

21. Gender Sensitization and Today's World

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Abstract :

Gender encompasses socially constructed and culturally based roles of women and men with a view to understand how unequal power relations between them are shaped and operated. Gender and its accompanying power relations are built in all institutions of society be it family, educational institutions, work place, religious systems, beliefs, norms etc. Gender relations do not operate in a social vacuum but are products of the ways in which institutions are organized and reconstituted. This paper explains the need of gender sensitization in today's world and following the process of gender sensitization programs we will be able to bring social change relating to women.

Keywords : Gender , Gender sensitization

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. Gender awareness requires not only intellectual understanding and effort but also sensitivity and open-mindedness to change one's views and limited perspectives and values. It opens up the widest possible range of life options for both women and men and builds their capacities to be more wholesome and humane.

Education is a major force that will help trigger change but this will occur only when 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. They are likely to have internalized a patriarchal gender ideology through their upbringing and years of socialization in both formal and informal settings. Teachers' patriarchal worldviews impact on the hidden curriculum that is often as influential in classrooms as the

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official curriculum. Frequently it is the hidden curriculum which ensures that gender differentiated practices, procedures and processes occur in classroom spaces and school structures where gender- friendly policies and curricula already exist ,

Gender is a construct that owes its creation to a number of social institutions. Some of these include family, educational institutions, judiciary, religion, etc. In recent times, the media has emerged as a powerful constitutive agent of gender-related ideas and notions. Before we look at the process of how gender is constructed let us briefly focus on the term 'gender'. Gender, unlike sex which is based on biological division and is specific in character, is more amorphous in nature and is subject to change with reference to context and time. That is why the concept of gender varies from context to context.

Gender is a political view of sex that is based on the binary division of male and female. This binary division apparently looks natural. The problem with this division, however, starts when one thing is considered inferior to the other which is regarded as superior. Meanings are assigned arbitrarily to objects and concepts. Apart from the literal or dictionary meaning of words, each word has certain connotations or associated meanings. These are constructed by society. The dominant groups in society assign positive meanings to what they do and negative meanings to what 'others' do. The construction of gender is largely done by dominant groups who assign roles and responsibilities and give opportunities to, and have expectations of, males and females —separately. For instance, it is society that suggests that girls should play with dolls and boys cannot and should not do so.

In this process of socialization, education and educational institutions play a central role. For instance, stereotypes pertaining to responsibilities, roles and opportunities, to which we are initially exposed in family settings, are endorsed at educational institutions. So schools are places where the socializing process is reinforced and given legitimacy and authenticity. The social knowledge relating to gender is constructed, validated and perpetuated by schools through textbooks, pedagogy skills, assessment and the academic milieu.

A considerable amount of research has been done on textbooks that represent female characters as weak, dependent and stereotypically shy, and confined to the home whereas the male characters are shown as strong, independent, innovative, outgoing and responsible for the outer world.

The 'authenticity' of the printed word in the shape of a textbook is further enhanced when these stereotypes are backed up and legitimized by the teacher in class. The assessment system approves of certain agreed upon answers and disapproves of non-conformity with fixed stereotypes. The school milieu also plays an important role in the formation of certain gender

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stereotypes. Thus schools are disseminating stereotypes favouring the patriarchal system in society.

A large number of families in the subcontinent still believe that there is no need to send girls to schools. Similarly, a sizable proportion of the population believes that girls should only be exposed to primary education. The argument given in favour of this, in our society, is that since girls need to be married off there is no need to send them for higher education. This attitude is changing somewhat though and we see a growing number of girls going to school.

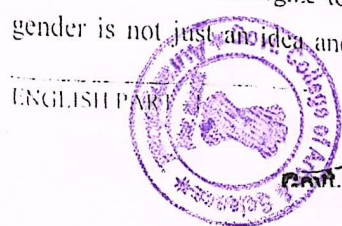
One problem still exists: a number of female professionals, i.e., medical doctors, engineers etc., after successful completion of their professional education do not work. One major reason is marriage which makes it difficult for them to pursue their profession. In most cases, it is because they are not allowed by their husbands to take up jobs. This goes back to our earlier discussion where women and men are viewed by society through the lens of gender where man is considered as responsible for the world outside and where the woman's role has been confined to the home.

Education, which has a strong link with power, has traditionally been a rare commodity for women. In Pakistan, we have seen long periods of silencing women and excluding them from modern education. That is why women have had to struggle hard to compete with men and create space for themselves in public life.

In some parts of the subcontinent, the exposure of girls to learning is still confined to religious education. Modern education, which is the key to economic independence, is denied to them. The control and hegemony enjoyed by men is largely linked to their role as breadwinners of the family. Economic independence is generally ensured by the acquisition of modern education.

Educational institutions have been engaged in perpetuating the existing social structures of power through the construction and legitimization of a skewed view of women. Even female students are led to internalize gender-biased views in schools. Thus education, that is supposed to emancipate human beings, is performing the opposite function by creating a tunnel vision among students. This tunnel vision is designed to favour the powerful and discredit marginalized groups. If we are serious about reducing the gender gap in society we need to revisit some popular stereotypes about women. For this, social institutions in general and schools in particular have to play their due role. We need to have a thorough review of textbooks, pedagogy skills, an assessment system and the school milieu, and address areas where improvement is needed.

While we strategize to reduce gender gaps in society, it is crucial to keep in view that gender is not just an idea and concept which should be dealt with only at a theoretical level.



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Besides being a concept, gender is a tangible factor in our behaviour. We make gender something real in our social interaction, through our attitudes and in practice. So the strategy should not be confined to theory alone, it should also be reflected in our daily life. For instance, it is not sufficient to include concepts of gender equality in the curriculum, it is also crucial that teachers show by example that they genuinely believe in gender equality. The fact is that a majority of educational institutions perpetuate gender-biased stereotypes. But it is these same institutions that can encourage students to challenge the stereotypes and resist the hegemonic designs of dominant groups.

Gender refers to the socio cultural differences between the males and females in terms of their strength, ability, performance, wage earning capacity and social acceptability etc. In fact the biological process does not discriminate between man and woman, but socially, women are regarded as weak, need protection and hence become subordinate to men. Gender sensitization refers to theories which claim that modification of the behavior of teachers and parents (etc.) towards children can have a causal effect on gender equality. Gender sensitizing "is about changing behavior and instilling empathy into the views that we hold about our own and the other sex." It helps people in "examining their personal attitudes and beliefs and questioning the 'realities' they thought they know.

Sensitization is by far the most effective and non-confrontationist approach of reforming the society. Gender sensitization is the process of changing the stereotype mind set of men and women- a mindset that strongly believes that men and women are unequal entities and hence have to function in different socio- economic space. Gender sensitization increases the sensitivity of people at large towards women and their problems. In the process it creates a class of responsive functionaries at different level, from policy making to grass root level, who are convinced that any form of gender bias is an obstacle on the way of attaining an equitable social and economic order and therefore consider addressing gender related issues in their situation as a matter of priority.

Gender sensitization is first instance, tends to change the perception that men and women have of each other. It creates a mindset in men that no longer sees in women the stereotypical image. The impression that women are a weak and unequal entity no more clouds the minds of common man. Rather they are seen as responsible and equal partners in socio- economic development. The general perception of men and women on the rigid gender division of labour and other orthodox practices related to gender begin to die down. Women also tend to develop the perception that they are no subordinate to men and they have an equally important role to play in decision making at household, community and organization level.

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The main problem of Indian society is lack of women recognition and appreciation for women's involvement in multifarious activities. The men, who are reluctant to acknowledge women's contribution, come forward under the influence of sensitization to recognize their contribution. The gender sensitization process develops understanding that women do possess wisdom and therefore they must be involved in decision making process. They have concerns and therefore should be treated with dignity and equal chance in sharing of social and economic benefits. Women cutting across, socio-economic boundaries tend to see their problems in larger perspectives of women development and come forward to recognize the efforts of fellow women. They even visualize the important role that men can play in their socio-economic development. Such an orientation marks the beginning of a definite realignment in gender relations. Social image of women improves and their concern are shared by men.

The barrier between men and women are crumbling down and society slowly gets over perennial problem of adjustment between them. With process of gender sensitization men tend to rationalize their behavior by shedding their egos as far as gender relations are concerned. Instead of complaining or reacting to the behavior of women men learn to exercise patience and restraint, and take the things in positive way. This will help the women in gaining the importance and recognition at society's and domestic sphere when their decision will be taken into account.

The gender sensitization process enable the teacher to become instrument of change as far as status of women is concerned. To what extent have they become action oriented and alert to see that women are neither being neglected nor discriminated against and they get their due status in society. Conscious efforts are made to create a favourable climate that allows nurturing and flourishing of women's talent and provides more flexibility and freedom to women.. Their perspective will help us to gather the information about their construction of social world related to gender issues and we will be able to see the impact of internalized notions of gender in the process of socialization from their childhood to present age. This will also help us to understand the common points of consensus in relation to gender concepts. The very aim of gender sensitization programme is to bring definite orientation in the thinking, practices and approach of individuals concerning gender. The gender sensitization process that individuals, particularly the men undergo involves four stages namely change in perception, recognition, accommodation and action. These changes take place in response to certain interventions i.e. gender sensitization programme. The focus of study will be to judge effectiveness of gender sensitization programme and to what extent we are able to sensitize teachers with reference to existing gender issues at present. Gender sensitization process requires time to develop an understanding of the related issues and problems associated with it.

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Persons exposed to gender sensitization also start behaving differently. They look at the positively endowed qualities of women. At this stage the male folk begin to recognize the virtues of women and their importance to the family and society. There is open and spontaneous appreciation for women's involvement in multifarious activities. The men who were reluctant to acknowledge the contribution of women, begin to do so under the influence of sensitization to recognize their contribution. As a result women's contribution becomes more and more visible. Further women's talents and capabilities that were going unnoticed and unexpected become subject of attention. Women too become more conscious of their capabilities and contribution and take pride in the same.

The message that gender sensitization conveys is loud and clear. Women do possess wisdom and therefore they must be involved in decision making process. They have concerns and therefore they should be treated with dignity and given equal chance in sharing of social and economic benefits. Women cutting across socio-economic boundaries tend to see their problems in large perspective of women development and come forward to recognize the effort of fellow women. They even visualize the important role that men can play in their socio-economic development.

Gender sensitized person become instrument of change as far as status of women in the society is concerned. They become action oriented and alert to see that women are neither neglected nor discriminated against and they get their due status in the society. Conscious efforts are made to create a favorable climate that allows nurturing and flourishing of women's talent and provides more flexibility and freedom to women. Moreover sensitized person becomes more inclined to take such steps that would make the gender equation more even and balanced. A number of affirmative actions are initiated to bring improvement in conditions of women. Women also become open rotaries of women empowerment and organize themselves for collective action against different forms of bias and discriminatory practices. They tend to become pro- active to gain a respectable position in family and in the society.

Thus it can be concluded that gender sensitization through education can be as a forceful, effective and primary tool to bring change in the thought process of students through formal school education. The main focus should be on breaking the stereotypes and set patriarchal notions prevalent in the society. The time has come for women to rise up and force the patriarchal society to underline the importance and necessity of the role played by women in cultivating a strong, rational and progressive society.



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