

Gender Sensitization: Significance of Higher Education

Barnali Baruah

Assistant Professor, Kamarbandha College.

ABSTRACT: *Violence against women and girls is a problem worldwide, occurring to a greater or lesser degree, in all regions, societies and cultures. Women, discriminated, unsafe and deprived of their fundamental freedom and human rights, cannot contribute to the development of a nation. Over the years, there has been growing concern about the extent and effects of violence against women among various organisations. The UNESCO is committed to promoting gender equality in and through education systems, formal and non - formal, from early childhood to higher education and lifelong opportunities for all and empowers all women and girls by 2030. Empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of whole families and communities. Gender mainstreaming is a key strategy to promote gender equality in society. Gender sensitization is very much required in our society today. It involves creating awareness about gender issues at all levels of society and make people understand the importance of giving men and women equal opportunity and treatment. Educational institutions at the tertiary level should play an active role in sensitizing students to gender issues through courses and programmes. A change in perception and mode of interaction is the need of the hour. Individuals need to be open – minded and unbiased in their thoughts and actions for effective implementation of gender sensitive programmes and policies. This paper aims to draw upon the policies and strategies adopted by organizations and governments to promote gender sensitivity and gender equality in the world of academia and how the higher educational institutions in India are working towards sensitizing students to gender issues and ensure all young Indians develop an understanding and appreciation for human rights. The study is based on secondary data collected from books, Government Manuals, official reports, journals, newspapers and electronic media.*

Keywords: *Gender, Equality, Sensitization, Mainstreaming, Institutions.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Violence against women and girls is a problem worldwide, occupying to a greater or lesser degree, all regions, societies and cultures. They become victims of sexual harassment, rape, dowry-related violence, trafficking, and discrimination etc. from time to time. These negative life experiences have adverse impact on women and curb the development of a society. Women, discriminated, unsafe and deprived of their fundamental freedom and human rights, cannot contribute to the development of a nation. Over the years, there has been a growing concern about the extent and effects of violence against women among various organisations. The promotion of gender equality and empowering of women is one of the Millennium Development Goals. With equal rights, empowerment, women can be ‘Agents of Change’ for sustained socio-economic development, security around the world.¹ Empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of whole families and communities. Gender mainstreaming is a key strategy to promote gender equality. This strategy attempts to bring a gender dimension into all higher education policies. Gender sensitization is very much required to achieve gender equality in our society today. Educational institutions at the tertiary level should play an active role in sensitizing students to gender issue through courses and programmes. UNESCO Bangkok’s initiative for ‘Enhancing Girls’ and Women’s Right to Quality Education through gender sensitive policy – making is encouraging.

Gender Sensitization

Gender Sensitisation involves creating awareness about gender issues at all levels of society and makes people understand the importance of giving men and women equal opportunity and treatment. It is recognition of the roles played by men and women for the development of the society, and addressing their needs through policies and institutional mechanisms. It enlightens people about citizenship and rights, countering sexual harassment

and issues of equality and freedom, questions of sexuality and the understanding and respect towards all. The gender sensitization process make people realise that women are intelligent enough to be involved in decision-making. Women also tend to develop the perception that they are not subordinate to man and have equally important role to play in decision making at household, community and organization level.

Importance of Gender Sensitization

The significance of gender sensitizing and gender equality to development is widely recognized worldwide today. Though women have progressed and have a voice in everyday life, the business world as well as in political life today, yet there is a long way to go to achieve full equality of rights and opportunities between men and women. Average women in the labour market still earn 24% less than men globally. As of August 2015, only 22% of all national parliamentarians were female. In India women occupies only 14% of its 542 seats in Lok Sabha. Worldwide, 35% of women have experienced violence by their partners. In India, discrimination is still visible throughout all strata of society. While women are guaranteed equality under the constitution, legal protection has a limited effect, where patriarchal traditions, prevail. Gender equality is an essential criterion to be observed in workplaces where men and women work together. Women are to be viewed as responsible and equal partners in development, and therefore, should equally enjoy the benefits with man. Raising gender awareness can increase general sensitivity, understanding and knowledge about gender equality. In a country like India, where vast diversity prevails in customs, traditions, social values, family beliefs and individual perception, there is the need for a systematic and well planned approach to inculcate sensitivity on gender issues. Gender sensitisation is imperative for creating a new reformed society where women are accorded equal rights and status with men in every sphere of life, women's contribution to socio-economic development is given due recognition and their achievements are celebrated, thereby making them confident and bold enough to recognize their own strengths and capabilities. Men will also shed off their egos and act actively towards dismantling systems of inequality.

Gender Sensitization and Higher Education

Education is a human right and is imperative for achieving the goals of equality, development and peace. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen rightly says, "If we continue to leave vast sections of the people of the world outside the orbit of education, we make not only the world less just, but also less secure"². It has a gender connection since it can be a very important issue for women's security. Educators can inculcate positive attitudes in students on gender issues that can restrain them from acts of gender discrimination and violence. The UNESCO is committed to promoting gender equality in and through education systems, formal and non-formal, from early childhood to higher education and lifelong opportunities for all and empowers all women and girls by 2030.

The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women endorsed gender mainstreaming as a necessary process for achieving gender equality in the most effective and efficient manner. Gender Mainstreaming is 'the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes in all areas and at all levels'³. Gender mainstreaming committee or centres are formed in colleges and universities that play active role in gender sensitizing students through curricula, research and career development and also fostering gender awareness through mass media, public lectures, workshops and conferences. A vital step in achieving gender equality is to integrate conversations on gender in every aspect of campus culture. Incorporating gender issues into curriculum, implementing gender sensitive education for faculty and staff, developing mandatory training to address gender-based violence and providing role models are quintessential to promote gender equality. Persons involved in research, extension and rural development should be given training to carry on sensitization programmes for men and women in villages, involve them in discussions about issues that affect women and other real life experience. Organization of sensitization camps in rural areas will be fruitful in creating a healthy environment as far as gender relations are concerned. Higher educational institutes must appoint women academic administrators and aim at producing young female academic talents equipped with computing skills, entrepreneurial mindset and leadership qualities to face the challenges in life. Mentorships, networks, learning opportunities, smart deployment of technology and support from boys and men can help girls in acquiring the life skills and abilities.

Teachers' commitment is a key factor in the promotion of gender equality in institutions. It is important for male and female teachers to use gender sensitive pedagogy. "Teachers are strategically positioned to act as agents of change in order to achieve gender equality, especially through what they teach, how they teach and how they role model their concerns, attitudes, beliefs and practices in the classroom and beyond."⁴ Stressing on the role of teachers, Libing Wang, Chief of UNESCO, Bangkok, rightly said, "You can have gender sensitive curriculum, textbooks and all of the most up to date resources at schools' disposal, but if teachers do not understand and believe in gender sensitive education, you won't have gender sensitive classrooms."⁵

Major steps taken for gender sensitisation in India

Gender has been accepted as a category in the formulation of policy and curricula framework in India. Various commissions and committee set up after independence advocated the need for gender parity in all stages of education. Kothari Commission, the National policy on education and the Programme of Action in 1992 greatly emphasise on promotion of gender equity in education. The national policy on education stressed that education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. The University Grants Commission (UGC) has promoted, strengthened and given directions to the Women Studies programme in the country since the VII Plan period. The XI plan of India recommends training programmes, discussions, workshops etc. to increase sensitivity to gender issues involving teachers in the university and college level. The government also undertakes many research projects and organises gender sensitisation programmes, community action, lectures, workshops, seminars and conferences regularly. It regularly offers the UGC's refresher course in women studies for teachers.

The Ministry of Human Resource and Development is re-examining and revising the curriculum, making gender positive materials and module integral part of teachers' annual in-service programme, and training girls in self defence in physical education classes. A taskforce was constituted by UGC in January 2015 to review the measures for ensuring safety and security of women and girls in campus and programmes for gender sensitivity. Awareness programmes have been organised by the Government of India to disseminate gender sensitive information about the hazards and risks found in the workplace and is inserting gender sensitive Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) material in adult education courses and in the curricula of higher educational institutes. The UGC has assisted institutions to establish Equal Opportunity Cells to look after the effective implementation of policies and programmes for disadvantaged groups and to provide guidance and counselling in academic, financial, social and other matters. The Cell holds programmes to sensitize university and colleges on problems faced by the SC, ST and OBC categories in Higher Education. The Ministry of Women and Child Development and Ministry of Human Resource Development of India have taken an initiative of engaging Gender Champions in colleges from among the students across the country who will take the responsibility of making young boys and girls gender sensitive and strengthen their potentials to stand up for gender equality. Educational institutes can form gender champion clubs who will involve in activities like creating a website or blog on gender equity and regularly writing a column on gender issues, for instance, stories of extraordinary boys, girls and transgender who changed lives of women and girls, about legislations, government schemes etc. Workshops, plays, films, annual functions of colleges or youth festivals in universities organized on the theme of gender equality and women empowerment can encourage students to express their support for gender justice and equality. Students' exposure visit to public service institutions at the village, block, district and city level, public health centres, hospitals, post offices, police stations to provide knowledge on gender issues can bring a change in attitudes and behaviours of people. The gender champions should make arrangements for providing necessary life skill education and information about existing public services to the fellow students. Gender awareness programmes may be inserted in the Annual Activity Calendar of the institutes for any two days in a week. The institutes will assign one or more teachers as nodal teachers to assist the gender champions in their activities.

'Gender Sensitization' in Higher Education finds a mention in the 'Draft National Policy For Women – 2016' and it also becomes an important recommendation of 'Saksham' – Measures for ensuring the safety of women and programmes for gender sensitisation in campuses, according to a report released by the UGC in 2013. The Saksham guidelines recommend the inclusion of gender related issues as a part of existing curriculum. Incorporating realistic and relevant examples of situations of women, deprived of their rights and how these situations hamper their professional growth, should be considered through various components in existing subjects. Higher Educational Institutes must conduct

Orientation courses for administrators that have a module on gender sensitization and sexual harassment issues. It is their responsibility to appoint Medical and Security staffs well trained in gender sensitization for the safety and welfare of the students. Higher educational institutes must extend counselling services through trained full – time counsellors. Information about gender equality and sexual harassment must find mention in the prospectus and prominent display at conspicuous places and notice boards for a safe and secure environment in the campus. Management education can have case-studies devoted to the gender pay gap. Students of hotel management and journalism could be made to discuss the impact of late-night shifts for women and the safety concerns that they bring and engineering courses should highlight the lower percentage of women students, and discuss how professions have been stereotyped as per gender. In addressing the gender gap in science and technology, educators could distribute to students articles from professional journals written by female researchers.

Outcomes of the Strategies

As a result of the strategies adopted to promote gender sensitization and gender equality, a significant, though not sufficient, progress in the advancement of women has been witnessed in the past twenty years. According to a report of the All India Survey on Higher Education (2016-17), total enrolment in Higher Education has been estimated to be 35.7 million, with 19 million boys and 16.7 million girls. Girls constitute 46.8% of the total enrolment. Gender gap in institutes of higher studies has reduced by nine lakhs in the last five years. There are 15 universities exclusively for girls. 67 Women's Studies Centres have been established in various universities and colleges in the country from the period of the VIII Plan to the current year, a major achievement for the women's movement in India. Vocational training centres were set up for developing women's skills in various fields. Women studies has gained an academic stature and developed theories based on the realities of women's lives. Efforts are being made for the empowerment of highly qualified women in the fields of research, training, advocacy, networking etc. Number of women in various professional fields are increasing steadily.

II. CONCLUSION

Gender equality is still considered a women's issue in our society. Many of the older assumptions about women and men in our society haven't really changed that much. Women are still not represented well in many aspects of public life – in politics, boardrooms, media and in science and technology. Outdated assumptions about men's role are often prevalent. Change is essential for the next generation to thrive. It is important to increase awareness that gender equality is not a women's issue, but a human and societal issue. It is high time to discard orthodox beliefs and biased values and promote more enlightened attitudes towards highly educated women whose qualifications entitle them to career fulfilment and who - as the principal or equal salary earner – require appropriate support in the management of personal and professional duties. UNESCO recognizes that gender norms do not change overnight. That is why the organisation remains committed to providing a platform to bring countries together to learn, share and advocate for more gender responsive education. If the Government policy stresses the importance of gender sensitization, educational institutions should also give due importance to it in all policy outlining quality education. A change in the perception and mode of interaction is the need of the hour. For an effective and efficient implementation of policies and programmes individuals need to be more open-minded, rational and unbiased in their thoughts and actions. Mun Yee Lee rightly says, "Gender equality will remain a distant reality unless stakeholders in respective countries take committed actions"⁶. The stakeholders of education must realise it their duty to inculcate gender sensitivity in students and create gender friendly environment in the campus that will help in building a rational, equal and inclusive society.

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