

NO MORE *INKAAR*: THE RELEVANCE OF GENDER-SENSITIVE EDUCATION TO INCREASED EMPLOYABILITY

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Abstract

With more women moving out of the confines of the home and hearth and joining the workforce, the need for a new grammar to define working relations between the genders has emerged! Many cases of sexual harassment or plain gender insensitivity (some alleged, some proved) at the work place have made news in the recent past. And as this conference's keynote speech has aptly put it, knowledge has to 'evolve and customise itself to the needs of the time'.

The point I am trying to make is that if greater emphasis is laid on channelling the various theories of gender equality towards imparting practical gender sensitive education in school and colleges, it could create a generation of young men and women who, in being more at ease with each other, will work with far greater efficiency and in a much more pleasant atmosphere. Such contextual education will thus ultimately translate into better work culture and productivity. Thus apart from moving towards the greater goal of a more egalitarian society; even from the purely practical point of employability, gender sensitisation training in school and college education has a lot going for it.

In this paper, I intend to focus on areas where such gender egalitarianism is lacking as of now in our formal education system and point out how some small practical steps can go a long way in correcting that.

Introduction

At one point it was taken for granted that men would be chauvinistic, and women who dared to live a life even remotely deviant from the one traditionally expected of them, would have to live with constant jibes and often, direct harassment from them. But as this conference's keynote speaker has aptly put it, knowledge has to 'evolve and customise itself to the needs of the time'.

In *Sexual/Textual Politics* Toril Moi states that the "principal objective of feminist criticism has always been political: it seeks to expose, not to perpetuate, patriarchal practices". One of the most enduring of these patriarchal practices is the confinement of women to unpaid labour, mostly the household work. But as more and more women join the workforce, throwing off the yoke of home and hearth, the need for a new grammar to define the relations between the genders has emerged, now more than ever!

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Although there is a crying need to redefine the relations between the genders the present scenario is quite dismal. A study of several textbooks reveals that they reinforce the stereotypical image that men dominate the public sphere and women the private sphere. Most women are shown in unpaid jobs like sweeping, cooking, washing, packing, fetching water, making tea and looking after children. In the public sphere of paid labour too, the stereotypes continue. Illustrations of nurses and teachers in the textbooks are consistently of women, while doctors, police officers, pilots, drivers, carpenters and soldiers are all men. Further, these textbooks seem to be subtly sending out messages about the 'glass ceiling'. In one textbook used in Tamil Nadu, for instance, of the twelve teachers portrayed, all ten were women. But the headmaster is quite tellingly a male (Mani 5). The message is clear—women are hardly ever qualified enough to achieve upward mobility in their jobs, even if they manage to get one in the first place. A mathematics problem asks about how long a piece of work that takes three women and two men five days to complete, would take a different combination of men and women. The moot point being that women have less output than men. Science textbooks almost always feature men as scientists.

Again most of these textbooks show boys participating in boisterous, outdoor games like cricket, football, or 'mind games' like chess. Girls, on the other hand, are shown as either lounging about with dolls or paint brushes, or even when outside, playing traditional games like 'hop skotch' or 'pebble games' (Mani 9-10). Again most illustrations in science textbooks show boys performing experiments or handling sophisticated equipment like computers (Noopur 28). The implications of such portrayals run deep—women are not good with complex machines or calculations.

Even curricula at the college level is not totally free from such biases. Till just a few years earlier, the University of Calcutta used to regularly set questions on the 'masculine qualities' of the English language for its students majoring in the language at the graduation level. Even today, a story like Bhabani Bhattacharya's 'Moment of Eternity' is part of the syllabus for B.A., general students, which shows that for a woman whose husband has expired, the only way out is to commit suicide.

It is precisely conceptions like this that, I feel, need to be expunged from the texts being fed to impressionable minds, because men and women who grow up believing in the inferiority of one sex as opposed to another will always generate a skewed gender equation at the work place.

Conclusion

In spite of several recommendations in the past about the need to gender sensitize our textbooks; there is still ample scope for improvement. Anita Rampal, former dean of the education department in Delhi University and an expert associated with the last revised preparation of NCERT textbooks for elementary classes in 2006-7, said last year that the texts on social science and literature give "examples to explain concepts of gender, self-dignity and values", but they "do not deal with such issues explicitly" (qtd. Mohanty). But several recent events seem to have brought this issue into sharp focus. Many leading newspapers carried articles about the PMO push to the MHRD to introduce gender studies in school curricula after the 'Nirbhaya' gang rape tragedy shook the nation in December 2012 (Kasturi, Dhawan, Mohanty, Vishnoi). Recently, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has even brought out a handbook on value education for teachers, which urges them to impart values through innovative means including the use of meaningful cinema and books. The board has also made counselling service compulsory in its affiliated schools and is collecting data to broad-base and streamline services.

The NCERT and text book framers of boards in many other Indian states are also making deliberate attempts to include information about women achievers in 'non-traditional' fields to provide a more balanced view to the students. Thus along with the customary (and necessary) information about Sister Nivedita, Helen Keller or Florence Nightingale, we now get to know that "it was a woman who invented the bulletproof jacket. Or that the first "spiritual leader" in recorded history was a woman called Vak, one of several women believed to have written the Vedas?" Again from the 7th grade onwards, textbooks have woven gender into the mainstream framework of day-to-day life. Through narratives, comic strips among other forms, they try to depict where women stand in relation to India's constitution, its media, minority populations, dalits, etc.

However, the good work done now needs to be reinforced. Monobina Gupta has pointed out how the gender sensitive curriculum is not being properly disseminated to the students because many teachers are not trained enough to do justice to the revamped syllabi. Rampal, too, has accepted that there is a big gap between the outdated B.Ed. training being imparted to the majority of teachers and the new syllabus they are expected to teach (*oneworld.net*).

It is only by correcting such obvious lacunae and through constant vigilance and upgradation of our curriculum and syllabi at the school, college and university level, can we hope to create generations of young men and women who genuinely believe in gender equity. And in that land of freedom, gender insensitivity or sexual harassment at the work place will, hopefully, be a thing of the past.

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