs of dominant groups.

Meaning of gender and gender sensitization

Gender' refers to the socio cultural differences between the males and females in terms of their strength, ability, performance, wage earning capacity and social acceptability etc. In fact the biological process does not discriminate between man and woman, but socially, women are regarded as weak, need protection and hence become subordinate to men.

Gender sensitization refers to theories which claim that modification of the behavior of teachers and parents (etc.) towards   children   can   have   a   causal   effect   on   gender   equality. Gender sensitizing "is about changing behavior and instilling empathy into the views that we hold about our own and the other sex." It helps people in "examining their personal attitudes and beliefs and questioning the 'realities' they thought they know

Need for gender sensitization

Sensitization is by far the most effective and non-confrontationist approach of reforming the society. Gender sensitization is the process of changing the stereotype mind set of men and women- a mindset that strongly believes that men and women are 'unequal entities' and hence have to function in different socio- economic space.

Gender sensitization increases the sensitivity of people at large towards women and their problems. In the process it creates a class of responsive functionaries at different level, from policy making to grass root level, who are convinced that any form of gender bias is an obstacle on the way of attaining an equitable social and economic order and therefore consider addressing gender related issues in their situation as a matter of priority.

Gender sensitization is first instance, tends to change the perception that men and women have of each other. It creates a mindset in men that no longer sees in women the stereotypical image. The impression that women are a weak and unequal entity no more clouds the minds of common man .Rather they are seen as responsible and equal partners in socio- economic development. The general perception of men and women on the rigid gender division of labour and other orthodox practices related to gender begin to die down. Women also tend to develop the perception that they are no subordinate to men and they have an equally important role to play in decision making at household, community and organization level.

The main problem of Indian society is lack of women recognition and appreciation for women's involvement in multifarious activities. The men, who are reluctant to acknowledge women's contribution, come forward under the influence of sensitization to recognize their contribution. The gender sensitization process develops understanding that women do possess wisdom and therefore they must be involved in decision making process. They have concerns and therefore should be treated with dignity and equal chance in sharing of social and economic benefits. Women cutting across, socio-economic boundaries tend to see their problems in larger perspectives of women development and come forward to recognize the efforts of fellow women. They even visualize the important role that men can play in their socio-economic development. Such an orientation marks the beginning of a definite realignment in gender relations Social image of women improves and their concern are shared by men.

The barrier between men and women are crumbling down and society slowly gets over perennial problem of adjustment between them. With process of gender sensitization men tend to rationalize their behavior by shedding their egos as far as gender relations are concerned .Instead of complaining or reacting to the behavior of women men learn to exercise patience and restraint, and take the things in positive way. The will help the women in gaining the importance and recognition at society's and domestic sphere when their decision will be taken into account.

The gender sensitization process enable the teacher to become instrument of change as far as status of women is concerned. To what extent have they become action oriented and alert to see that women are neither being neglected nor discriminated against and they get their due status in society. Conscious efforts are made to create a favourable climate that allows nurturing and flourishing of women's talent and provides more flexibility and freedom to women.. Their perspective will help us to gather the information about their construction of social world related to gender issues and we will be able to see the impact of internalized notions of gender in the process of socialization from their childhood to present age. This will also help us to understand the common points of consensus in relation to gender concepts. The very aim of gender sensitization programme is to bring definite orientation in the thinking, practices and approach of individuals concerning gender. The gender sensitization process that individuals, particularly the men undergo involves four stages namely change in perception, recognition, accommodation and action.These changes take place in response to certain interventions i.e. gender sensitization programme .The focus of study will be to judge effectiveness of gender sensitization programme and to what extent we are able to sensitize teachers with reference to existing gender issues at present. Gender sensitization process requires time to develop an understanding of the related issues and problems associated with it.

Process of gender sensitization

Gender sensitization programme are generally organized for group of people. The very aim of such program is to bring a definite orientation in thinking, practices and approach of individual concerning gender. The process includes the following:

1. **Change in Perception** – Gender sensitization in first instance to change the perception then men and women have each other. It creates a mindset in men that no longer sees in women the stereotypical image. The impression that women are weak and unequal entity no more clouds the minds of common men . Rather they are seen as responsible and equal partners in socio-economic development. At this stage men realize the ill effects of prevailing biases against women on family and society. The general perception of women on rigid gender division of lie down. Women also tends to develop the perception that they all subordinate to men and they have an equality important role to play in decision making at household or community and organization level.

2. **Recognition** – Persons exposed to gender sensitization also start behaving differently They look at the positively endowed qualities of women . At this stage the male folk begin to recognize the virtues of women and their importance to the family and society. There is open and spontaneous appreciation for women's involvement in multifarious activities. The men who were reluctant to acknowledgement of women's contribution, come forward under the influence of sensitization to recognize their contribution. As a result women's contribution becomes more and more visible.
   Further women's talents and capabilities that were going unnoticed and unexpected become subject of attention. Women too become more conscious of their capabilities and contribution and take pride in the same.

3. The message that gender sensitization conveys is loud and clear. Women do possess wisdom and therefore they must be involved in decision making process. They have concerns and therefore they should be treated with dignity and given equal chance in sharing of social and economic benefits.
   Women cutting across socio-economic boundaries tend to see their problems in large perspective of women development and come forward to recognize the effort of fellow women. They even visualize the important role that mencan play in their socio-economic development

4. **Accommodation**- The barrier between men and women starts crumbling down and the society slowly over the personal problem of adjustment between them. Men tend to rationalize behavior by shedding their egos as far as gender relations are concerned. Instead of complaining or reacting to the behavior of women, men learn to exercise patience and restraint and take the things in a positive way. The difference between men and women narrows down as men allows women to function in a comfortable environment in the available socio-economic space. Problem creates i.e. those who were discouraging and obstructing women in their socio-economic participation become supporters of women empowerment. In the family, women start gaining importance as their opinion and suggestions are counted for overall development and management of family. At community and organizational level too, women were encouraged to play their role in matters of management. It isalso observed that women, on their part tend to underplay the problems with their counterpart and wish to solve their problems through dialogue.

5. **Action-** Gender sensitized person become instrument of change as far as status of women in the society is concerned. They become action oriented and alert to see that women are neither neglected nor discriminated against and they get their due status in the society. Conscious efforts are made to create a favorable climate that allows nurturing and flourishing of women's talent and provides more flexibility and freedom to women. Moreover sensitized person becomes more inclined to take such steps that would make the ender equation more even and balanced. A number of affirmative actions are initiated to bring improvement in conditions of women. Women also become open rotaries of women empowerment and organize themselves for collective action against different forms of bias and discriminatory practices. They tend to become pro- active to gain a respectable position in family and in the society.

Gender sensitization strategy

Forms and intensity of gender bias varies greatly according to the socio-cultural and economic contexts. Therefore in order to bring desired change in people and in the society, we need to develop a well thought out gender sensitization strategy considering the prevailing socio-cultural economic and psychological situation of target group. The strategy basically involves three components selecting the target audience, deciding the content and deciding the methodology. Since the content and methodology of the program are decided according to the target group before designing the sensitization program.

Pedagogic strategies to promote gender sensitization through education

1. Particiaption

Most feminist educators understand that knowledge is not neutral, that teacher and students alike bring 'texts' of their own to the classroom which shape the transaction within it. Feminist pedagogy emphasizes participatory learning and teaching, within which subjectivity, emotions and experience have a definite and valued place. While participation is a powerful strategy, its pedagogic edge is blunted when it is ritualized. Participation, when seen as an instrument to achieve certain specified, predetermined objectives and where the teacher's own ideas dominate classroom discussion is not meaningful. It involves appreciation of importance of starting from experience of both students and teachers.

2. Recognising difference

Implicit in any effort at facilitating real participation is to work with the principle of recognizing difference. As children share reflect on their individual and collective experiences they simultaneously acknowledge and relate these to the experiences of others who may not form a part of their social reality. It is important that this difference not be marked by status but by diversity . Pedagogies that provide space for individual children to express themselves freely in the classroom, without fear of judgment and stereotyping are essential building blocks in

working towards a future where they can have more critical engagements with what is being taught in the middle and higher classes.

3. Reading against the grain

However it is possible and also necessary to be able to equip students to "read against the grain", to critically question received knowledge, whether it is biased text book or other literary sources in their own environment. Undoubtedly this is an objective that education would aspire for in the higher school. Yet there is need to build in approaches that encourage learners to comment compare and think about elements that exist in their own environment. Women educators have used songs as a powerful medium for discussion, comment and analysis in culture that are primarily oral. As repositories of knowledge exist in different medium, all these forms whether television, advertisements, songs, paintings etc. need to be brought in to create a dynamic interaction between learners themselves. Lateral learning processes necessitate new equations between the teacher and the student.

4. Acknowledging power

A gender sensitive pedagogy is one that does not merely affirm different individual and collective experiences but it located these with in larger structures of power . Question such as who is allowed to speak for whom? Whose knowledge is most valued? Inform engagements with learners. A Bachelor of Elementary Education teacher reflected on her course that the ' gender and schooling' paper has made her conscious of these realities . She said that she may not able to change everything but she will try and make difference where she can within the classroom. This translates into evolving different strategies for different learners. For e.g encouraging a child to speak in class may be important for some children and learning to listen to others may be of priority for others.

5. The teacher as facilitator

The teacher's role is to provide a safe space for children to express themselves and simultaneously to build in certain forms of interaction. While consolidating and constructively pushing the limits of learner's understanding, s/he needs to be conscious of how differences are expressed. An atmosphere of trust wouldmake the classroom a safe space where childrencan share experiences, where conflict can be acknowledged and constructively questioned, where resolutions, however tentative, can be mutually worked out. A space where they can practice democratic ways of interacting with each other and build skills to negotiate with conflicts outside the school. For girls in particular, school and classrooms should be spaces to discuss processes of decision making, to interrogate the basis of their decisions and to make informed choices.

The construction of the female learner as passive may act against her within participatory teaching and learning contexts. In our schools where gender based construction underpin ideas of classroom discipline and strict divisions are maintained between girls and boys, a girl who is interactive is likely to be pulled up for transgressing the 'gender code'. Clearly, there needs to be a rethinking of the agency of the learner in the classroom context. This reconceptualization has to become an organic part of the way we think of education today and find a prominent role in teacher training programs.

Conclusion

Gender has been accepted as a category in the formulation of policy and curricula framework in India. "Gender , Equality and Empowerment of girls have been used as key words in education document for long .Gender has primarily been viewed :

- As concerning only girls and women (a biological category)
- As an isolated category, not related to other issues
- In terms of provision of equal facilities

A focus on 'Equality' has led to strategies focusing on:

- Increasing representation of these notions of gender in educational material
- "Sensitive portrayals of discrimination that girls/women face
- Portraying positive role models and enacting role reversal of stereotypes
- Neutralizing text of any gendered references
- The formal or sameness approach that focuses on equal treatment rather than equality of outcome

Thus we can conclude that gender sensitization through education can be as a forceful, effective and primary tool to bring change in the thought process of studentsthrough formal school education. The main focus should be on breaking the stereotypes and set patriarchal notions prevalent in the society. The time has come for women to rise up and force the patriarchal society to underline the importance and necessity of the role played by women in cultivating a strong , rational and progressive society.

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