Gender Justice in Education: Peek Into Indian Schools

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Abstract:
Understanding what gender justice stands for in education and how it can be implemented in schools with regard to India.

Keywords: Gender, Justice, Education, School, India

Gender Justice' is a wide term that takes in its sweep every facet of life. For centuries, in fact ever since known history, we have been living in a patriarchal (with some notable exceptions) and feudal society which assigns to women a subordinate position in the social hierarchy. To begin with, on a very simplistic note, we can look at the two words – "gender" and "justice" separately first.

Unpacking Gender
"Gender" in the most layman understanding is way of referring to the social organisation of the relationship between the sexes. In grammar, gender is understood to be a way of classifying phenomena, a socially agreed upon system of distinctions rathe than an objective description of inherent traits. In addition, such classifications suggest a relationship among categories that makes distinctions or separate groupings possible. According to Scott (1999), Gender seems to have first appeared among American feminists who wanted to insist on the fundamentally social quality of distinctions based on sex. The word denoted a rejection of the biological determinism implicit in the use of the terms as "sex" or "sexual difference". In addition to that, gender was a term offered by those who claimed that women's scholarship would fundamentally transform disciplinary paradigms. Geetha (2006) opines that Gender is a category of analysis which is basically a methodological tool that enables a researcher to identify and isolate the elements that one wishes to study. Like caste and religion, gender is both a part of reality we study as well as the lens through which we view reality.

The entire feminist scholarship regarding the fact that gender is a socially constructed through kinship, economy and polity and the biological understanding has only restricted the understanding to the extent that there is a palpable disadvantage to a certain group because it is a power structure and not just some physical capability. Gender as a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences, therefore signifies relationships of power and involve the following four interrelated elements (Scott, 1999)- Culturally available symbols that evoke multiple and often contradictory representations, normative concepts that set forth interpretations of the meanings of the symbols, that attempt to limit and contain their metaphoric possibilities, notion of politics and reference to social institutions and organisation, and lastly subjective identity.

Justice - a concept in evolution

The idea of justice occupies centre stage both in ethics, and in legal and political philosophy. It is applied to individual actions, to laws, and to public policies. Classically, justice was counted as one of the four cardinal virtues (and sometimes as the most important of the four); in modern times John Rawls famously described it as 'the first virtue of social institutions' (Rawls 1971, Rawls, 1999).

Aristotle distinguished between 'universal' justice that corresponded to 'virtue as a whole' and 'particular' justice which had a narrower scope (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book V). A core definition comes from the Institutes of Justinian, a codification of Roman Law from the sixth century AD, where justice is defined as 'the constant and perpetual will to render to each his due'. Sen defined Justice as "fairness". Therefore, broadly speaking, justice, means the fulfilment of the legitimate expectation of the individual under laws and to assure him the benefit promised therein. Justice tries to reconcile the individual rights with the social good. The concept of justice is related to dealings amongst human beings. It emphases on the concept of equality. It requires that no discrimination should be made among the various members of the society. Historically, justice has regularly attracted the profound interests of politicians, economists, sociologists, and jurists among others. Despite its significant role in institutionalising social institutions and designing the system of distribution, the question—what is justice—has always endured the problem of conceptual disarrays and is still unfolding demands for conceptual clarities and interpretations.

Perspectives in Gender Justice

To construct the idea of gender justice, feminist philosophers have developed different perspectives to redress the structural, cultural and political inequalities arising from difference and misrecognition of women and suppressed groups.

Recognition of the marginalised for addressing inequities

Young (1990) proposes a politics of difference, which is constituted of two forms: the politics of positional difference and the politics of cultural difference. Young emphasises the value of cultural distinctness and elaborates on how dominant groups limit the rights of cultural minorities. In her account, distributive injustice begins with the concepts of domination and oppression and involves social structures and relations (Young 1990). Promoting justice requires recognising social and cultural differences and paying attention to processes of creating inequalities in social and economic institutions and practices (Young 2004).

Nancy Fraser (2013) elaborates on the groups and individuals constituted through structural social processes such as gender, disability, race, class and how these individuals are differently positioned in society. Like Young, Fraser also implies that there is a lack of recognition of certain groups. Fraser (2003) has argued for a two-dimensional categorisation of redistribution (economic) and recognition (cultural), while more recently, Fraser (2013) advocates a three-dimensional categorisation including the representation principle, on the basis of parity of participation (political). This entails that all members of society interact with each other as peers. Thus, she aims to cover inequalities related to both socio-economic and socio-cultural perspective, as well as to a sociopolitical perspective through the principle of who is included and excluded from justice claims. She proposes the restructuring of society via institutions.

Recognition v/s Redistribution

Several authors (e.g. Eisenberg 2006 ; Enslin 2006 ; Gewirtz 2006) apply Young's multi-dimensional account of injustice to education, arguing that a reallocation of resources alone can do little to address structural barriers which exclude girls (and suppressed groups). These scholars argue that Young's ideas might be used to challenge domination by creating curricula reflecting the diversity of the multi-cultural and multilingual nature of society; raising awareness against racism and sexism; ensuring that the voices of parents, teachers and community are included in decision- making; examining exploitative relationships within educational institutions and processes of marginalisation; and by looking into violent practices within or around education and schools.

Deliberative Democracy and Critical Thinking

Benhabib (2002) and Phillips (1998) argue that deliberative democracy is important for collective decision-making in diverse societies to reach a consensus on the problems of the public good. It addresses differences and frames the gender issue from a perspective of intercultural dialogue. Benhabib (2002) argues that an open cultural dialogue, openness of one culture to another and negotiation among different cultural traditions in a democratic civil society can bring about sexually egalitarian norms and moderate tensions between gender equality and cultural difference. Everyone who has been affected can have a voice in deliberations, whereas some feminist philosophers are sceptical about deliberation and point out that in the process of trying to reach consensus, those who have been historically silenced may not be able to voice their views, and the untrained voices of women and others who have been marginalised may not be heard. This is because a rationalist, male and hegemonic polity ignores the differences in articulation of voice and ideas of the public.

Synthesis

While each of the debates are important for the evolution of study of gender justice, there is also a requirement of synthesis of the various values to some extent in order to deal with gender justice in education. Firdevs Melis Cin (2017) focuses on three different approaches to thinking about gender justice by a synthesis of the existing and ongoing debates-

- Recognition and redistribution,
- Democratic participation and
- Representation and a (social) contract with the aim of establishing a universally applicable yet contextually gender-sensitive gender justice approach based on diversity, which could be applied to education.

Gender in Education

It cannot be overlooked that the potential capacity of education to transmit new ideas and representations has been and remains to be vital; schools, in fact, stand among all institutions as providing the greatest opportunity for the production and dissemination of counter-messages. In the struggle for educational access and completion, the issue of knowledge content has been left aside, as access to schooling, especially in the developing countries is seen as the prime and almost exclusive educational goal. While access is crucial, in order to put women on par with men educationally and professionally, much more has to be done. The lived experience of schooling is an important arena for the production of gender identities and must therefore be part of educational policies to improve schooling.

Is Education unjust to girls?

Education enjoys such a shared positive value that few people are willing or able to see schools as institutions that protect a very uneven gender status quo. Connell (1996) recognises the gendered regimes of institutions, which through structural arrangements and daily practices recreate ideologies that are oppressive to girls and women. Schools clearly constitute such regimes: It has been observed across several studies that schools do engage in a sexual division of labour with women usually teaching at lower levels and men at higher levels and as administrators, and women teaching humanistic and social science subjects while men predominate in mathematics and natural sciences. In their daily interactions, those—both young and adult—who inhabit the schools face (and typically accept) manifestations and attitudes of masculinity as contrasted with those of femininity. Authority patterns foster the mindset that men are naturally endowed to control and lead. Masculinising practices in discipline, sports, peer culture and some of the sex-segregated courses tell students and teachers alike that boys and men are superior to girls and women in many respects (Connell, 1996). Numerous gender codes in school serve to re-contextualise what is appropriate gender behaviour in the family and community and translate it into appropriate gender academic and social practices in educational environments. The personal ideologies of teachers regarding sex roles are a major factor in determining their willingness to use non-sexist or anti-sexist materials (Streitmatter, 1994); teachers untrained in gender issues, therefore, usually reproduce conventional views of femininity and masculinity. In other words, not only cognitive but also cultural, ideological and emotional outcomes are reproduced by the schools.

While the above might be generalisations that are being actively combatted through policy and planning at current times, the mindset however, remains. The idea of school is not to create a world outside of the existing knowledge realm but to be able to settle from the point that needs to cater to the actualisation of the goals. There has to be a way by which these show effect in the current work phase to be able to make sense. From a feminist perspective, in fact, it is difficult to separate from academic achievement and school knowledge such gendered aspects of schooling as sexuality, gender identity, gendered aspects of adolescent discourse and subcultural norms of masculine and feminine behaviours that pervade the school environments. There have been shifts over time in the ideological construction of femininity and masculinity. But a rationality that favours men prevails and thus it is men who, in administrative roles, constitute the majority of educational leaders. School organisations and their processing of knowledge create environments that are not sufficiently critical of dominant social class and gender division to discourage their reproduction. Ironically, adults—either educators or parents—engage in a posture of denial vis-a`-vis the total functioning of schools, not accepting the highly influential role of peers in the creation of gendered subcultures that often match the influence of the gendered regimes the schools themselves provide.

Across the world, around 65 million girls are not schooled and two-thirds of the world's 774 million illiterate adults are female (UNESCO Statistics 2013). To address these issues, the Education for All (EFA) campaign (initiated in Dhaka in 2000) set out to provide basic education for all children across the world and identified six goals—including the goal of eliminating gender disparities and inequalities—to be met by 2015. The EFA 2015 report by UNESCO shows that there has been some notable progress in relation to ensuring that girls have equal access to basic education. Nevertheless, in 2015, only 69% of countries are estimated to have reached gender parity at the primary education level, and this figure drops

to 48% in secondary education. This shows there is still a long way to go towards achieving gender equality.

Such inequality and injustice is not only a question of lack of funds, but also related to ensuring access, providing quality of education, culture, sustainability and governance; all of which could be framed around the concept of gender as they usually involve lack of representation, distribution or recognition of the interests of women and girls. All these issues are central to development, particularly to the development of women and girls, and thus to the themes in this book. As McCowan and Unterhalter (2015) state, education and development are two closely related and interdependent themes, and education is an integral part of development. It is true that the expansion of schooling has not been accompanied by discernible efforts to modify either the content (curriculum) of schooling or the training of teachers in gender-sensitive education. It is necessary to go beyond access and revise conventional values and messages in the curriculum and to alter the practices of teachers, principals and students at the school site, where they constantly reproduce gendered expectations.

The definitions and provisions of all relevant international treaties as well as the Right to Education Act of India, are unanimous on the right to education that is free of discrimination, including discrimination based on sex. The instruments state that states shall respect and ensure the rights of each child within their jurisdiction to education without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status. UN Member States, while respecting the diversity of national educational systems, therefore have the duty not only to prohibit any form of discrimination in education, but also to promote equality of opportunity and treatment for all in education. For these purposes, the term `discrimination' normally includes any distinction, exclusion, limitation or preference which, being based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic condition or birth, has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing equality of treatment in education. The term `education' usually refers to all types and levels of education, including access to education, the standard and quality of education, and the conditions under which it is given. In order to eliminate and prevent discrimination in education, the international community undertakes to abrogate any statutory provisions and any administrative instructions; to discontinue any administrative practices which involve discrimination in education; and to ensure, by legislation where necessary, that there is no discrimination in the admission of pupils to educational institutions.

The Istanbul Convention (2011) stresses the need to include teaching materials on issues such as equality between women and men; non-stereotyped gender roles; mutual respect; non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships; as well as gender-based violence against women and the right to personal integrity adapted to the evolving capacity of learners in formal curricula and at all levels of education. The Istanbul Convention also highlights the importance of the need to promote the principles referred to in Article 1 of the Convention among a broader range of stakeholders contributing to education, explicitly naming informal educational facilities, as well as sports, cultural and leisure facilities, along with the media. The international legal acquis thus recognises the need to prevent discrimination based on gender on the one hand, and to promote gender equality on the other hand.

According to the Stromquist, schools are responsible for gender indoctrination because they are an important arena for the production of gender identities and must therefore be part of educational policies to improve schooling. The personal ideologies of teachers regarding sex roles are a major factor in determining their willingness to use non-sexist or anti-sexist materials. Teachers untrained in gender issues, therefore, usually reproduce conventional views of femininity and masculinity. In other words, not only cognitive but also cultural, ideological and emotional outcomes are reproduced by the schools. Education is also seen as a site for reproductive knowledge, where schools protect a very uneven gender status quo. Therefore, it is important for educators to revise conventional values and messages in the curriculum and to alter the practices of teachers, principals, and students at the school site, where they constantly reproduce gendered expectations.

**Gender Justice in Schools in India**
Gender-based discrimination results in Indian girls being excluded from the education system. Lack of access and adverse learning outcomes result in a lifetime of deprivation. Historically, India has been a multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic society with a clearly defined caste and gender hierarchy which more or less determines a child's life-chances.

The education system is an arena of social reproduction as it creates new and reinforces existing forms of social segregation. Extant research clearly maps out the vulnerability of female children, especially if they belong to marginalised communities. Gender intersects with other dimensions, such as the deprivation of urban slums, the geographically segregated communities of Dalits and scheduled tribes and the mobile groups of nomadic tribes (Nambissan, 2014). Burgeoning evidence has not resulted in policy shifts geared towards immediate goals of improvements in economic efficiency or long-term transformatory goals associated with social justice. Feminist voices in India have been faint and fragmented when it has come to questions of girl-child education from marginalised communities (Balagopalan, 2012). Such policy failures do not appear as innocuous acts of omission in a context marred by institutional biases against the Dalits, Muslims and scheduled tribes.

India, over the last two decades, has witnessed consistent improvements in its economic growth together with the several social policy innovations, yet better human development outcomes remain elusive. As compared to its counterparts in the other developing countries in the BRICS, India has performed poorly in the attainment of the global benchmarks set by the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Although India had cut in half its total incidence of extreme poverty, from 49.4% in 1994 to 24.7% in 2011, ahead of the 2015 MDG deadline, its neighbours Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh have each outstripped India in poverty reduction (Raghavan, 2015). In relation to human development, India ranks 135th among 187 countries globally, and the lowest among its BRICS counterparts with Brazil at 79, Russia 65, China at 91 and South Africa at 118 (UNDP, 2014). Gender inequality in India, in particular, remains ranked 135 on the United Nations Development Fund's Gender-Related Development Index, which is a composite index measuring women's status based on female to male ratio, life-expectancy at birth for males and females, and mean years of schooling (UNDP, 2014). The gender discrimination is manifested by a perilous child sex ratio as the latest census of 2011 reveals a further decline in the number of girls to 918 from 927 (2001) to 1000 boys (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2011). Primarily, this is attributed to the preference for a male child as opposed to female children in Indian

families. The Indian parliament has passed the Right to Education Act (RTE), making eight years of quality education a fundamental right for every girl and boy in India, which has resulted in improvements in enrolments. However, gross enrolments stand at 54% for males and 56% for females. China has gross enrolments of 61% for males and 62% for females. South Africa has gross enrolments of 65% for both males and females (UNICEF, 2015). Brazil has not only made impressive strides in terms of the universalisation of education but improvements in the quality of education are evident from the 2009 results for the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) – the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) test of high school student learning levels in over 70 countries.

It would be futile to assess the state of gender justice in schools in India through quantitative data of access and enrolment of students, as it is hardly throws light on the inherent inequalities of the society and imbedded injustice of the school structure. The important thing to do would be to capture the gendered realities and the disadvantages thus arising due to them. As gender is a part of a complex social and institutional structure in India, it is necessary to look at gender inequalities in education within the broader framework of social, economic and location specific inequalities on one hand, and the prevailing school system on the other. Ramachandran (2009) captures the interplay of the same through the following table. This gives a better and layered idea of not only the gender issues at play, but the related socio-cultural and economic factors that interplay with gender to create the inequalities within the educational system.
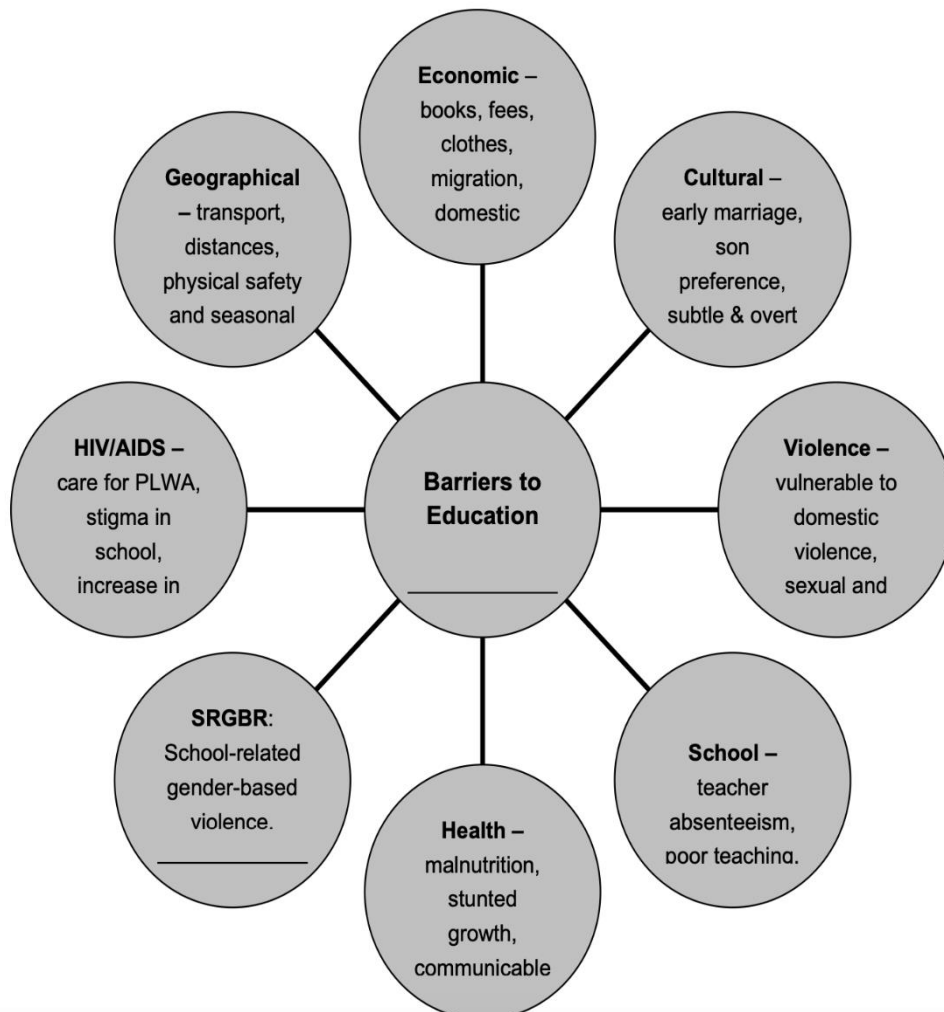
Ramachandran, V. (2009)

Having said that, there has been several steps taken at the administrative level over the years to soften the blow of the multi-layered issues faced by the girl students, that include scholarships, ear-marked resources for girl child, providing support systems like associations and programmes such as Manila Samakhya, residential education etc. However, the school remains a slice of the society at large and represents the people and the cultural ethos of the region, irrespective of the extent of government policy planning. The barriers to education for a girl child in India ranges from geographical distance to cultural religious beliefs outside of the school, and from gender-based violence to lack of opportunities due to gender bias within the school.

Sudarshan (2016) finds that in relation to gender equality and how this is understood, the initial focus of the education system has been on the structure/ institutions, that is, removing formal obstacles to schooling and achieving gender parity, a goal for which enrolment and drop out rates are the key indicators. It has also been recognised that there may be a `hidden curriculum`, eg classroom practices that reinforce traditional gender norms. This study finds that there is in general an agreement on `boundaries` of acceptable behaviour among teachers, parents, girls and boys. Little evidence was seen of schools/ teachers attempting to push these boundaries, for example, encouraging older girls to play, or encouraging boys to think about gendered constructions of behaviour.

Ramachandran (2013) in her assessment report of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan in India, notes that despite the best intentions, how policies have fallen short of the objective of gender justice and equity. In 2001, the Government of India (GOI) had launched Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan with the specific purpose of achieving universal elementary education. One of the main goals of SSA was to bridge gender and social gaps at primary education level by 2007 and at elementary education level by 2010. SSA led to a steady increase in the literacy rates of both male and female and there has been an overall increase in the enrolment of girls and children from SC, ST, OBC and other minority communities. Along with enrolment, impressive progress has also been made to decrease the number of out of school students and drop outs, and to improve school infrastructure and facilities. Many schemes have been introduced to increase school enrolment and retention of students such as Mid-Day Meal scheme, free textbooks, uniforms and bi-cycles to students, bridge and remedial courses, programs like KGBVs and NPEGEL to increase enrolment among girls, and many more. More teachers are getting hired including female teachers, new teaching methodologies have been adopted, and efforts made to increase the role of community and SMCs in the overall management of schools. However, the assessment study also threw light upon poor content of teacher training programs and a lack of focus on gender and equity issues in these training programs, therefore underlining the fact that the teachers and administrators were not aligned to the cause of gender justice within schools. The focus and the actionable workplan centred around brining children to school and retaining them while the experience of schooling itself has taken a backseat.

It has been long established that gender, social and economic status has a strong influence on the education level of a child. A child is at a greater disadvantage if he/she is living in rural areas and belongs to a poor family. This situation becomes worse if a child is a girl and especially an older girl. Therefore, addressing gender and social equity issues in education requires a framework that can capture heterogeneous gendered realities and multiple disadvantages, which are influenced by factors such as location (rural, urban, remote,

tribal etc.), identity (caste, cultural, religion, occupation), socio-economic status of the family, which type of schools (government or private) children are enrolled in, ability and disability and within all this, gender relations. All these factors intermesh with each other and not only influence formal access to schools but more importantly, how children are treated inside the school, their ability to participate actively in school activities, ability to learn in school and the kind of support they get or do not get at home and within their community. Consequently, it would be fair to say that achieving equity goals in education requires work simultaneously on several fronts at the same time and cannot be one-dimensional. However, the awareness of this kind of intersectionality and the processes to address them, if not eradicate them, should exist within schools to ensure that it was worth striving for to get everyone to school and give them similar environment and experience of learning.

Role of Teachers and Administrators

Ramachandran, in her study of gendered realities of Indian schools, squarely places a large responsibility on the teachers and administrators for reform. She emphasises that meaningful access to schooling does not end with providing entry to schools but is only fruitful when there is equitable opportunity for all children to engage with the educational system. A prominent part of that is access to teachers, who will provide differentiated support catering to varied learning styles, pay attention to those who need help and most importantly, who will provide a safe, gendered space with room to find and express one's own identity without the fear of discrimination or mockery. Since the school is a microcosm of the society we live in, more often than not, inter-personal and inter-group dynamics present in the community is reflected in the schools. Ramachandran notes through her research, that teachers, if they are not adequately trained and sensitised, will inadvertently transfer behaviour patterns and prejudices to the school. Teachers, in particular, are crucial actors in the ensuring quality education, yet their own agency and gendered identities are often ignored both as individuals and professionals. In a review of the content and process of schooling across Asia, Latin America and Africa, Stromquist found stereotypical, domesticated images of women being perpetrated through the attitudes of teachers towards girls and boys, and their social expectations from them. Masculinising practices in discipline, sports, peer culture and some of the sex-segregated courses tell students and teachers alike that boys and men are superior to girls and women in many respects. Numerous gender codes in school serve to re-contextualise what is appropriate gender behaviour in the family and community and translate it into appropriate gender academic and social practices in educational environments. The personal ideologies of teachers regarding sex roles are a major factor in determining their willingness to use non-sexist or anti-sexist materials; teachers untrained in gender issues, therefore, usually reproduce conventional views of femininity and masculinity. In other words, not only cognitive but also cultural, ideological and emotional outcomes are reproduced by the schools. From a feminist perspective, in fact, it is difficult to separate from academic achievement and school knowledge such gendered aspects of schooling as sexuality, gender identity, gendered aspects of adolescent discourse and subcultural norms of masculine and feminine behaviours that pervade the school environments. On the other hand, many educational practices attempt to iron out gender differences. Teachers may deliberately set out to de-emphasise gender difference, laying their emphasis on individual growth, creating a structure of invisibalising any difference in experience of schooling, further muffling any voice of protest or feeling of discrimination Teachers have a clear relation of power dynamics with students and therefore patterns of dominance, harassment, and control over resources among pupils lies with their control. Connell notes a familiar and important pattern is the association of masculinity with authority,

and the concentration of men in supervisory positions in school systems. Such patterns also percolate down to students who learn much more in observation than through direct instructions. Therefore, it is not only through direct teaching-learning processes, but the general school culture which leads to a gendered understanding of an educational experience. On the other hand, in newspaper reports and on-ground research also reveals deeply disturbing trend of sexual harassment and abuse in schools. Ramachandran notes a lot of resistance from the government to do any systematic research on the prevalence of such abuse in schools because of which data is not collated well, and there is very less research-based evidence, topped by a general hesitation to talk about such issues. In her own research, she found after a lot of coaxing, children would respond with personal stories and even female teachers have spoken about abuse. Dalit and adivasi women have been found to face the dual burden of caste and gender discrimination at work.

While administrators and politicians point blame on the teachers, they do not escape the responsibility and are duty-bound to endure non-discriminatory environment in schools. It is found that teacher orientation and training is often limited to administrative requirements and subject knowledge. There is also a growing evidence of training fatigue amongst teachers, especially in government schools. While administrators oversee the functioning of school processes, and may not interact with the students directly, they are responsible for the tone-setting amongst teacher-interactions, code of behaviour and conduct, and the constant invigilation to uphold a pre-decided image through all activities pursued within the school. The relationship between administration and school teachers also reflect the gendered realities of the society at large and the power dynamics of control and supervision. While teachers may be the foot soldiers carrying out the daily tasks of the education system, the administration has oversight as well as power to enable or discourage any discrimination or culture of injustice.

Gender in Indian policy and planning

In India, there has been an attempt to actualise gender equality and justice through planning and policy and much headway has been made. Though the initial national level planning looked at equalising access of education, in the later years it was realised that the quality and experience of education mattered and that needed to be formally addressed, considering the patriarchal set up of the Indian society. While the Right to Education (RTE) enshrined the constitutional right for education for all without discrimination, many newer policies and programmes have furthered the cause.

Since 2018, Samagra Shiksha scheme has been implemented to provide gender-segregated toilets, gender sensitisation, effective menstrual waste management and other programs to help students deal with adolescence concerns. Though, majority of schools are under the jurisdiction of the State Government, these programs run by the Centre have significantly bridged the gender gaps at school education. From the year 2018-19 to 2020-21, the Drop-out rate of girls at Secondary level has decreased from 17.03% to 13.7%, Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at secondary level has increased from 76.93 to 79.45 and GER at higher secondary level has increased from 50.84 to 54.65.

Samagra Shiksha, an Integrated Scheme for School Education (ISSE) comprising many interventions geared at girls' education, is being implemented by the Ministry of Education's Department of School Education and Literacy. One of the Samagra Shiksha's key aims is to eliminate gender and social class

disparities in education at all levels. Various initiatives under Samagra Shiksha have been targeted to increase the higher involvement of females in school. Among the interventions are:

1. The state-mandated opening of schools in the neighbourhood
2. Free textbooks for females up to Class VIII;
3. All schools should have gender-segregated restrooms.
4. Sensitization programmes for teachers to encourage girls to participate,
5. Girls in classes VI through XII get self-defense training.
6. CWSN females in grades I through XII get a stipend.
7. Hostels/Residential Schools.
8. Construction of teacher housing in remote/hilly areas/difficult terrain.

As per UDISE+ 2020-21, 97.45% Government schools have gender segregated toilets. In addition, a Composite School Grant is also available for schools for the annual maintenance and repair of existing school buildings, toilets, and other facilities. School Health Programme, under Ayushman Bharat lead to the incorporation of a module on 'Growing up Healthy', which inter alia includes information on physical challenges during adolescence and attaining puberty. An Adolescence Education Programme is also being implemented by NCERT in order to raise awareness of the concerns of adolescence and instill a positive attitude regarding these concerns in the learners. The states have been advised to utilize funds earmarked for Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) and management of menstrual waste under Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin) Phase-II at village level, for installation or maintenance of incinerators in schools having girls from classes VI to XII and for creating awareness on MHM among adolescent girls and in the society in general. It has also been communicated that subsidized sanitary napkins are available at the Jan Aushadi Kendras.

The National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 focuses on 'Equitable and Inclusive Education' which reverberates the idea that no child should be left behind in terms of educational opportunity because of their background and socio-cultural identities. It has taken into account the concerns of the Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) which includes female and transgender individuals. In addition, NEP prescribes to approach gender as a cross-cutting priority to achieve gender equality in education with the partnership of states and local community organisations.

National Education Policy, 2020 provides for setting up a Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) especially for girls and transgender students to build the nation's capacity to provide equitable quality education for all girls as well as transgender students. The objectives of NEP for equitable and quality education for girl children are being met through specific provisions under Samagra Shiksha 2.0 by allocating dedicated resources for Socio- Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). Under Samagra Shiksha, various interventions have been targeted for providing quality education to girls, which include opening of schools in the neighbourhood to make access easier for girls, free uniform and text-books to girls up to class VIII, additional teachers and residential quarters for teachers in remote/hilly areas, appointment of additional teachers including women teachers, stipend to CWSN girls from class I to class XII, separate toilets for girls, teachers' sensitization programmes to promote girls participation, gender-sensitive teaching-learning materials including text books etc.

In addition, to reduce gender gaps at all levels of school education, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs), which are residential schools from class VI to XII for girls belonging to disadvantaged groups such as SC, ST, OBC, Minority and Below Poverty Line (BPL), are sanctioned in Educationally Backward Blocks. As on 30.06.2023, a total of 5639 KGBVs have been sanctioned in the country with the enrolment of 6.88 lakh girls. The task of up-gradation of the KGBVs was started in the year 2018-19 and till the year 2022-23, a total of 357 KGBVs have been approved for up-gradation to Type-II (class 6-10) and 2010 KGBVs have been approved for up-gradation to Type-III (class 6-12).

NEP–2020 recommended to ensure the safety and security of female students both on and off campus. Before applying for accreditation, institutions must guarantee that harassment, discrimination, and domineering behaviour are not tolerated on their campuses. This initiative is aimed at combatting gender stereotypes that prevent females from attending school and promote dropout rates.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 directs the government to enhance boarding facilities – matching the standard of Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas – in school locations where students may have to come from far, and particularly for students who from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, with suitable arrangements for the safety of all children, especially girls. The existing Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas, that have helped to increase the participation in quality schools (up to Grade 12) of girls from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are being planned to be strengthened and expanded to. Further, Special State Specific Projects for varied interventions under equity are emphasized for enhancing access, retention and quality of girls by promoting enrolment drives, retention and motivation camps, gender sensitization modules etc. Finally, NEP also pays careful attention to the safety and rights of girl children and demands developing mechanisms to report any forms of discrimination and harassment. The NEP 2020 further talks about emphasis on subjects like gender sensitisation, sex education, knowledge of legal rights, etc in the curriculum, which might have a positive impact on creating awareness around gender justice within the educational system. While a lot of plans are on paper, the effect of these are yet to be seen in the real world.

Despite the fact that the Indian education system and the government policies have made steady progress in closing gender and social category gaps, large differences persist at all stages of schooling, especially at the secondary level for socioeconomically disadvantaged populations who have historically been underrepresented in education. Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) are defined in a variety of ways based on gender (particularly female and transgender individuals). Girls from SEDG backgrounds are four times more likely to drop out of school than boys. Females from the poorest families have the lowest likelihood from elementary school to graduation. According to India's Demographic and Health Survey (DHS-2006), more females (23 percent or 21,800,000) are out of school than boys (16.6% or 16,700,000). Children from rural areas have a higher out-of-school rate (22%) than children from urban areas (14 percent). Out-of-school rates were highest among children in the poorest families (36 percent). According to the Annual Status of Education Report, females outweigh boys in government pre-schools and schools (ASER 2019).

Summing Up

Gender injustice is not an additional issue to be "handled" but a structural element built into the seducational system due to the larger social and cultural ethos of a region. But as an institution catering to children, schools also hold immense power in inculcating the right mindset towards a more inclusive and just society. According to the Stromquist, schools can contribute to transformative knowledge by revising conventional values and messages in the curriculum and altering the practices of teachers, principals, and students at the school site, where they constantly reproduce gendered expectations. This can be done by incorporating gender-sensitive pedagogy, which involves the use of teaching and learning strategies that challenge gender stereotypes and promote gender equality. Teachers can also use non-sexist or anti-sexist materials and be trained in gender issues to avoid reproducing conventional views of femininity and masculinity. Additionally, schools can create environments that are critical of dominant social class and gender division to discourage their reproduction. By providing transformative knowledge, schools can help women to analyse their realities and subsequently to devise means to transform their lives, if not societies.

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