

**WHAT WE TEACH OUR CHILDREN: GENDER
SENSITIVITY WITHIN THE INDIAN CURRICULUM**

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Abstract

Equity and Equality are an integral part of any humane society. As a country with norms formulated and bills passed around gender disparity and equal education rights, India has come a long way to be gender-inclusive when it comes to educating the youth. However, beyond the admittance of students in schools, the quality of education imparted to them acts as a measure of the child's development. Despite the tremendous strides in technological and institutional aspects, the Indian curricula still fare poorly in the discourse of gender sensitization. Gender inequality and societal stereotypes are an integral part of the kind of stories included in the Indian syllabi. The present study looks at the magnitude of gender inclusivity within the Indian curriculum by exploring the English textbooks for grades IX and X prescribed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). The paper alludes to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the country's efforts in maintaining gender equality in the classroom; and draws a parallel to the content taught in a child's formative years. By analyzing the manner in which gender roles, stereotypes, heteronormativity, and gender-based binaries are expressed within the high-school textbooks, the study opens up an academic probe into the impact of rigid gender boundaries on a student's mental health.

KEYWORDS:

Gender Sensitivity, Indian Curriculum, Stereotypes, Gender, Sex, Gender Disparity, Teaching English

Introduction

The Constitution of India is a critical document that sets out the fundamental principles every citizen of the country has to abide by. It pledges to provide everyone “justice, social, economic and political; ... equality of status and opportunity; and to promote among them all fraternity.” There are several articles within the constitution that guarantee Indian women equal status without any discrimination. Moreover, many amendment bills have been passed through the annals of history to rehabilitate the status of women in the country. Although much has been done to cultivate a balanced sex ratio, there is a big gap between the inclusion of women as a part of executive amendments and women’s portrayal as a part of the social construct. The present article seeks to probe into the extent to which women are represented within the Indian curriculum.

Patriarchy is a construct that has existed in society through civilizations, rendering a system that excludes female participation in litigation, medicine, employment, politics as well as education. Gender disparity is a global problem that is constantly reinforced by dint of stereotype formation, discriminatory approaches, and diminished opportunities for one gender, as against the preference of the other. The 2030 Agenda for Global Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015, maintains vital Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The fourth and fifth goals (SDG-04, SDG-05) focus on inclusivity in education and women empowerment. However, “full-gender equality... where all legal, social and economic barriers to their [women’s] empowerment have been removed, remains unfulfilled” (UN, 2020, p. 34).

The National Education Policy (NEP) of India, recently revised in 2020, lays itself parallel to the SDGs and envisages inclusive and equitable education for all students by 2030. Some of the radical changes included in NEP 2020, like the ‘Gender-Inclusion Fund,’ aims to provide funds to States in order to prioritise and assist “female and transgender children in gaining access to education” (p. 26). However, such utopian aspirations sharply contrast the dismal learning outcomes within classrooms. The policy goes into much detail while highlighting the need for inclusivity, but it appears to be empty when areas like the addressal and sensitization of the issue of inclusive education are concerned (Jana, 2021).

While there has been considerable discourse in bringing women inside the classrooms, there remain gaps in discussing what is taught to this apparently ‘gender inclusive’ class. The paper aims to address the problems of the unequal representation of women within the Indian curriculum. By taking the English textbooks of grades IX and X as the representatives of the stories narrated and taught to students in high school (right after the Right to Education – up to the age of 14), the study attempts to identify the extent to which female figures appear in narratives and as writers. It probes at the policies existing *beyond* bringing a stable gender ratio within the classroom by questioning the female representation in the ‘rooms’ as against it within the syllabi.

Gender Disparity in the Indian Education System

Literacy is one of the foundation stones for developing human capital. It is one of the first steps in building an empowered generation of individuals, which has the potential to “open the door to a much wider world of knowledge and information than would otherwise be accessible to women [and other socioeconomically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs)]” (Memon-Sen et al., 2001, p. 43). Education widens the opportunities for a woman by providing her with tools to make informed decisions and claim her rights

Article 21a of the Indian Constitution, also known as the Right to Education (RTE) Act, provides children within the age group of 6 to 14 years with the fundamental right of availing free and compulsory education (*Know Your RTE*, n.d.). The RTE is associated with several other rights, including the right to freedom from discrimination. Nevertheless, about 245 million women in India are not literate (Memon-Sen et al., 2001).

According to the latest census of India, the literacy rate of the country is 73%. Despite the competent percentage, there still exists a considerable gap in the male-female literacy rate.

Census Year	% of Male Literacy	% of Female Literacy	Total Literacy Rate (in %)
1901	9.83	0.60	5.39
2011	80.90	64.60	73.00

Table 1: Increase in Literacy Rate

Thus, even though there is a sharp increase in the overall literacy rates, female literacy is still looming around 65%, as against a steep 16% difference from the male literacy rate. Mr Pranab Mukherjee, the 13th President of India, addressed the nation on September 8, 2013, on the eve of International Literacy Day, and highlighted the urgency of a stable gender ratio in literacy.

The time has come to put in renewed vigour and concerted efforts to improve our literacy rate. It has been envisaged that by the end of the Twelfth Five-Year Plan period, we would achieve a literacy rate of eighty per cent and also narrow the gender gap from sixteen to ten percentage points. Our ultimate objective should be to bring the literacy rate not only at par with the world average but at levels attained by leading nations. The existing gender disparity in literacy levels has to be bridged by turning our attention on the girl child and women. (as cited in Katiyar, 2016)

Although an utterly stable gender ratio in literacy is a far cry, the Government of India has implemented various programs to address as well as eliminate gender disparity and gender-based discrimination. The National Policy on Education, 1986 emphasized the importance of educating women by claiming, "Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. In order to neutralise accumulated distortions of the past, The National Educational system will play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women" (Govt of India, 1986).

The most recent policy change in education, after over three decades, is the National Education Policy 2020, which addresses gender inclusivity by suggesting the addition of a gender inclusion fund, which would equip States to give more access to females and other SEDGs to gain access to education. It also talks about building residential facilities for girls to promote education in rural areas through the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs). Other ongoing schemes include the *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* campaign, which strives to enable females to avail educational opportunities.

Despite the campaigns, policies, acts, and bills through the decades of arguments and exchanges, the reality lies in the issue of retention and the quality of education availed by the 'future' of the country. Most of the policies do not go beyond pushing children toward the four-walled classrooms. However, as soon as the students open their books, the atmosphere shifts from an 'inclusive' system to an unequal gender discourse. The following sections will provide a detailed analysis of the English textbooks of grades IX and X from a gendered perspective.

Gender Exclusivity in the Indian Textbooks

The National Focus Group (2006) quotes a poem written by a group of four students of class VII of Utkarsh School in Vadodara, Gujarat:

In my textbooks I learned that only men are kings
and soldiers.

Till I read a book in which famous, queens ruled
and fought against enemies. In my textbooks I
learned that only men are doctors.

When I went to a doctor I saw that she was a
woman.

In my textbook I learned that only men do farming
in my country,
until, on a train journey I saw women working in
the fields.

I have learned that I have a lot to learn by seeing.

After entering the classroom, the most essential tool that students are given to gain education is the content that they study. The texts that a student reads shape his/her understanding of the world. Provided that students spend most of their time using textbooks, these texts are believed to be the foundations of “essential authoritative knowledge” and “credible information” (Knight, 2015). Ironically, the books that form a majority of classroom teaching depict an imbalanced worldview by cultivating narratives that position one gender as superior. Most of the textbooks are biased and androcentric, promote rigid gender roles, and advance hegemonic discourse (Jabeen et al., 2014; Kostas, 2021). Therefore, the biggest paradox of the education system lies in the belief that it is a tool for empowerment, yet at the same time, belying it by its denial to provide equal status to women in the syllabus.

The Indian textbooks reinforce societal inequality and gender-based stereotypes. Women’s portrayal is often based on idealist beliefs within the context of a conservative society. Most of the female characters are shown to be submissive, domesticated, and inconspicuous. Such a lopsided worldview not only emphasizes the hegemonic male-dominant ideology but also acts as an impediment to the empowerment of women. A report by the Press Information Bureau of India (2019) claims that the syllabus within the textbooks issued by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) promotes “gender sensitization in the school curriculum.” However, the findings of the study point out otherwise.

The NCERT issues textbooks for teaching students of Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) as well as of several other State Boards. English syllabus for these grades is primarily divided across two books – a primary textbook and a supplementary reader. For the sake of evaluation, the present study undertakes a detailed analysis of stories provided in both books for each grade.

The English textbooks of grade IX are called *Beehive* and *Moments*. The former includes texts written by 19 different writers, out of which only 3 are written by women, whereas the supplementary reader (*Moments*) does not have a single female author within its coursework. Furthermore, the primary textbook of grade X – *First Flight* – has a total of 23 writers, and their supplementary reader – *Footprints without Feet* – includes 10 different authors. As against this, the number of female writers in these books is 5 and 1, respectively.

Sr. No.	Grade	Textbook	Ratio of Representation (male vs. female)	Portrayal of Women (in %)
1	IX	Beehive	16:3	15.70
2	IX	Moments	10:0	0
3	X	First Flight	23:5	21,74
4	X	Footprints Without Feet	10:1	10

Table 2: Women as Authors

International Journal of English Learning and Teaching Skills

The staggering figures are merely one of the aspects of the representation of women within the curriculum. The textbooks also depict a sharp distinction of labor, thereby reinforcing stereotypes in almost every chapter. Beyond creating a curriculum with a majority of male writers, women appear in even fewer stories as leading figures of the narrative. Grade IX as well as X, both only portray 5 female protagonists each. Three in every four women in the supplementary reader of Grade X plays the role of a housewife. In contrast, stories like *A Letter to God* depict the female character to be an obedient housewife who stays at home and cooks for the family, and is addressed in the narrative as “woman.” The story highlights the rigid gender roles in society by showcasing women inside the house and men working in the fields. The anecdote of *A Baker from Goa* talks about women in terms of marriages and cooking as “the lady of the house must prepare sandwiches on the occasion of her daughter’s engagement.”

The textbooks of grade IX make an attempt to portray unconventional career choices of women by representing strong female figures like Maria Sharapova, Evelyn Glennie, and Santosh Yadav. However, it continues to showcase much weaker characters like “the little girl “a young child who is subjected to domestic violence by her father for an innocent mistake. Much of the female population forming a part of the 9th grade is caught in an angel-monster dichotomy, where beyond the mention of ideal figures, there exist narratives like *Iswaran, the Storyteller*, in which the only mention of a woman is as a ghostly figure. Both grades also have a few stories revolving around historical figures. The brief chapter on Nelson Mandela in grade X does not talk about any female freedom fighter in the struggle against apartheid; A.P.J. Abul Kalam’s mother is described to be “an ideal helpmate” to his father; and Einstein’s first wife is portrayed as someone who received constant disapproval from his mother for her intellectual abilities, their marriage eventually ending unhappily.

The above findings reinstate the argument that schooling, with the help of a prejudicial system, has become, and will continue being, a distinct mode of reinforcing domestication and subjugation.

Impact and the Perception of Students

Textbooks are agents of social control and its propagation. A study reported that almost 80% of the time spent by students in the classroom is in reading textbooks (Blumberg, 2008). Thus, the curriculum becomes integral in shaping a child's perception. The content, diction, narrative, and visuals heavily influence the perception of the students. Therefore, beyond *prima facie*, or the 'pseudo-curriculum,' the hidden teachings mould a student's behavior by promoting hegemonic ideologies. Stereotypes affect students' mental health as well as their career choices and academic accomplishments (Bazler & Simonis, 2006). This brings us to the claim that the assumption that empowerment inevitably follows with the admittance of women in the classroom is faulty to its core.

In an attempt to estimate the extent to which the curriculum impacts the perception of the students, the study was furthered by conducting a survey of the students of grades IX and X. The brief questionnaire, circulated digitally, asked simple questions about the students' understanding of the texts they study as a part of their English Syllabus. The questions revolved around the students' memory retention of male and female writers, protagonists, and characters of their texts. A total of 35 students of grades IX and X participated in the survey. The findings are as follows: 13 of the respondents could not recall any female writers within their texts, whereas almost all of them successfully recalled more than one male writer; 62.9% of the respondents felt that there should be an increased female representation in their syllabus; 89% claim that alien characters (forming a part of one of their stories) are males; 50% believe that the role of women in the stories prescribed in the syllabi is that of a housewife.

Additionally, an open-ended question about the perception of the students was asked – *When you think of a woman as a character within a story, what role do you imagine her playing?* – which gathered some interesting responses, including the following answer, "Mostly seen destitute and poor ... [and a] few passionate female characters [who] want to follow their passion but can't because of their family." From the above data, the results from the survey prove that a child's perception is greatly threatened by the content of the textbooks a matter of concern that must be addressed with urgency. Indeed, "the school becomes an enclosed space, like the domestic sphere where discriminations and violations are not talked about or questioned" (National Focus Group, 2006, p. 4).

Conclusion

Gender disparity is a problem that exists at a local as well as a global level. It is constantly reinforced in society by stereotypes, binary formation, discrimination, and prejudices. The study looked at the portrayal of women in the English textbooks of grades IX and X of the Indian curriculum. By establishing the importance of teaching the right content and moving beyond simply bringing a female audience to the classrooms, the paper holds a novel perspective to looking at gender disparity and female representation. The findings from the analysis of four English textbooks that form the English syllabus of the two grades showed an androcentric image that is constantly reinforced with the help of narratives, which eventually shape the perception of the students.

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