

Some Reflections on Education and Gender Bias: A Need for Reality Check

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ABSTRACT

Education as a human right is instrumental in catering to and harmonizing individual development with social good. But as a matter of fact even today education is not free from gender bias as text books and curriculum consciously tend to promote patriarchal values, ideologies that encourage stereotyping of roles and models causing serious challenge to the implementation of gender equity and gender mainstreaming. This in my view is a serious matter of concern and thus calls for an urgent need for a reality check to explore the deeper understanding of ultimate aim of education in achieving sustainable development for all.

Keywords: Education, Gender bias, stereotypes, , sustainable development

Kofi Annan, the former Secretary General of the United Nations in one of his speeches once had stated that education is a human right with immense power to transform. On its foundation rest the cornerstones of freedom, democracy and sustainable human development. Such observation makes us clearly understand that despite there being conflicting educational philosophies, education is basically perceived as a process of initiating learners into a form of life that is desirable for both an individual and the society. Thus, harmonizing individual development with social good is well recognized as the ultimate goal of education.

Now it is often argued that individual development can never take place unless a person's needs, interests and abilities are naturally modified and integrated through self-expression which should also take into account one's lived experiences.

Social psychologists would agree that bringing about social good necessarily requires conscious, critical and purposive adaptation to and appropriation of social heredity. As every individual's lived experiences occur against a social setting, therefore, individual's development is greatly impacted by the process of socialization. It is exactly at this point, I think, one needs to explore why and how education which is meant to cater to individual empowerment as well as social progress is still facing serious challenges.

In my present submission, I intend to discuss that although women like their male counterparts have access to formal education more freely and frequently than earlier days, however, education itself is not free from gender bias. Truly speaking, studies and researches across the globe reveal that although ratio may vary between developed and developing countries, yet womenfolk all over the world are still considered as the weaker section of a society. Even today they are forced to adapt to patriarchal patterns of social leaving, social tradition and social morality. Education as a formal discipline plays a vital role in this regard. That is why education promoting patriarchal values and ideologies are taken for granted as a

common practice. These are rarely criticized as questioning them would expose the demerits inherently built into patriarchy itself.

Now this being the hard core reality the idea of empowering or emancipating individuals and particularly women through education seems to be a distant dream to me and thus calls for urgent reality check. Here I would like to share some of my thoughts on this matter. In my opinion such a discussion has a direct bearing on a deeper understanding and far-reaching consequences pertaining to ultimate aim of education precisely what kind of people do we aim to become after such education is imparted on us?

Stating some instances might help to understand the issue better. I will begin with an observation made by University Education Commission headed by Dr Radhakrishnan in (1969) which advocated that although the members (all males) of commission held that a mother who is inquiring, alert, well informed and is familiar with subjects like history and literature, who lives and works with her children at home will be the best teacher in the world of both character and intelligence. Since the members of the commission glorified the perception of wife-mother role of a woman in shaping well ordered men, therefore they were inspired to emphasize that education of a male and female should not be identical in all things. Higher education would force obstacle in her preparation for home-making which was viewed to be a woman's primary role. Then also urged that education should aim at equipping women with special skills for home-making. Hence, formalizing public-private dichotomy played a very important role in educational policies during that time. However I feel such a mind-set still prevails not only in India but in every nook of the world as well. Even in the post-modern world modern woman is highly suppressed and needs opportunities for self expression. This throws light on the fact that though women are entitled to education yet even today society at large is ambivalent about the kind of education to be deemed appropriate for women. Alka Kumar in an article rightly points out that the inherent power structure determining social exclusion or inclusion policy have crucial significant roll to play in preparing educational curriculum in so far as women education is concerned. Teachers prepare lessons based on text books while students view text books as a framework or guide. Therefore, they may get easily influenced by the thoughts and opinions stated in a textbook. For example, nursery rhymes and stories that students read in school relegate them to well defined and mutually exclusive social spaces. Gender bias in text books forms a stereo-typical male - female character thinking model, family role which eventually affect students gender consciousness. In this context, I am tempted to cite an instance which came as a case study regarding toys used as teaching tool in America. It was published in The New York Times in 2000. Laura Kramer in the book entitled "Sociology of Gender" discussed that The Mattel Corporation launched two computer models which did not simply differ in appearance but also the one meant for girls known as Barbie Model was not equipped with all educational software present in Hot wheels model that was meant for educating boys. The traditional male female personality traits depiction does not favor students to cultivate healthy personality traits. Text books even consist of stereotypes on gender thinking model which reveal that females are better at expressing emotions and taking care of family members while males are better suited to outside activities requiring physical fitness and development of rational cognitive faculties. Feminist philosophers argue that such mind-set and gender specific roles tend to teach boys aggressiveness as masculine value that over time inspire them to be exploitative and dominating in nature. Stereotyping and distorting female images in text books also restrain female roles to certain specific fields alone. Further more, text books often adopt visual images as key players for interpretations. Illustrations contained in textbooks provide children with resources that expand their world, connect them to societal values and help them define who they are. For example history books as the name of the discipline goes puts up sole narratives

of men; depicts the glory of male emperors and reformers. Contributions made by women in the field of discovery, reforms etc over the ages never received attention of male historians as if women did not exist at all.

Now we must not forget that though gender is innate, gender roles are however learned. The absence of adequate female images and role models in history and science text books make girl students believe that only men can make substantial contributions to society thus impairs confidence level in female students. Moreover this might conflict with social and family environment which however seek to promote and attach importance of gender equity and gender mainstreaming.

Even after coming a long way since our independence things continue to be the same all over the world and especially in India. Such ideology still dominate patriarchal social psyche so rigidly that women happily continue to be under represented in mathematics, engineering, science and technology, defence studies as their cognitive faculties are shaped in such a way that female students are made to believe that these disciplines are best suited for male occupation. Therefore, they unconsciously come to terms to the misconception that they have no other option but making traditional career choices. However in this context, it is also worth- mentioning that such 'stereotyping' also make male students the hidden victims of gender bias. Wrong perceptions and policies make men's lives miserable too as 'idea of masculinity' comes to them with loads of burden. For example men are ridiculed for taking up dance or cooking as profession which are deemed as 'feminine' by the 'patriarchal society'. Moreover, even in today's competitive world, pursuing career is still optional for girls whereas the socially constructed meaning of the term 'masculinity' involves the very false idea of self-sufficiency. This makes it immensely difficult for boys to abandon such gender culture resulting in strengthening of the 'circular effect' of gender bias. Having said all that, in my final analysis, I would like to draw attention of my readers to the fact that several researches and feminist study reveal that such ideologies are based on patriarchal assumptions regarding differences between the sexes, personality traits, intellectual abilities and behaviour patterns. All these are basically products of social treatment which can thus be reassessed and replaced by alternative ideas and ideologies. The father of metaphysical poetry John Donne had rightly pointed out that no man should be perceived as an island entire of itself. Truly speaking, every man is a part of the main. Keeping in mind that line of thought, I, hence, propose that the need of the hour is that special care should be taken in preparing text books. School curriculum should aim at implementing gender equity and gender mainstreaming. Educational models should be designed to inculcate democratic and humane values in children. Last but not the least, adopting a holistic approach towards life itself is also indispensable for facilitating an intelligent and considerate exercise of our will so as to ensure a harmonious and sustainable living.

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