

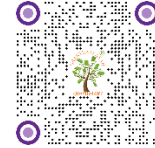


Original Article

RECONSTRUCTING EQUALITY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF GENDER BIAS IN INDIAN EDUCATIONAL TEXTBOOKS AND PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

India is the most populated country in the world and has one of the largest youth populations. This gives the country a great opportunity for national development. For this, it is very important to provide quality education to young people. Education not only helps individuals grow and become confident but also supports social and economic development. Recognizing its importance, the United Nations has included Quality Education as the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) and Gender Equality as the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 5). These goals are interconnected. Education cannot be truly inclusive without gender equality, and gender equality cannot be achieved without inclusive education. In India, gender bias in the education system still exists in both visible and subtle ways. School textbooks, which strongly influence young minds, often show men and women in stereotypical roles. Men are usually shown as leaders or professionals, while women are often shown doing household work or playing secondary roles. These kinds of representations can limit students' imagination and shape how they understand gender roles in society. Apart from textbooks, classroom interactions, teaching methods, and the overall school environment may also reflect these inequalities. This can affect students' participation, confidence, and future goals. This paper studies gender bias in Indian educational textbooks and teaching practices. It tries to understand how inequality exists within the content of textbooks and the learning environment. The paper also examines the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which focuses on equality and inclusion, to see how well it addresses gender representation and sensitivity in education. By studying textbooks, curriculum frameworks, and classroom practices, this research aims to identify hidden gender biases in the Indian education system and suggest ways to create gender-sensitive, inclusive, and empowering learning spaces for all students.

Keywords: Gender Bias, Indian Education System, Textbook Analysis, NEP 2020, Gender Representation, Pedagogical Practices

INTRODUCTION

India is the largest country in the world and holds a strong position internationally because a larger youth population contributes to greater national development. This makes it essential to enhance and use full potential of our human resources. Education plays a crucial role in shaping young minds, building skills, and preparing them for the future. United Nations has identified 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and among them, Quality Education is the 4th SDG and Gender Equality is the 5th SDG. Gender is part of our identity which consciously and unconsciously affects our self-image and interpersonal attitudes.

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“Gender is a pervasive social and cultural regulating mechanism that is part of our everyday life, our thinking, and speaking. This apparently biological phenomenon is in fact not just “biological” but is “realized by means of architecture, socialization, economic, and psychological credentials, body identification, clothes, etc.” [Felderer \(2008\)](#).

Quality education and gender equality are two basic rights of all humans. The proper education aware human about gender equality and gender issues prevailed in our society and culture. Education helps us understand unfair practices in our society and encourages us to question them. It becomes important to make education more open, accessible and fair for all students. When education becomes truly gender-neutral, it helps create a more equal and progressive society.

There is common misconception that gender bias is related to women and unfair treatment with women but in reality both men and women suffer in different ways because of unequal gender expectations. Gender inequality especially in education affects the most because from the very beginning children adopt the preconceived notions in the society. When boys and girls grow up hearing stereotypes such as what they should or should not do they begin to accept these ideas as normal. Indian society is patriarchal in its nature and whatever children learn and observe in their home and school they reflect the same ideologies. It becomes very crucial to provide gender neutral environment to each and every student at school, college and any educational institution.

In India, even with ongoing reforms and policy efforts, gender bias continues to influence the education system. These biases often begin in the very places meant to promote equality like classrooms and textbooks. Textbooks are the first written document that students interact with. Children understand the world around them with the help of books. They learn science, nature, morals and explore new ideas. In this way Textbooks helps in shaping the young minds. One point cannot be ignored that many of these textbooks present gender in stereotypical ways. This gender bias is evidently present in everyday teaching practices and classroom interactions. There is a difference in dealing with girls and boys students. Girls are often encouraged or praised to be well-behaved, disciplined which indirectly means being quiet in the classroom. On the other hand boys are encouraged to speak confidently, participate in different activities and lead in the classroom. In future, this pattern remains the same and girls voluntarily and frequently avoid leadership roles. Sheryl Sandberg explains in her book “Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead”, it’s because women are fearful of how others will perceive them if they speak up step out or be assertive. In turn, boys are seldom called aggressive or bossy because as a society, we expect it. (Trautner, par. 2)

On the long run, these differences affect students’ overall personality and their academic and career choices. The NEP 2020 has introduced many policies and norms to transform the Indian Education system. The next step is to examine the proper implementation of these norms and policies. The policy appearing perfect on paper becomes challenging while implementing in reality. Regular assessment is essential to examine how effectively these policies are working in the real classroom.

This Research paper aims to explore gender bias present in Indian Textbooks and Teaching Practices and tries to analyze how strongly these biases and inequalities are present in the education system. It highlights the representation of gender in learning material and classroom interaction. It also examines the role of National Education Policy 2020. It is important to understand how these systemic biases affect the educational experience of the students so that we can create a gender sensitive, and empowering educational atmosphere for every learner to grow freely and contribute to a more equal society.

GENDER STEREOTYPES DEPICTED IN INDIAN TEXTBOOKS AND LEARNING MATERIALS

Textbooks play a crucial role in the life of the students. Books are the first source through which they learn new ideas, words, languages, and subjects. They also understand their surrounding atmosphere, culture, society and gender roles. From kindergarten to higher education books are the primary source of information. Students spend around 80 to 95 percent of their whole class time on textbooks, at the same time textbook is one of the major materials helped teachers to do their instructional decisions. [Sadker and Zittleman \(2007\)](#)

Students become aware about the information through words, pictures, illustrations and language. Textbooks often contain gender biased examples, illustrations and language. It may shape young minds and reinforce stereotypical ideas about gender roles and inequality. Depiction of men is shown leaders, scientists, doctors, or decision-makers, while depiction of women is often shown performing domestic tasks or supporting roles. Such recurring portrayals give a strong message to students about what men and women are supposed to do in society. [Marinković and Erić \(2014\)](#) Textbook is sufficient to build core values and norms to young generations who do not step into society and start their careers.

Gender biasness and stereotypes are observed in pre-primary and primary books. For instance, in the portrayal of family, women are usually shown doing household chores like cooking, cleaning, or taking care of children, while men are often shown sitting with a newspaper or involved in office-related work. These repeated visuals create a strong impression on young minds that household and care giving work are only a woman’s responsibility and outside or professional work belongs to men. This exposure shapes students understanding of gender roles before they develop critical thinking. As a result, girls start believing that their primary role is care giving and taking up household duties inside the house and boys feel pressured to earn bread and butter and be a provider. These stereotypes hinder their imaginations, dreams and career choices.

Stereotypes of masculinity and femininity can be found almost in every textbook used frequently in school lives. Most textbooks, dictionaries, and things like that were edited by men. In their work, they used tons of sentences showing women’s weakness and

normality. This can be shown in research carried out by Hartman and Judd. They found that women rarely play important roles in most cases. [Hartman and Judd \(1978\)](#)

There are certain rules in English grammar that unknowingly give preference to masculine nouns. For example, when we use words like everybody, anyone, or everyone, we often use the pronouns his, him, or himself instead of female representative pronouns like her or herself. This creates the impression that males are the default human. There are many such cases in English grammar. When there are two or more nouns of different genders in a sentence but the masculine pronoun is usually used. For instance, in a sentence like "Every boy and girl must bring his notebook" the pronoun his is traditionally used even though girl is also included.

"In the ordering of sex pairs, such as father-mother, brother- sister, all most male term proceeds the female term. Although it is a minor point, such automatic ordering reinforces the second-place status of women." [Dominguez \(2003\)](#)

Language is an essential part of our daily life which actually affects our perception about gender roles. Many traditional English expressions are masculine by default which subtly reinforces the idea that men represent the whole society. Words like mankind, man-made, manpower, chairman, and businessman ignore the presence of women and other genders and present men as important and primary. These language patterns give an impression that women are secondary. It may seem small but they strongly influence the students' understanding of gender roles and identities.

Gender bias contained in books can be overlooked easily, causing potential gender discrimination in students' cognition. To relate different topics, visual images in the textbook often show different scenes, all of which have the possibility of gender discrimination. [Rong et al. \(2021\)](#)

The language used in textbooks often prefers masculine pronouns such as he, His, and himself in examples and lessons. Even the language of science and other technical subjects are male dominated. Hardly have we found any feminine nouns and pronouns used in the textbooks. NEP 2020 has emphasized creating gender-sensitive content and encouraged the development of inclusive teaching-learning materials to correct such linguistic biases. By revising textbooks and promoting gender-neutral language, the education system can move closer to providing truly fair and balanced learning environments for all students.

GENDER BIASES REFLECTED IN PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

In Indian pedagogical practices, we often witness that both students and teachers have different perceptions about subject choices and academic preferences. The science stream is commonly considered as more intellectual, analytical, and important than fields like social science, arts, or humanities. As it is the long-held belief that boys are naturally more analytical and logical than girls, this stereotype gets reflected in classroom behavior. This stereotype creates a gap between the choices of subjects and behavior of boys and girls. Boys are mostly encouraged to take subjects like Mathematics, Physics, and Accounts, while girls are encouraged to take subjects considered softer such as Arts, Literature, or Sociology. As a result, the number of girls enrolled in Arts and humanities is higher than boys and vice versa. These subject preferences do not always reflect true interest and ability rather it reflects the social conditioning. Girls usually avoid subjects like science not because they lack capability rather they lack encouragement and confidence.

In today's world, many leadership roles are held by men. Men outnumber women in elected official positions as well. So the questions remain: What happens to girls as they exceed in academics and pursue higher education, yet do not obtain high level management positions? The answer might be found at a much earlier age when we label girls as being uptight, nerdy, princess, bossy, tomboy or ditz. Studies have shown that girls are twice as likely as boys to worry those leadership roles will make them seem "bossy" or "aggressive." (Trautner, par. 2)

The society expects different behaviors from the boys and girls. Something is appropriate for boys but does not considered good for girls. This mentality is reinforced in education as well which is clearly visible in subject choices and career preferences.

The same happens with boys as there are few subjects and career options that considered feminine in nature such as; Home science, Dance, cooking and kindergarten teacher. If a man chooses to pursue these careers he faces resistance from the society. Data show that some subjects and professions still carry strong stereotypes. Even the teaching profession where such stereotypes are not desired is not free from this biasness.

This gender imbalance becomes even more evident when we compare selection data from different examinations.

In the MPPSC Assistant Professor (Home Science) Result 2022, all 42 selected candidates were women, and not a single male candidate appeared in the final list. A similar situation was observed in the Uttar Pradesh Assistant Professor (Home Science) result where again every selected candidate belonged to the female category. This trend reflects the long-held belief that Home Science is a feminine field.

In the Result of MPPSC Assistant Professor (Home Science) 2022, all the selected candidates were women. Not a single male candidate was avail to be appeared in the final selection list. The same case has been witnessed in the result of Uttar Pradesh Assistant Professor (Home Science). All the selected candidates were women. This data reveals the long held stereotype that subjects like Home Science is a Feminine course connected with cooking, nutrition, child development, and household responsibilities roles that society traditionally assigns to women

However, when we look at the data from the District Sports and Youth Welfare Officer (2024) exam conducted by MPPSC, a completely opposite pattern emerges. Out of 10 total seats, 6 male candidates were selected, while only 4 female candidates qualified. This contrast shows how deeply gender stereotypes shape career path. Women dominate fields considered as soft, nurturing, or domestic, whereas men dominate areas associated with physical strength, leadership, and outdoor activities.

Table 1

Table 1		
Position	Assistant professor	District Sports & Youth Welfare Officer (2024)
	Home Science (2022)	
Total seats	42	10
Selected female candidates	42	4
Selected male candidates	0	6

Similar patterns can be seen in other professions as well. For example, PT teachers in schools are usually expected to be men because society connects sports and strength with masculinity. On the other hand, dance teachers are expected to be women, as dance is seen as a soft skill or graceful art in which men can't be as good as women. Nursing is another field heavily dominated by women due to the belief that caring and nurturing roles come naturally to them. These everyday examples show how deeply gender stereotypes affect career choices and create invisible boundaries for both men and women.

India is patriarchal in nature. Topics like Sexuality, reproduction and human anatomy are still taboo in Indian classrooms. Teachers feel hesitated discussing these topics openly with the students. Girls usually feel shy and uncomfortable to ask questions. They don't feel open with male teachers and feel awkward discussing subjects like Biology and Health education lessons. At the same time, female teachers feel awkward and uncomfortable teaching topics like male reproduction and sexual health to boys. Usually both boys and girls worry about being misjudged, misunderstood or seen as bold which in a way affect their learning. This discomfort creates an environment where these topics are ignored or not explained properly. As a result, students don't receive complete and accurate knowledge which leads to misinformation, shame and silence on some basic biological processes. This shows how classroom teaching is highly influenced by cultural and societal norms. It becomes important to develop gender sensitive teaching methods.

CONCLUSION

Gender equality is very important to build a progressive and educated society. The examples discussed in this paper clearly show that gender bias exists in textbooks, classroom interactions, subject choices, and even in professional opportunities. If boys and girls grow up believing that certain roles, subjects, or careers belong only to one gender, their true potential may never be explored. A gender-equal education system can help every student grow with confidence, dignity, and the freedom to choose their own path. Achieving this is important not only for the development of individuals but also for the overall progress of the nation. The National Education Policy 2020 has taken an important step toward making education more inclusive and reducing gender inequality. It introduced the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) to support girls and transgender students so that they can continue their education without difficulties. The policy also recognizes female and transgender learners as part of the Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), which shows that educational support is available for all genders. NEP 2020 also focuses on improving school infrastructure and learning materials to make them accessible and gender-sensitive. Overall, NEP 2020 aims to build an education system where every learner, regardless of gender, feels valued, included, and empowered.

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