

Decoding the Conceptions of ‘Gender’ among Student-Teachers

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ABSTRACT: *This paper is based on a study that investigates how groups of student-teachers talk about their own lives in relation to gender and processes of change; how they address issues of gender in their public and working life. What are the inequalities faced by them on a daily basis? This paper attempts to argue that courses on gender issues and concerns have a vital role in shaping conceptions of gender that student-teachers construct as they prepare to become teachers. The study also highlights that developing a more gender sensitive disposition presents important challenges for the teaching profession. Pre-service teacher-education programmes can indeed play a critical role in shaping notions vis-à-vis gender either by way of reinforcing popular notions or by enabling a more nuanced conceptualisation. The present study empirically proves that the most needed demand of the present times is to strengthen our teacher education institutions as ‘epistemic communities’ which can create ‘transformative professionals’.*

KEY WORDS: *Gender, Teacher Education and Citizenship*

Date of Submission: 21-02-2021

Date of Acceptance: 04-03-2021

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary feminists provide alternatives to both republican and liberal feminist discourses of citizenship (Dillabough and Arnot, 2006; Werbner and Yuval-Davis, 1999). They emphasize that women should not be considered as one universal category, but rather they should be understood from their cultural and political situatedness in their society vis-a-vis class, race, ethnicity and sexualities. Another branch of contemporary feminists is sceptical of the multicultural framework, which they argue becomes oppressive because of an overriding interest for community rights. Feminists have questioned and shifted the “meaning of such rights need, dependency, entitlements and democratic participation. Equally they have sought strategic transformation of power which configure the terms of inclusion and exclusion in the polity” (Kenway and Langmead, 2000, p. 313). What unites them is their struggle to redefine and reimagine a citizenship which is not unjust and inimical to women. Different discourses within feminism have contributed in uncloaking the dynamic patriarchal relationships that shape content and form of citizenship. Feminists have used varied trajectories to question and challenge the structure and discursive practices that are oppressive to women; thus creating a language of possibility, and a common future for an egalitarian society.

Empirical research and theoretical engagements on gender issues with regard to student-teachers and their notions have received scant attention in India. Recent attention to the issue of gender takes, as its primary focus, school curriculum content and design. Very little attention is paid to the school teachers and their education as critical factors that can influence children’s developing notions of gender issues and concerns. As argued by scholars, contemporary curricular reforms in India have also failed to address the reality of school teachers, their preparation and their role in bringing about educational change. This paper is based on a study that investigates how groups of student-teachers talk about their own lives in relation to gender and processes of change; how they address issues of gender in their public and working life. What are the inequalities faced by them on a daily basis? This paper attempts to argue that courses on gender issues and concerns have a vital role in shaping conceptions of gender that student-teachers construct as they prepare to become teachers.

METHODOLOGY

In 2012, I conducted a study with the student-teachers of an elementary teacher education programme; data was collected by using questionnaires, conducting individual interviews and focus group discussions to investigate into the constructs of gender. A total of 35 student-teachers participated in first stage. i.e. self-administered questionnaire. Ten student-teachers were then selected for individual interviews and Focus group discussion.

Through these, the implicit notions of gender were made explicit; shedding light on the processes that discursively shape their constructs of gender issues. Understandings of gender were teased out by shifting the analytical focus to student-teachers as active agents of gender-specific discourse; understanding how in banal way the constructs of gender are meaningfully embodied, expressed, and sometimes performed in the routine life.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The questionnaire included five questions designed to assess the gender-dimension of citizenship. Questions on gender, caste and class emerged during individual interviews. Focus Group Discussions used two questions to interrogate and seek clarity on what emerged during the interviews.

The association activity in the questionnaires included words such as 'woman', 'man', 'love', 'family' and 'homemaker'. The purpose in giving these words was to understand how references to gender are made in the construction of these words. The analysis of the responses reflects a patriarchal notion of citizenship. A 'woman' is defined in a highly patriarchal frame where she is perceived as one whose primary responsibilities lie within the 'household'. Student-teachers viewed gender as neatly defined categories of men and women. They treated them as binaries where women were described as soft, patient, mother, sister, wife, my mother, always dominated, helpless, oppressed by men, struggler, playing societal role and patient are used by student-teachers. The analysis of the responses show that these student-teachers perceived women as passive beings who lacks agency. Similarly, the word 'homemaker' was seen as essentially gendered category where they described the latter as a domain of 'mother', who 'sacrifices her happiness for the good of family', 'ghar ki Lakshmi', who, 'with all sincerity works for the family and fulfills her responsibilities'. A homemaker is addressed as 'her' and the home is perceived as an abode exclusively for women. Homemaker is defined as someone who is housed within the four walls of the home.

The student-teachers marked men as the binary against women. Student-teachers viewed them as 'violent', 'powerful' or 'patriarchal beings'. The choice of words such 'courageous', 'capable', 'we live in a man-made world where they are granted minimal roles', 'hard nature', 'dominating', 'little adjusting', 'muscles and ego', 'patient', 'strong', 'patriarchal society', 'irresponsible creator of society', 'should serve the country' reflect the deep seated notions the student-teacher hold about gender as men/women binaries. Responses obtained to the association of words of 'love', 'power', 'authority', 'justice' and 'people' also reflect how student-teachers constructed certain emotions as specific to either men or women. Findings show that student-teachers viewed love, family, homemaker as the private and feminine domain. The questionnaire included three descriptive items on women related issues.

The first question asked was: Is it right to say that women are caring and compassionate by nature? Do they also believe so? Do they see any problem with such a construction? 72 percent of responses reflect perception of women as caring and compassionate by nature. Many of these respondents provide the example of mother, sister and wife to substantiate their point. However, 14 percent consider socialization as a factor in inculcating caring and compassionate behaviour in women. 11 percent responses questioned this formulation and argued that they knew men who are caring and compassionate and women who are cruel. 3 percent did not respond. Thus, most student-teachers believed that women are caring and compassionate by nature. The majority also believed that gender is a biological category and that women and men have gender specific dispositions.

Student-teachers were asked to reflect on the conflict women face at work at home/work outside home. Analysis indicates that 33 percent responses reflection advocacy for woman's discretion whether she wants to work outside home or not. They also asserted that women have equal rights as that of men. 27 percent responses indicated a belief that women should be allowed to work. Further investigation into this notions showed that the student-teachers believed that in order to work outside home, a woman needs to seek permission from the men of the household. 25 percent responses reveal that women should work only if they can maintain a balance between household work and their professional lives. 11 percent responses advocated that men should share the domestic burden and 5 percent responses presented the argument that women have always worked in the agricultural field and they must continue to work. An overwhelming majority of 52 percent responses reflect that student-teachers held the opinion that women should either seek permission to work outside home or should maintain a balance between household work and their professional lives.

An analysis of the above responses suggests that student-teachers still look at gender in a very patriarchal way where gender existed as binaries and a woman as an individual was constructed as a highly restricted and hegemonised being, thereby reducing her status to an economically dependent and subordinated wife, homemaker, or mother. The role of a woman was perceived as that of a creator and a 'moral vessel'.

The work of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) has significantly challenged the private/public divide for creating hindrances for women or a class- glass ceiling that restricts a woman's access to power ridden public spaces and thus disallows her from exercising her rights as a 'full citizen'.

What clearly emerges from the analysis is that for student-teachers of this teacher education programme, a woman is the weaker gender category whose role has been set by society. These roles were perceived as restricted to their household domain. Contrary to this, student-teachers described man as a binary opposite to woman who was described as aggressive and dominating and therefore considered to have the nature of 'being a public and hence a political being'. Looked at closely, the ideals and attributes used to define a citizen by student-teachers were highly 'masculine' and 'public' in nature and do not value the supposedly 'private world' of women in its vocabulary.

During FGD, the discussion was centered on the student-teachers' responses to the questionnaire wherein they were asked whether women needed more rights and entitlements than ordinary citizens. 46 percent responses supported this. During further investigation during FGD, they were asked what made them feel that women needed more rights than men. The majority of the responses were influenced by the 'Nirbhaya Case' in Delhi.¹ Mostly student-teachers were deeply impacted by the incidence which made strong presence in their responses to the questions on women and their rights to be safe. Student-teachers, when asked if there should be more rights for women in other spheres of life also, did not give any answer. Some of them also felt that the set of rights presently available to women is adequate for them to lead a violence free life. However, they expressed an urgency to create awareness among women with respect to the rights available to them. The following responses explain this further:

Box 1 : Focus Group Discussion on Gender Issues

Women already have sufficient rights in the Constitution. They don't need extra rights. All they need is a little more awareness of how to make use of those rights.(DR-01)²

Women's level is unpleasantly low. If we provide them rights, we can create a stronger support system for them make them equal to men. (DR-03)

I think the present set of rights is sufficient for women. We just need to educate them about their rights. For example, the media played a pivotal role in creating awareness among the young after the case of 16th December, the positive consequences of which can be seen in the form of the government's effort to start separate public transport for women. Many MNCs have changed the timings for women, and are no longer forcing them to stay in office after 8 pm. If a woman is asked to stay after 8 pm, the company is obliged to make arrangements for her to reach home safely.(DR-04)

Sources: Focus Group Discussion

Many student-teachers felt that the public spaces are gendered and unsafe for women. They expressed that woman needed extra police protection and other facilities like separate public transport for them. A few of them, however, argued that '*women should stay within their limits and should not venture out late at night*'. There was an intense argument on this when all student teachers except two male respondents³ felt that women should not venture out during the night. The following excerpts demonstrate how, for these respondents, time and space is gendered.

Box 2: Gender, Time and Space

I feel many women deserve police protection, especially those who are victims of domestic violence.(DR-01)

There is a helpline number but if you check with women, I doubt if even 30 percent of women know this number.(DR-03)

Protection is fine but a woman is also responsible for her safety. If we take the case of 16th December, there are people who are pointing fingers at the girl. They want to know what she was doing out that late in the night. (DR-04)

I find a problem in this argument, why are we raising our eyebrows when a woman ventures out at night. What about men? No one questions them!(DR-03)

As I said earlier, if women really want to have few rights to enjoy, they must also stay within their limits. (DR-02)

This society is not that progressive about women, and women should always remember it.(DR-03)

Even if boys are roaming late at night, it does not mean that girls should forget about their own safety and start to emulate them.(DR-06)

Researcher: Do you feel that women should not be allowed to go out late at night?

Men and women have equal rights.(DR-07)

Our society has formed a few rules for women for their safety and they should abide by them.(DR-04)

I agree that women should be given equal freedom to venture out late at night, like men. But even then, girls should restrain themselves. I strongly feel that if something wrong happens, then the woman is also responsible to some extent. There is no absolute freedom, it's always regulated. Even our family teaches us these values. (DR-08)

We should also reflect why there are restrictions on women to go out late at night. These restrictions are valid as they are formulated for our safety. We must understand this. (DR-09)

What you are talking about? It is the way of thinking which is problematic. This thought process also has its roots

¹ The 2012 Delhi gang rape case involved a rape and fatal assault that occurred on 16 December 2012 in New Delhi, A group of men physically assaulted and gang raped a 23-year-old woman. The incidence ignited protests across the country.

² D.R. denotes Student-teachers.

³ The FGD as well as interviews had only 4 male student-teachers

in society. It was society which supported the sati system where a woman was burnt alive when her husband died. We are the young generation who need to change this thinking; if a girl is going out late in the night with her parents, then it is ok but why should it become a problem when she goes out with a man? So it is society which needs to be changed...and rapes happen in broad day light as well.(DR-09)

Source: Focus Group Discussion

The above discussion among student-teachers throws light on the several gendered conceptions they hold on the issue of women. The most explicit is the understanding that there are certain spaces and times which can be marked as gendered. It is reflected in the responses made by student-teachers who argued that '*girls are responsible for violence against them if they step out of their home at night*'. Also, the student-teachers subscribed to the idea of unspoken societal norms which restrict women's access to specific public spaces such as secluded spaces, clubs or domain outside the home. They viewed and justified such restrictions as '*justified and meant for the safety of women*'.

It is pertinent to note that many student-teachers endorsed the view when one of the student-teachers remarked that *one hand alone cannot clap* which meant women's responsibility in crimes against them. However, there were three other respondents who felt that women have equal rights as men to access time and public space. They also stated a counter perspective that the need is to change the mindset of people who still believe in patriarchal and oppressive norms which oppressed women.

What emerged sharply from the responses of the student-teachers is their notion that women lacked agency. What she could wear, where she could go, and at what time, were all depended on what the society allowed them and to what extent. The idea of freedom for women was interpreted within the same framework. Women were perceived as carriers of family honour and any sexual offence against women was perceived as a loss of the honour of the family.

What also emerged from the response of the student-teachers was that violence against women was not perceived to be an outcome of patriarchy but rather, a lack of education of the social mores of sexuality.

Analysis reflects a highly patriarchal understanding of gender issues, where a woman was perceived as a 'virtuous being', 'nurturer' and 'care giver'. Student-teachers viewed women's place in society was restricted mainly to the household domain; their sexuality was reified as the honour of the family. They also argued that the protection of this honour would mean restriction on women's access to certain space and time as justified and hence gendered. This would necessarily mean her limited role in political public participation. Moreover, except for a few, the majority of student teachers believed in the 'patriarchal view' of women to accept societal norms and values. The belief that women are not allowed to go out late at night for their safety echoed patriarchal narratives of oppression. Martin assesses the place of woman as a category in political theorization and finds that "the category 'woman' has been erased from politics and political theory as women have emerged as historically determined and socially constructed categories, who are 'benevolent actors' and 'virtuous beings'. In this context, women as mothers and care-givers are constructed against the grain of political action which is formal in nature and therefore, women are seen as outsiders to the political process" (Martin cited in Dillabough and Arnot (2008) p.166).

Conclusion

In the last couple of decades, India has witnessed an increase in curricular reforms and policy initiatives to achieve ideals for inclusive democracy and social justice. The vision created by NCF (National Curricular Framework) 2005, Right to Education Act 2009, NCFTE (National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education) 2009 and Justice Verma Committee (JVC) 2012 has emphasized the need to ensure rigorous and academically sound teachers education programs. They have voiced a felt need to give attention to create gender transformative classroom by preparing the teachers for the same. The understanding of gender, both as a concept and as a day to day practice is crucial to education which is a tool for expanding life opportunities and freedoms for all men and women as well as to establish democracy in true spirit. NCF 2005, in view of this, highlights the need to educate students with the issue of gender from a social, cultural and psychological perspective and teach them to use the gender issues within their own personal and societal contexts. The role of a teacher is to enable students to not only investigate the actual differences in the upbringing and personality development among different genders, but also assist students to critically examine how these differences play out in terms of power dynamics in socio-cultural contexts.

The need to develop a more gender sensitive disposition presents important challenges for the teaching profession. Pre-service teacher-education programmes play a critical role in shaping notions vis-à-vis gender either by way of reinforcing popular notions or by enabling a more nuanced conceptualisation. Notions that teachers carry are likely to enter schooling as part of the official and hidden curriculum of the school. Rovengo (2003) writes 'to understand good teaching, we need to hear teachers' voices and study what good teachers taught, know and believed.'(p.295). Various researches have shown that teacher education programmes can

create opportunities for student-teachers where they can reflect on their own deeply embedded epistemological beliefs. This engagement with their beliefs and notions can empower them to engage with realities that can place them in a better position to question and counter the structures and practices of oppression. Thus for the empowerment of teachers; a first condition is to engage with their tacit and deeply embedded beliefs. The present study empirically proves that the most needed demand of the present times is to strengthen our teacher education institutions as "epistemic communities" which can create 'transformative professionals'.

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