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Eliminating Gender Stereotypes in India

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ABSTRACT

Indian society has historically been patriarchal and conservative. As a result, Gender stereotypes have existed since time immemorial. The purpose of this article is to analyze the role that education can play in eliminating this contemporary social issue. It aims at altering the existing education policy of India in this context. This alteration will aim at sensitizing gender identities by deconstructing stereotypical notions passed on to everyone in society since childhood through the current education policy.

The concept of gender is more profound than the traditional distinction between a man and a woman. Going beyond the biological differences, it explains the position of man and woman in the social context. There is a universal consensus that gender refers to the roles and expectations attributed to each sex by society. As a result, gender reflects the notions of the society that exists at a particular time. Such expectations would be in terms of the perspectives of every person in society towards each sex. If the society is liberal, both sexes would be on equal footing, and there would be no bias or discrimination between them. Although this is an idealistic and theoretical explanation, in the context of a patriarchal and conservative society like India, it becomes pertinent to note that the roles and expectations of society towards both the sexes discriminate against the female sex.

Nevertheless, where did these stigmas originate? There is no specific origin for behaviour that calls for stigmatization of females. Thus, it becomes difficult to pinpoint one single event or action that led to the marginalization of women. However, we can identify a few broad ideas that may have led to this bias. It could be biological differences that set roles for both sexes; initially, there existed some jobs that could be fulfilled by a particular sex because it was an easier task for that sex, but over some time, this job became affixed to the sex. Eventually, the attributing certain tasks and behaviour to a particular sex became a norm.

Normative affixation of roles led to a situation where all positions which governed the society, began to be occupied by males. Positions of power became the foothold of men, making society androcentric. This conditioned society to think that only men were capable of being in such positions and eliminated the concept of choice for women. After creating this

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social conditioning, it was passed on from generation to generation through positive and negative reinforcement of behaviour that appropriated roles to each sex. For example, when a male child cries, there would be instant communication from his elders who asked him to 'stop crying like a girl'. When a male child runs arbitrarily, there would be another communication that asks him to 'stop running like a girl,' or when a female child is aggressive during her formative years, she is asked 'to be docile and timid'. All these words which one hears during childhood, shaped and continues to shape one's perspective about each sex. During this process, we could see an increasing normalization of this non-inclusive behaviour. This process of normalization is, to such an extent, in the status quo that the very idea of women being equal to men is startling to some people in the interior parts of the Indian subcontinent. One of the consequences of this trend is the promotion of excessive gender stereotypes, which perpetuates a culture that promotes female sex as a means of reproduction. Thus, creating a society that overly sexualizes women as objects to fulfil the sexual desires of men ('rape culture'). In India, one can identify many such instances of the normalization mentioned above. For example, a few months ago, when debates sparked in the country, where a woman was raped and burnt alive, there were defenders of the perpetrators who said that the crime happened because 'the woman wore provocative clothing' and 'the woman provoked the beastly nature of man'. When a journalist inquired about this issue in certain villages, one said that 'after 15 years of age there is always consent, and it is not rape'. Some instances of this toxic behaviour are seen through public statements made by our politicians as well - 'If women cross the limit of morality, such cases will happen,'; 'I have no hesitation in saying that about 90% of the girls consensually go with men, and then they end up meeting criminal minds and become targets of rape,'.

These instances reflect very poorly on India. However, this situation has arisen as a consequence of multiple layers of social conditioning since childhood. How does one deconstruct this intricate web of social lies that have passed from one generation to another? For this purpose, we need to understand that this process has to stop at its very roots. Thus, it is imperative that this conditioning stops for the next generation of children. This will not be possible because doing this will require an already conditioned lot not to pass on their own biases, stigmas, and stereotypes to children. However, even if children are already in the process of being conditioned, they are still at an age where they can be moulded easily by what they see and hear. It is at this juncture that education will play a significant role in changing the outlook of the child. Education will help cut down the web of lies by society, restricting the proliferation of new layers of conditioning.

Nevertheless, what about the existing webs that narrow down the vision of society? For the first division of people (Those who have already been exposed to the conservative notions of gender roles), it proposed that we need to take substantial efforts to sensitize gender stereotypes through campaigns and media. Here media includes the press as well as audio-visual media such as advertisements and movies. Historically it has been these types of media that played a significant role in creating gender stereotypes. This was done through advertisements with taglines such as 'men will be men' preceded by an audio-visual message where a man tries to woo a woman. These advertisements project gender stereotypes where women are sexualized, and it acts as an instrument for reinforcing attribution of behaviour that is 'appropriate' for each sex. Therefore, emphasizing on advertisements that avoid the accentuation of a culture that polarizes both sexes is of paramount importance. These types of media are accessible to a large number of people in society. It is thereby helping in busting out the myths that it had initially constructed and thrown into the minds of the people. Therefore, it is suggested that we use media that initially normalized/conditioned society to renormalize/recondition, thus deviating from the deviant.

In a survey conducted among school children in Haryana about a rape incident that took place in a nearby village, it was observed that the children believed that 'it was the girl's fault and that is why rape took place'. It is noted here that their opinion was based on their interactions with their teachers on the subject. As stated earlier, a holistic and comprehensive framework of education needs to be adopted to counteract the repercussions of passing off conditioning (as it has been done in the above illustration). Essentially, the aim is to break myths associated with gender, which have developed at a young age. It means that instead of changing the entire framework of education, there have to be specific alterations by trimming and adding new ideas in the existing policy itself. This change in the framework will include a revision of textbooks prescribed by the board of education. This revision will entail making it more gender neutral. For example, when a child studying in 1st grade learns about verbs from a textbook prescribed by NCERT, the child would encounter the verbs 'run' and 'cook'. While going through the illustrations for these verbs, he/she would be confronted with the examples 'He runs' along with a picture of a male running and 'She cooks' along with a picture of a female cooking. These illustrations play a significant role in shaping the child's mind, attributing to the action of running as a masculine trait and that of cooking as a feminine one. Eliminating notions created through the mental association will be the first step towards eradicating gender roles/stigmas through education. The Secondary level of education will also include the change proposed in the primary level along with two new

changes- one, deconstruction of language and two, the introduction of sex education as part of the curriculum. Firstly, deconstruction of language would entail using gender-neutral identities such as 'humans' instead of 'man' while collectively referring to people in society. Secondly, sex education would provide a platform for males and females to understand the nuances of sexual interaction. In the status quo, owing to the absence of sex education as part of the curricula, children often piqued by their curiosity. In the process of satisfying their curiosity, they end up viewing pornographic websites. These websites perpetuate misogynistic behaviour which overly sexualizes a woman and makes them look like objects to satisfy a man's sexual desire. Thus, adding sex education to the curricula would help circumvent children from being exposed to this product of androcentrism.

CONCLUSION

The changes in the education policy are just baby steps towards the end goal of eliminating gender stereotypes. These changes have to be perceived in the right manner by society to be effective. Social transformation requires an open mind, and people should be willing to change; it cannot be forced. Just as society was conditioned to be patriarchal and misogynistic over a long time, this process will also take time to fructify. However, it is in this light that we keep striving towards a better education policy. Education can bring in change efficiently. As we normalize the abnormal for each new set of children by educating them along these lines, it will bring us closer to the end goal. However, education and media are not the only factors that can drive this change. Certain factions of the society do not have access to either education or media. Thus, we need to take sensitization to the grassroots level, where we can ensure that we can provide education to those who do not have access to it. An alternative would be administrative efforts to increase the social capital of those who are deprived of this mode of sensitization. This alternative would be a solution that would help reduce poverty and, at the same time, act as a step towards the elimination of gender stereotypes. Although these two suggestions are not all-encompassing, it will help in creating a ray of hope in a society that has been shadowed by a web of lies.
