Prospective teachers’ perception of gender roles education and stereotypes

ABSTRACT

The education system does not exist in isolation from the society within which it was created. The hierarchies deeply ingrained within Indian society just as well influence the education system within it, too – one of such hierarchy that influences the system greatly is that of gender discrimination. The question to be asked is how far these hierarchies influence education – that is, whether our prospective teachers who are being sensitised on gender based issues are, in reality, getting sensitised to the extent of acquiring gender neutral perspective. The present study was planned to seek an answer to this question. The present study was qualitative in nature, pursued through an open ended questionnaire and brainstorming session. The sample of the study consisted of the 183 prospective teachers pursuing B.Ed during three consecutive academic sessions (2016-19). In terms of nativity, the prospective teachers under reference hailed from West Bengal, Jharkhand, U.P and Bihar. It was found that the prospective (male) teacher’s perception of the opposite gender as evident from the noted traits or characteristics is demonstrative of the socially nurtured attitude, and is carried forward even after completing educational program up to and even beyond the graduation level, that is, even after receiving the gender sensitization related education. The teachers training programmes only rarely provide the opportunity to learn practical tools for rectifying inequalities in the classroom for all students. The results of the study indicate the need to include gender mainstreaming, the consideration of the social dimension, into university curricula. There is an urgent need to incorporate critical feminist pedagogy in teacher education so that our prospective teachers will be gender sensitive and promote gender sensitization.

Key words: Gender discrimination, gender stereotypes, critical feminist pedagogy, teacher education.

INTRODUCTION

In accordance with its position as one of the significant and imperative constituent units of the social system, education has multiple roles to play both for individuals, in particular and the society, in general. Education and education system are instrumental in the maintenance of the existing orders and promoting development oriented change. Being a crucial player in the education system, the teacher is expected to lead and guide students on the path of knowledge acquisition and wisdom. Teacher’s education plan aims at preparing teachers to work in the existing educational system which seeks to enhance and strengthen the ideas of equality and equal opportunity and smashing parochial mindset that shelters caste, creed and gender centric discrimination. Gender sensitivity has now become a buzzword in education and, one may notice no dearth of lip service. Yet at grassroots level, safety of girl students cannot be taken for granted even in schools, much less in the open world. It is extremely painful and shameful to recall the reported incidents in which the teachers and principals themselves sexually assaulted their own minor girl students.

Gender awareness and sensitivity necessitate intellectual
understanding and open-mindedness to change one's views and restrictive perspectives and values. "Gender sensitivity is not about pitting women against men. On the contrary, education that is gender sensitive benefits members of both sexes. It helps them determine which assumptions in matters of gender are valid and which are stereotyped generalizations" (UNESCO 2004).

Gender sensitivity opens up the widest possible range of life options for both women and men and builds their capacities to be more wholesome and humane. Teacher is the only person who inculcates these required values collectively in future generations. The Teacher Education, therefore, includes education for gender awareness, gender equality, human rights, cultural diversity, intercultural and international understanding, and much more. It is also a reality that the gender equality concern in and through education, especially in classroom spaces, is critical because of the negative and far-reaching implications that gender disparities and inequities (reflected through biases, stereotypes and discriminatory practices) have for educational interventions. Undoubtedly education is a foremost force that may help set off change but this may occur only if the teachers and learners are assisted in adopting classroom initiatives that reflect new images based on a positive gender equity ideology. Gender equality as a strategy has great potential to create desired change because it has the capacity to address both 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 to achieve gender equality, especially through what they teach, how they teach and how they role model their own attitudes, beliefs and practices in the classroom and beyond. Indeed, teachers do not come into classrooms as gender-neutral persons. In all likelihood, they might have internalized a patriarchal gender ideology and/or ideas through their upbringing and years of socialization, in both formal and informal settings. Impact of teachers' patriarchal worldviews that infiltrates into educational institutions and comes to operate as hidden curriculum is oftentimes as influential in classrooms as the official curriculum. Frequently, it is the hidden curriculum which provides sustenance to gender differentiated practices, procedures and processes occurring in classroom spaces and school structures even where gender-friendly policies and curricula already exist.

The role of the teacher in the educational process is very vital and crucial. He/she influences the students by what he/she says and does. The teachers’ attitudes towards the pupils are important for pupil growth. The students are influenced by the teacher’s behaviour, approaches and attitudes. Each and every word uttered by them or gesture they make is absorbed by the students, who in turn apply them when they deal with others in society, for years to come. “The education system does not function in isolation from the society of which it is a part. Hierarchies of caste, economic status and gender relations that characterize Indian society also deeply influence access to education and participation of children in school"(National Curriculum Framework, 2005). One major hierarchy that is being perpetuated and reinforced in schools is of gender discrimination. The important question that arises here is whether our prospective teachers who are being sensitised on gender based issues are, in reality, getting sensitised to the extent of acquiring gender neutral perspective. The present study was planned to seek answer to this question.

Research problem and questions

Gender inequality is a challenge that is as old as India; girls and boys have received differential treatment in their homes, in schools and workplaces.

Does the gender inequality have any bearing on crimes against women, particularly so as the crime is on the rise? The question comes up mainly because the crime against women are on the rise—“34,651 cases of rape, 4,437 attempted rapes, 59,277 kidnappings and abductions, 7,634 dowry deaths, and 1,13,403 incidents of domestic cruelty have been reported and registered in India in one year alone” (National Crime Records Bureau, 2017). The statistics being so staggering, the problem cannot be regarded in isolation anymore.

On the brighter side of the painful scenario, the Ministry of Women and Child Development introduced a National Policy for Women 2016. The Policy envisages some new promises such as providing supportive environment in schools and colleges through a responsive complaint mechanism to address discriminatory attitude within the organization, particularly action based response on the issue of sexual harassment. The policy requires schools and colleges to act in a more gender sensitive manner. In this regard, the NCTE has also introduced a paper, titled Gender, School and Society that seeks to sensitise B.Ed, level students in the teachers education institutions. In the context of National Policy for Women 2016 and the NCTE's steps, one may like to know if the efforts have met with success. The degree of success may be gauged by examining the status of gender sensitivity among the prospective teachers.

In consideration of the above stated issues and premises, the researchers sought to explore answers related to the following:

- What is the status of gender sensitisation among the prospective male teachers towards their female counterparts? Is the gender sensitization appropriate?
- What hangovers and stereotypes have been shaping attitude of prospective male teachers towards their female counterparts?
- What remedial, corrective and preventive measures may be introduced in teacher education programs for gender sensitization?
METHODOLOGY

The intent of the present study was to seek a wholesome view of the gender sensitivity among the prospective teachers engaged in B.Ed program of study in regular mode.

Method and sample

The present study was qualitative in nature, pursued through an open ended questionnaire and brainstorming session. Most of the data were collected in literary form, that is, in words rather than in numbers. The sample of the study consisted of the 183 prospective teachers pursuing B.Ed during three consecutive academic sessions (2016-2019), at the College of Teacher Education (Bhopal), Maulana Azad National Urdu University (Hyderabad). In terms of nativity, the prospective teachers under reference hailed from West Bengal Jharkhand, U.P and Bihar.

Tools and data collection

With the research questions in mind, the researcher framed an open-ended questionnaire seeking the views, perceptions, attitudes towards opposite gender. After filling up the questionnaire, brainstorming and focus group discussion were conducted with the prospective teachers. In the process of data collection, teachers were motivated to speak their heart freely, fairly and frankly.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Having adopted qualitative method, a survey was conducted among the prospective teachers of College of Teacher Education (Bhopal), Maulana Azad National Urdu University (Hyderabad) with the above stated objectives in mind. The first objective of the study was to ascertain the status and appropriateness of gender sensitisation among the prospective male teachers towards their female counterparts. The Qualitative methodologies adopted for identifying the level of gender sensitization consisted of prospective teacher’s experiences, perception, opinions, attitudes and feelings. The researcher made query such as what qualities generally a woman has; what are the constraints or advantages of women working in the informal sector, male and female’s views on the causes and consequences of underrepresentation of women in higher positions, etc. Other than that, the participatory methodologies such as focus group discussions and social mapping tools were used to collect data for qualitative indicators.

Intense data analysis showed that most of the prospective teachers happened to be first generation learners. Out of 183 students only two’s mothers were working, as school teachers. Social mapping tools showed that their sisters had been married in early age. In the brainstorming session, the very first question asked was that once they came across an instant reference to man and woman, what qualities or characteristics usually flashed in their mind in regards to male and female. Beauty, fragile, emotional, cunning, timid, work shirks, self-centred, spend thrifts, lazy, talkative, gossip, selfish, less intelligent, short-sighted and shrewd like traits were the male prospective teachers’ off the cuff observations. Interestingly, the group did not mention even a single positive trait for women. On the contrary, the group came out for the men with such traits as strong, intelligent, sober, liar, visionary, emotionally stable, brave, courageous, handsome, sensitive, caring, aggressive and bold. The female representation in the group being only four percent was proportionately too less to be proactive or assertive. Therefore the females looked almost suppressed and unable to raise their voice.

The prospective (male) teacher’s perception of the opposite gender as evident from the noted traits or characteristics is demonstrative of the socially nurtured attitude, as carried forward even after completing educational program up to and even beyond the graduation level. As regards the marital status, the prospective teachers were with few exceptions all unmarried and none was educated in any co-educational institution. Their interaction with the females was predominantly confined to their respective mothers, sisters and other female inmates of the family. Moreover, researcher asked a direct question if their mothers and sisters were lazy, cunning, selfish, and shrewd but got deafening silence by way of answer. Did the affection and regard for one’s own family from volunteering facts or it was the double attitude one for self and the other for general or other females that made them shy to come out with truth. Anyway, it is contended that gender inequality is profoundly inseminated in the norms, decision-making processes, power embodiment manners, rules, unwritten cultures, and resource allocations of institutions (Unhalter, 2005). Teachers are one of the bodies where these inequalities are observable in the most concrete way.

Similarly, Wijewardene (2016) found that “higher education and wider exposure to the outside world through information technology and social media have not changed the mindset of university students on perception of gender role for women. It was found in his study that nearly half the sample (48.3%) condoned verbal abuse of wives. However, more than 78% of students did not condone physical abuse of their mother (by the father), girlfriend or wife”.

On female employment, the prospective male teachers did not favour women’s entry into job market. They opined that woman acquire job at the cost of man and, thereby lead to unemployment of more men. The male members have a simplistic equation: more females in the job market mean
more unemployment for men.

In terms of male and female's familial job value, the prospective male teachers treated female employment dissimilar from male employment. To them, the job for a man meant bread earning for the family whereas for woman it meant to be lavish and spend thrift. They consider upward movement of the sex related crime graph as the consequence of the females increasing presence in the job market. Two prospective teachers opined that overall body make up and temperament of the female is in natural way meant for household work. Feminist always misled and continuously misleading today's women and our women aping men in every aspect in irrational way.

A number of prospective male teachers wanted the female to confine themselves to the domestic world and play the role the (tradition ridden) society has assigned to her since ancient times. Whilst gender roles and stereotypes to many, may seem more or less nonexistent in the present day culture, in fact they are still prevalent registering considerable impact on the contemporary and future generations. The stereotyped gender centric perceptions set limits on personality and mental health awareness, and even affect the ways of building and maintaining family life.

The teachers training programmes only rarely provide the opportunity to learn practical tools for rectifying inequalities in the classroom for all students. The results of study indicate the “need to include gender mainstreaming, taking into consideration social dimension, into university curricula. Change of attitudes of young men towards gender equity and equality is imperative for the society to move forward progressively providing equal opportunities for women to work and to reduce verbal and physical abuse of women” (Wijewardene, 2016).

There is a well felt need to incorporate “critical feminist pedagogy which is concerned with how education creates and entrenches existing structures of power and seeks to provide practical tools for redressing inequality both within the classroom and in society at large. Critical pedagogy seeks to investigate the ways education creates and enforces class division under capitalism. Feminist critical pedagogy additionally seeks to explore how gender inequality is perpetuated through educational systems and offers libratory, educational alternatives that endeavour to create social change” (Shor and Freire, 1990). “Feminism offers a lens that allows us to analyze and understand phenomena in the social world through recognizing the hierarchical nature of gender under patriarchy” (Kenway and Modra, 1992). “Feminist critical pedagogy therefore seeks to explore how the marginalization and “othering” (De Beauvoir, 2001) of women takes place through specific educational practices, such as gender bias ridden curricula, hidden and overt messages given to students and the effect of instruction style on boys and girls. Feminist critical pedagogy seeks to promote equality between different groups in society through education and expose the mechanisms in education that marginalize certain groups. It confronts educational institutions with questions such as: what (hierarchical) hidden forces of discrimination continue to act against children from different backgrounds? How can they be transformed? What is the overt or covert impact of the social structure and power hierarchy in our educational institutions? What kind of hidden or covert messages does our curriculum convey? In what ways do hegemonic forces continue to control the atmosphere in the school and the content of the curriculum? Whose voices are absent from our curricula? Whose interests are served by our educational system and the dominant discourses of education that it reflects?”

“The role of schools in perpetuating unequal social, cultural, political, and economic realities is a central theme of critical and feminist theorists who agree that schools serve the power of dominant ideologies and beliefs” (e.g., Apple, 1990; Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Freire, 1973; Giroux, 1988a, 1988b; Goodman, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1992; Lather, 1984, 1991; Shor and Freire, 1987; Weiler, 1988). “A critical perspective problematizes the institutionalization of the dominant beliefs and interests that control and determine social relationships and the teaching/learning process. Schools may reproduce socioeconomic interests through ideological messages embedded in the organizational structure of colleges, universities, and schools” (e.g., Bowles and Gintis, 1976).

“There are two central orientations in critical pedagogy. The first orientation, demonstrated in the research of Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren, emphasizes a vision of social change reflected in educational practice. The second orientation, which is demonstrated by Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, emphasizes changes to methods of instruction in specific contexts. Similarly, feminist critical pedagogy can be divided into two streams, one that focuses on feminist theory and its application to education and another that focuses specifically on methods of teaching. The first stream emerged from Women's Studies departments while the second emerged in the study of education” (Gore, 1992). The issue of ‘Gender Equality’ remains one of the prime importance in present times. This has been highlighted by the 2015 Global Monitoring Report – Education for All 2000–2015: Achievements and Challenges by UNESCO. It has been cited that India has made significant progress in fulfilling the human development goals, specifically in universalizing primary education and gender parity in schools since 2000. However, the gender equality in schools still remains an issue to be focused upon.

Conclusions

Gender-based violence and harassment are quite common in schools and colleges and these practices create a negative institutional culture and environment. Women and
men, who are harassed, either the staff or students, experience a negative working and learning environment. There is urgent need to incorporate critical feminist pedagogy in teacher education so that our prospective teachers would be gender sensitive and promote gender sensitization.

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