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# Gender Issues in Classroom Practices: Perceived Challenges and Mitigative measures

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## Abstract

*Gender stereotyping and gender-based practices continue to challenge the education system hindering the achievement of Universal Secondary Education. According to NCF (2005), achieving gender equality has been a key objective of education policy in India for over three decades, but it has lacked critical edge in implementation. This study explores occurrence of gender discrimination practices in classroom as perceived by students and teachers with reference to gender bias and gender stereotyping. The study focuses on the innovative practices or strategies implemented by teachers in reducing the prevalence of gender-based practices in terms of gender –inclusiveness and gender-neutrality. A descriptive survey research design was employed for the study. The researcher-developed questionnaire regarding gender-based practices was administered to secondary level students to comprehend the extent of occurrence of gender discrimination. Interviews with teachers and stake-holders are conducted to understand the challenges faced by teachers while implementing the strategies to reduce gender discrimination in curricular practices. The suggestions, innovative practices used by teachers and stakeholders, aiming at mitigating the occurrence of gender discrimination at school are elicited. The findings from this study is expected to have implications for changes in organising the curriculum, transaction methods, and also inputs for content and pedagogy of pre-service and in-service teacher education.*

**Key words :** *Gender issues, Gender equality, Classroom practices, Mitigative measures*

## **Introduction**

Despite the recent economic growth and development in India, the nation continues to face large gender inequalities in access to education and occupational status. As of 2009, only two-thirds of girls ages six through 17 were enrolled in school as compared to three-fourth of boys (Kishor & Gupta, 2009). Over the course of development, Indian children are immersed in a society where the lower status of women is normative. Continual exposure to strongly differentiated gender roles is likely to shape children's beliefs about how well males and females perform across variety of domains. Gender inequality thus is an acute and a persistent problem. Gender stereotyping and gender-based practices in the domain of education continue to challenge the education system hindering the achievement of Universal secondary education. According to NCF (2005), achieving gender equality has been a key objective of education policy in India for over three decades, but it has lacked critical edge in implementation. There are subsequent initiatives by the government under the schemes of SSA and RMSA in terms of providing incentives, scholarships and other privileges to promote girl's education, thereby addressing gender inequality. The improvements in educational access due to policy interventions have made some impact on improving access to education for girls stressing the need for empowering women and making them self-reliant through exposure to education. Still, there are fundamental systemic issues that constrain progress towards gender equality in education.

Gender discrimination practices in schools are an extension of thinking patterns existing in the family, society and community. There has to be camaraderie, dignity and partnership among the members in reducing gender discrimination. There is a need to identify various types of discrimination in school, i.e., overt and covert types that are caused by ignorance and deep-rooted ways of thinking among teachers and stakeholders of education. This manifests itself in language, gestures, postures and action as seen in the seating arrangement of boys and girls, the tasks assigned, the responsibilities given to them in the curriculum. The removal of gender-bias practices in the curriculum has to be consciously done and just not by looking at textbooks and correcting the stereotyping.

## **Need of the Study**

Research in the western world indicates that children's school performance and their subsequent educational and occupational outcomes are shaped in part by cultural stereotypes about differences in boys' and girls' competence in various academic domains (Colley & Comber 2003, p. 163; Miller & Budd 1999,; Nosek, Smyth, Sriram, Lindner, Devos, Ayala, Bar-Anan, Bergh, Cai, Gonsalkorale, Kesebir, Maliszewski, Neto, Olli, Park, Schnabel, Shiomura, Tulbure, Wiers, Somogyi, Akrami, Ekehammar, Vianello, Banaji & Greenwald 2009, p. 10593). Stereotypes shape motivation and performance through several mechanisms, one of which is their influence on academic self-concept. Whereas academic gender stereotypes are beliefs about the academic competence of males and females in general, academic self-concept refers to beliefs about one's own

abilities in academic domains (Evans, Copping, Rowley & Kurtz-Costes 2011, p. 265; Kurtz-Costes, Rowley, Harris-Britt & Woods 2008, p. 390). Evidence indicates that school-related gender-based practices affect children and adolescents. It is one of the negative manifestations of gender discrimination and violates a wide range of children's rights. Education is critical in empowering and transforming the lives of young people, especially girls, yet widespread gender-based practices in and around schools seriously undermine the achievement of quality, inclusive and equitable education for all children. To identify the gender discrimination practices being followed in school from students' and teachers' perspectives, challenges faced by teachers in reducing such practices and their suggestions for reducing the occurrence of gender discrimination practices, following objectives were formulated.

### **Objectives**

1. To identify students' perspective of practices related to gender discrimination in their classrooms
2. To identify teachers' perspective towards practices related to gender discrimination in their classrooms
3. To identify teachers' practices to reduce gender discrimination
4. To elicit suggestions from teachers to reduce the occurrence of gender discrimination

### **Research Questions**

1. What are students' perspectives towards practices related to gender discrimination?
2. What are teachers' perspectives towards practices related to gender discrimination?
3. What are the practices employed by teachers to reduce gender discrimination in classrooms?
4. What are suggestions of teachers to reduce occurrence of gender discrimination in classrooms?

### **Methodology**

Descriptive survey research design was followed for conducting this study. Questionnaire for students and interview schedule for teachers regarding practices related to gender discrimination in schools was prepared. Questionnaires were administered to students and Interviews were conducted with teachers to gather data for the formulated research questions.

### **Sample**

The sample of this study includes 173 secondary class students (boys =80 & girls =92) & 9 teachers of 3 government schools of Mysore district. Questionnaires were administered to students and interviews were conducted with teachers to gather data for the formulated research questions.

## Description of Tools

### *Questionnaire for the students*

A closed-ended questionnaire with yes/no type responses was developed by the investigator. The items focused on the practices of gender discrimination were categorized under four sub-dimensions, namely practices based on gender bias (5 items), gender stereotyping (7 items), gender neutrality (5 items) and gender inclusion (5 items).

- **Gender bias:** It is a prejudice or discrimination based on an individual's gender.
- **Gender stereotyping:** It has been linked to gender roles and may include the belief that one gender is intrinsically superior to another.
- **Gender neutrality:** It refers to the idea that language and the social institutions avoid distinguishing roles according to individuals' gender, in order to avoid discrimination arising from the impression that there are social roles for which one gender is more suited than the other.
- **Gender inclusion:** It includes respecting all students' gender identity and gender expression by honouring the right of students and prohibiting the separation of students based upon gender.
- The questionnaire in total included 22 items for which respondents were supposed to choose either yes/no based on their experiences and observations of gender discrimination practices in their school. The developed questionnaire was translated to regional language – Kannada for administering to students.

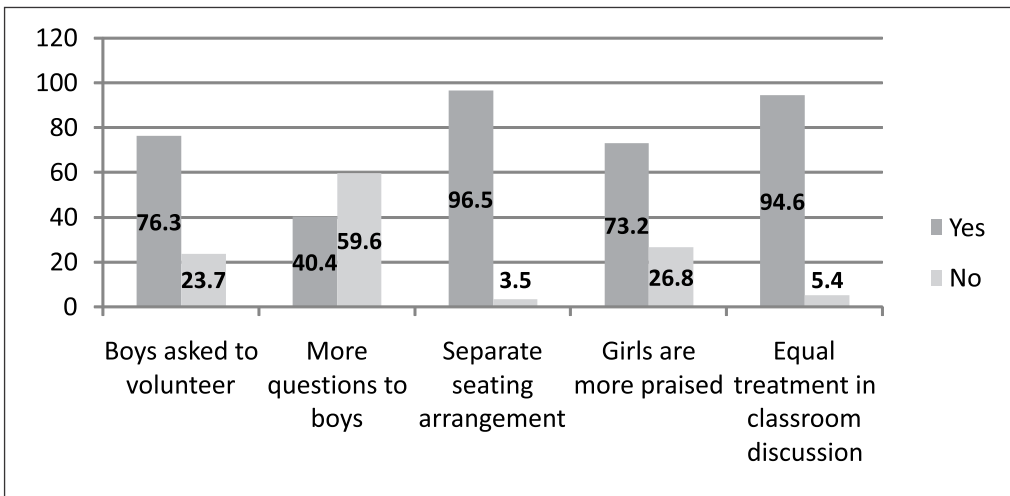
### **Interview schedule**

An unstructured interview schedule was constructed and used with teachers to know the practices of gender discrimination that occurs with students in schools and the strategies they adopt to reduce the same. Interviews were conducted with 09 teachers to gather data for the formulated questions. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The data obtained was subjected to qualitative and quantitative analysis.

## **Results & Discussions**

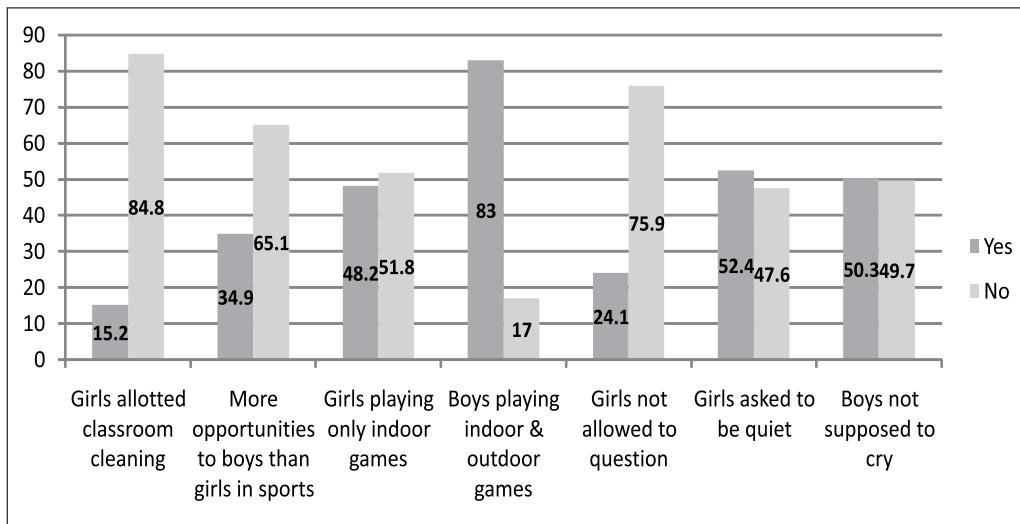
### **Objective 1: To identify students' perspective of practices related to gender discrimination in their classrooms**

The data for this objective was obtained from students in relation to practices being followed under gender-related practices under 4 categories namely, gender bias, gender stereotypes, gender neutrality and gender inclusiveness.



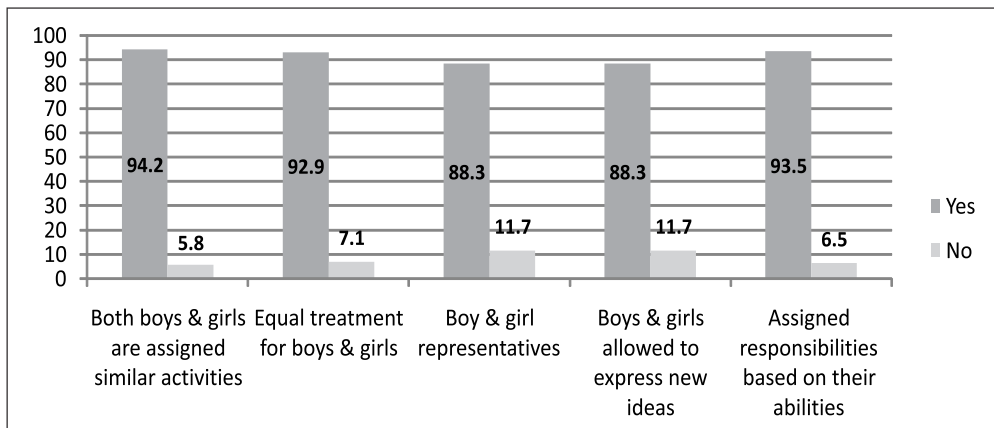
**Fig 1: Students' perception related to practices of gender bias**

Practices related to gender bias in schools indicates that they followed separate seating arrangement for boys and girls (96.5%), boys being asked to volunteer for tasks (76.3%) and favoured girls in terms of they being praised for their work in general (73.2%). Questions were posed to both boys and girls (59.6%) and majority of students opined that they were treated equally in classrooms (94.6%).



**Fig 2: Students' perception related to practices of gender stereotypes**

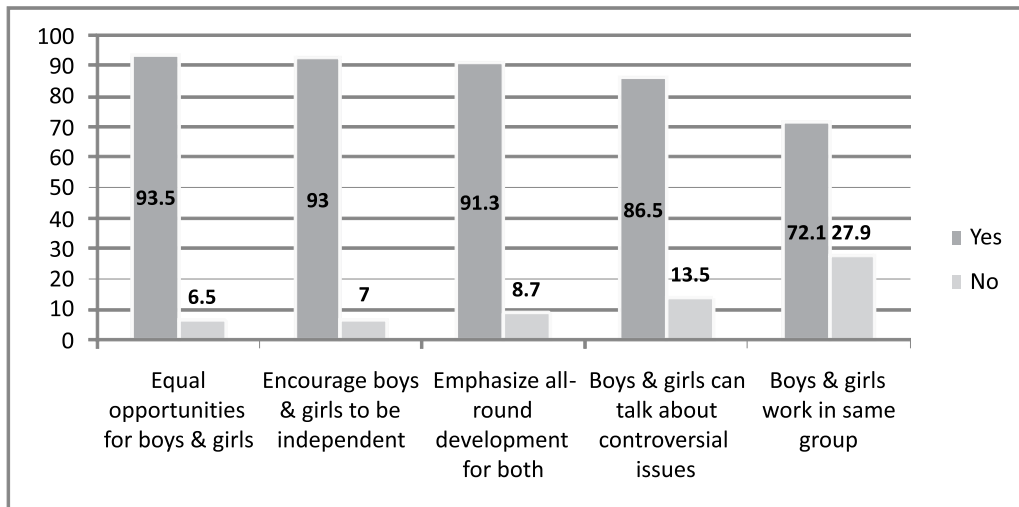
Practices related to gender stereotypes indicates that boys are allowed to play both indoor and outdoor games (83%), whereas girls were allowed to play only indoor games (48.2%); also girls were asked to keep quiet in most of the situations and not allowed to voice their opinions (52.4%). More than half of the students agreed that boys should not cry in adverse situations (50.3%) shows that gender stereotyped beliefs exist in students too. Apart from these, gender stereotyped practices were less as mentioned in only girls being allotted the task of cleaning classroom(15.2%), providing more opportunities for boys than girls in sports(34.9%) and girls not allowed to question teachers(24.1%). These indicate that there are practices of gender stereotypes exist in schools at a moderate level.



**Fig 3: Students' perception related to practices of gender neutrality**

The representation of the data regarding practices related to gender neutrality depicts that the practices in schools were gender neutral as both boys & girls were assigned similar activities(94.2%), followed by assigning responsibilities based on their abilities(93.5%), treating both the gender equally (92.9%) followed by each class having boy& a girl class representative and they being allowed to express new ideas(88.3%). Very less percentage of students opines that the gender neutral practices do not exist in their classrooms.





**Fig 4: Students' perception related to practices of gender inclusion**

Majority of students agree with the gender-inclusion practices happening in their school as both boys and girls being provided with equal opportunities(93.5%), teachers encouraging boys & girls to be independent(93%), emphasizing holistic development (91.3%), providing opportunity to talk about controversial issues(86.5%) followed by teachers allowing boys and girls to work in same group(72.1%). In most of the schools teachers do not allow as they consider it to be a sensitive issue and they do not want any problems by allowing both boys & girls to work together.

**Objective 2: To identify teachers' perspective towards practices related to gender discrimination in their classrooms**

To know the perspectives of teachers related to gender discrimination, teachers were asked some of the questions and they have mixed responses related to the same. Some teachers opined that discrimination practices do not happen, whereas majority of them stated that such practices cannot be completely removed as long as there is no involvement and support from parents and society. During in-service training programmes, problems of gender discrimination are addressed to some extent though not exclusively, it is difficult to handle such situations and hence much importance is not given for the same.

It is also seen that, even among students, there are practices of gender discrimination observed to some extent. Usual tendency is that boys feel themselves as superior to girls and this is deep-rooted. This is not reduced despite trying out of different strategies, and this may be due to societal and cultural influences.

### **Objective 3: To identify teachers' practices to reduce gender discrimination**

There found a mixed response regarding practices of teachers to reduce gender discrimination. Most of them opined addressing gender discrimination practices are taken care in regular teaching. The tasks were assigned to students based on leadership qualities and IQ indicating that equal opportunities are not provided to all students in the classroom resulting in bias.

Teachers also assign group activities to students but do not allow boys and girls to be in the same group as they are not comfortable with and expect it to be a sensitive issue. Teachers expect this may result in some problems and they do not want to waste their time on this as long as students perform well in their academics.

The analysis of the strategies employed by teachers to reduce gender discrimination implies that there is no effort made from teachers' end in reducing gender discrimination and they also are not very much concerned about reducing the same. Also, they do not employ correct strategies in assigning tasks to students. This implies there is a significant need to orient teachers in reducing gender discrimination practices existing in school.

### **Objective 4: To elicit suggestions from teachers to reduce the occurrence of gender discrimination**

The response to this question was very less as they do not want to focus on reducing gender discrimination and consider doing this a waste of time. Teachers opine that changes in text book and transaction strategies have to be made so that the problem is taken care of. They also opine only when the curriculum load is reduced, they can focus on such issues as more focus is on students' performance in academics.

Only one teacher from all teachers interviewed said the use of a neutral language while interacting with students, keeping expectations same from all, using examples and instruction materials that are gender balanced, avoiding assigning tasks that are stereotypic, placing girls & boys in non-traditional situations, creating an atmosphere where both boys and girls are encouraged, and actively integrating groups not allowing for self-segregation, not using gender as a base for grouping students and applying classroom rules fairly to both boys and girls will help in reducing gender discrimination in school.

### **Conclusions**

Beliefs about gender inequality can be detrimental for the growth of students as well for the nation. Persistence of gender stereotypes can divide students into gendered categories affecting educational trajectories. One point of intervention to combat such disparities is the school setting, however school should not be the only point of intervention (Nosek et al., 2009). Implicit gender stereotypes and gender gaps are mutually reinforcing and this can be reduced at school level by orienting teachers towards the significance of reducing gender based practices. In-service teacher trainings can also focus on developing training modules, hand-outs & help teachers with strategies to reduce

gender based practices in schools. It is also to be ensured that teachers consider this as a part of the curriculum and it is their due responsibility to mitigate such practices occurring in school thereby providing equal opportunities to all will promote talents and interests of all students.

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