



## GENDER SENSITIVITY: A PRERQUISITE FOR TEACHERS IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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### **Abstract**

Schools have the potential of playing a transformative role in changing the prevalent patriarchal notions and unequal gender relations. But very often classrooms serve as key social and cultural spaces for the production of a range of gendered performances and relations. The teacher has the key role to provide a safe and gender friendly space for boys and girls to express themselves and simultaneously develop notions of gender justice among students. A study was conducted to analyse the perceptions of teachers about gender equality. Focus group discussion and interviews with teachers were used to collect the data. Interviews with 48 teachers- 24 male and 24 female, belonging to 24 schools in Malappuram and Thrissur districts of Kerala, 12 at primary and 12 at secondary levels revealed that majority of teachers lack gender awareness and the concept of gender and its implications are unknown to several of them. The findings of the study revealed that the perceptions of teachers are gendered with traditional concepts regarding gender roles of men and women and subject choices of girls and boys. Teachers though following the gendered practices do so without realizing that their behaviours are gendered. Gender equality according to a few teachers is only a utopian idea and some of them even declared 'men are men and women are only women'. Such statements highlight the extent to which they have internalized the notions of men as the norm and women as the inferior other. They accept and uphold the popular gender norms regarding masculinity and femininity and unknowingly transmit them to the future generations. Based on the findings of the study, the author suggests gender equality as a prerequisite for teachers to ensure gender sensitized pedagogic practices and classroom behaviours of teachers.

**Key words:** Perceptions of Teachers, Gender Equality, Gender Awareness, Dress Code of Girls, Seating Arrangements.



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### **Introduction**

Schools have the potential of playing a transformative role in changing the prevalent patriarchal notions and unequal gender relations. But very often classrooms serve as key social and cultural spaces for the production of a range of gendered performances and relations. Gender bias and discrimination in the education system pose serious implications to the nature and quality of education that boys and girls receive from the schools. The classrooms as well as the overall school climate play a significant role in developing values of gender justice in the growing minds. The teacher has a pivotal role in providing a safe and gender friendly space for boys and girls to express themselves and simultaneously develop notions of gender justice among students. According to Sadker and Sadker (1994) sitting in the same classroom, reading the same textbook, listening to the same teacher, boys and girls receive very different



education. Studies have revealed how gendered school experiences negatively impact upon girls' educational attainment (Sadker&Sadker, 1994; Younger & Warrington, 1996).

The approach and behavior of teachers vary with girls and boys. Teachers also have gendered perceptions regarding the achievement of students. Teachers' gendered interactions with students often reflect different teacher perceptions and expectations of boys and girls. Typically, teachers see boys as good at analytical thinking and girls as good at observing (Shepardson & Pizzini, 1992). Teachers' gendered perceptions of students' ability are also reflected in the type of praise and expectations they have of their students. Liu (2006) points out that teachers often give girls less meaningful and less critical praise than boys. Boys' work is described as unique or brilliant, while girls' work is often undervalued, critically ignored, and praised for its appearance. This aspect of teachers' behavior is particularly detrimental to girls because it means they do not receive feedback on their work that could help them develop deeper understandings of concepts (Liu, 2006). Girls' and boys' academic abilities and achievements continue to be differently interpreted. Recent research suggests that girls' high achievements continue to be undermined by their teachers as the result of 'hard work' or 'natural flair' (Renold, 2001), while boys' low achievement do not deter teachers from maintaining their academic potential (Maynard, 2002). Girls also continue to blame themselves and internalize failure in performance, and hide, downplay or deny rather than celebrate and improve upon their successes (Lucey & Reay, 2002; Renold, 2001). High-achieving girls, are also expected to continue their care-giving role as 'little helpers' and 'settlers' (as mini classroom assistants and pseudo-teachers) as the police boys' (naturally) disruptive behaviors and services their emotional needs and achievements (Francis, 1998; Thorne, 1993).

The teachers and educational administrators who are products of patriarchy are totally unaware of the need for gender equality and they happen to act as agents spreading patriarchal values (Kuruvilla, 2011).

### **Objective of the Study**

1. To assess the perceptions of teachers about gender equality

### **Methodology**

#### *Sample*

The sample consisted of 24 male and 24 female teachers selected using convenient sampling from 24 schools, 12 of them belonging to the primary level and the rest 12 to the high school level of Malappuram and Thrissur districts of Kerala state. Data was also collected from 48 teachers, i.e. 2 teachers from each primary and 2 from each secondary school by using the convenient sampling method. Teachers were selected by directly meeting them in the staff room, whoever were available and willing to share their perceptions and attitudes towards gender issues and experiences. Out of the total number of 48, 15 were males and 33 were females.

### **Tools and Data Collection Procedure**

#### **Focus Group Discussion**

Focus group discussion was employed as a pre-research tool to generate ideas on the role of schools as gendering agencies and to record the perceptions of teachers about the gendered practices followed in schools. For this, 20 teachers-both male and female, from a government high school in Malappuram district were selected as participants. The discussion was planned and the venue and time were fixed in consultation with the teachers well in advance. The school teachers were happy to share their perceptions, beliefs and assumptions on the gender issues and problems of students. An unstructured questionnaire was prepared to ensure validity and reliability of the data collected. The



questions were related to the roles and responsibilities assigned, interaction between opposite sex, mixed seating arrangement, mixed student grouping, dress code and academic assessment and performance of boys and girls in cocurricular activities. The main focus of the discussion was on how the school becomes a gender socialization agency in developing gender identities among children. The discussion lasted for an hour. The discussion was recorded using a digital voice recorder with prior permission of teachers.

The research scholar and the supervising teacher facilitated the focus group discussion. Two other members were also deputed to concentrate on noting down the discussion points in order to ensure effective and complete recording of the minute details. The teachers were very friendly and cooperative in conveying their assumptions, apprehensions and opinions regarding gender related issues in and around school.

### Interviews

An unstructured interview guide was used to collect data regarding perceptions of teachers regarding practices followed in schools, specifically with regard to the general rules and regulations of the school, roles and responsibilities assigned, play provisions, interaction of students with the opposite sex, seating arrangement, dress code, student grouping and achievement of students.

### Analysis and discussion

#### Perceptions of Teachers on Gender Equality

The data collected from interviews of the teachers regarding their perceptions on gendered practices in the school and gender roles of men and women in general was subjected to qualitative analysis. Teachers agree with the existence of differential practices for boys and girls with regard to their dress code, assignment of roles and responsibilities, seating arrangements, disciplinary practices, student grouping, and teacher-student interaction. The analysis also revealed that the perceptions of majority of teachers are gendered with traditional concepts regarding gender roles of men and women and subject choices of girls and boys. The results of analysis are discussed in detail below:

#### 1.a. Teacher Perceptions on Dress code

Teachers in general were found to support dress code, specifically of girl students even when it is not there in their schools. Two of the teachers from Muslim management schools opined that girls may enter any field or any job but they must strictly follow the religious instructions on dressing. The results are summarised in Table 1.

Table1

#### Teacher Perceptions on Dress Code

| Teacher Perceptions on Dress Code                                                              | Agree |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Girls need to care more about their dressing pattern                                           | 100%  |
| Dressing style is the main cause for violence against women                                    | 100%  |
| Girls should avoid wearing of tight dresses, which would invite unwanted attention and trouble | 100%  |



### I.b. Teacher Perceptions on Seating Arrangements

The present analysis shows that there is gender bias in teachers' perceptions regarding seating arrangements in the classrooms and are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

#### Teacher Perceptions on Seating Arrangements

| Teacher Perceptions on Seating Arrangements                                              | Agree |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Mixed seating is good to be followed at primary level only                               | 39%   |
| Mixed seating is good, because it reduces segregation or difference among boys and girls | 17%   |
| It facilitates classroom management                                                      | 15%   |
| Mixed seating is not good as it may lead to unfair relations among boys and girls.       | 44%   |

As per Table 2, 44% of the teachers, from both primary and secondary classes opined that they do not agree with the mixed seating in the classroom. According to them mixed seating is not good as it is not in our culture, girls reach maturity earlier than the boys and the touch and intimate contacts between boys and girls may lead to unwanted consequences at this tender age. Teachers, who agreed with mixed seating conveyed that this system would help to reduce gender segregation or difference between boys and girls and also would reduce the shyness of girls and promotes mingling between the opposite sex.

### I.c. Teacher Perceptions on Grouping of Students in Classroom Activities

Majority of teachers, both at primary (92%) and secondary (71%) levels except teachers of Muslim management schools in Malappuram district accept and agree with the mixed grouping in classroom activities. Most of the teachers conveyed that they do not follow the mixed grouping system because of the resistance from the PTA. The results are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3

#### Teacher Perceptions on Grouping of Students

| Teacher Perceptions on Grouping of Students   | Primary | Secondary |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------|-----------|
| Mixed grouping is good                        | 92%     | 71%       |
| Mixed grouping is not good and not encouraged | 8%      | 29%       |

### I.d. Teacher Perceptions on Teacher-Student Interactions

Majority of teachers at secondary level responded that both boys and girls are interactive in the classroom and some of them opined that boys are more interactive than girls in the classroom discussions. Regarding the attention given to students, 62% of teachers of secondary schools opined that they give more attention to boys in the classroom as boys are more restless than girls.



### **I.e. Teacher Perceptions on Interaction Between Boys and Girls**

Majority of teachers, both males and females were not in support of free mingling of adolescents with their opposite sex. According to them despite all the restrictions imposed they come across lots of issues including unfair relations and love affairs on a daily basis and the parents and teachers remain helpless in some cases. The influence of TV and misuse of mobiles and internet were also specified by majority of those who disagreed with too close interactions and contacts between adolescents of opposite sex.

### **I.f. Teacher Perceptions on Assignment of Roles and Responsibilities**

Above 65% of the teachers in the primary and secondary levels responded that they employ voting system for selecting the class leader and school leader. The rest of the teachers select class leaders based on the students' performance in the classroom. 30% of teachers at the secondary level opined that girls are reluctant to come forward to the leadership positions, but the teachers at primary level responded that there is no such difference at the primary level. All the teachers, both at the primary and secondary level opined that the girls are actively engaged in all the responsibilities assigned to them.

In assigning the responsibilities of classroom cleaning, 89% of teachers conveyed that they group the students separately dividing the responsibilities equally for boys and girls – to clean the girls' side by the girls and the boys' side by the boys. They also responded that majority of boys do not give seriousness to the cleaning responsibilities while girls do it with utmost sincerity.

But it was also found that majority of teachers despite dividing roles and responsibilities including that of classroom cleaning equally among boys and girls, still hold traditional gender role perceptions.

### **Discussion**

Teachers are of the opinion that there are gendered practices with regard to the dress code, assignment of roles and responsibilities, seating arrangements, disciplinary practices, student grouping, play provisions, academic assessment of students and teacher-student interaction. The analysis also revealed that the perceptions of teachers are gendered with traditional concepts regarding gender roles of men and women and subject choices of girls and boys.

Teachers in general were found to support dress code, specifically of girl students even when it is not there in their schools. Majority of them share the popular patriarchal notion that dressing style of girls provoke men and it may lead to sexual harassment and violence against them. Two of the teachers from Muslim management schools opined that girls may enter any field or any job but they must strictly follow the religious instructions on dressing.

Teachers, who agreed with mixed seating conveyed that this system would help to reduce gender segregation or difference between boys and girls and also would reduce the shyness of girls and promotes mingling between the opposite sex. All the teachers at the secondary level follow separate seating in their classrooms. When it comes to the primary level all the teachers except those in Muslim management and government schools follow mixed seating in their classrooms. 15% of the teachers responded that mixed seating is an effective method as a classroom management strategy. According to them this may reduce the unnecessary chats and talks among students during class time. Every time students are seated or lined up by gender, teachers are affirming that girls and boys should be treated differently. Majority of teachers, both males and females were not in support of free mingling of adolescents with their opposite sex. According to them despite all the restrictions imposed they come across lots of issues including unfair relations and love affairs on a daily basis and the parents and teachers remain helpless in some cases. The influence of TV and



misuse of mobiles and internet were also specified by majority of those who disagreed with too close interactions and contacts between adolescents of opposite sex. Only 35% of the teachers said that it is good that boys and girls become interactive, if restrictions are imposed on it, students may misuse it and this would lead to lots of issues in the schools as well as in their societal relations. They also opined that through these interactions girls may acquire will power and social skills along with reducing the gender difference and fear of mingling with boys at a later stage.

Media influence on adolescents is well studied. Instead of teaching them judicious use of media, whether it be watching TV or interacting in the social media, teachers argue about the fragility and vulnerability of adolescent boys and girls. Healthy interpersonal relationships need to be promoted with the vision of a gender just society where boys and girls men and women of all ages, coexist with mutual respect. Teachers seemed to be ineffective in meeting adolescent needs and handling their issues.

When different behaviors are tolerated for boys than for girls in accordance with the popular notion that 'boys will be boys', schools are perpetuating the oppression of females. Similar findings were obtained in the study of Dean et al. (2007) in their study on 'Role of Schooling in Constructing Gendered Identities' conducted in Karachi. Majority of teachers perceived that girls are obedient and docile, easily controllable while boys are disobedient, uncontrollable and more indisciplined in the classroom.

The findings of the present study are in agreement with the opinion of Renold (2001) that teachers have gendered perceptions and expectations regarding academic achievement of boys and girls and their academic abilities and achievements continue to be differently interpreted. Gender segregated mentality on students' academic performance and characteristics render boys and girls as polar opposites and encourage the construction of masculine and feminine identities. Similar findings were also obtained in the studies of Jha (2008), Dean et al. (2007) and Berekashvili (2012) according to whom the skills and talents of girls are underestimated, expectations about them are low and their behavior is restricted to stereotyped feminine roles.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

The teacher has the key role to provide a safe and gender friendly space for boys and girls to express themselves and simultaneously develop notions of gender justice among students. Expectations about teachers to become effective change agents for gender equality – inside reformers – will not be met unless teachers are supported and empowered to do this through the coordinated efforts of pre-service training institutions, providers of in-service training and ongoing professional development. Teacher education courses should take it seriously and devise special strategies to make prospective teachers engage in and understand the implications of gender and the need for including multifaceted gender issues in the curriculum.

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