Gender Inequities in School Teaching: Reasons and Repercussions

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Through much of the 20th and 21st centuries in India, women entered the teaching profession in fairly significant numbers. There are many reasons for this. At the level of government policy it was decided that to increase enrolment of girls in school there should ideally be at least one female teacher in every primary school. To further this goal, many teacher training centres were set up exclusively for women and female teachers were given incentives to work in remote areas (Manjrekar, 2013). In addition to government policies, societal beliefs and practices have also tended to support the entry of women into teaching. Amongst the middle classes, teaching is viewed as a suitable profession for women because it is seen to be less demanding, (having shorter hours than many other jobs) and therefore compatible with household and childcare responsibilities. During my own career as a school teacher, I was often complimented on my choice of profession as an 'ideal job for a woman'.

As a result of societal values and government policies, the proportion of women in school teaching is fairly high. DISE data for 2012-13 indicates that about 50% of all primary school teachers and approximately 40% of all secondary school teachers in India are women (data for regular or permanent rather than contract teachers). Earlier analytical reports published by DISE for 2008-09 estimate that 66.15% of primary school teachers in urban areas and 37.2% of primary school teachers in rural areas are women. The question arises, does women's pre-dominance in numbers result in greater gender equity in the profession? Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

For one, as the above statistics indicate, women are concentrated in primary school teaching while men tend to be represented in larger numbers in high school. Often, the reason given for this is that women are better able to care for and nurture young children, given their 'natural' mothering instinct. In contrast to primary school teachers, high school teachers are subject specialists and often have postgraduate degrees. Consequently high school teaching tends to be more prestigious and better paid. But the 'naturalization' of the specialized knowledge and skills required to teach young children is highly problematic.

In a talk given in Bangalore in 2012, Professor Krishna Kumar, the eminent educationist and scholar, argued that teachers perform certain 'civilizational functions' which are intrinsic to the reproduction of society. They teach children to represent sensory experiences in words, to notice their surroundings and to communicate with others. All children learn in primary school to name fruit, vegetables and animals, to identify shapes, colours and everyday objects, to build on the vocabulary acquired at home. Some even learn a language that is not spoken at home. Thus, the job of primary school teachers, in addition to teaching the three 'R', s is to enable children to become social beings.

Such a delicate and important task requires careful planning and preparation. Primary school teachers need to create charts, diagrams and 3D models that will stimulate the curiosity and engage the minds of their students. They need to think of simple illustrative examples to convey abstract ideas in a language appropriate to their students' age and context. They attempt to individualize their lessons to cater to diverse learning needs. By suggesting that these specialized skills are 'natural' to women, we not only undervalue the training that enables

them to perform their role effectively, but also suggest that men are ill equipped to do so.

During my early days as a primary school teacher I worked with an exceptionally gifted male colleague who was visiting India from Denmark. A talented musician and poet, he often brought his guitar into the classroom, composing songs to teach concepts in geography, science and history. As a class teacher, he forged close bonds with the students, celebrating not only their birthdays but also his own with songs and music and bringing his infant son to school to meet his students. Needless to say, the children enjoyed his classes, and grew very fond of their teacher. But more importantly, he taught them to appreciate a more caring, gentle sort of masculinity that thrives in the company of young children. Unfortunately, after he left, the primary section went back to being a largely female space with male teachers being confined to the high school or the physical education department and conventional masculine and feminine stereotypes began to re-emerge in the hidden curriculum of the school.

As I mentioned earlier, teaching is believed to be ideal for combining paid work and household responsibilities given the long vacations and shorter hours than most other white collar professions. Such a view fails to account for the work that teachers carry home in the form of 'corrections' (assessing and marking students' work) and preparation. While teachers do get home early, their hours extend late into the evening as they mark and grade students' work. One retired teacher whom I interviewed as part of my on-going research project on the professional identities of school teachers in Bangalore claimed that she used to regularly wake up at three in the morning to mark the notebooks of her 77 students! In addition to marking, the preparatory work that I mentioned earlier often takes place after school hours.

In the 1970s, feminist sociologist, Ann Oakley argued that housework, which is performed by women after their husbands and children leave (for the office and school), is rendered invisible and therefore devalued by the family and society. Similarly, the extent of work that teachers do on assessment and preparation is rarely acknowledged by students, their parents and school administrators; like housework it is performed at home and therefore 'invisibilized'. Like other women who undertake paid employment, teachers become skilled at multi-tasking, cooking, cleaning and supervising their own children's homework whilst completing their corrections and preparations for the next day's lesson. A research project undertaken by my colleagues S. Indumathi and Indira Vijaysimha amongst both male and female teachers a few years ago found that the former often spent their time after school hours on sports, leisure activities and socializing with friends while the latter tended to catch up on housework. It is easy to deduce who has more time for professional development activities.

This brings me to my last point, that there are very few women in leadership positions in education. With the exception of private all-girls' schools, one rarely sees women as school principals. Given their family responsibilities women rarely have the time to develop their skills or augment their qualifications to prepare for managerial positions. Many women begin and end their careers as classroom teachers, with only some variations in the age-group or the subjects that they teach. As a result, schools end up mirroring conventionally gendered authority structures of the family and community, where power is vested largely in the hands of men. Not only does this undermine female teachers' authority in the classroom, it also reinforces traditional masculinity and femininity with men engaged in leadership and women in nurturing roles.

If the primary purpose of education is to bring about social change, and enable students to question taken-for granted assumptions about the world, then the skewed representation of men and women in different areas of school teaching needs to be challenged. Sincere efforts must be made to recruit women into high school teaching and to make primary school teaching attractive to men. Both male and female teachers should be sensitized to avoid reinforcing conventional gender stereotypes in the classroom and women need to be encouraged to take up leadership positons in education and

given adequate training to do so. If such measures are taken up seriously and consistently we will, in the next ten to fifteen years, not only bring about greater gender equity in the teaching profession and challenge the gendered division of labour in schooling, but also enable the younger generation to take a more inclusive view of the roles of men and women in education, in childcare and more generally in adult life.

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