



## GENDERED BEHAVIOURAL PRACTICES IN THE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS OF KERALA

Thasniya K. T.<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Moly Kuruvilla<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Women's Studies, University of Calicut, Malappuram, Kerala.

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of Women's Studies, University of Calicut, Malappuram, Kerala.

### ABSTRACT

*Gender equality in education system does not imply the equal access to education only but also the process of providing equal opportunities and experiences for boys and girls. Schools have a significant role in developing proper skills, attitudes and values in children that would enable them contribute to the development of a gender just society. A study was conducted to analyse whether the behavioural practices in the primary and secondary schools of Kerala promote values of gender equality in students. 12 primary and 12 secondary schools belonging to Malappuram and Thrissur districts of Kerala were selected as the sample. The study using observation and interview with teachers revealed that the practices in several primary and secondary schools are gendered with regard to the rules and regulations, dress code, and seating arrangements of boys and girls. The study also revealed that the overall school climate is gendered and the boys and girls prefer to sit, interact and play with the same sex only.*

**Key Words:** Gendered school climate, Rules and regulations, Entry-exit points to the school, Seating arrangements, Dress code for staff and students.

## INTRODUCTION

Access to education is a fundamental right of both women and men. The right to free and compulsory primary education, without discrimination has been reaffirmed in all major international human rights conventions. Though India is the second largest country in the world so far as population is concerned, it is a backward country with regard to educational standards of its people. India is reputed to have a progressive education policy with regard to the question of gender. The National Policy on Education, 1986 pays specific emphasis on women's education. Gender inequality in education in the Indian context has been highlighted by the reports of several committees and studies. Because of the prevailing patriarchal notions, several women are deprived of the right to education, information, knowledge, skills and thinking associated with formal education.

Schooling reinforces the gendered inequality across all divides. Research findings have been fairly consistent in highlighting the gendered classroom climate and the gender stereotypes reflected in teachers' interactions with students(Scantlebury, 2009[1]; Kuruvilla and Najmunnisa, 2011)[2]. In the gendered school climate, girls are not allowed to play football while boys are not encouraged to take craft works. Despite class, caste and regional differences boys are generally encouraged to opt for technical subjects while girls have to take up home science.Liu (2006) [3] points out that the gendered classroom environment like the overall gendered school culture, may have important implications on the evolving identities and future lives of students. Ideologies that shape female and male identities in Indian society are mutually reinforcing across institutions, such as the family, workplace, and community (Kabeer and Subrahmanian, 1999) [4] leading to vicious cycles of under-investment in females.

The fact that a vast body of research evidence coexists with continuing and prevalent sexism in the classroom and the school, warrants an enquiry into the nature of gendered behaviors in the classrooms. Such studies are very rare in the Kerala context. Most of the research related with gender issues in education are on issues related with school availability, enrolment and drop out rates. Hence the present study focused on gendered behavioral practices related to the general regulations in schools at primary and secondary levels was undertaken.

### Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the study were:

- To examine the gendered behavioural practices in primary and secondary schools with regard to the general rules and regulations – such as entry and exit points and timings to school, dress code of staff and students, seating arrangements of boys and girls and permission to boys and girls to move around the school.
- To understand the interaction styles between boys and girls in primary and secondary schools

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Sample**

The sample consisted of 12 primary and 12 secondary schools belonging to Malappuram and Thrissur districts of Kerala State. Since religion is considered as a major socialization agent, due weightage was also given to the type of management of the school as to Government, Aided and Unaided Schools of Christian, Hindu and Muslim managements. Though the schools were selected randomly, the investigators faced non-cooperation from a few management schools on the claims that there is no gender issues in the school and things are all fair in the practices followed. A few of them seemed offended in their regulations and activities being observed.

### **Tools and Procedure of Data Collection**

Structured observation using a checklist was used to collect data regarding the gendered behavioural practices in schools. After taking prior permission from the concerned school authorities, the general rules and regulations of the schools with regard to entry and exit points and timings of students to the school, dress code of students and teachers, seating arrangements of boys and girls and permission to move around the school were observed by the researcher in each school, on three different days at one month interval. The observation was done from morning till evening so as to get information regarding all the above aspects along with the interaction styles of boys and girls during intervals, lunch time and play time. Interviews with 48 teachers, two each from the 24 schools also supplied additional data for substantiating the findings of observation.

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **A. General Rules and Regulations of the School**

The present observation revealed that there are gendered behavioural practices in the general rules and regulations of primary and secondary schools of Malappuram and Thrissur districts. The rules and regulations regarding entry and exit, seating arrangement, dress code, permission to move around the schools were found to be varied depending upon the type of management of schools.

#### **A.1. Entry and Exit at School**

There are considerable variations among schools with regard to the restrictions imposed on entry-exit time and space for boys and girls. Unlike the government schools which have same entry and exit time and gate for boys and girls, the management schools were found to have differential regulations for the entry and exit of boys and girls. Such restrictions vary from separate queues, separate timings, separate staircases and separate gates for boys and girls. Separate corridors for boys and girls with cameras installed on the way of boys were also found in some schools. There are schools that use long bells indicating boys to move first during lunch time and school dispersal time. Two of the Hindu management schools have separate staircases for boys and girls to exit from the school. The toilet and wash facilities were found to be at extreme ends in almost all management schools. This type of grouping, lining and timing based on gender during school leaving time of students were observed in most of the secondary schools.

But such a strict polarization was not seen in the case of primary schools. In management schools, separate toilet and wash facilities and separate queues for boys and girls were seen in primary schools also.

#### **A.2. Permission to Move around the School**

The present study reveals that there are gendered practices in the regulations regarding the permission given to move around the school. Most of the primary and secondary schools studied do not allow the students to go outside the school without the permission and consent of teachers during school hours and it is very strict in the case of girls. All schools insisted girls to

bring their lunch or have it from the school itself without going out or buying anything from outside. All schools except unaided schools provide lunch at school. But in the case of boys, they are allowed to go outside the school to mosque, shops and for lunch. In one of the Muslim management schools, girls were not even allowed to go the school canteen, if they need food it will be brought into the classroom by the Peon of the school. But the girls of this school get freedom of movement around the school during Fridays when boys will be going to the Masjid for prayer. In the absence of boys, girls were found to be talkative, smart and louder.

In one of the Christian management schools both boys and girls were not allowed to move out of the school during school time. Girls should sit inside the classroom except for going to toilets. All schools insisted parents to come and take their wards if they need to take them home during school time. One Hindu management school keeps movement register in the school. If the students whether boy or girl, wants to go outside they need to sign in the movement register with time and reason along with taking permission from the class teacher. The restrictions and regulations in general were found to be affecting the freedom of movement of girls than that of boys.

Boys and girls in all primary schools, whether government or management, were not allowed to move out of school either for having lunch or buying things from shops. Teachers were found to be more caring and protecting at the primary level than at the secondary level.

### **A.3. Seating Arrangements**

When it comes to the seating, all the schools follow gender segregation in the seating arrangements of boys and girls at secondary level. All the secondary schools follow two sided or front-back sided seating arrangements. If there are more girls than boys then the girls become seated at the back of boys and when there are more boys than girls then the girls are seated in front. Most of the boys and girls were found to prefer sitting with same sex only and show a reluctance/ inhibition to sit near the opposite sex and not even look at the opposite sex. The quarrels between boys and girls were very rare.

Out of the total sample only four schools- two Hindu and two Christian management schools follow mixed seating at primary level. The students in the primary schools that follow mixed seating were found to have no shyness or inhibition to mingle with the opposite sex. The quarrels between boys and girls were common, playing together, making friendships, sharing study

materials and sometimes food items were found in such classrooms. But this is very rare in primary schools that have separate seating.

#### **A.5. Dress Code**

The dress code of the students and teachers is a significant one for analyzing gendered behaviours in schools. The present analysis reveals that there are strong regulations on the dress code of girls and female teachers than boys and male teachers. Boys wear *pants* and *shirts* while girls have to wear *Churidar* with the *shawl* compulsorily pinned on the *Churidar*. *Churidar* without slits and shaping is a common dress code for girls in all schools whereas full sleeves along with pinned head *scarf* for Muslim girls was compulsory in both aided and unaided Muslim Management Schools. Majority of management schools insisted a coat instead of shawl for girls.

At the primary level boys have to wear *pants/trousers* and *shirts* and girls have to wear *Churidar with shawl or skirt* with *shirt*. In Muslim management schools some of the girl students use *scarf* but it is not compulsory.

In the case of teachers, in majority of the unaided schools and a few aided schools, female teachers both at primary and secondary levels were insisted to wear a coat over their *Saree/Churidar*. But it is surprising that this is not applicable for male teachers. Because of the strict dress code, girls and female teachers were found to be unusually conscious about their dress and their bodies. Such a dress code was not seen in the case of female teachers of government schools.

#### **B. Interaction Styles among Boys and Girls**

At primary level children seemed to be more free in mingling with the opposite sex when compared to the secondary schools. This was specifically found in the five primary schools where mixed seating of boys and girls was followed. In the other primary schools despite the absence of any restrictions from teachers, boys and girls seemed to be more shy to interact with each other. During play time the children seemed not to prefer playing with members of opposite sex. Even when encouraged for mixed group role plays, the boys and girls were reluctant to do so.

Boys and girls seemed to prefer sitting, interacting and playing with the same sex in the secondary schools. The mingling between boys and girls was found to be very low in Muslim management schools when compared to Hindu and Christian managements. In the case of government schools boys and girls were seemed to come and go in mixed groups, share their food, interact and at times quarrel with each other. But an overall preference for same sex grouping was evident among them also.

## **DISCUSSION**

Analysis of the observed facts in the present study reveals that the overall environment of the schools at primary and secondary levels follows strong and persistent gender segregation in their practices. The results also revealed that the overall culture of the schools is gendered in general regulations, dress code of teachers and students and the seating arrangement of boys and girls. The aided and unaided schools follow more gendered practices than government schools. Among these, Muslim schools have strict regulations in the entry- exit points and timings, dress code of female students and teachers, seating arrangements and interactions between boys and girls when compared to Hindu, Christian and Government schools.

Restrictions in general were found to be more in the case of adolescent girls at secondary level which could be seen as an extension of what is happening at home and in the society. As opined by Kuruvilla and Nisha (2015) [5] with the onset of puberty, restrictions are put upon the mobility and activities of girls while their counterparts enjoy more freedom and privileges. Attraction towards opposite sex and maintaining healthy friendship are always been an issue of adolescents. The teachers and school authorities express their inability in managing the same and instead they put more and more restrictions on girls at the secondary level schools. There are schools where mixed seating arrangements had to be changed as per the demand of parents. The teachers in the schools, especially at the secondary level seemed to be apprehensive of the consequences of mixed seating arrangements in classrooms. They are confused of encouraging the interactions and closer mingling of students on the grounds that it may lead to ‘unhealthy and out of way’ relationships among them which in turn would affect the learning outcomes of students. Teachers and school authorities in general are unknowingly practicing gendered behaviours and are unaware of the consequences of such gender segregation in school.

The findings of the present study are supported by the study on religion and gender role perception conducted by Kuruvilla and Nisha (2015) [6] according to which schooling reinforces

the gendered socialization that begins at home. There are schools in Kerala where practices like assigning specific dress codes to girls and lady teachers, separate timings and gates for boys and girls to enter and exit school, compulsory veiling for girls etc are practiced. Such practices strengthen the gender role perceptions also which highlight the differences between the genders and the secrecy and vulnerability of the female body. As observed by Kahn (2013)[7] teachers' dress codes enforce traditional characteristics of gendered notions under the guise of professional attire and these ideologies reflect gender hierarchies where women are subjected to more regulations than men.

Delamont (1990)[8] opines that schools develop and reinforce gender segregation, stereotypes, even discrimination, which exaggerates negative aspects of sex roles in the outside world. The findings of the present study are also in accordance with the opinion of Bassi, 2003[9] and UNICEF, 2009[10] that gender bias is clearly visible in classroom and playground, even in the minds of the teachers and administrators.

The overall gender segregation in the society and the gendered school climate might have contributed to the preference for same sex groups among boys and girls at the primary and secondary school levels. Wherever there was mixed seating arrangements in classrooms, children were more willing to mingle freely with members of opposite sex. This further indicates that a positive intervention on the part of the school would enable children overcome the gendered segregation imposed upon by other socialisation agencies.

## **CONCLUSION**

The observations of the present study reveal the gendered school climate in Kerala. The organizational structure of schools creates boundaries between the spaces of boys and girls. Both boys and girls suffer from these; but it affects girls more negatively than boys. Sadker and Sadker (1994)[11] point out that boys and girls sitting in the same classroom, reading the same textbook, listening to the same teacher receive different education. The findings of the present study also substantiate that boys and girls receive different experiences and opportunities in the same classroom. Thorne's (1993)[12] research about children's behavior in schools, report that boys and girls recognize acceptable behavior for their gender at early ages and this is often reinforced, perhaps unknowingly, by teachers and school staff.



The reinforcing of gender stereotypes through school curriculum plays a major role in sustaining gender discrimination in the society. Teachers as agents of social change must be committed to reduce the gender-role typing through their own behaviours, classroom practices and language. As suggested by Kuruvilla and Thasniya (2016)[13] teachers should encourage activities that involve both sexes and structure the classroom activities so that boys and girls get opportunities to cooperate and mingle with each other. The present school climate need lot much of change in the general rules and regulations related to the entry –exit points and timings to school, seating arrangements and dress codes of students and staff to ensure a gender neutral atmosphere that in turn may reduce the gender based discriminations and foster egalitarian relations among the youngsters.

The gendered behaviours in the classroom may lead to low self-esteem among girl students. The specific dress codes in schools would in turn strengthen the body consciousness of girls and women and support the patriarchal notion that women are bodies rather than minds. The school managements and administrators are sustaining gendered practices without being conscious of its impacts. Gender sensitization of the educators and policy makers, teachers and parents is necessary to make them aware of the gendered practices and their impacts on growing minds whereby such practices could be eliminated from the school system.

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