

The Strength of Women Educators and the Weakness of History

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ABSTRACT : *The paper explores the link between gender socialization and schooling. It highlights the challenges that women have been facing in society, when their education intersects with the expectations of an ideal daughter, wife and mother. First, an attempt has been made to understand how young children are socialized into gender roles and stereotypes. Second, joint actions of teachers, students and curriculum have been studied with specific examples related to classroom processes and representation of women achievements in text-books in context of gender socialization. Finally the paper attempts to build the significance of being a reflective practitioner for teachers who not only understand the various historical factors and view-points that have been the reasons for women subjugation, but also be able to work towards eradicating such inequalities from their classrooms.*

KEYWORDS: *Gender, Schooling, Socialization, Classroom processes, Curriculum, Reflective practitioner.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Why are women disadvantaged compared to men? Has this inequality been reduced in recent years? What difference if any, does the women education make to other areas of their lives? Are contemporary form of femininity as restricted as those of the past? This essay seeks to answer such dilemmas. “To be understood, a society must be seen and grasped in terms of the ‘action’ that comprises it. Such action has to be seen and treated, not by tracing the separate lines of action of the participants, but in terms of the joint action into which the separate lines of action fit and merge” (Blumer, 1969, pp-71). Thus school seemed the most appropriate place where one could understand this issue. The conceptual scheme which has helped me in this essay is the awareness of gendered education (Acker, 1994), which will support my understanding throughout. My explorations will be based on observations made by some of the eminent authors in the field, which explain the true nature of the ‘social action in the school premises’. Also having special interest in ‘curriculum development’, I would be trying to find the extended threads of the same explorations in that area too. This essay aims to understand the problem of gender socialization, delving shortly in its history, linking it to school experience, and evaluating the changes happened so far.

II. GENDER ROLES AND SOCIALIZATION

Children grow up listening stories from their parents and grandparents, taking instructions from them, finding permission at least in their initial years, observing their activities, responses and reactions to different social issues etc. Their most early contacts consist of their parents, extended families, siblings, and neighborhood. Of course one thing which cannot be ignored is their school experience. Many researches cite the importance of the school as primary force in the development of one’s personality (Minuchin, Biber, & Shapiro, 1969). But before embarking upon the real focus of this essay, i.e. the school context, it is important to understand the problem of gender socialization historically in the wider arena of family and society. Gender roles are conceived, performed and learnt within a complex of societal relationships. The composition and structure of society is such that it nourishes these roles. Generations grow learning these compositional and structural roles, which are embedded in them when young through the process of socialization. Romer (1980) observes that every society trains its young people to function within its own view of the world. They teach them the views adhering to their cultural rules and regulate any deviation through punishment. People are not just victim of such a process; rather they eagerly participate in this because they want to be a part of the society. It is this process which prepares children to play the roles that society expects or requires of them as adults.

Sex is a biological category, but social rules which are created by basing on this biological category fall under the process of genderization. Biological differences between males and females are universal throughout human history. But the social rules developed on the basis of biological differences vary across the world. However Bhasin (2000) maintained that the categorization of roles between man and woman has gone far beyond the biological difference and the role of reproduction (such as bearing a child and breast feeding). The division of labor has been done in a manner that most of the care taking tasks has been allocated to women and

external, public and monetary tasks have been given to men. Such an allocation becomes all the more unfair when switching of roles is highly condemned by the society.

The roles have been fixed in such a way that people take pride by abiding to them. Society socializes new members by the same standards of gender specific norms and roles. Any deviation is neither expected nor accepted. Socialization into roles begins almost from the moment of birth. At the same time that the biological needs of the infant are being met, the child is being responded on a social level also (Romer, 1980). Parents respond and talk to children in ways that promote their understanding about what the society expects from them born as a male or female. Many researchers explain their childhood experience and the genderization process through their families (Dube, 1988; Bhatti, 1988; Das, 1977). Dube (1988) explained that girls grow up with a temporary sense of belongingness with their natal homes. For example Gauri Puja conveys to young girls the truth that they too will have to leave the mother's home. Women have no autonomy over the issue of marriage. They are expected to obey the system of leaving the home of their parents without question. For the same they are always told stories about good wives and homemakers who could adjust all the pain and misery and could still live with their husbands. After understanding how society socializes children in gender specific roles, now it's important to understand how it has been influencing women education system and particularly their curriculum as prescribed by the society.

III. COURSE OF WOMEN'S PROGRESS IN EDUCATION

Over the past century, expansion of women's education in India has been much debated issue among social reformers, politicians and policy makers. There are many steps which were taken by the government for women emancipation and their education. But education was permitted to enter into the lives of nineteenth century women only when its subject matter and method of teaching was not regarded as threatening to the existing power relations within the family (Karlekar, 2000). The theory of patriarchy explains these power relations and the consequent subjugation of women (Bhasin, 1993). Karlekar (2000) explains that in the Bengal's closing years of the nineteenth century, the access to girls of education became an area of considerable debate among a wide section of people. She postulated that women education was specifically designed in such ways that they develop intelligent companions and homemakers, who could grow children well and could be a presentable entity in the new growing social world. In this way education has a dual responsibility of developing home-oriented females who could also meet the demands of the changing world. A similar kind of experience is explained by Karuna Chanana in her research of Banaras's educational history in the context of women education (Chanana, 2001). So we understand how the duality was maintained in the hidden agenda of women's education. In recent years we see many changes in terms of increasing participation of girls in education system, stepping out of the four walls of their homes to work in different sectors, and increasing awareness regarding women's rights. But the following section will explain the superficiality of such steps which are taken at the policy level, and the actions of society are still very much affected by the same mind set. It will be tried to explore the hidden meaning in different interactions related to the educative activity and how the meaning is thus constructed and transferred to the next generation.

IV. EXPLORING PATTERNS OF DISCRIMINATION IN THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATION

'Growing up male' is a beautiful article written by Kumar (1986) which explains a young boy's thought and interpretation arising from a significant number of cues given around in his environment. This of course is an individual case, but it does imply what happens in a country like India where still a large number of government schools are either all boys or all girls. The writer illustrates that up till primary school; there was no segregation among boys and girls. It was made at the secondary level, which came as a sudden shock for everybody. He explained that girls schools are usually designed differently from boys schools. They had a courtyard in their school itself, where they played in total seclusion and safety from the outside world. Also there was high wall around their school and nobody could peep in. Here, the architectural difference was a sign of 'confinement'. How it was encountered and internalized by the student is also explicit in the writer's words. More such areas and experiences in school will be explored, which according to Dube (1988) are coated by the ideal picture of men and women. We already know that society is embedded in the matrix of meanings and interpretations. But socialization is nevertheless an important phenomenon, which creates inertia in the process of re-construction of roles. This in turn affects what an individual will interpret from the surroundings. Let us examine in some detail the attributes of the ideal man and ideal woman:

- Ideal man- powerful, intelligent, rational, independent, self-reliant, strong, courageous, daring, responsible, resolute, temperate, cautious, sober, honest, forthright, self-affirming, confronts world, authoritative, decisive (Ruth, 1980).

- Ideal woman: nurturing, supportive, intuitive, emotional, cunning, timid, fragile, capricious, child-like, exuberant, tactful, artful, lives in heart, withdraws from the world, compliant, submissive.

Research shows that a large collective whole connects them to the same categories as written above (Krishnan, 1988). Thus the meaning derived from the word 'nurturant' will have some femininity related to it. Similarly the meaning derived from the word 'rationale' will have some masculinity attached to it. These meanings might differ in their degree of relationship to these categories depending on different individuals, and contexts. But in a 'social act' participants try to fit together in terms of the meanings broadly maintained. Also it should be held here, that this social interaction is not constrained to any single form. This has implications for how can we intervene in the process of conditioning of children. Further discussion on this point will be held a little later. In the next section, I will describe the same discrimination patterns in the context of classroom processes.

V. CLASSROOM PROCESSES

Scholars (Parthasarathi, 1988; Nambissan, 1995) have noted that the behavior of girl child in classroom does conform to societal expectations of feminine behavior. This could be seen as a response of girl child's interpretation of the various societal expectations that she is presented with. The following is an attempt to understand those societal expectations which are presented to the children in very subtle voice.

- **Attention:** Teachers tend to give more attention to boys, as they feel that girls are better behaved. In this process, girls are often marginalized in the classroom. Researchers have elaborated upon the second side of the same situation. They believe that boys tend to be more hyper because they are usually given more attention. Consequently we find usually boys making more noise in the classroom. Similarly girls are expected to behave submissively (Nambissan, 1995).

- **Control and punishment strategies:** Teachers also use gender to facilitate control in classroom. A usual form of punishment in classroom is to order a boy to sit with the girl, making both boys and girls consciousness of embarrassment at crossing the gender barriers.

- **Allocation of tasks:** Gender based expectations can be seen representing themselves when teachers allocate tasks within the classroom. For instance flower arrangement, cleaning up and putting things neatly away is usually assigned to the girl. Boys in the other hand may be more readily asked for tasks such as lifting heavy articles and technical skills for instance fixing lights and so on.

VI. TEXT BOOK ANALYSIS

As already discussed, the anxiety about the content of education was very much prevailing when woman were allowed to take education after centuries of struggle (Karlekar, 2000). There was an increasing preoccupation on the part of so called esteemed male members of the society to keep the education content for women such that they remain close to their homes and consider it as their first responsibility. They wanted to make the women feel that their priority is home only. The same ideology can be seen presented in the National Curriculum Framework (2000). Despite its reiterations on equality, fundamental rights and quality education for all, the emphasis of it was on Indian tradition, and collapsing of value education (Bhog, 2002). Bhog further explains that the phrase 'value education for women' finds its meaning in all those Indian tradition which wanted to keep women subjugated inside the four walls of home. A need was recognized by the policy makers to work upon such orthodox traditions, which made them feel a need to explicate upon gender equality on policy level (National Curriculum Framework, 2005). But we need to understand that policies aren't successful until awareness is created among practitioners regarding such issues. Summarized below is the perspective of various writers who have illustrated how gender discrimination works in hidden way in our textbooks also.

- **Some statistics affecting our consciousness indirectly:** The following is a brief look at the SCERT's language textbook for classes 5 and 8 in the decade following the formulation of NEP (1986). The rationale for focusing on language textbook is that language is a key issue in feminist pedagogical practice. Stories/narratives create meaning in all cultures. By ordering and describing our experiences, they enable us to make sense of the world. In the preface of the textbook, it is claimed that the objective is to inculcate 'values within her'. Also it explicates that the teacher should tackle language teaching through methods that facilitate discussions and interaction in the class as a whole. By encouraging children to undertake role plays, for instance, it is possible to raise their confidence to communicate. However the content and the presentation of the lessons leaves one with serious doubt as to whether the teacher would be able to achieve these aims; particularly with regard to the girls in her class. Consider the following statistics based on the review of 75 lessons from the textbook mentioned earlier (Bhog, 2002):

- 1) In as many as 34 lessons, that is nearly 50 percent of the aggregate, man and boys were the only actors in the text.
- 2) In 10 lessons the presence of women was either mentioned in passing or confined to traditional roles.

About one in ten lessons sought to represent women and girls in a different light. For instance chapter on *swimming* which includes reference to women who have achieved excellence in that sport.

- It is important to look at how men of honor and achievements are represented in these narratives of the text book. The narratives of their lives and achievements are very much in the public realm. No details are given of their family life or homes. Minor events in the lives of the man are discussed which imbued the same meaning of non-existence or rather to say, non-necessity of their home lives- for example, in the case of LalBahadurShastri, his stealing a rose from the garden and consequent words of admonition from the *mali* are supposed to change his life. Bhog further points out what *Mali* actually tells the little LalBahadur: “you don’t have a father”. Not having the presence of a father in his life would no doubt have serious implications for the life of a boy. The boy interpreted from it that having Father is the most important pre-requisite for becoming a moral boy. The same might be grasped by other children also who read this text.
- The accounts of achievements made by girls are somewhat muted and neglected in books. “Madam Curie used to do all housework herself.....cleaning....washing clothes.... After two years of marriage she gave birth to a girl child.....” (SCERT, Hindi textbook, 2000)
Above extract highlights the most subtle way of telling the dual responsibility of women. The whole sentence is creating a meaning that, it is important for the girl to take care of her household anyways. She cannot escape her stereotyped role of the ‘good wife’ and ‘good mother’.
- Of equal importance are the images and roles of women that are portrayed in school textbooks. Women, if portrayed in textbooks, are usually shown as passive and subservient adhering to stereotypical gender roles. The environmental studies school textbook prescribed for class 3 by Delhi administration has a lesson on solids, liquids and gases. The colorful picture of a ‘mela’ given at the start of the lesson has both men and women in it but in strikingly different roles.

Males	Females
Filling balloons with gas from cylinder	Watching balloons being filled
Leading wife	Being led by husband
Removing/ filling something from tank	Carrying babies
Selling articles	Purchasing articles

In the scene described above, roles are based on distinct gender stereotypes and these create certain kind of meaning in the readers mind.

- Language is a powerful tool in establishing our experiences. But language, like society, can and does change over time. Those who argue for changes in language point out that there are conventions of language which exclude women. For example, phrases such as “the history of mankind” (history book, class 10th, private publication) may not be ambiguous to those who know what it is intended to include; women as well as men, but such usage does limit our understanding.

VII. DIFFERENCE IN ABILITY

In 1992 it was found that girls enrolled in fewer advanced Math and Science courses than boys and did not perform as well as boys on standardized tests (Chanana, 2001). Although early literature addressing gender disparity attributed gender differences in academic performance in science and mathematics to genetics (Gray, 1981), the overall biological differences between men and women have been dispelled by researchers as possible explanations for disparity (Linn & Hyde, 1989). Social expectations which are presented to children from the day they start responding either in verbal or non-verbal manner shapes their abilities and interests. The differential treatment of females is grounded in beliefs that society has about gender differences. Sexism is built into our societal system and pervades our culture. Society undervalues the role of women, placing higher value on the traditional male role. Girls and women receive conflicting messages about their worth and place in our culture from schools, home, and the community. They are taught to love, be submissive and care about their family life first. They promote conformity, acceptance and no autonomy of choice (Adams, 1996). Also boys

are given toys which served to develop their spatial and motor skills (for example construction set), which also encouraged them to show greater interest in related subjects at schools (Bhasin, 2000).

The consequences of this kind of disparity in play material and role expectations by the society pose serious problems in girl's educational choices later in their lives. This, of course, contributes to the underrepresentation of women in science and maths related careers.

VIII. FEMALE TEACHER: A REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Femininity has not changed much despite the rapid participation of women in education at various levels and employment in non- traditional areas. Any attempt to deal with the issue relating to women's education is likely to be unrewarding unless these are viewed within the social context and changes are made there itself. We as educationists need to utilize the possibility and bring all the discourse related to gender discrimination inside the classroom, making it open for the teachers as well as students open for critical reflections and discussions, rather than saving them from such sensitive issues. Though schools are embedded in the larger social structure characterized by hierarchical gender relations and ideologies that devalue the position of women, attempts must be made to push the limits and explore the possibilities of change through schools, particularly as they offer public space that is obliged to be informed by principles of equality (Nambissan, 2002). Also it is important for us to understand its implications related to teacher education. When we stand as teacher educators, we forget to give our teachers the same kind of reflective opportunities that we expect in our regular classrooms. The reason could be that the university education habits are much the same as they were decades before. They rely on lecture methods and have little scope for reflections, which if incorporated will help build development perspectives among prospective teachers. For this, it is most important to understand the conceptual schemes related to the issues such as 'gender'. There is, therefore, a need to acquaint teachers, students and university educators alike of all the gender related perspectives. They need to evaluate their own course of actions under the light of these perspectives. Thus, their actions will be directed by this holistic understanding and not by one which is largely affected by the blind and ultra-conservative propaganda of scions of cultural and society.

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