

Social Construction of Gender in School

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Abstract

This paper was written as a part of writing a conceptual paper in the sociology course, to particularly understand the '*social construction of Gender in school*', during post graduation. This therefore does not effectively include empirical data, but I have brought in some experiences as a researcher/ teacher/ student and most critically as a woman to try understanding how social construction of gender takes place in school.

The question has always been a curious concern for me to enquire as to how children as young as 4-5 years olds come to identify the stereotypical roles even before entering school, and how does school very effectively reinforce this gendered understanding of oneself and the other; and thereby in this process reproduce social inequality. For example, while mathematics, language, environmental studies have prescribed curricular objectives for implementation, how is it that children learn and live 'gender' which is not explicitly 'taught' in the institution.

Given this situation, can the teachers be someone who is sensitive towards gender inside and outside the school? This calls for a lot of meaningful and contemporary understanding of gender amongst the teacher, who in their daily interaction with their learners and community are explicitly and implicitly working with the minds of young learners. Thus reflection and discussion amongst the teachers on various aspects like textbooks, rituals (outside and inside the school), uniforms, perspectives about parents towards gender, learners own conception about gender etc needs to be incorporated in the functioning of the school.

Keywords: Gendered identity, Hidden curriculum, third sex, panopticon

The famous line of *Simone de' Beauvoir*, "*One is not born but becomes a woman*" (*The Second Sex*, 267), gave us the vocabulary for analysing the social constructions of femininity and masculinity and the structure for critiquing these constructions. Thus it can be stretched to 'one is not born a man or a transgender or a lesbian or a gay or a homosexual, but society creates them.' This brings me to highlight the significant role of society in constructing the concept of being one of the 'normal' members of the society but portraying restricted, predetermined roles. Foucault's concept of the 'panopticon' fits in well, when one thinks about the free minds and bodies being forcefully structured to grow in an arrested environment. And this environment is not just limited to any particular institution but the society as a whole with religious institutions, school, media and family all

taking up their undue role in fulfilling the normative symbols of the Panopticon.

It should also be clear that *'a distortion is produced by looking at gender in isolation of other variables, such as social class, ethnicity and geographic location, religion and caste, all are intertwined with gender; M. Roland and Harber C Gender Identity.'* But in this paper I would be limiting myself to the topic of having an understanding of social construction of gender in school.

The recent buzz around feminism attracts a lot more amusement than understanding and people often propose to have a humanistic approach rather than a feminist approach. But the point is understood after tracing the historical background of the educational, social, economic, political experiences of people who have undergone phenomenal exploitation. Thus education comes as a support, to counter the claims that seemed futile for centuries. *'As inequality between male and female was rarely recognised as a problem, or at most was seen as an anachronism that would disappear with coeducation M Roland.'*

But, even with or without education *'women have learnt to lose and more than that they have learnt how to lose. M.Arnot'*, and men on the other hand have learnt how to carry the male hegemony successfully forward from generation to generation, time to time and from society to society. Jon Swain in his article, explains various Theories of Embodied Masculinity, where *Foucault's notion of Bio-power* is also explained *as a form of social control that focuses on the body, that controls movements, gestures, and locations to produce 'docile' bodies.'* To arrest freedom, it requires constant reinforcement and alertness on the part of the authority, and most often it happens under patriarchy (male domination). Thus either consciously or unconsciously the roles played by the individuals become part of their identity, as in this case their *'Gendered Identity.'*

It is very interesting to see how the social structures on the basis of gender are formed implicitly and explicitly. Both the kinds are equally dangerous, as each feeds on the other. I do not know from where to start but before going into details some normative rules of the process could be dealt with. For example, names of new born children, a male having a feminine name or a female having a masculine name invite jokes and amusement from others, stereotypical language being interchangeably used by either of the sexes is strongly discouraged. With language, toys, colour and kind of clothing's, amount of time spent on play (in-door /out-door) or academics, etc. all are scheduled for the young ones to be grown into women and men. *Moreover, gender identity can be understood as a stylised performance, socially scripted and regulated but amenable to change (Butler. J, 1997).*

And amongst all that jazz the minority which is often known as the *'Third Sex'* including transgender, lesbians, gay, homosexuals are almost treated as non-masculine and non-feminine, a category that implies relations that does not imply to human beings. As all children learn to identify themselves to be either boys or

girls and those who try to escape these rules and norms are either labelled by the 'socialised and normalised beings' or are out rightly out casted.

In research journals it is quite prevalent to see studies done on schools, where while talking about children it majorly states boys and girls and talking about teachers it reads as male and female teachers and for higher positions it is either a head mistress/master. How does one see this? Is it because of the nomenclature attached with a specific profession? Or is it majorly to emphasise that it is easy to divide children on the basis of sex and then socially add value to their existence? Thus the time a child enters a school s/he has already been socialised in the family to respond, interact, approach, and even think in a particular manner that is primarily gendered. *'Gender socialization appears to start at birth and continue undisturbed to adulthood. M. Arnot.'*

Hidden Curriculum in schools further maintains such stereotypical gendered arrangements of the society. It could be experienced that some children completing primary school are not able to master the 3Rs, (because of various reasons) but what is it that even young toddlers articulate and comprehend of the gender roles that are not even explicitly dealt as a school subject? Hidden curriculum a much talked about topic in curriculum studies, explains what else that is not planned intentionally by the school is actually culturally learnt by the students. *'The hidden curriculum that (partially) creates bodily differences between the genders also makes these physical differences appear and feel natural. Karin A. Martin.'* But school here is a secondary source of such reinforcement, as society already associates certain norms on individuals even before they are born. Perhaps a significant act to do is to identify what actually happens while adults and young interact. *'Perhaps the most important difference is that cultural analysis concentrates upon how rather than why schools function to reproduce the patterns of gender inequality. M. Arnot.'*

I remember a visit to one of the alternative schools in a remote area in Rajasthan, where a male teacher asked his students (12th graders) to put up an act (drama without any dialogues). The students after a bit of hesitation did come forward. One of the students initiated and acted out a scene of an individual sweeping the floor and putting the waste in the dustbin. The act involved two characters, which was initially played by the single student. The teacher posed a question to the group as to who did they think were the characters in the act? Majority of the students exclaimed that the two characters were women. The teacher asked as to how they know, whether the characters portrayed were; woman, man, child, adult or an aged person..? Students exclaimed that the main character had a 'dupatta' on her head, while the other could be anybody else, thus it has to be a 'Girl' (ladki), and because of the movement it seemed that the main character was either a child or young woman but not an aged woman. Analysing the analysis of the act by the students it seems that the prop used 'dupatta' is an accessory of the females and thus a feminine characteristic. On further argument by the teacher,

that it need not be necessary for only a women to wear a dupatta or any cloth on their head, the immediate response of the students was that 'ladke jhaadu nahi lagate' (boys/men do not broom). This respond was later argued by the teacher, but the point is that it is not one characteristic that qualify under the feminine characteristic but the imbibed idea of what a woman does or a man does not do and thus what she and he really are. This constructs a picture that she has to be the domestic labour who have limited amount of chores and work to do, and so are not involved in producing anything like men. *'The process of understanding requires one to perceive the concept of male hegemony as a whole series of separate 'moments' through which women have come to accept a male dominated culture, it's legality and their subordination to it and in it M. Arnot.'*

And how come this is the understanding all across the world? Does this become a world over phenomenon? What logic is there that maintains and drives the structures, may be the Male Logic that works almost in all the spheres of every society; private and public.

I remember very well, when one of my male friend was helping me learn to ride a scooty (bike), and shared that in villages one has to be careful of three things while driving on the road. The first was other vehicles, children and women. On asking why women, the answer was that in villages women are not exposed to travelling on busy roads and thus they get nervous when encounter a vehicle coming towards them. Thus the basic premise is that the driver of the vehicles is always a man and cannot be a woman. And thus this lack of confidence on the part of the female and the expression of confidence and power by males is something that males can celebrate about. *'Masculine gender bodies are often a source of power for men and on the other hand it is the opposite for women. Women's bodies are often sources of anxiety and tentativeness. Women's lack of confidence and agency are embodied and stem from an inability to move confidently in space, to take up space, to use one's body to its fullest extent. Karin A. Martin.'* This was quite a thought for me, as my mobility as a female was not that restricted compared to women in restricted environment. But then that leads one to acknowledge and understand that it's just a matter of equal opportunity for all to experience the surrounding that belongs to everybody, female, male, black, and white, all alike.

'Schooling plays an important part in the process of liberation M Arnot.' But when the stakeholders of the school turn out to be exact transfers of cultural and traditional thoughts to the younger generation then it no more acts as a site of empowerment and liberation. Moshe Tatar and Gina Emmanuel conducted an ethnographic study to understand 'Teacher's perspective of their students' gender roles.' They explained that male and female students have different perspective of the male and female students and thus expect different responses that are mostly

implied in the traditional and stereotypical gender roles. The subjects of study are also stereotyped, with male students engaging more in so called academic subjects and female students more enrolled in the extra or so called co-curricular subjects, the male teachers chose the teaching profession in elementary schools as then the upward movement for position, to the secondary or senior secondary school come up easy and natural to them, and it was mostly assumed that female teachers would choose teaching the primary grades. It is very evident as the Bachelor of Elementary Education that started 15 years ago in New Delhi still is limited to women's graduate program and Bachelor of Education, a course opted all across the country comprises students of both the sexes.

'Changing the attitudes of both men and women in society is a slow process; Slater (1996), but, it is imperative that resources are invested into equal socialization to release future generations from traditional gender roles.' Thus even in the B.El.Ed program efforts were made to expose students to the gendered identities the society readily constructs, so that sensitivity is developed regarding the issue as to how one can either reproduce it or counter it, being a teacher.

I remember the school where I took my first job as teacher in the primary school, was a very impressive experience as teachers were given autonomy to design their own curriculum for their group of students. Thus one of the Hindi fictional story book (Pippi Lambe mozey) that my class (7-10 year olds) and I enjoyed was the story of a 9 year old girl named 'Pippi'!! The story was a about this girl who lived in a house with a pet monkey and a horse, the most interesting thing was that she was not afraid of living alone and was physically very strong. While sharing the episodes of the story, children would enjoy when she was praised for being a sensitive person, students would also guess that pippi could never be untrue and dishonest and could do anything to save the innocent. The book is remarkable because it breaks the gender stereotypes that are mostly prevalent in the society. Children would identify her with themselves, and would express what they felt about pippy! She is not portrayed as a female who explores masculine aspects that are attached to males, but is only a child who tries and questions the traditional setup of the traditional society. Reading her it seemed that would be a kind of changed and liberated individual if one has the choice to challenge the social 'Panopticon' kind of structured society. The extent of change among school girls depend on how far customary concepts of femininity have been problematized and how far traditional forms of male power have been challenged in the family, the economy and the school M. Arnot. Thus it's not just the psychological growing up of individuals but the social growing-out of the traditional roles of the society as well, and if the learners are given ample opportunities to challenge and question their own curiosity that they encounter in everyday life it would be difficult for having a vision of an Equal, just and a humane society. 'In the future, schools could address these micro-inequalities of education if they understood themselves less as a social bounded institution and more as a particular constellation of sites, spaces and opportunities for learning M. Arnot.' It indeed is a challenge and can be faced only by the one who has been on the receiving end or the oppressed side.

As they would have the lived experience of facing moment after moment, hour after hour, day after day, and years after years of exploitation.

The following poem, explains the need to understand individuals just as they are, without judging them on the basis of any kind of added value. Why can we not look at a human being just as one, like the self and not look at others as superior or inferior?

Gender

I don't know whether October's a man or a woman.
When I say She, He looks at me with such masculine eyes;
And when I say He,
She shakes her red head at me.
So I think maybe
October's a child –or a god.

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