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Kamlesh Narwana and Sharmila Rathee

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GENDER DYNAMICS IN CO-EDUCATION SCHOOLS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TWO SCHOOLS IN INDIA

Kamlesh Narwana¹ and Sharmila Rathee²

Abstract

Different forms of schooling i.e. single-sex or co-educational have been discussed in educational academia from the perspective of its impact on gender equality. The debate revolves around the question: which form of schooling (single- or co-educational) will be effective on combating prevalent gender stereotypes. With the contradictory evidences, this paradoxical discussion remains inconclusive. Based on a comparative analysis of two co-educational schools, the present paper aims to analyze the co-educational schooling and its relation with gender equality. The paper attempts to contribute to the debate by arguing that any policy (co-education schooling here) is largely mediated by socio-cultural and traditional context of the institution. By drawing linkages between socio-cultural aspects and schooling practices, it endeavors to analyze parental concerns, role of school as an agency and interface with culture and tradition, and its impact on peer behavior. With the help of qualitative data collected through semi-structured interview of stakeholders, school officials, community leaders and focus group discussions (FGD) with students, the paper argues that provision of co-educational schooling solely cannot influence gender dynamics as school being a social institution is largely influenced by its socio-cultural settings. In spite of being co-educational, different school practices and gender dynamics in both the schools reflect that considerable factors remain accountable for accomplishment of education policies.

Keywords: *India, coeducation, school*

1. Assistant Professor, Panjab University Rural Center, Kauni Panjab University.

2. Assistant Professor, Institute of Home Economics, University of Delhi.

Résumé

Les chercheurs s'interrogent sur le rôle de la mixité et de l'éducation séparée dans la promotion de l'égalité filles-garçons et la lutte contre les stéréotypes de genre. Jusqu'à là, les réponses sont contradictoires et peu concluantes. En s'appuyant sur deux écoles mixtes indiennes, cet article propose d'analyser comment une scolarisation basée sur la mixité influence les modalités de l'égalité des sexes. Il en ressort que, quel que soit le type de scolarisation (ici mixte), le contexte socioculturel où s'insère l'institution pèse de tout son poids. L'article met en valeur la manière dont l'environnement scolaire agit, par le biais des pratiques scolaires comme des préoccupations parentales, mais aussi le rôle de l'école en tant qu'interface entre les discours traditionnels et plus modernes et ses conséquences dans les relations entre pairs. À partir de données qualitatives récoltées lors d'entretiens semi-directifs avec des acteurs de terrain (responsables d'écoles, leaders communautaires et étudiants par le biais de groupes de discussions), il semble que la mixité ne soit pas suffisante pour améliorer les relations de genre. Bien que les deux écoles soient mixtes, les pratiques scolaires et les relations hommes-femmes existantes influent largement sur la mise en place des politiques éducatives.

Mots-clés : Inde, mixité scolaire, école

Introduction

The forms of schooling i.e. single-sex or co-educational have been discussed in educational academia from the perspective of its impact on gender equality. The heart of most debates in this context is whether girls will be safer and get better education and development if they learn only with other girls or in mixed classes/school with boys (UNESCO, 2007). Gender equality is viewed in the context of equal access to schooling, participation in classroom, subject choice and equal competence in academic performance etc. Another aspect of the debate concerns the effectiveness of particular kind of schooling (single-sex or co-educational) on challenging and rejecting prevalent gender stereotypes. Situating itself in a "form of schooling and gender equality" debate, the present study attempts to analyze the gender dynamics in two different co-educational school settings. Based on a comparative study of a rural government school and a metropolitan private school, the paper argues that provision of co-educational schooling solely cannot influence gender dynamics as there are many socio-cultural, family and environmental variables at work which influence the functioning of the school as an institution.

Different researches have presented contradictory evidence in the context of forms of schools and its relation with gender equality and formation of

gender identity among students. In the case of single-sex schools, Evans (2014) analyzed that these schools have been portrayed as free spaces for personal development, away from male intimidation. In different African case studies, Lee and Lockheed (1990), Mbilizi (2010), Picho and Stephens (2012) (as cited in Evans 2014) have reported the positive result of single-sex (girls') schools on academic achievement of girls. Besides academic achievement, some researchers have pointed out a positive impact of single-sex schools on speaking abilities (Ebrahimi and Yarahmadzahi, 2015), self-esteem (Sullivan, 2009), participation in physical activities and subject selection (Spielhofer, Benton and Schagen, 2004). Co-educational settings have been considered as risky environment for girls where girls are marginalized and belittled (Francis 2000, Jackson and Bisset 2005; Jackson 2010; Pahlke, Bigler and Patterson 2014). On the opposite, mentioning the challenges of access to only-girl schools, UNESCO study (2007) mentions that only-girl schools have been a target of male predators who call these schools "Candy shops" in Africa. Underlining the importance of co-educational settings for the social development of students, in a review work, Schmuck (2005) considers the isolation of girls and boys in single-sex schools as a barrier for developing the effective interpersonal skills, as they will be grown-ups. Another concern for mix schooling and against single-sex school setting is seen in the form of relying and reinforcing essentialist understanding of gender, reifying the differences and eliding the similarities. This concept underlines that girls and boys are so different that they need to be in segregated classrooms and schools (Fabes et al. 2015; Goodkind et al. 2013; Halpern et al. 2011; Jackson 2010 as cited in Bennett 2015). Evans (2014) has found co-education more conducive to gender equality. While questioning the role of single-sex school in enhancing girls self-confidence, she maintained that seeing girls demonstrate equal competence in mixed-sex classes can undermine gender stereotypes, on the part of boys and girls alike. On the opposite, while sharing reflection from her study in India, Manjreker (2003) noted that practices like mix-seating in co-educational settings found to be used as "a shaming technique" to be used by teachers to prevent indiscipline in classroom. In this paradoxical debate, the arguments remain inconclusive. Further, it seems problematic to generalize the impact of particular form of schooling on gender without exploring the socio-cultural aspects of any particular setting. Pointing at the neglect of social context in most of the studies on co-educational and single-sex schools, Smyth (2010) highlights the importance of studying the potential influence of social context on the processes in different kinds of schools.

To have a brief look at the status of co-education in India, Indian schooling system is majorly functioning in co-educational setting as 96% of schools are co-educational. There are only 2% boys and 3% girls' schools

(AISES, 2016). While there is lack of studies to discern gender dynamics in co-educational schooling in Indian contexts, Chanana (2001) has provided a conceptual framework for studying the development of the education of women in India which is very appropriate for the current study. She underlines two simultaneous processes to study the development and growth of women education in India. On the one hand, the state policy and public discourse on education put a premium on the need to promote education among girls and women to generate positive forces at the macro-level. On the other, the micro-level forces rooted in the family, the kin group and culture determine the educational policies, programmes and ability of girls and women to access. Therefore, it is not possible to view education without reference to the social context, which is rooted in culture, religion and in the “patrifocal family structure and ideology” (Chanana, 2001: 37). Similarly, Kumar (2010) argued that the State’s social policy agenda in education will remain inconsequential if the cultural forces shaping the lives of girls are not taken into account. He further maintained that although education is the responsibility of the State, the successful fulfilment of the responsibility depends on the active cooperation of society. Efficiency of the State, in this context, can hardly be measured without taking into account the social world – its current ethos as well as its institutions – in which the State attempts to fulfil its educational responsibility. Though education has been visualized as a policy instrument of modernization, Chanana (1990) cautioned that it is naive to presume that education universally promotes institutional and value changes which are desired by policy makers as the impact of education is likely to be shaped by the specific complex of socio-political, economic and cultural factors that prevail in a given society. In the other context, discussing the limitation of state legal structure, Verma committee on “Amendment on Criminal Law” cautioned that correcting the “societal mindset of its gender bias depends more on social norms, and not merely on legal sanction”. The report importantly envisioned schools as potentially transformative spaces in which these patriarchal norms can be challenged, arguing that “schools have to act as counter-socializers to tackle gender bias and discrimination” (Verma, Seth and Subramanian, 2013: 396 as cited in Iyer, 2015). This discussion indicates that school as a social institution has a potential to play a contradictory role by disrupting and strengthening social practices. Iyer (2015) opined that it is needed to conceptualize schools both as institutional agents in gendering and sexualizing processes, and as sites in which young people act as agents (particularly within peer cultures) by responding to and shaping these processes themselves. This comparative study makes an attempt to explore this contradictory aspect of school as an institution in the context of co-education and its relations with gender dynamics.

To present Indian government policy context regarding form of schooling, in spite of expressing continuous commitments for girls' education, the government commissions (Mudaliar 1952 and Kothari Commission 1966) conveyed apprehensiveness towards the co-education schooling. However, challenging such apprehensions, in *Towards Equality: Report on the Status of Women in India* (1974), Indian feminist strongly recommended for adopting co-education as a long-term policy in the interests of 'efficiency, economy [and] equal opportunity' (Iyer, 2015). Iyer (2015) noted that after this particular report, the issue of co-education has not been discussed in Indian education policies. Nevertheless, the government of India has recently adopted more favorable attitude towards co-educational settings which can be noticed in report of Ministry of Human Resource Development on Girls education and Common School system (2005). While addressing the issue of shortage of schools for girls, the committee emphasized on conversion of boys' schools to co-educational schools besides opening new co-educational schools. Thus, co-education has been visualized as a powerful strategy by government for empowerment of girls by providing girls such experiences by which they can learn with boys on equal terms.

Against this backdrop, the study attempts to analyze how this policy strategy of co-education schooling mediates the gender practices in Indian scenario. This paper is laid out in four parts. First section presents the theoretic aspects of co-educational schooling, role of socio-cultural milieu and family ethos on school system and briefly presents the policy regarding co-educational schooling in Indian scenario. The second section elaborates the research setting and methodology of the study. The third part analyses field observations in the form of parental concerns, institutional practices, peer culture and interface between schooling and local culture. The last section concludes the paper.

I - Research Setting and Methodology

This paper is based on a comparative study of two schools functioning in rural and urban setting. The study purposively selected schools from two diverse backgrounds to understand how same policy is functioning differently in different contexts. One of the studied schools is a government school, functioning in a village in district Jind, Haryana. The other school is an elite private school, functioning in south Delhi district of Delhi. Haryana and Delhi share geographical border as Delhi is surrounded by Haryana border from three side. In spite of having close geographical proximity, both states differ

in their social cultural outlook. These locations are purposively selected to understand the functioning of co-educational practices in diverse contexts.

To give a brief background of research settings, Haryana, a wealthy agricultural state, is known as the most backward state in terms of social indicators. As per 2011 census, Haryana has been at the bottom of ranking with 879 sex ratio. Khap Panchayats, i.e. kinship-based community organizations are other important feature of Haryanavi society which influence the society rules with their timely dictates. Delhi, the country's metropolitan capital city, represents remarkable diversity in terms of social, economic, religion, language, culture, and customs. This second wealthiest city of India has many premier educational institutions to its credit. The city has witnessed a significant growth of private schools in recent years. To give a brief profile of the schools, as mentioned earlier, both the schools have co-educational settings. The government school has classes up to higher secondary. This school is being attended mostly by socially backward and oppressed castes and economically weaker classes. The elite school in the study is a private-aided senior secondary school. The school majorly caters to the upper-middle or high social class of society. This school has a reputation of fostering progressive values and to be capable of providing favorable learning milieu in sync with constant social changes. Considerable parental interactions and involvement are some of the key features that this school focuses on for achieving its academic goals and vision.

The study has adopted a mix method approach to understand the complexity of different settings. The data was collected with the help of semi-structured interviews, school and classroom observations, focus group discussions (FGD) and informal conversations at different interval of academic session of 2015-2016. Interviews were conducted with different stakeholders such as parents, school teachers and principals, students and community leaders. As a part of classroom and school observation, different settings such as morning assembly, classroom lecture, recess and playground activities were mainly observed to see the intermixing and interactions of the students in different age groups, the 5th class and 11th classes.

II - Gendered Schooling and Schooling of Gender: Understanding Socio-Cultural and Institutional Dimensions

1 - Familial Concerns and Co-education Schooling

Dube (1988) pointed out that gender roles are conceived, enacted and learnt within a complex of relationships. To understand this process, it is necessary to keep in mind the implications of the family structure and the wider context of kinship in which it is embedded. Similarly, Chanana (2001) underlined family socialization as a primary process of gender construction. The family is the site of primary socialization while, schools which are site of secondary socialization. She argued that both the process of socialization and formal schooling interact and react with each other. To share the picture from research setting, it was interesting to note that parental concern differs in both settings.

As mentioned above the school in rural setting is majorly serving the socially and economically weaker castes and class. Parents whose children attend this school are mainly involved in agriculture and daily wage laboring activities. It was informed that their children, especially girl child are first generation learners in their respective families. Enrollment of their ward in government school is noted as first interaction with formal educational schooling process.

To share the concerns of families served by government schools in Haryana, parents were found very apprehensive of co-educational schooling system. In the studied village, the parents belong to two different backgrounds. One section of parents who are native of that particular place, did not appreciate this form of schooling. The native parents expressed that sending their daughters to this school is a compulsion as there is no separate girl school in their village. They sound more protective for their girls after their attaining of puberty. As one of the parents lamented that in the co-educational setting, girls and boys got a chance to mix regularly and they can have a love relationship. The love relationships are not approved in this society. Most of the parents expressed their anxiety about this issue and this situation can bring bad name to their family as daughter's sexuality is seen as matter of family honour. It is important to mention here that Haryana state is notorious for its social conservative attitude towards love marriages, inter-caste marriage, and marriage in same clan as many cases of honour killing have been reported in past several years in this state. During informal discussion with village community members and students, the love relation in general and within the

same village in particular are very objectionable as it is assumed that all the native of the village member originally belong to same clan. There have been cases when the families, where such incidents had happened in past, were excommunicated from their respective clan members. It was also highlighted that there have been cases when any such relation is sighted, the girl was forced to drop out of the school and forced into early marriage. So co-educational settings are seen as a site of tension where the parents need to continuously put a check on the inter-mixing of boys and girls. On the other hand, the second section of parents who were migrant agricultural laborers from surrounding states did not show much concern to this issue. It was observed that since they do not have much community's affiliation, they are not under constant community pressure of doing the moral policing of their wards.

The discussion with native parents of studied villages highlighted that some parents give strict instructions to teachers to keep boys and girls apart in senior classes. It was mentioned by one of the interviewed parents that they discourage any joint activities where both girls and boys have to work together. Giving example of one such case, he mentioned that they did not allow their children to go on educational school trips. It was noticed that parents were not comfortable with this form of school setting.

The family background of the students at Delhi based school was characterized mainly by upper middle and elite social class, with a small percentage of parents from working class. These working-class parents are the parents of the students admitted under reservation to weaker section and socially disadvantaged group. Most of the parents admitted under this category were working on contract basis or running livelihood through small jobs like vegetable sellers, dhobi wallahs, watchman. In some cases, mothers worked as a house cleaners or cooks at nearby "posh" colonies. Other parents at this school here had businesses or settled professions. In a significant percentage of cases, both parents were occupationally independent. Their educational background ranges from senior secondary to doctoral studies. These parents were not observed to be apprehensive of co-educational practice of school. Studying together, sitting together, working together and eating together etc. seemed to be very obvious to the parents at this school. Their concerns were directed more towards the effectiveness of co-educational practice on gender equality and equal opportunities. However, the safety of girls was the main issue of concern for some parents at this school especially for adolescent age-group. Though not many in number, the majority of parents who expressed concerns regarding the safety of girls and apprehensions regarding liberated

interaction of boys-girls, belonged to an urban village in the vicinity of school dominated by Jat caste³.

It was noticed that there is another set of parents in the same school who are more concerned regarding gender equality rather than insecurity of gender-interaction. To mention one of the Parent Teacher Meeting (PTM) in this context, the parents of a fifth-grade boy expressed their apprehension that sometimes their son utters statements reflecting negative gender stereotypes. They further requested teacher to plan some activities and sessions to explore similar issues among his peers and subsequently consider the ways to deal with the issues. Teachers also take notes of the episodes where any gender biases or grouping becomes prominent, and share it with the school counselor to delineate further strategies. Especially in junior grades, conscious efforts were made by teachers to enhance mutual respect among boys and girls. Teachers' and parents' response to such issues indicate that considerable attention was paid by teachers across the grades if any such concerns were observed.

This discussion underlines that there is a regular interaction between familial concerns and educational practices. The familial perspective, their culture and social norms found mediating and modifying the policy of co-educational schooling. Where in government school in rural setting, there is continuous fear and anxiety about mix schooling which works for the segregation of boy and girl students, on the other hand in the urban private schools, parents' awareness and focus on gender interactions influence the institutional practices and activities to be more inclusive. This continuous dialogue between these two contexts significantly impacts the school as an institution and the way it deals with the gender issues within its periphery.

2 - Institutionalized Co-education

Observing the importance of analyzing school setting, Arnot (2002: as cited in Bennett 2015) pointed that if schools are "thoroughly gendered" and active participants in the construction of gender relations, then analyzing school settings and the processes within them will be important to understanding how they contribute to students' construction of their gender identities. It is necessary, then, to attend to the "gendered nature of the contexts, structures and micro-processes of schooling". As mentioned earlier, the school setting has been perceived in a very contradictory context. On one hand, it is argued that the inequalities in the wider society were carried into the classrooms shared by girls and boys, and classroom settings are amplified and solidified gender

3. Govinda (2013: 3) describes Jat caste as "an agrarian, middle-ranking caste which takes immense pride in its 'rural' identity and 'masculine' strength".

differences (Kenway et al. 1994; Mac, Ghail and Haywood 1998, as cited in Bennett 2015). On the opposite, the schools are envisioned as potentially transformative spaces in which the patriarchal norms can be challenged. It is expected that schools will act as counter-socialisers to tackle gender bias and discrimination (Verma, Seth and Subramaniam, 2013: 396 as cited in Iyer 2015). Hence it becomes very relevant to see how school as an institution intervenes in co-educational schooling.

To look at the government school based in rural Haryana, the school followed gender segregation norms which are quite apparent in different aspects of this educational setting. All the school routine focused on the minimum intermixing among the girls and boys especially in senior classes. The principal of the school expressed that our school strive to inculcate high cultural values among our students and these practices are very much part of this philosophy. Interviews with teachers revealed that they consider the co-educational schooling as unnecessary tension as one of the teachers expressed that their roles became more of invigilators than teachers in co-educational setting where they are expected to keep a close eye on the students' behavior. Teachers are found to be held responsible for preventing boys-girls mixing or any other interactions. It was sighted that female and male teachers are given charge of girls and boys groups respectively during different tasks. For example, for National Cadet Corps (NCC) and National Service Schemes (NSS) camps, female and male teachers were accompanying girls' and boys' groups respectively.

It was observed that the school follows different rules for senior and junior classes. Segregated sitting pattern is a strict rule in secondary classes. However, in junior classes, the students have more intermixing space and opportunity as there is no such strict rule for sitting arrangement. The separation become more highlighted when the students are attaining or reaching puberty. This gender-based segregation for senior students can be sighted during prayer assembly, midday meal and sports activities. The classroom observation reflects on the teachers' appreciation for more shy and docile girls. Though teachers were found encouraging girl students for studies and appreciate them for their good academic performance, however in general, the girls were instructed to be more disciplined. One of the teachers opined that the girls need to imbibe these qualities since childhood and school is the best place to learn and practices it. In this context, Dube (1988) noted that the socialization of both sexes outside the school is very much reflected in school setting as well. Girls are encouraged to speak softly, and to avoid abrasive male language. Boys, of course, learn all kinds of abuses; however, even the milder abuses used by women are frowned upon if used by young girls. A girl must demonstrate

her capacity for self-restraint: talking and laughing loudly is disapproved of; a girl should not be argumentative. The teachers in this school found to be believing and practicing this moral values paradigm. It becomes very relevant to mention Bourdieu (1992) here. Reflecting on the power of dominant gender discourses in informing our daily perceptions of the world, he explained that when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself “as a fish in water”, it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted. Comparing “fish-in-water” metaphor to teacher behavior, Morojele (2013) argued that teachers are intricately entangled in the gender discourses and practices within their environments to a point where they might become uncritical of the prevalent inequitable gender relations.

Observations at Delhi based school revealed that this school made conscious effort to incorporate the principles of co-education. To defy the concept of “the gendered otherness” and to provide maximum interactions, the school opted for mixed-sex sitting arrangements and classroom activities for all the grades. Gender interactions were so obvious in this school that it didn’t receive extraordinary concerns from the personnel involved in school life. It was noted that parents of these students were not apprehensive of such interactions among students. In fact, PTM observations highlighted that parents voiced their concerns if they perceive their child is not at ease with students of opposite sex or expressing prejudice towards another gender. Teachers were noticed to be very thoughtful and receptive for discussing these issues. Individual cases were often discussed in staff meetings to deliberate such issues and follow ups were often supported by parents. The school authorities conduct special workshops for orienting parents regarding gender stereotypes. To share one observation from the field, especially organized for parents of third and fifth grades pupils, oriented them towards development of gender stereotypes among children in this age-group. Parents were instructed to prefer the reading materials, stationeries, bags, lunch box and water bottles etc which are gender-neutral i.e. doesn’t display any stereotypical gendered colors or images.

Different studies argue different impacts of mixed-sex activities in the context of gender equality. Studies such as Ronspies (2011) or Pearson and Webb, (2010) support the single-sex-physical activities from the gender equality perspective, as it is argued that girls were found to be more participative, comfortable and confident in single-sex physical activities rather than mixed-sex physical activities. On the other hand, arguments supporting mixed-sex physical activities are based on possibilities of positive outlook towards counterparts (Wilson, 2012) and potential for rejecting gender-based stereotypes regarding strength and abilities during physical activities (NUT,

2013). In this context, to mention another case of a school trip of students of Grade 5 and 6 in a private school, activity organizer was specially instructed by principal to be conscious of grouping students in mix-sex groups through adventurous activities and to avoid boys versus girls teaming. Here the role of the school teacher as a school authority becomes critical as it was sighted that teachers ensured that girls are getting equal opportunities in every activity and were encouraged to participate in all adventurous activities. Similarly, boys equally shared the responsibilities of decoration and food distribution otherwise considered feminine activities. In the same way, it has been observed that the school laid emphasis on the participation of girls in physical activities. The physical trainers are given continuous orientation for equal participation of both genders in sports activities. While expressing the importance of mixed-sex sports activities in breaking gender stereotypes, one of the interviewed physical trainers of the school posits that:

Students often enter the playground with some sort of gendered notion of sports. In initial years, one can often hear them saying that x is a boy's game or y is a girl's game. We make conscious efforts of not affirming stereotypes which they have about another gender. Along with playing traditional common games, we often work on planning new games which includes mix of skills such as physical strength as well as quick decision making. We try to convey that while some skills demand strength and stamina, others demands concentration and quick response. Every individual differs in their capabilities due to several factors, however anyone can improve their skill set if they practice on it.

Besides sports, this school encourages participation of boys and girls in several unconventional activities which are often gender stereotyped, such as dancing and cooking for boys and drumming for girls. Most of the clubs and re-creational activities are mixed-gender. During a conversation, the Principal of the school takes pride in saying that

We do our best to realize the principles of co-education in every sphere. We have no apprehension if either boys or girls prefer to learn unconventional skills; rather, we encourage and provide support to them for learning what otherwise is called gendered. Such acceptance and support are important to make the school really inclusive from a gender perspective. We feel proud to see that no activity is dominated by a particular gender, rather, everyone does everything without being stereotypical about a particular domain of learning. We consider it a goal and an achievement of co-educational schooling.

This discussion reflects that school actively mediates as an agency and influences co-education functioning. Both schools differ in their dealing with gendered concerns and highlight that the school setting plays a crucial role in shaping the mind and notions of the students. However, it becomes important to mention that the government school in the village works closely

under the influence of the village community. In the private urban school, which is an autonomous body, the school authorities have the agency to make attempts to achieve gender equality. This school was free from the influence of community-based patriarchal forces which were quite visible in the village government school.

III - Peer Culture in Co-educational Settings

Students' responses and their behavior in both schools present a very diverse picture. Focus group discussion with the students in government village shows that girl students were very hesitant in giving any opinion on the co-education and intermixing with the opposite sex. Most of the girls were very anxious to discuss it. It was observed that essentialization of two gender "boys and girls" is so rigid that they cannot think the opposite sex just as their fellow students. Girls have fear and anxiety because they do not get much space for interaction. It was also informed that as "girls talking to boys" is not a very normal sight, and such behavior generally leads to the stigmatization of their character. The only accepted form of interaction between boys and girls emerged in the form of "brother-sister relationship". It was informed by the girl students that they have Rakhi⁴ brothers in their class with whom they can intermix freely. One of the respondent highlighted that this relation is the most respected and valued relationship between a boy and a girl rather than being "just friends". Sancho (2012), Kerkoff (2003) and Abraham (2001) (as cited in Iyer, 2015) maintained that brother-sister relationships are often idealized as the most appropriate form of hetero-social interactions within co-educational schools in India. In contrary to girls' response, boys responded in a very agitated manner to this aspect. It was reported that they try to defy these rules of segregated spaces for different genders whenever they get a chance. To cite one example, it was informed that during their NCC and NSS out-station camps, they plan joint activities with girls. These camps tours are especially looked for by all the students as an opportunity of having fun time with their classmates. Though they are accompanied by male and female teachers, however, being outside their school and village setting, they managed to break the set rules for intermixing.

To look at the private school in urban setting, there were no set rules for inter-mixing of boys and girls, rather, conscious efforts were made by school personnel to construct a school culture free from any kind of gender bias. The

4. The Oxford English Dictionary defines Rakhi as a popular annual festival, usually in August, during which girls, or women, tie a cotton bracelet to a brother or someone she considers as such, who in turn treats her like a sister.

impact of school endeavors was very visible as one can observe the overlook of gender-preferred selection of peers for any group activities and most of the groups presenting diversity in terms of gender compositions. As a result of liberated gender interactions, students were very comfortable in expressing themselves in presence of another gender. School also provided them ample opportunities to feel comfortable with each other which led to a reduced sense of “otherness” among students. It was sighted that students in junior grades, sometimes discuss the nature of relationship among senior boys and girls. Sometimes, they also pointed out the inclination of particular peers towards another gender. During a conversation, a Fifth-grade girl expresses that “they always think that I have some wrong intentions towards the boy I sit with. Yes, I like to sit with him because we have good understanding and he needs my help in academics. I even told my friends that I consider him my brother. But still some of my friends think that I love him. I don’t know why they think so badly about me”.

In another similar incident in Grade 7, a light mock turned into a spat among a group of friends where one girl was questioning the proximity of her peer friend with a boy from another class. During the argument, one girl said that “if no affair [love relationship] exists between you two, then why don’t you call him Bhai (brother)”. This particular observation echoes the findings of earlier cited studies (Sancho, 2012; Iyer, 2015) regarding brother-sister relationships in co-educational schools. Interestingly most of such instances were reported by students belonging to working class⁵ who have got admission to this elite school under clause 12 of Right to Education (RtE) Act, 2009. This clause allows for a 25% provision reservation for the admission of students belonging to weaker economic and social sections of society.

In the above narrated episode, the girl who was questioned about her relationship with another boy ran crying to her teacher and narrated the episode. The next day, the teacher discussed the issue in class during the circle time⁶ without tagging the particular students, and tried to engage students in critically analyzing the need for brother-sister relationship among boys and girls at school. She further conveyed that just being friends⁷ is also a platonic form of heterosocial interactions. Other than a few instances of this kind, in general heterosocial friendships were considered platonic by teachers as well as by students in this school. The discussion also underlines the role of school

5. Here working class refers to the weaker economic and social section of the society whose wards are admitted in school under the above mentioned RtE (Right to Education) clause.

6. Circle time was the twenty-minute time slot allotted in every grade to discuss the classroom issues with their class teachers.

7. Although it was not explicitly said but it was inferred from the teacher’s comments that although just being friends is acceptable, anything beyond that will not be considered appropriate.

as an agency in guiding the students witnessing two different socialization processes i.e. society/family and school.

Interface Between Society, Culture and Schooling

As discussed in previous sections, the school being a social institution, is embedded in the socio-cultural context of its surroundings. Before analyzing the implications of social and cultural settings on school, it is important to mention that given the decentralized educational set up, local governing bodies (Village Panchyats⁸ in case of village, and Municipal committees in urban area) are given the responsibility of effective school governance. Besides these, every school also has School Management Committee (SMCs) where female and parents are given representation.

To have a look at the patriarchal social set up in Haryana, Mahajan (2004: 263) pointed out that female feticide, domestic violence, dowry deaths and harassment, caste-based oppressions and cultural restrictions on women's access to educational and health opportunities are some of the well documented and commented aspects of gender oppression prevalent in all the socio economic sections of Haryana. Another important aspect of cultural norms in Haryana is lack of sharing of public spaces by females. The "veil system" where female keep themselves under veil in front of their elders, is one the important tool to ensures that females don't speak in front of the elders of the village or participate in public domains with males. These rigid social traditions don't let them gain confidence to participate in public spheres (Narwana 2015). Similarly, the participation of females in SMC meetings was also negligible. Narwana (2015) has noticed that mothers have a comparatively high rate of participation in attending school meetings or visiting schools when they are supposed to deal with a female teacher or if it is a girl's school. Male to female interaction still remains an uncommon occurrence. The interface between such cultural norms and schooling is very much reflected in the school functioning. The culture of grabbing of public spaces by male, and gender-based segregation is cultivated since the school times. It was observed that the senior classes have separate section for girls and boys in the schools. The school principal informed that this arrangement is done by the special instruction of Village Panchayat. If the school needs to take combined classes due to any reason, the school authorities' needs to seek permission of Village Sarpanch. It indicates that form of schooling (here co-educational schooling), itself does not offer much changes when local cultural context is effectively mediating the schooling experience. The cultural beliefs

8. Village Council is known as Panchayat.

and societal norms play a vital role in instituting, maintaining and upholding segregated gender-based schooling.

Drasko, Ceriman, Bojanic and Zentner (2016) in their study maintain that local communities often exert pressure on school officials regarding school functioning and organization, which jeopardizes the policy implementations. The Delhi-based school faced similar challenges when during PTMs sometimes parents who belonged to the nearby urban village sometimes expressed their apprehensions regarding the liberated culture of the school in terms of heterosocial interactions. These apprehensions were noticeable because of the difference of progressive culture of the school and that of the family culture which was more patriarchal in nature. Drasko, Ceriman, Bojanic and Zentner (2016) also suggest that to enhance gender equality in schools, continuous monitoring of cooperation between school and family becomes important. In the same line, school officials also believed that leaving the task to schools will not be able to bring desirable changes in this regard. Keeping this in mind, school officials dealt with such issues more sensibly and tried to make parents comfortable with their philosophy which they consider as best suited in changing social context.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to study the gender dynamics in two co-educational schools based in rural and urban setting respectively. The study underlined the impact of prevalent socio-cultural ethos and school as an agency on the gendered norms in educational arena. Both schools, in spite of being co-educational, presented two different pictures. Working in the patriarchal social atmosphere, the government school in Haryana, found to be reinforcing the gendered cultural norms in education. The parents and village Panchyat noticed to be playing important role in maintaining the gendered segregation in school vicinity. In the name of inculcating cultural values in students, the school authorities were observed to be promoting 'gendered otherness' among students. The safety of girl students, the fear of love relationship among adult students, and family honour were major concerns for parents and teachers which shape the schooling norms and practices in the context of intermixing of students and their behaviour. The elite private school in an urban area founds to be functioning as an effective agency in promoting the gender equality and sensitivity. Different aspects of school functioning such as sitting plan, activity group, teachers' attitude and parents' orientation are managed and planned keeping this policy in the center. While giving space to the parental voice and concerns, the school authorities noticed to

be effectively championing the cause of “challenging gender stereotype”. In both the settings, the impact of the school vision and philosophy on peer behavior was very visible. In the rural school, where girls found to lacking confidence, shy and idealizing brother-sister relationship as the ideal form of boys-girls relationship, the boys in this school were sighted to be resisting the school rules with every possible opportunity. On the contrary, the elite school peer found to be freely mixing during different activities. Even when there was any difficult situation, teachers were observed playing an important role in guiding and counselling students. This comparative study cautioned against any straightaway generalization of role of co-educational or single-sex schooling in the context of gendered practices. To conclude in Abrahams and Sommerkorn (1995) words, co-education can be considered as necessary condition in an effort to bring gender equality, but it is not a sufficient condition to achieve gender equality. Provision of co-educational schooling alone will not be able to bring the desirable changes; its effectiveness will be attained only if it perpetuates equal educational experiences for both boys and girls. The findings suggest that school as an agency has potential to play an important role in challenging stereotypes. However, it needs to be emphasized that there are multiple factors which shape and influence the functioning of the schooling.

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