

Gendered Experiences of School Teachers A Study in Government Schools in Delhi

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Abstract

This article is based on primary data collected in Delhi Government schools that point towards gendered practices and processes within the schools, and how the teachers navigate and negotiate with them. The school represents the microcosm of the society, and presents its own version of private and public spheres, within which the female and male teachers find themselves getting segregated, in terms of duties, responsibilities and key expectations. Through in-depth interviews and discussions with teachers across two government schools in Delhi, this study aims to highlight that the gendered structure, system and norms within a school, decided and actioned upon by the teachers, impact them as well as their worldview. The school cultures at both schools were found to reflect the inherent biases of the society, and creates a version of private and public spheres within the institutions that govern the interactions between the teachers and the spaces as well as their professional outcomes.

Keywords: School Teachers, Gender Socialisation, Gendered Experiences, School Culture, Public and Private, Gender Inequality.

INTRODUCTION

Schools as institutions are a microcosm of the society and for the most part, reflect the culture of a

given society within which it is based. The teachers, who are a part of the same society, also carry most of the predominant socialisations and the

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worldview that comes with them. It is only natural for the systematic gendered realities of the world to seep into the realm of education and schools. However, the goals and aspirations of education, one of which being equity of opportunity and capability, can juxtapose with existing social norms and give rise to complex cultural settings within the school. In this article, an attempt is made to take a closer look into the work-lives of teachers, who are navigating and interacting with this space, given their gender socialisations, and constantly constructing the culture of the school as a result of them.

Gender Differences

Gender constitutes one of the several identity arrangements humans have created to maintain an order in the society, that trace back their origin to biological bodies, and is an integral and omnipresent part of life experience. Gender as a category in research is viewed as a lens of perceiving the world, and is inherently hierarchal and hegemonic in nature. Biological sex and sociological gender are two different entities, and the latter is a socially constructed category, that has clear power relations and widespread implication into day-to-day lives. Patriarchy is all-pervasive and has created a deeply entrenched, historically validated and widely-accepted hierarchical set-up, that has led to subjugation and oppression of one gender in the hands of the other. The concept of

feminine and masculine colours our world-view to the extent that it's a permanent lens through which identities are viewed and performed in our lives. Gender and society works in a corresponding manner and this can be understood by exploring the understanding of how gender legitimises and constructs social relationships. This in turn renders its logic to the reciprocal relationship of gender and politics, making gender an important aspect of identity-politics.

Gender Socialisation

The term 'socialisation' refers to a process by which individuals of a given society learn the skills, behaviour patterns, standards, customs and values of the society. In another words, people learn how they can be a successful member of their social or cultural group, and adapt themselves to the society where they live through socialisation. Through this process people understand what behaviour, beliefs, and lifestyles are acceptable to the community and find their functions in society as a member. However, this process is not "simply transmitted from one generation to the other; rather, they are, to some extent at least, constructed by each generation" (Grusec and Davidov, 2014). It can be said that one of the main goals of socialisation is the institutionalisation of the values, the beliefs, and standards of the society for all members of a given group and occurs across the lifespan of an individual and occurs through various agents like family, school

and education system, peer group, and social mass media (Grusec and Davidov, 2014). So, these roles are socially constructed and are not a natural reality.

Gender is an idea coming from the concept of 'doing gender', which is a matter of performance according to socio-cultural contexts—a system by which the bodies of human beings are managed, controlled and fashioned in specific ways, and dictate their behaviour and social interactions, creating a sense of performance of genders. Studies show that almost all societies transfer different roles, and values to women and men, and these gender roles and meanings have formed our gendered world. What we think is natural in women and men behaviours indeed are what the society has considered and defined as femininity and masculinity. Therefore, gender socialisation is a process that encourages girls and boys to adopt and develop certain values, behaviours and personality traits as masculine and feminine forming the identity of men and women in society. This process will continue for almost a person's life. Therefore, gender socialisation develops gender stereotypes and reinforces gender discrimination (Leaper and Farkas, 2014), because it can produce and reproduce gender roles as social facts, and spread gender discrimination as a natural issue.

Gender, Schooling and Teachers

Since, gender is an integral part of one's identity and is structured around

roles that are performed, they reflect in every institution, in both structure and norms. Teachers, the foot soldiers of any educational policy and the main actors of the educational system, automatically perform their gender roles in the professional realm of a school in some capacity or the other.

The gender roles performed by people follow the divisions of space, which can be 'private' or 'public'. In gender studies, it is understood as the 'private' being the more domestic, household sphere that pertains to attributes and work in caregiving, managing household matters, which are somehow considered inferior to the 'public' that pertains to the outside world of professional work, economic value, political power, social status, etc. With the gendered behaviour and experiences of lived lives, it is interesting to note that the reflection of the 'public' and 'private' may be seen in work places too, such as schools, and that it can influence and control the space and function of women.

It has been a long-standing notion that school-teaching is a 'feminine' job. (Ullah, 2016) In occupational studies, feminisation refers to "a process in which the number of women in an occupation increases until the occupation switches from being predominantly male to predominantly female" (Addi-Reccah, 2002). But the statistical shift is indicative of several socio-cultural phenomena that are wider than just the numerical growth in employment. In India, teaching, especially at the school level and nursing have been

jobs that are dominated by women, which is not necessarily the result of their excellence in the field. One of the predominant reasons is that it is considered a more convenient fit in keeping with the prevalent social norms of domestic roles. Apart from the need of academic acumen, the job of a teacher also requires various soft-skills and is often seen as a ‘soft’ profession that suits women (Skelton, 2009), who are primary caregivers in the private space, and therefore, are considered to be more capable of extending those qualities into the public space. While this can be an advantage in employability in industries, such as education, nursing, hospitality, etc., it also comes loaded with the notion that it is a mere extension of the stereotypical gender roles from the households to the workspace, that offers women “quasi-familial roles and identities around a core of male hierarchies and privileges” (Newman, 1994, p. 193).

OBJECTIVES

This paper attempts to fulfil the following objectives:

- 1. Understanding gender biases held by the teachers.

- 2. How their notions of gender biases affect their work and the school culture.

METHODOLOGY

To explore the dynamics of gender socialisation and work experiences of the teachers, two government schools were identified, wherein the school culture was studied along with in-depth interviews and discussions with the teachers. The study is based in the government schools in New Delhi and from each school, twenty teachers spanning different subject-expertise and years of teaching experience were interviewed. An open-ended question schedule with prompts were used to conduct the interview, and through discussions with other stakeholders and non-participatory observations, the school culture was studied. Some of it also reflected from the interviews itself. Sampling has been purposive in nature and a qualitative analysis of the study is presented in connection to prominent themes that emerged therein.

Table1
Sampling of teachers in the two schools

School A		School B	
Male	Female	Male	Female
9	10	12	8
Total=19		Total=20	

Grand Total=39

The 'Private' and the 'Public' within the School

"If you check the timetable, you will find that female teachers have more periods than male teachers.... every time there is a teacher absent in class, they always put a female teacher for duty, not the men, even if they have been free for a while. All the decision making is with them. Earlier, most of the women were guest teachers, when the permanent positions opened up, then we got a chance to be permanent teachers."

"None of the real charges are with the female teachers. We have none of the leadership roles, none of the duties that lets us represent the school in any platform outside of these premises, block-level, inter-school level. Only if there is some responsibility directly related to the girl students, then it will come to us. I cannot take names but male teachers on certain occasion have said things like I don't know why these women come out to work, they can't handle anything properly. The male teachers have done so many blunders in so many programmes, no one seems to bat an eyelid. They don't seem to want the female teachers to come forward and be seen. Not many women are talking about it here, but some like me feel this intensely. Its unfair."

"Staff meetings are more about rolling out decisions than any real discussion. Women barely speak. They don't even say they disagree to

something in the meeting, but when the men are gone they will crib."

The above-mentioned respondents are from both schools and from female teachers having different amount of teaching experiences in those schools, who seem to echo the same issue that the female teachers seem to be assigned duties that are closer to their role in the private spheres. The men continue to hold positions of decision-making and are always chosen for the 'outside' jobs like inter-school or block-level events the roles that automatically create a power structure within colleagues. There also seems to be a general adherence to status quo. None of these issues were raised by any of the male teachers in both the schools. With female teachers, while some were very vocal about this practice, the rest did not comment on it at all. There is a general acceptance of such a system, as no one seems to be actively protesting against it or has taken any action that they mentioned, but the displeasure about the injustice was communicated amply in the interviews.

"Gender is defined in the school itself. You can see, if there is a guest coming, then we will be called to receive them and give them flowers. But if there is an real work, they will get it. Not everything is directly done. Many things happen indirectly. You will come to know."

"I am one of the youngest women in the maths department. There are

15 of us, 6 women and 9 men. There are many seniors, but I'm the most qualified, I started the mental maths initiative. They made me the maths faculty in-charge, so I am in many co-ordination duties. There is always a challenge to convince the seniors for anything, especially men."

Much of these 'harmless' acts of distribution of work are more covert than overt in nature. One of the teachers further elaborated how choices of who should do what came in the form of suggestions, which were always attached to someone in power, like the principal, so no one would question it. Many a times decisions have been taken and the staff was only informed of them, leaving no space for negotiation or a feedback system. Also, most subject teacher in-charges, the teacher development Co-ordinators and the principals in both schools were male, making the circle of decision-making almost entirely male. Though in both the schools, the vice-principals were female, there was barely any real power with them as everything was ultimately the decision of the principals. Moreover, their functioning in the staff-meeting and in oversight of other events was found to be tokenistic and did not claim any independent agency.

Within organisations, women have been found to be at a disadvantage when it comes to be considered for leadership positions or managerial roles compared to

men. Research also suggests that they have lesser opportunity at work to scale up (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Heads of departments and projects have been found to be less willing to provide the female workers with professional development opportunities or challenging work (Glick, 2013). Research also point out that female managers have lower chances of being assigned advanced tasks that lead to skill and position development, creating barriers to promotion and that women are less likely to be trusted with leadership roles in even female-dominated sectors like schools.

Culture of any organisation, like the society, tends to fester inequalities based on social order, and thus, gender injustice is also a part and parcel of the workspace experience. 'Pink ghetto' exists where stereotyping and discrimination against women workers force them to particular roles and positions, with accepted standards or behaviour towards them at an organisational level (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Rudman et al., 2012). This is not by chance or coincidence, but usually such traditional gender underpinnings and rigid hierarchy is built into the system through structural processes and policies that hinders the growth of women in organisations. Research in psychology of organisations note that the standards for men and women's proficiency and execution of their jobs follow the gendered norms and

hierarchies (Eagly and Karau 2002) and this kind of gender-profiling can hamper their chances of being selected for a particular task or for promotions.

The notion of jobs also having gender-based traits associated with them, i.e., masculine and feminine jobs or tasks, also further segregate the workers on gender lines. (Davison and Burke, 2000) Thus, when women pursue higher or leadership positions, it is considered too ambitious as it is overturning the gendered organisational power structure. (Rudman et al., 2012). Enough evidence exists to prove that women who use their agency, skill and confidence to follow career-oriented goals are depicted as deviant or socially ostracised, likely to be not popular amongst peers and not preferred to be hired. One of the quoted interviews skirted the issue of being a young and qualified woman in a leadership role in a subject considered masculine (mathematics), and having trouble to getting seniors to respond to her co-ordination efforts.

However, research is also witness to the fact that if women aim and chase only traditional feminine roles at the workplace, it is seen as affirmative traits and are accepted by their peers. (Eagly and Karau, 2002) Perhaps, this is the motivation why many female teachers continue to do what they are assigned and not raise any disagreement. It has also been found that women with expertise

in a particular field are prone to be discredited and rejected as there is lack of conviction in their skill, as opposed to men of the same skill level, which leads to rating women low on resolving issues that require high level knowledge of the field. (Thomas-Hunt and Phillips, 2004) Multiple female teachers across both schools mentioned that they were only assigned simple, feminine jobs like in-house arrangements, co-ordination for medicines and vaccines, hospitality and decoration, cultural programmes but not jobs that are considered slightly more complicated, and therefore, valued more—like time-table co-ordination, examination duty in-charge, communicating with outside stakeholders, representing the school in larger events, etc. As stated in one of the interviews, perhaps there is an understanding not only amongst the leadership, but also the colleagues themselves, that certain groups are suited for specific kinds of jobs and the discrimination arises therein, and is accepted as a part of the school culture.

Even within women, those with specific traits of conditions are prone to more discrimination in getting picked for jobs or at appraisals like pregnant women, mothers, etc., as opposed to men, whether married or not. Though there is a reverse effect that men might have to bear more with extra responsibilities that happen post regular school hours, it is because the women are doubly

burdened with housework that does not reduce once she starts working outside the house (Sudarshan, 2014). But this also becomes another reason for being passed over for being chosen for important duties that might have career implications or have reasons to be valued by the teachers. Considering all the several pieces of literature, it is clear that workplace discrimination against particular kinds of women have the identical impact on the entire scenario—which is prejudiced selection and appraisal processes. The primary data in this case too corroborates that fact.

Gendered Teachers Interactions

In both the schools, the staff rooms were found to be separate for male and female teachers. Though some of the teachers said that there is no restriction from anyone going in and out of either of the staff rooms, or sitting in the other staff room together for work, it was also accepted by the teachers themselves that such a thing rarely happened. The interaction was, therefore, mostly work-related and were discussed hurriedly or briefly in corridors because male and female teachers rarely sat together, even in recess. Thus, it is further easier for the duties to get categorised along gender lines as groups are formed where co-working is easier. In the case of an important task, which necessitated the co-ordination between male teachers and female teachers for longer periods of time, the principal's office was used for

these meetings and discussions, often in the presence of multiple other people or even the principal who would be constantly attending to several people in his office.

There was a general air of resistance and discomfort for mixed group activities and deliberate distance being maintained amongst the male and female teachers. None of the male teachers in either school seem to have a problem with this segregation. In fact, a few of them mentioned that it is better that women have their privacy and men have theirs in their free time, and did not seem to think it had any impact in co-working, as the need for the same was limited. However, in each school, at least three female teachers raised the issue that they did not understand this segregation when the school was co-educational and the teacher population is almost 1:1 in both schools for male and female teachers. In fact, they advocated that it would be a better working culture, and co-ordination amongst subject departments and general relationships will be easier. It is clear that this is an administrative decision, which no one has formally contested so far.

Female Teachers and Space

Observations around the schools revealed that the female teachers would promptly return to the staffroom after a class, and remain there in their free periods and recess. However, male teachers

were observed to be 'hanging out' in science laboratories, computer labs, PE rooms, administrative office, councillor's office, etc., in their free time, interacting with other fellow male colleagues who were located in that particular space. These spaces outside of the staffrooms were also found to be mostly male in both the schools. Upon visiting the staffroom in the first school several times during recess, it was observed that almost half the male teachers were not present in the staffroom, whereas the researcher found the female staffroom to be completely full during recess. It is a clear indication that within the school premises, female teachers preferred to be in a limited space and access spaces only based on need while male teachers were comfortable to access most parts of the school. This is also a reflection of the society at large, where women have accepted to be confined to a space, that is the house, and internalised limited, need-based outing while it is the men who experience and exercise more freedom to access various spaces. More often than not, the latter also is one of the reasons for the former to happen. In the Indian context, it is the man's freedom to be able to freely access spaces irrespective of time, and is what directly impacts the woman's freedom to access those spaces freely due to the male dominated power dynamics and the otherisation of women. Especially if the space has gender segregation embedded into its culture, it is only

natural for it to manifest itself outside of the staffrooms as well.

CONCLUSION

School culture is understood as both reflecting the 'wider culture' of a society and resulting from multiple interpretations, and interactions by individuals and groups as active agents. Kessler et al. (1985) suggest that there is a particular 'gender regime' at work in every school (as in other institutions), and this can be defined as— "The pattern of practices that constructs various kinds of masculinity and femininity among staff. and students, orders them in terms of prestige and power, and constructs a sexual division of labour within the institution....It confronts them as a social fact, which they have to come to terms with somehow" (Kessler et. al., 1985:42).

The gender regime reflects the dominant gender relations in the larger society and is reflected through the gendered experiences of the teachers as well. As Mac An Ghaill (1994) notes, whereas the institutional culture of the school defines gendered behaviour for its inhabitants, it is through the school micro cultures of school leaders, teachers and students that masculinities, and femininities are mediated and lived out. As in any institution, the attitude of the leadership or the main actors will reflect in the working of any group, and the inherent biases of teachers can have dire implications on the way curriculum is transacted and in

general teacher-student interactions. Learning is “a continuous interaction between cognitive, behavioural and environmental influences” (Bandura, 1986). Schunk and Zimmerman (1997), in their research on social processes of learning ascertain that observation and emulation are the first two phases of learning, which is why school cultures and actions of teachers become important to study in order to understand how students stand to be impacted. Terrier (2020) among others, has demonstrated through extensive research how gender biases of teachers have impacted the academic achievement and of self understanding amongst the students as certain stereotypical assumptions are culturally and socially associated with the gender groups. The rules, norms, patterns of behaviour set in school constitute a gender code, and provides cues for gender appropriate behaviour within a particular school setting and often disadvantage girls (Velaskar,

2021). Bhattacharya’s (2021) work in primary school show how stereotypical gender socialisations are continued through schooling by various practices of space and activity segregation, and differential assumptions and expectations from boys and girls.

Education reforms have been numerous, yet few have directly involved gender justice. The closest attempt has been the push to increase the population of girls in Indian classrooms and incentivise girls education. Even less has been done to understand the standpoint of the teachers and where they come from, what are their struggles with the structures and the systems, and how they are constantly influencing them as well as being impacted by them, in their work lives. For equity and capability-building concerns, the education system needs to look into this aspect of the school culture as well.

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