

# EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF GENDER BIAS ON LEARNING AND TEACHING FEMINISM IN INDIA: AN EXPRESSION

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## ABSTRACT

*'Feminism' is a very popular branch of academics, which features its value and importance in theoretical perspectives and philosophical developments. Nearing about a century of explorations, 'Feminism' is found as a popular content in gender studies being taught in higher education institutions. Not only being limited to curriculum, feminism has also led to rigorous social research; policy documents/ papers and designing of the developmental policy also. Being a part of pedagogy of different social sciences like Sociology, Law, Political Science, History, Public Administration, Economics, Psychology, Anthropology and also Languages and Literature; 'Feminism' is taught and learnt with different approaches and methods. But there are common challenges, which pose a risk to proper dissemination of knowledge with reference to teaching feminism. There are some social, cultural and psychological barriers, which inhibit a proficient teaching of feminism in India. The present paper tends to open up and discuss those barriers and challenges which make the teaching and learning of 'Feminism' incomplete and also do injustice to the pedagogy and curriculum incorporating the gender studies or feminism or both. Secondary sources of information have been used to gather information and data for the present paper. The findings state that if 'feminism' is to be taught efficaciously, a lot of efforts would be required from various stakeholders including parents, teachers, administrators and of course the 'students' holding on the central position of the scenario. Both at school as well as higher education level, different strategies are required to address the age and socio-cultural differentials between the learners.*

**Key Words:** Gender, Bias, Learning, Teaching, Feminism, India and Policy.

## Introduction

'Feminism' predominantly originated from the West and started being open and expressive about women's rights and interests. The discourse in the beginning talked about narrower range of concerns like right to vote and right to education, but lately, developing through different phases, it focused on a much broader spectrum. Feminism developed into a movement standing strongly for social, cultural, political, educational, occupational and economic rights of women. The paper owns a little space for the discourse regarding the historical development of the movement, since it more focusses on the challenges being faced while teaching and learning feminism in India; hence shall move to the main context. In the times when society seeks and fights for justice, equality and equity within the context of gender justice, it becomes very important to focus on how different sexes and genders are referred to, 'within and out' of the traditional domain of survival and also through the legal lenses. Informally, 'sex', the biologically ascribed body is dominantly seen as 'gender', the socially constructed person with reference to one's birth sex. This is universally seen in social institutions like family, Kinship and marriage which very strictly levy roles, duties and moral obligations on particular sexes, that is genders, as constructed and seen by them. This social construction of gender has a breakthrough in educational institutions; which further is 'the least' explored and understood domain of knowledge; one of the most effective gateways is 'Gender Studies'. Gender Studies is a vast subject which covers a very wide range of themes and sub-themes related to gender and gendered roles and notions. But, every aspect required different approach and method of teaching and hence learning.

The present discourse explores the challenges and barriers which deter teaching and learning feminism in India and Indian education system. Feminism advocates and supports 'not only' about women's right to education; earn; move freely; vote and dwell as an independent person; rather, the contemporary waves of Feminism also talks about various aspects of sex and sexuality including women's rights related to marriage, sex, reproduction; menstruation and the like. Many of the such components are considered

'taboo' and hence open discourse on these topics are ardently avoided. In the following part of the article, the social, cultural and other barriers inhibiting teaching and learning feminism in classrooms shall be discussed; following an analytical approach to resolve the situation. The pattern of Socialization our mind set and the development of the gender within our biological entity which we call sex. Social, cultural, political, psychological, and some other aspects of life influence gender and also get influenced by gender in multiple ways. These social changes further leave a large impact on Human Social and Sustainable Development variably taking place in the society. All this needs to be studied.

### **Components of Learning and Teaching Feminism**

Learning and teaching of feminism is a knitting of various components. Some of these components are academic in nature and others are non-academic in nature. The academic components means the curriculum development in educational institutions; availability of facts and information on gender studies; research being done on communities and also area studies; teachers and their approach towards teaching feminism in co-educational and other colleges and universities and the like. The non-academic components include gender sensitivity; readiness to teach topics which are otherwise considered as taboos, social backup for gender studies; reporting of the issues related to gendered socialization and gendered roles in social institutions like family, kinship and marriage and the like. These components influence gender studies realms on all, regional, national and international levels. If we ask ourselves, what is the need to teach feminism, it simply answers 'to bring about the desired social changes'? Social changes must be brought in a systematic manner; which can come through knowledge and a correct pedagogy in this case. Crime against women and girl children is very loud in data. This hits and threatens the overall social security of women and many families also. In this light understanding social issues and crime against women with a gender perspective becomes very much needed. Teaching and learning feminism includes exploration of the emerging faces of criminality also. Social systems, social issues, social set ups are different in rural and urban areas. Rural urban cultural differences lead to changes in many aspects of human life in these regions marked with differences. Similarly, rural-urban dichotomy also leaves impact on gender streams and gender roles. Gender studies and feminist references are studies with distinct focuses on countryside's and city's lifestyles and life culture. Child sex ratio and sex ratio; women work participation; women political participation; women reservation and the like are some such aspects are also components of teaching and learning feminism. Sociology of Gender and feminism also majorly focus on social movements; the causes behind emergence of social actions and social responses leading to social movements; the factors behind success and failure of social movements. The scope of feminism is much wider than any single branch of academics, since it explores all angles of livelihood of one particular gender in relation to the counter parts. Hence, it almost cover all domains of life like cultural, social, psychological, religious, etc. since we have by now understood that teaching and learning feminism involves an endless range of topics, it seems very clear how challenging and also interesting it is to teach and learn feminism. The efforts have to be analyzed from two sides; that is side of the students/ learners and the side of the teachers. Perhaps, it is very novel to make an attempt to understand why isn't Feminism being taught in educational institutions; and if it is being taught, why isn't it being taught in the manner it 'ought to be'. There are several factors which influence the pedagogical approaches being applied while making a decision to add feminism in the curriculum being designed and also while teaching in the classrooms.

### **Age and Level of Education**

Age of the learners and the level of education are very crucial indicators to be focused and analyzed. Discussing gender is a very sensitive attempt to intervene in someone's psyche. Hence, age becomes a

very important criterion to see what is to be taught. In some institutions and education boards, special teaching sessions are being planned to make children aware about sexual abuse. Awareness about menstrual hygiene is also being spread through education in school level. If gender equality is to be brought, the mindset needs to be changes from the very beginning. When studies related to sex and gender are undertaken in school level, it becomes part of early socialization of the child and he or she starts developing his or her own perspective which may be more socially desirable than the one his or her family is nurturing. But, what is very crucial is to see, what is to be taught and what is to be omitted at different stages and ages. In teen age, the mind is tender, and the contents of being taught leave large impact. A recent study done in United States by Annie White in March, 2019, got published in Smithsonian Magazine. The title of the study is “What schools teach about women’s history leaves a lot to be desired”. This study depicts many aspects of school education on feminism and says how deeply such education contents influence lives of people. For Annie, the content being taught about women’s history should be broadened because much is yet left to be taught and to be learnt. Many other social scientists and academicians also have pointed out that teaching feminism and gender studies is important on school as well as higher education level of social inequalities and socially imposed gendered roles are to be done away with.

Sexual orientations in childhood and teen age lay a very strong foundation for individuals to develop as professionals and also as a member to a social system like family or society. Learning and teaching feminism is not instilling superiority or inferiority in on or the other gender; is about cutting the adverse part of ‘Gendered socialization’, a concept we have discussed in some previous lectures. Teaching feminism in little ages like school going age may make it learnt by the budding minds that there is no concept of gender roles. It means that household chores do not belong to women or girls only; boys can also work in kitchen and girls can also earn in future. Gender identity is to be developed but in a very optimum way. On one side one has to identify in a positive connotation with one’s birth sex and on the other hand the identity should not make one rigid. Gender divide is as dangerous as any other form of critical stratification; hence right age for being neutral is very important. Psychologically saying, the consciousness of individuals grows differently in different ages under the influence of different social and cultural experiences. Gender is a very deterministic part of the concept of social consciousness; hence there is always a need of making due and needed interventions thought teaching pedagogy to create and form a socially positive and culturally a functional consciousness. Teaching and learning feminism can make the aspects neutralized in both matriarch and patriarch structures; and can be very productive for society. When feminism is taught on level of higher education it makes one sensible for real time role play and role performance. This is the age after which one has to enter institutions of family as a souse, one has to be parent, and one has to be a professional. More a person is learned in gender related aspects lesser after the chances of the widening of the vicious circle of gender biases; crime against a particular gender; gender divide and social inequalities can be reduced. Gender Performativity acts as a determinant factor for many awards, rewards and incentives for both the sexes. On one side, it encourages the powerful sex to perform and on the other hand it discourages the subjugated one to surrender to social pressure.

### **Issues of Expression and Sharing of the Information**

Social cultural settings in India are different from other countries. Even when seen on national level, different regions have different social and cultural settings. These differences in social systems and social experiences create different opinions about talking about gender and giving an expression to gender related issues. In some societies talking about women’s liberty; menstruation; physical issues or health

issues related to pregnancy and delivery of the child; and the like are believed to be barred discussions. Women are allowed to discuss all this with the local doctors only; who in many cases are not even qualified ones, but the socially trained or experienced for maternal care and to deliver babies; they are also known as 'Daai'. In such areas, or for the people of such areas, talking about gender related issues in classroom is a very indigestible step on development. When the families do not allow such discussions in homes, for them classrooms are a big target to be achieved and to be even thought for. We can not forget that teachers also come from same background in schools of such areas. When they themselves were never given opportunity to express their physical or other issues in their homes, how will they allow the girl students to discuss all with them in classrooms? Perhaps, this one is one logic for which gender education has to be added in curriculum of schools and other educational institutions. To complete the syllabus is the duty of the teacher. With the fear of action against self for not performing complete duties, they open up with girl students about their sexual orientations. This brings about change in mindset of women themselves too; but it is very challenging in Indian society. Due to the way women are socialized, they are not even able to assist or help the girls in schools during their period- days or when they have psychological issues due to biological developments. 'Not expressing what they feel' becomes a habit, which can be undone only with teaching and learning feminism. This situation becomes even more worrisome in patriarch structures like India has. Many families do not seek or approve admission of their daughters in any educational programmes rendering sex or gender education. For some if it is done it shall bring disgrace for the whole family; and also ruin marriage prospects of the girl. The major difference in teaching and learning feminism in India and abroad is the difference in thoughts about expressing and addressing the issues. In most of the western countries, women's personal liberty; gender rights; and gender justice are neither shocking nor new talks. They are already imbibed in their social and legal culture. But, in India the situation is very conventional as yet in many regions. Here in India, classes exist within the classes. In women, there are many sub categories, making discussion more complicated. Gender mingles here with religion, caste, region, class and hence there can not be a single set of solutions working for all. If culture, sub-cultures which people practice do not allow women to relish liberty, it is nearly impossible to convince people to teach their children gender or sex education or feminism. Teaching and learning feminism is not important for girl child only; but for boys too. To bring about gender equality, it is important that both girls and boys are trained to be gender sensitive and to check any tendencies that may harm coherence or harmony between them.

Now since the gender issues and the general arena of gender is broader than the traditional conceptualization of the binary notions of men and women and now it makes the platforms open for discourses on third gender including transgender and intersex also. These discussions need a very open mind set in classrooms or public spheres, so that the audience or the participants feel comfortable in sharing their views. For such an environment to inculcate, there is a need to train the teachers of schools as well as colleges and universities and also to sensitize them regarding their role in disseminating the sensitive information and learnings related to feminism and gender studies. Breaking the orthodoxy in formal institutions is easier than doing it in social institutions; hence this is where the efforts can be brought to fruition.

### **Pedagogy and Curriculum Development**

Bringing feminism to classrooms is a very challenge in terms of the curriculum and teaching pedagogy. What is to be taught and how it is to be taught decides the success. For systematic changes to be brought, systematic planning on academics is the crux. Hence designing a proper curriculum on the basis of the level being taught is to be done very judiciously. In the whole world, nations are coming together to

implement efforts and means to bring about gender justice and gender equality. Gender based violence and criminality is globally prevalent with little or more difference in statistics. Empowering women can be done only when they are invested with educational development and professional training. Their cultural health is to be preserved, which very pre-dominantly includes their maternal features and rubrics. Legal institutions and judicial organizations and bodies have to create a stand by for women to go against the mainstream or the prominent wave. Today, transgender and homosexuals also create another world for discourse and research. Hence, there is so much to teach and so much to learn. One aspect is adding all these contents and contexts in the curriculum and the other is the way they are to be undertaken in the classrooms. Mere one-way lectures shall not perform the desired work. Learning and teaching of feminism has to be interactive in form of open house sessions in the classrooms; panel discussions; presentation of papers by the students; internal examination or projects or assignments on practical issues being faced people. Experts from various fields of academics, research and profession are to be included in teaching and to disseminate knowledge on gender and sex related issues. Only teachers in classrooms are not enough today. One very important part of pedagogy is 'language' being used for teaching and learning. The latest National Education Policy sets a clear aim for the schools and other institutions that a learner must not be deprived of learning efficiently due to language bars. Regional language, or national language or also English is to be used to in order to make the message of knowledge passed on completely to all the students. In many classrooms, plural nature of learner is observed. In such a case, the use of multiple languages has to be made. If in case the principle teacher is not able to use more than one language, the experts from other languages must be invited to undertake cooperative teaching and learning. The main aim of the combination of pedagogy and curriculum should be to reduce the 'fear of the others' while doing any big or small act. The real success of teaching and learning feminism in classrooms will be when in open social spaces the conventional gendered behavior will end or shall not be taken a matter to boast or flaunt with. Patriarch's grace might justifiably lie in leading the women, but not at all lies in suppressing or oppressing her. These radical thoughts can be instilled in a child or youth's mind only through developing a proper curriculum and pedagogy.

## Conclusion

Introducing feminism in schools or university today means making feminism centric curriculum and involving neutral teaching faculty. Selection of right books, journals and data analytics reports being available in the institutional library is another additional thing. The main aim of bringing feminism to classroom is helping the budding minds to manage their identities. On one side they are to settle to their own individual identity as a sex or as a gender; on the other hand this identity should have no crisis or rift with that of the identity of the other gender. Nowhere in feminism, it is taught or propagated that men have to subordinate to women; or women have to be equal to man. Feminism simply puts on that both the genders while understanding their own individual conscious levels and identities should remain in least conflict with each other. At least such teachings can lay foundation for a society which has either no or negligible social inequalities on the basis of gender and gender rights. Asmita Bhutani contributed an article entitled, 'What does feminism have to do with schooling? Everything!', in the year 2018. This article openly expresses that 'schools are the powerhouses of patriarchy where stereotypes get generated, stored and perpetuated. Schools are the first place where in routine a child goes and it influences his or her personality development to large extent. On the other hands colleges and universities hold even a bigger onus since in the age children or teens are vulnerable to committing crimes or violence in name of gender. The notions which are needed to be popularized are both females and males feel pain; both females and males get emotionally hurt; both males and females can be perpetrators; and also that the natural physical differences between the two shall remain same, but they shall not be misused to create

typical scenes of gender hierarchy. This is about social responsibility a person or a community holds for society which always thrives to adjust to the social changes occurring thereon. As an academic system, the educational institutions can very significantly contribute to creating and nurturing an emotionally healthy and psychologically strong learning environment in the classroom, so that the desired messages reach youth without any flaw. A preplanned pedagogy can also play a remarkable role in attaining objectives of equality and equity in society; but all this planning has to be community sensitive and relative, depending upon the nature of the learners and stakeholders.

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