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The Gender Inclusivity of Academic Curriculum and its Effects on Students

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Abstract

Gender disparity has always been a permanent part of society. There has been a plethora of efforts to bring gender equality and the erasing the existing gender norms, the role played by the textbooks used in schools and the course structure that students are subjected to cannot be debated when it comes to the reinforcement of gender-exclusivity. Our textbooks, stories, illustrations, examples, every single aspect of our curriculum adds to the formation of gender stereotypes in students. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to analyse the magnitude of gender-inclusivity in the educational realm, and the existing effects it has on a student's mental and overall well-being. A comparative analysis of New Zealand and Indian educational structures has been performed to find the missing gaps in our system that alludes to how the country still needs to put an abundance of efforts in achieving Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5, through an overview of the National education policy 2020. The authors have recommended some measures and potential solutions that aim at revolutionising the educational landscape of India and bring forth equity and inclusivity in the academic domain.

Keywords: *Gender-inclusivity, stereotypes, gender, sex, curriculum, mental health, NEP, New Zealand*

1.0 Introduction

Gender equality is a pillar of a strong and sustainable society (UNDP, 2015). Gender equality, in a patriarchal setup, is a difficult dream to realise, especially when the system is so deep-rooted. Not only does gender disparities harm the gender minorities, but also bring a lot of harm to the male intersection of society that it favours. The gender disparity is visible in literacy rates - 82% of boys are literate while only 65% of girls can read and write (*Census of India Website: Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011*). Conservatism and the lack of awareness can be fought with proper education and raising our children in a gender-sensitive environment. It is the responsibility of education to chip away at the walls of gender discrimination and do away with stereotypes and redundancy. Gender stereotypes lead to the reproduction of systematic oppression as well as the strengthening of a patriarchal society.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 as outlined by the United Nations strives to bring about an academic revolution in the world of education, and construct a system of teaching that is inclusive and progressive. The underlying objective of education as a concept is to help all individuals reach their full potential so that they can fully and equally participate in creating a better world. The word ‘inclusive’ essentially means *including everyone*, regardless of their socio-economic background, gender, sex, etc., (Merriam-wester, 2021). And so far, the curriculum structured to meet the Indian youth is far away from *inclusive*.

The importance of analysing the degree of gender inclusivity of the Indian curriculum is vast, ranging from realising the SDGs 4 and 5, to bringing the adequate and unbiased representation of gender minorities to the academic sphere, which has been largely male-dominated and biased. Several points in our curriculum point towards gender insensitivity and it goes unnoticed because of the normalisation of exclusionary behaviour favour. Educators play a key role in explaining the intricacies of gender inclusivity but the support taken from textbooks reinforces the stereotypical representation. It, therefore, becomes important to evaluate and analyse the content, terminology, and illustrations that our textbooks contain.

Hence this paper aims to offer a comprehensive analysis of the academic curriculum and its influence on impressionable minds while also studying how existing harmful stereotypes are perpetuated with a gender insensitive pedagogy. The paper also throws light on the role gender-inclusive course structure has invisibly been playing on the mental health of students, promoting unhealthy gender roles that foster unhealthy interpersonal relationships between peers; gender roles that stick to the person’s subconscious and steadily contribute to a gender-exclusive and conservative society. The paper discusses the New Education Policy of 2020 and highlights the drawbacks of the same, pointing towards the areas where the policy fails in bringing a progressive approach to gender and sex. A comparative analysis of India and New Zealand’s educational policies and curricula helps in adding substance to the analysis. The differences between the former and the latter help us in building an argument and outlines the effect of a rather inclusive curriculum. Further outlining the contrasts between the educational playgrounds of the two countries, the paper offers viable solutions and recommendations. This paper is written to bring forward gender insensitivity in the curricula and shed light on the effects it has on students and society as a whole.

2.0 Gender Exclusivity in curriculum

Textbooks are an integral aspect of the curriculum and an important influential mechanism through which children are exposed to ideas about gender (Aikman & Rao, 2010). While there are debates about whether society influences textbooks or if textbooks are meant to influence society, the more important aspect is that they are instruments of social control, cultural reproduction, and agency of socialisation into the norms of society. In some contexts, textbooks are the first and sometimes the only source of knowledge a young person might have access to (Lässig and Pohl, 2009). In classrooms, educators have the flexibility of teaching a subject in a way that they find meaningful, they often have limited space and freedom to diverge from the contents of the textbook. A study revealed that textbooks occupy almost 80 per cent of classroom time and educators take the majority of the instructional decisions based on them (Blumberg, 2008, p. 346) Hence, it becomes important to analyse the aspects of gender inclusivity and gender- parity, or a lack thereof in the Indian textbooks.

There are many concerns about gender equality that have been reflected in our national policies. The revised National policy on education 2020, is reputed to be progressive with its policies on gender with its attempt to focus more upon the inputs and the instrumental aspects of gender such as enrolment rates, retention rates, accessibility to schools, etc. Although transformative in that aspect, what lags is the quality of teaching and learning. The teacher's handbooks- Women's Equality and Empowerment through Curriculum: A Handbook for Teachers at Primary Stage (1996) and Women's Equality and Empowerment through Curriculum: A Handbook for Teachers at Upper Primary Stage (1997) and textbooks from apex institutions - NCERT has been revised to make the learning experience for children more inclusive (National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2016). However, an analysis of textbooks, mainly NCERT and SCERT textbooks reveals how gender parity in textual content and illustrations were marked by their limited understanding of Gender, Equity, and Equality (The National Focus Group Paper on Gender Issues in Education (2006)). To explore the extent of gender parity in Indian textbooks, four main aspects of disciplinary knowledge are considered- lack of biology of gender fluidity, the language used, the content of stories, and the illustrations that accompany it.

In the discourse of gender fluidity or issues relating to the LGBTQIA+ community, it has been limited in its scope of Indian society. The Ministry of Education has referred to gender issues only with context to girls and some extent, transgender students (Sharma & Babbar, 2020). A large part of the LGBTQ community is therefore side-lined and even forgotten. The existence of the third gender, however, is not an alien concept in India. Transgender persons were mentioned in the Indian Mythological Texts-Ramananya and Mahabharata as well as in Vedic literature. (Dasari & Reddy, 2018, p. 353). They were revered through much of India's history and were victimised only during colonisation. In recent times, their condition has not improved. A study by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) of India found that about 99 per cent of transgender people have experienced social rejections on multiple occasions. Moreover, 52 per cent of the community has faced harassment by their school classmates and 15 per cent from their teachers, resulting in their dropping out of school (Jain, 2020). While curriculum alone cannot alleviate the injustices suffered by them, it does have the agency to sanitise the young generation and bring awareness among students. History textbooks fail to recognise the struggles and achievements of this community through the non-inclusion of key historical events such as the stonewall riots. The sociology textbooks speak of the family in a traditional sense of a biological male and female with their offsprings. Biology textbooks fail to touch upon key issues related to binary and non-binary genders.

Simultaneously, language - primarily a means of communication - is also a medium through which knowledge about different disciplines is acquired. Language is one of the most powerful means through which sexism and gender discrimination are perpetrated and reproduced. As a consequence, language subtly reproduces the societal asymmetries of status and power in favour of men, which are attached to the corresponding social role. An analysis of 41 textbooks prepared by NCERT revealed the following trends (Women and Sexism-Language of Indian School Textbooks," 1986, p. 796) :

1. The stories were male-dominated, where men emerged as dominant characters in the plot. While more than 100 women were victimised due to their sex roles;

2. Out of the 465 occupations mentioned in the books, women were excluded from 344. The occupations were further assigned to the social roles where women were mostly educators, nurses while men were engineers or doctors;
3. There were 47 biographies of men and only 7 biographies of women.

Furthermore, a report formulated by the department of Gender studies (NCERT) analysed the elementary textbooks of 13 Indian states. The findings texts were rife with gender-biased terms such as policeman, the story of man, man-made instead of their gender-inclusive counterparts such as police officer, the story of humans, human-constructed, etc. Gender stereotypes were associated with the profession. However certain progressive aspects were also highlighted in terms of social-appropriate behaviour. For Example; men were shown to be emotional (*Analysis of the Textbooks of Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Odisha, Maharashtra, Manipur, and Rajasthan: An Overall Report*, 2016).

Consequently, illustrations in textbooks serve as crucial sources of knowledge. Research indicates that students often see pictures before they start reading textual content, thereby impacting their imagination, creativity, and implicit biases (“EFFECTS OF PICTURES IN TEXTBOOKS ON STUDENTS’ CREATIVITY,” 2015, p. 83). A multitude of studies on NCERT and SCERT textbooks reveal how the gender imbalance is visible, not only in the quantity but also in the quality of illustrations. An analysis of a grade 5 textbook shows that 56 per cent of the pictures depicted only men while 20.6 per cent only depicted women, and the others had both genders (Alva, 2017). Moreover, a study that dealt with the content analysis of pictorial depictions of English and Malayalam textbooks of primary classes revealed how the illustrations were discriminatory and skewed. The study found biases in pictures related to jobs, gendered skills, dress codes, gendered spaces, gendered roles, and household responsibilities (“Gender Stereotypes in the Pictorial Depictions of Primary School Text Books,” 2015, p. 21). While certain changes have been made to combat these stereotypical images by including non-conforming, counter-stereotypical images of men and women, there is a lack of representation when it comes to people of colour, ethnicity, race, and sexuality.

3.0 Impact of Gender Exclusive Curriculum on Students

Gender discrimination in the academic curriculum stems from the gender discrimination prevalent in the general society - be it urban or rural. It is pervasive in all spheres of life-family, occupation and professional settings, academic institutions, etc. The curriculum plays an important part in propagating gender non-parity. The 'hidden curriculum', i.e., the unwritten values and learnings from textbooks and pedagogy subtly propagate patriarchy and heteronormativity, which has short and long-term implications.

According to the new survey, one in three college students reported having suffered from mental health issues during the school years. As many as 42 per cent of students of Class 4 to 8 and 36 per cent of students of Class 9 to 12 have been subjected to bullying and harassment (Gyanesh, 2017). While bullying and harassment can occur due to numerous reasons, one reason is also the non-conformity and deviance from stereotypes (Peguero & Williams, 2011, p. 547). The social environment that a child is brought up in such as school or family plays a crucial role in problems relating to body self-esteem and body image. (Gurian, 2012). For example, when a student, identifying as a biological as well as a social 'Male', does not conform to the expected physical appearance of being tall or being muscular, he is often victimised. The hidden curriculum, therefore, forms an integral part of the process of socialisation thereby reinforcing stereotypical expectations of behaviour, physical appearance, career opportunities, etc. In turn to contribute to a non-inclusive atmosphere in classrooms and schools. Not only does a non-inclusive curriculum lead to short-term bullying among students, but it also has some far-reaching and long-lasting impacts. Claude Steele, a renowned academician argues how anxiety develops due to the constant fear of being viewed through the lens of a stereotype and to having to fight against stereotypes. Steele further explores how anxiety not only decreases academic performance but students tend to seek escape from such situations- either physically by absenteeism or withdrawal, or psychologically via misidentification (Steele, 1997, p. 626).

Stereotyping not only affects the mental well-being of students but also impacts academic achievement, subject choices, and career paths (Bazler & Simonis, 2006; Potter & Rosser, 1992; Powell & Garcia, 1985; Shepardson & Pizzini, 1992). A research was conducted to examine the effects of biased images and their relation to academic performance.

The results indicated that female students had higher comprehension after viewing counter-stereotypic images (female scientists) than after viewing stereotypic images (male scientists). Male students had higher comprehension after viewing stereotypic images than after viewing counter-stereotypic images (Good et al., 2010b, p. 138). In addition to the effect on academic achievement, gender differences are prevalent in subject preferences and career choices. According to the Observer Research Foundation, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) related jobs have seen a growth of 44 per cent in the last three years, however, they have remained choices for men (Jain, 2021b). Even though 43 per cent of STEM graduates are women, their share in the job market related to this field is a mere 14 per cent. (Jayan, 2020b). This relation between gender and profession may have a significant impact on the economic standing as the STEM sector is more lucrative and high-paying than other sectors. This thereby puts women at a higher risk of an earning disadvantage to their male counterparts, which in turn widens the gender disparity.

4.0 National Education Policy, 2020

4.1 Overview

The National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 aims at bringing a systemic change in the educational playground of India, to meet the SDGs as outlined by the United Nations (Ministry of Education, 2020). The policy is focused on constructing a system of learning based on Indian ethics, cultures and values and building a holistic framework that is sustainable and rooted in traditional values. The National Education Policy of 2020 is the first education policy of the 21st century and looks at revamping the various critical points of development of the country. The policy primarily focuses on bringing out the creative capabilities of each student while offering them a robust teaching faculty and a diverse curriculum, designed to hone their individualities and make learning 'enjoyable' (Ministry of Education, 2020), with one of the most notable targets of the NEP 2020, to raise the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) to 50 per cent by 2035 (Aithal & Aithal, 2020).

The NEP, 2020 is full of radical reforms in the current education scenario. To transform the current pedagogical system of 10+2 with a more participative structure of 5+3+3+4 wherein students of the ages 3-6 will be provided with a strong base and childhood care to promote healthier development and learning (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Other important highlights (Press Information Bureau, 2020):

1. The policy looks at liberalising the curriculum structure and bring forward multidisciplinary subjects that would give students to opt for the subjects best suited to their interests,
2. Heavy emphasis on multilingualism and language learning,
3. To promote education among Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), etc.

4.2 National Education Policy 2020 stance on Gender Inclusivity

The NEP 2020 has brought many important and inclusive changes in its stead. It has introduced the Gender Inclusion Fund toward equitable education for girls and transgender students with an increase in public investment to bring education to 6% of Gross Domestic Product (Bhatt, 2020); However, it must be brought to notice that the NEP that talks about bringing gender inclusivity in education mention the word ‘gender’ only 16 times in the 66 pages long document. Moreover, the policy boasts of lofty goals of building a gender-inclusive learning environment and mandated awareness sessions to break gender-based stereotypes, adding that teachers will be made aware of gender-sensitive pedagogy and inclusive classroom management. However, the policy fails to point towards a concrete plan of action as to how these goals can be achieved systematically. Furthermore, the policy only refers to girls and women, with a few scattered mentions of transgender students, while talking about gender-inclusive learning environments, failing at taking into consideration the non-binary nature of the societal construct of gender (Mathur & Sharma, 2020).

Taking the conversation of inclusion further, the words ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, bisexual’, ‘LGBT Community’, etc., find no mention in the policy document (Sharma & Babbar, 2020), indicating even clearly towards the policy’s lack of prioritisation towards the ‘equitable’ part of the Sustainable Development Goal 4 that demands quality and equitable education for all (UNDP, 2015). The Ministry of Human Resource Development has made no accommodations for the LGBTQIA+ Community in the educational playground they have envisaged and has referred to gender issues only with context to girls and some extent, transgender students. (Sharma & Babbar, 2020).

4.3 Exclusion of Sex Education

The new National Education Policy has equity as one of its central areas of focus, but it does little to add substance to those goals and uses unclear and feeble words here and there (Jha, 2019). In addition to vague descriptions of gender inclusion, the NEP 2020 underperforms in the arena of inclusivity and equality by not introducing sex education into the curriculum. The fields of sex education and gender studies remain brutally unattended in the policy document, highlighting the deep-rooted stigma, gender stereotypes, and lack of education and willingness to move towards a sustainable society (Feminism in India, 2020). The blame for this circumstance majorly goes to people taking sex education at face value, assuming that the subject teaches children how to have sex. They are unaware that the subject deals with areas of consent, sexual health, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), gender and sexual identities, etc., which are important in equipping children with the necessary knowledge of their bodies and instilling a sensitive approach to other people (Mukherjee, 2020).

Sex education invites apprehension and resistance from stakeholders like parents, teachers, and politicians. The hesitation is so powerful that legislations of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, etc., have banned the provisions of sex education, arguing that the discipline goes against ‘Indian values’ and corrupts children. Whereas, in reality, the subject helps children understand the basic life skills of decision making, asking before doing something, communication, listening skills, etc. (Ismail, Shajahan, Sathyanarayana Rao & Wylie, 2015).

Research shows that sex education contributes to lowering teen pregnancy rates, transmission to sexually transmitted infections and diseases, helps children understand their bodies and proper hygiene practices (Raphael, 2015). The benefits of sex education extend to reduced sexual assault and sexual crime rates and reduction in domestic violence.

Another aspect of gender inclusivity and sexuality education that the NEP 2020 fails to give proper importance to is the conversation of menstruation and menstrual hygiene. Period poverty is India's invisible evil that affects almost 88% of the menstruators in India. It refers to the situation when a menstruator is not able to access or afford safe menstrual hygiene due to social and economic barriers. According to the Ministry of Health, only 12% of the total menstruators in India can access safe menstrual hygiene (Chowdhury, 2020). The ambitious goal of the policy to attain 50% GER by 2035 would be very cumbersome to achieve as 23 million girls drop out of school annually after entering the age of adolescence (Rath, 2020).

A study conducted by Babbar (2020) outlines the number of times the words menstruation, menstrual hygiene management, puberty were taken in the policy document. The analysis brings out a shocking result, showing that little to no importance is given to providing adequate menstrual hygiene infrastructure to menstruators, let alone teaching every student about menstruation and efforts to curb the stigma around it.

Gender-Related	Range	Menstruation-Related	Range	Sanitation-Related	Range
Girl	8	Menstruation	0	Hygiene	2
Gender	12	MHM	0	Sanitation	5
Women	6	Puberty	0	Toilet/Latrine	3
Female	7	Pads	0	Water	6

Table 1. Gender, Menstruation, and Sanitation-related keywords used to analyse NEP 2020.

Source: Feminism In India (Internet).

The National Education Policy of 2020 is implemented to fulfil the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, but India's reluctance in covering and planning the execution of comprehensive sexuality education, menstrual health management, and gender sensitivity will hold it back from her its performance in SDG 3, SDG 4, SDG 5 and SDG 6 that are of good health and wellbeing, quality education for all, gender equality and clean water and sanitation, respectively (Rath, 2020).

5.0 Comparative Analysis of New Zealand and India's curricula

5.1 Education in New Zealand: An Overview

The education system of the island country of New Zealand offers a student-centric curriculum to foster and promote the learning and progress of every student, notwithstanding their abilities, beliefs, ethnicities, etc. (Ministry of Education, 2021). All students between the ages of six to sixteen must attend a physical school or be homeschooled. Moreover, education for children between the ages of five to nineteen that attend public schools is government-funded. The education structure in New Zealand is divided into stages, namely, Early Childhood Education (ECE), Primary Education, Secondary Education, and Tertiary Education (Powell, 2012). New Zealand's national curriculum consists of two curriculums - The New Zealand Curriculum and Te Marautanga o Aotearoa.

The New Zealand curriculum includes eight essential learning areas of English, Arts, Physical Education, Science, Mathematics and Statistics, Language learning, Social Sciences, Technology. The *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* is designed for the indigenous Māori community and it is New Zealand's first indigenous curriculum, making it the first country to implement such a structure. Te Marautanga is crafted for teaching and education in the Māori medium schools of New Zealand and it aims to facilitate Māori participation and education in the country (Teach NZ, n.d.).

The majority of schools in New Zealand are owned and financed by the government and follow the national curriculum. The State Integrated schools also teach the national curriculum but have their own separate set of values and ambitions, and a compulsory amount of attendance dues is charged. Private schools in New Zealand do not follow the national curriculum and formulate their pedagogies. In addition to that, they aren't state-funded and finance themselves through charging fees (Ministry of Education, 2021).

5.2 Gender-inclusive pedagogies in New Zealand

The curriculum in New Zealand is vast and diverse, with attention given to the areas that are contemporary and significant. Proper sexuality education is a component of the New Zealand curriculum, along with other rather stigmatised topics of mental health (which is incorporated in health and physical education), drugs and alcohol education, etc. (Ministry of Education, 2020). In 2020, The Ministry of Education released new guidelines - relationships and sexuality education guidelines - which mandate all schools to uphold the human rights of people. The guidelines realise the importance of free and inclusive education and ask schools to provide students with the same, regardless of their gender identity, expression, sexual orientation, etc. (Collins, 2020). Titled *Relationship and Sexuality Education - A Guide for Teachers, Leaders, and Board of Trustees Years 1 - 8* and *Relationship and Sexuality Education - A Guide for Teachers, Leaders, and Board of Trustees Years 9 - 13*, the guidelines have been put in place to acknowledge the changing social dynamics of the world and bring forward social inclusion, facilitate healthy relationships, shifting social norms about gender and sexuality, etc. The revisions ask for including proper relationships and sexuality education (RSE) right from the beginning of primary school because young children are living in extremely volatile social, political, economic, and environmental spheres; changing family structures, a digital world, and high exposure to technology, climate change, etc. A quality RSE gives the children the necessary know-how to deal with these circumstances by developing healthy relationships and attitudes. In addition to that, the RSE helps children in:

1. Combatting homophobia, transphobia, and gender and sexuality-based violence,
2. Studying the lasting effects of colonisation and the impacts of factors like population growth on the environment,
3. Equipping them with the knowledge of religious and cultural diversities of the native indigenous communities,
4. Understanding sexual and gender diversity, and consequently making a healthy and inclusive environment (Ministry of Education, 2020).

5.3 Students' Experiences in the Educational Sphere

Equality is an integral part of New Zealand and it is evident from a study conducted that shows a swooping majority 82 to 97 per cent of students (in year 9 alone) in favour of equal rights and opportunities for all genders; the ones who stood for complete gender equality were proved to have had higher civic knowledge (Satherly, 2011), hinting, towards the role played by and the significance of a gender-inclusive and progressive curriculum. New Zealand has always stuck to its principle of providing every person with an inclusive and safe learning environment. The introduction of Relationship and Sexuality Education guidelines has been welcomed by the general public and LGBTQIA+ Advocacy groups, but some have expressed concerns over the proper implementation of said guidelines (Graham-McLay, 2020).

5.4 New Zealand and India: A Comparison

It is evident from the Sustainable Development Goals Index report (2020) that New Zealand has performed beautifully in recent years, standing at the 16th rank, out of 193 countries. While some challenges remain to achieve SDG 4 and 5, the SDG trends are positive and display a hopeful picture: the performance towards SDG 4 is moderately improving and SDG 5 is currently on track (Sustainable Development Report, 2020). India, on the other hand, has shown a comparatively underwhelming performance and ranked at 117 out of 193 UN Member States. Many challenges remain in the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5, the trend in both of which have shown stagnation in 2020 (Sustainable Development Report, 2020).

New Zealand has been taking continuous steps towards a gender-inclusive education system, as seen with the introduction of the Relationship and Sexuality Education guidelines of 2020, whereas India still has some way to go. In 2021, New Zealand announced free access to menstruation products to its students in an attempt of battling period poverty (BBC, 2021) and to ensure that no child is held back from their education and experiencing life, due to a fact of life such as menstruation (Ministry of Education, 2021). On the contrary, no such steps have been taken in India to ensure students in India aren't held back by the unsolicited taboo of menstruation - about 23% of girls in India leave school on the onset of puberty and menstruation (Verma, 2018).

In addition to this, New Zealand has recognised the importance of the gender inclusion system and has started taking the necessary strides to ensure that students feel respected in the learning environment. The Ministry of Education has asked all schools to ensure the usage of students' correct pronouns and preferred names, and to challenge existing gender norms and stereotypes. (Rodriguez, 2020). However, no such steps have been taken to improve the pedagogical structure and practices in India and remain stringent and absolute.

Analogous to that, there's a stark difference between the academic curriculum of New Zealand and India in consequence of the inclusion of sex education and gender awareness in the course. Relationship and Sexuality education in New Zealand is a part of the curriculum and is provided to the students from Year 1. It teaches children about families, gender diversity, and relationships and takes on the topics of sexual health, contraceptives, etc., as the students enter the age of adolescence (Ministry of Education, 2020). On the other hand, sexuality education is not taught in Indian schools because it is deemed unnecessary and harmful by stakeholders and the whole conversation is hush-hushed and tabooed.

6.0 Recommendations

Having studied and analysed the significance of academic curriculum in the educational sphere, it is evident and visible that a gender-exclusive course structure results in not only mental health deterioration of the students and general erasure of their identities but also affects their academic performance for the worse. Gender insensitive curriculum has heavy social costs and ramifications, hence it becomes crucial to address those areas and bring meaningful change and required representation. The policies formulated by the government are forward-looking and ambitious but lack the sense of progressiveness needed to make a sustainable world.

- In contrast to the recently introduced holistic structure, a thorough revision and edition of the current course work and textbooks such as NCERT are required. Exclusively, in terms of gender-inclusive language, examples, representative illustrations, and text that reflects the gender non-binary, etc. Also, some important curriculum changes that mention intersex people, concepts of gender fluidity, and sex incongruence.

- An inclusion of feminist theories women-centric concepts and the feminist movement is strongly recommended, along with other key historical events like the Stonewall riots, the suffrage movement, etc., as a historical discourse to instil in the students an appreciation and respect for the fights people led for equal rights. A comprehensive course on feminist ideologies can help students understand the importance of gender inclusion and gender equality.
- Classroom pedagogy should provide exposure to primary students regarding gender diversity, gender norms, and families - conventional and unconventional. Such an early childhood education would let the students understand the gender non-binary and give them a non-cis-gendered and non-heteronormative approach to life, removing any sort of biases that they may already have and deleting the chance of further adopting gender stereotypes.
- The inclusion of a comprehensive course on sex education. An opportunity for students to explore the stereotypes & equip them with the necessary knowledge about their bodies, healthy relationships, self, and others. It will teach them about the various aspects of the human body and the different sexualities, along with healthy life skills such as consent, communication, etc. A comprehensive sexuality course provides young and impressionable students with a safe space where they can access proper information, and not fall trap of misinformation on unreliable and/or unsafe internet sources. Moreover, the sex education course will prove significant in curbing sexual crimes and diseases. The name of the course may be changed to something that would be more welcomed by stakeholders such as parents who often take the name *sex education* at face value.
- While changes in the curriculum are much required, another aspect of the situation is the pedagogy adopted by the teachers and their training. It is recommended that teachers - both preservice and in-service - are provided with holistic and inclusive training that would clear their biases and provide them with the correct way to approach the students regarding the same. The implementation of such is necessary for the academic scenario to overcome gender disparities in the education system.

- It is recommended for the teaching faculty to openly discuss menstruation as part of their classroom conducive environment, irrespective of the gender and sex of the students to minimise the integrated taboo surrounding the subject. The government should initiate necessary arrangements in schools to ensure a progressive thought process abolishing the unwillingness between student-teacher relationships. It is also recommended to ensure a safe and functional menstrual hygiene management system, with the providence of free menstrual products in the educational institutions - such a provision can be a huge leap forward in combating period poverty.

7.0 Conclusion

The role played by education in society is pervasive and imperative. Today, as society moves forward and progresses towards a world of acceptance and equality, it is crucial for our education systems and curricula to initiate the movement towards an inclusive world. The current pedagogies show us the image of a world that is exclusionary and biased. Such a curriculum seeps into the minds of the students, propagating these stereotypes and making them vulnerable to gender inequality and discrimination which takes a toll on their mental health and facilitates systems of injustice and oppression.

The study shows that textbooks and coursework are heavily gender-biased and insensitive. The text is very gender binary and does not give any information or mention to the LGBTQIA+ community and gender non-binary. Research has proven that NCERT textbooks in India contain highly male-dominated stories and give preference to male characters in their text, examples, and illustrations. There exists a lack of literature by women writers and academics. The curriculum fails to recognize the stereotypes that are enforced upon children which consequently takes a toll on their mental health. As discussed in the paper, almost 50 per cent of students were victims of bullying by their peers for not conforming to gender stereotypes. It adds to the toxic culture that exists in the academic biosphere, affecting children mentally, emotionally, and many times, physically. Moreover, this also brings about deteriorating academic performance which propagates gender disparities.

The government has participated in the fight for gender equality and pledged to achieve Sustainable Development Goals. The New Education Policy 2020 is a forward-thinking step towards the fulfilment of SDGs 4 and 5, but it lacks the required sense of commitment and progressive approach. Although the NEP 2020 boasts of achieving a 50% Gross Enrolment Ratio, it is not possible unless the problem of period poverty is addressed and curbed. Furthermore, gender equality (SDG 5) cannot be achieved if gender stereotypes are held on by society. A strict set of efforts to destroy gender norms is the need of the hour and that can be achieved by revising the course work and curriculum and making it more gender-sensitive. The policymakers need to recognise the importance of comprehensive sex education to students, especially seeing the rising number of sexual crimes in the country.

The comparison of New Zealand and India's curricula gives us necessary insights into the changes that are required in the country. The stark differences between the two educational playgrounds are because of the emphasis given in different areas. The society and cultures of the two countries are different but important lessons of equality and inclusivity can be learned and key areas of urgency can be recognised and worked on.

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