

Gender Bias in School Curriculum Curbs Girls' Career Aspirations

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Abstract: *The progressive growth of nation happens when the nation utilises the potential of men and women equally. In such an optimum 'social climate' economies grow faster, children's health improves and everybody can realize and accomplish their individual capabilities. But unfortunately the deep rooted patriarchal convictions and traditional stereotypes predefine their roles in society, restrict their freedom and sets limits to girls career expectations. In our school gender bias is cultivated through micro aspects. "Sitting in the same classroom, reading the same textbook, listening to the same teacher, boys and girls receive very different educations." (Sadker, 1994). The harmful effects of gender bias and differential treatment on girls' self-esteem, self-confidence, and achievement have been the focus of serious research discourse (Streitmatter, 1994; Wellhousen & Yin, 1997, Sadker, 1999; Bauer, 2000). This research effort highlights on the perception of students on gender bias in the existing curriculum and the influence of teachers' attitude on students' gender identity specifically on girls' career aspirations. The study was used both quantitative and qualitative design like survey and case study approach. Data were collected through questionnaire, classroom observation and Focus Group Discussion Sessions (FGDS) with teachers and students. The results of the study showed that gender bias existed in school curriculum and it led to the curbing of girls' future career aspirations. Hence the study would provide an insight to reform the existing curriculum in tune with the changing demands of the progressive and egalitarian society.*

Keywords: *Career aspirations, Gender bias, Gendered practices, Gender Stereotypes, Gender socialization, Hidden curriculum.*

I. Introduction

Education is the potential instrument to empower women with knowledge, life opportunity, self confidence and skill that are imperative for a country's social and economic development. When our country utilizes the potential of men and women equally then economies grow faster, children's health improves and everybody can realize their individual capabilities. But unfortunately the deep rooted patriarchal convictions and traditional stereotypes predefine their roles in society, restrict their freedom and sets limits to girls expectations. Some researchers raised their concerns about Gender bias in schools system, gender stereotyped career choices, academic achievement, and stereotyped representation of women in textbooks in western countries (Leder, 1992; Watt & Bornholt, 1994; Powell, *et.al.* 2002; UNESCO 2004; White & White, 2006). The schooling system of Kerala too reinforces these traditional convictions and stereotypes through its gendered curriculum. To what extent this gendering act as a precursor on the career aspiration of girls is an interesting question? The appropriate way to address this issue is to analyse the perception of the students themselves. Hence the paper highlights the perception of students on gender bias in the existing curriculum and the influence of teachers' attitude on students' gender identity specifically on girls' career aspirations. The results of the study will provide an insight to reform the existing curriculum in tune with the changing demands of society.

II. Method

2.1 Participants and procedures

The research study used both quantitative and qualitative research paradigm. The first part of the research study used quantitative survey by using structured questionnaire. Participants of this study are 200 secondary school students and 20 teachers from different secondary schools of Malappuram district in Kerala. A survey (using questionnaire) designed to collect data in relation to the extent, pattern and nature of gendered practices in the school curriculum. Percentage analysis was used to analyse the perception. The second part comprised of qualitative approach emphasized on the Focus Group Discussion (FGDS) to explore the influence of teachers' attitude on students' gender identity specifically on girls' career aspirations. The data were collected through interviews which was recorded by smart phone and later transcribed. Classroom observation was made using field notes, the researcher was a participant observer who interacted with them for two months and observed their verbal and visual behavior and noted physical features during

lessons. Classroom interactions were not recorded since doing so would cause unpredictable effects on participants (Odimegwu, 2000).

Data were analyzed by using Discourse analysis. Here the participants' conversations and interaction patterns emerged from FGDS and classroom observations were analyzed. Discourse analysis is a qualitative research method in which ideological effects of language constructions and how texts contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation (Foucault, 2006). In this study it was used as a lens to explore the gender biases in the schools of Malappuram District in Kerala and how the ideological biases embedded in the curriculum affect girls' career aspirations when they pursue higher education as per their perception.

III. Results and discussion

Students' perceptions about gender bias in the existing curriculum were analysed. The questions were primarily asked about whether the teachers and the instructional material in schools perpetuate gender bias. Table 1 shows students' views on gender bias in schools in percentages.

Table 1 : Students perception on gender bias in curriculum

SlNo.	Gender bias in curriculum	Agree(%)	Disagree(%)
1	Equal importance to the experiences of men and women in classrooms	38	62
2	Teachers encourage boys more than girls while conducting debates	52	48
3	Select boys more than girls as group leader when conducting group activities	67	33
4	Teachers provide guidance and encouragement to both genders in Mathematics, Science and ICT	44	56
5	Provide adequate support to both genders to participate in classroom interactions	42	58

To explore students' perception about gender bias in school curriculum the classroom observation along with structured questionnaire was employed. The questionnaire consists of questions related to the interaction of teachers in classroom, group activities and teachers' encouragement in the whole school activities. The first question was related to the teachers' classroom instruction, i.e. whether the teachers give equal attention in sharing men's and women's life experiences in classroom while transacting content in the classrooms. Table 1 show that 62 percent of students disagree with the question because most teachers are unaware about gender equality while presenting the content in classrooms. In group activities especially in debates 52 percent students accepted that teachers encouraged boys in debates and discussions, hence boys tried to dominate over girls thereby girls got little attention in classroom activities. Some research finding is also in consistent with the point that the boys try to dominate in classroom activities and enjoy scientific experiments more than girls (Jacobi, 1991; Francis, 2000). 67 % students agreed that teachers selecting boys as leader in group activities than girls. Consistent studies also claim that girls are more conscientious and present a higher standard of work than boys (Barber, 1996). Hence it was found that school in general reinforces gender bias and discriminatory practices against girl through various activities in schools.

Table II: Student's perception on gender bias related to Instructional Materials

Sl No.	Instructional Materials	Agree	Disagree
1	The topics in the learning materials fulfill the needs of boys and girls	60.5	39.5
2	Textbooks depict men and women in traditional roles	37	63
3	Images, examples in textbooks prefer men than women	48	52
4	Textbook language perpetuate gender bias	24.5	75.5
5	Learning experiences in textbook restrict girls' freedom	6.5	93.5

Table II shows students' perception of gender bias in the textbooks. Most of the research in this area shows that instructional materials dominated by the stories, images, examples, voices of men than women. In western countries and some states of India too experience females under representation and men's domination in the textbooks. This observation was consistent with the studies identified. Erinosh (1997) analyzed 76 science textbooks and reported great disparity in gender representation. Of the 2995 pictorial illustrations 63.2% were of male while 36.8% were of female. Of the A total of 13,506 generic words (noun/pronoun) found in the textbooks, (10211, 75.6%) were male and (3296, 24.4%) were female.

The present study furnish an enlighten vision about gender sensitization by representing men and women equally in the instructional materials. Kerala's education performance has been so impressive that it could receive the distinctive acclamation as the 'Kerala model'; and some recommend Keralization of the whole education system in India (Lewis, 1997). The recommendation of NCF 2005 regarding rewriting of textbooks to remove gender bias was fully accepted by the state. Majority of the students (60.5%) revealed that topics in the textbooks cater to the needs of both gender. Only 37 percent students agreed that textbooks depict men as engineers, doctors, pilots, and lawyers, where as women are represented as teachers, housewives, nurse etc. 63% of them disagree with this statement. The language, images, illustrations of textbooks are all free from

gender bias. This is a remarkable feature of Kerala school system as an outward signs of the infusion of curricular principles of NCF 2005.

IV. The Gendered Practices Curbing Girls Career Aspirations

In order to gather information on whether teachers' attitudes and expectations influence girls career choices, the investigator used classroom observations and FGDS. The gathered data is scrutinized through Discourse Analysis.

Case I

From the analysis it was revealed that some teachers assign tasks to girls and boys on the basis of their gender. The classroom observations clearly disclosed that teachers unconsciously perpetuate gender bias by clearly defining gender appropriate roles to girls and boys. In classrooms teachers assign duties the tasks like sweeping, preparing tea, cleaning etc to girls. Whereas boys were encouraged to do tasks like going outside to purchase something, maintaining classroom discipline etc.

Case II

Many teachers promoted girls to join activities like cookery, dance, drama, mehendi design and stitching etc. as a part of their co-curricular activities. They encouraged boys to do activities which are apparently masculine tasks like boxing, karate, gymnastics, judo, aerobics etc. These findings are in consistent with Walkerdine's content that the school as a structure serve to engender and reinforce society's gender polarized role expectations and career aspirations for children (Walkerdine, 2006). This clearly indicated that teachers being an agent of social transformation unknowingly reinforce the gender discrimination which is already prevailing in the society.

Case III

From observation and FGDS it was emerged that teachers have a strong traditional stereotypical notion about gender identity. Because they thought that mathematics and science are masculine subject areas, as is technology. Humanities and languages tend to be associated with femininity. This gendering of particular curriculum subjects directly sets limits to girls' career aspirations. Due to this prejudiced idea about girls, they are not ready to take subjects like Mathematics, science, IT when they pursue plus two courses. Because girls think that learning these difficult subjects is not suitable to them, because their roles are already predetermined and clearly defined by the patriarchal society.

Case IV

The classroom observation and interview with teachers revealed that the hidden curriculum in school restricts the choices of girls. The formal curriculum did not clearly discriminate between boys and girls but the hidden curriculum reinforces stereotyped notion of gender identity through the process of gender socialization. These findings were also confirmed with the school curriculum provides differential messages to girls and boys, schooling fails to afford girls opportunities for competing on an equal footing with their male counterparts and influences educational career aspirations and choices (Burrow, 2005).

V Conclusion

To the crucial issue whether our schools perpetuating gender bias through this study it was found that school perpetuates gender bias among students through a gendered curriculum. The textbooks in schools of kerala are purely gender sensitive when compared with that in other states in India. The paper throws light on how the teachers stereotyped traditional gender identity induces girls' career aspirations and prospects. The findings of the study also attest the view that school, as one of the modern apparatuses of social regulation, not only defines what to teach but also defines and regulates both what a girl or boy is and how learning and teaching are to be conditioned for him or her. Hence it was revealed that the attitude and expectation of teachers about gender identity needs to be changed and some measures need to be taken to deconstruct the gender role stereotypes, ideas and values embedded in the school system. The curriculum must be reframed in a gender sensitive manner and it should empower the girl child to fulfill her career aspirations.

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