11 Making Higher Education Institutions Gender-Sensitive

Visions and Voices from the Indian Education System

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Setting the Context: Higher Education and the Gender Question

Higher or tertiary education is one of the most important levels of education which see through a person’s transition from school to higher levels of specialization and further on to the person’s becoming a responsible, empathetic citizen. It is at the higher education level that the fundamental objective of education of ensuring liberty, dignity and livelihood for a person reaches its eventuality. The impact that higher education (henceforth HE) has on a person’s learning outcome goes a long way in shaping not just their capacity to earn a livelihood but, more importantly, a person’s outlook and personality. As a provision in almost all Constitutions across nations, and as part of international and regional legal instruments, conventions, charters, laws, declarations and frameworks — education, including HE — have come to be the site on which much of global politics, economy and culture come together. It is also the site where other, comparatively less visible, intersectional concerns of gender, class and religion come together, in not so positive ways.

The Global Context

Gender concerns in education have been foregrounded as one of the primary areas of deliberation in the legal instruments and documents and include questions of equality, diversity, parity and inclusiveness (A Question of Gender-Sensitive Pedagogy, 2011). Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979 in Right to Education, p. 5) and UNESCO’s Convention Against Discrimination in Education (CADE, 1960 in Right to Education, pp. 10–12) are the two foremost documents which focus on gender issues in education, including women’s right to education, career and vocational guidance without being subject to discrimination. These documents, specifically, emphasize the elimination of gender stereotypes at all levels and forms of education, as well as the need to put into effect monitoring and complaint mechanism in
education institutions for reporting discrimination, if any. What all these gender concerns add up to is what we understand as gender sensitivity in education. Gender sensitivity is “a way to reduce barriers to personal and economic development created by sexism” (Gender Sensitivity, 2004, p. vii). It is the milieu that enables gender equality and inclusiveness to flourish by helping one to “determine which assumptions in matters of gender are valid and which are stereotyped generalizations” (Gender Sensitivity, 2004, p. vii). Gender inclusivity can work in education systems only when stakeholders, including teachers, students, office personnel, families and communities, are sensitized into acknowledging the gaps in the system, accept gender stereotypes as being built into the system and sincerely feel the need to address the same (Gender Responsive, n.d. p. 6).

Despite the world community coming together to affirm their commitment to address education rights for all, across class, caste, gender, religion, geographical location, ensuring access to education and creating an enabling environment for the same did not reach its desired goal. Marginalized genders, including women, non-gender binary persons and persons with disabilities are yet to be part of the vision of inclusivity that the various legal instruments and covenants so grandly project. Gender stereotypes, along with a diverse range of discriminatory practices are the main obstacles to ensuring access to education for all marginalized groups, including women and girls (Guidance for Developing Gender-Responsive, 2017, p. 26). Gender parity (balance between enrolments of all gender categories) is commonly understood to be the sole index that countries, increasingly, project and refer to which overshadow the equally, if not more important question of gender sensitivity. Hence, ensuring an enabling environment in educational institutions and society at large—one of the primary provisions in all the international instruments—is compromised while statistical data on the increasing number of women in HE is projected by countries as an indication to their realization of the right to education. It is important to understand that gender parity is only the first step to gender sensitivity, and not to be confused with gender equality. “Gender parity is no indication for classroom experience, participation, achievement, capacity development, but only gives an incomplete information needed to develop, support, sustain gender responsiveness in education” (Guidance for Developing, n.d. p. 33). Discrepancy in choice and offer of subjects to boys and girls, low enrolment of girls in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) subjects (Women and Gender Equality in Higher Education, 2015, pp. 18–21; To Choose Or Not To Choose Science, 2019), low presence of women in senior and managerial/administrative positions in HE sector (Status of Indian Women in Higher Education, 2016; Women and Gender Equality, 2015), gender differences in career and job preferences have been identified, globally, as areas which indicate gender gaps and violations and are, yet, neglected by most education frameworks around the world. This calls for the immediate need to address the question of a gender-sensitive curriculum (that
does not reinforce gender differences and stereotypes) and everyday school practices (gender stereotyping, use of gendered vocabulary, homophobic attitude, disability-insensitive infrastructure and corporal punishments) in order to create enabling environment in education institutions (Guidance for Developing, n.d., pp. 26–28).

**The Regional Context: India**

Identifying causal links between global forces of political economy and local/regional education policies helps us in putting our national education agendas and frameworks in perspective. Empirical studies of local educational phenomena add to this perspective—giving us a larger spectrum of global visions and local ground-level realities. It indicates how nation-states and their education policies are placed precariously at the crossroad of inequalities of global capitalist forces and the demands of democratic ideals on which nation-states are founded, taking into account diverse socio-cultural groups (The Three Stages of Critical Policy Methodology, 2014).

This paper argues that despite a strong foundation of the Right to Education Act (2009) in the Indian Constitution, and sound suggestion from experts in the field of education, Indian education framework leans on a flawed vision of education as primarily being a marketable commodity aimed at creating human resources (National Education Policy 2020, henceforth NEP) rather than sensitive empathetic citizens. And in the light of such a vision, gender sensitivity in higher education is compromised—both as a process and as an outcome. This chapter uses empirical studies in the form of data collected from stakeholders like teachers, academicians associated with syllabus-making processes in HE institutions, faculty associated with Internal Complaints Committee in HE institutions and research students, to support this argument and to establish that in the absence of a blueprint for implementation of the visions and monitoring mechanisms of NEP 2020 to evaluate outcome, neither the visions of gender sensitivity in policies nor the laws to address it will be effective.

**The Vision**

A critical engagement with education policies and practices helps us situate curriculum in the national political and economic agenda, as well as provides an idea as to if and how curriculum, and education policies at large, need to be altered. In the case of India, as might be the case for a number of industrializing nations, its national economic agenda and, consequently, its education agenda are directly affected by the current neo-liberal and neo-conservative politics that shapes much of contemporary global capitalism (The Three Stages of Critical Policy Methodology, 2014, p. 348). The NEP 2020 of India is a clear manifestation of India’s economic agenda—considering education institutions as manufacturers of ‘human resource’ in
terms of labour, who will eventually participate in the national and global economy and a complete absence (or tokenistic presence) of a vision for gender sensitization. Here, I wish to draw attention to the fact that the Education Ministry in India is one of the verticals of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) (Niti Ayog, Govt. of India, 2015), which calls for a critical evaluation of the larger objective of education agenda— driven by the aim of creating formal and semi-formal economic subjects rather than sensitive citizens.

The whole range of education systems, including primary, secondary, higher education, adult literacy, sports, youth affairs, education for girls and Scheduled Castes and Tribes, are under the aegis of the Ministry of Education and, hence, MHRD. The Ministry partners with organizations like the World Bank, Piramal Foundation and Boston Consulting Group for consultation, financial and infrastructural support. This, I argue, has direct and indirect impact on the way education is envisioned, designed and implemented in institutional settings in India—as a way to “reduce the gap between Industry and Education” (Emerging Trends of Privatization of Education in India, 2016, p. 2). It, no doubt, affects curriculum designs, subject choices and preferences, and access to education for socio-economically marginalized students in certain levels and areas of education. The Government of India’s education vision insists on the need for privatization of HEIs to provide quality education, while also ensuring equal access to socio-economically diverse groups of students (MHRD, 2019, p. 206). To call private HEIs “public-spirited philanthropic HEIS” (MHRD, 2019, p. 206) “seems ironic in an age when education has been commoditized, and is part of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)” (How Does the NEP Accelerate the Privatization of Higher Education, 2020).

Interest-driven political intervention in the education sector, including HE in India, is borne by the creation of Rashtriya Shiksha Ayog (National Education Committee), an apex body to oversee education in India, with the Prime Minister at its head and the establishment of the National Research Foundation to act as a “liaison among researchers, ministries of the government, and industry” (MHRD 2019, p. 209) (Priya, 2020). Instead of an emphasis on the “creation of social knowledge and historical awareness about formations of power, culture, and knowledge”, the policy mandates the creation of “beneficial linkages among government, industry, and researchers” (MHRD, 2019, p. 279)—a clear “attempt to quantify research for its commoditized capital use-value” (Priya, 2020).

Outcome-based curricula being at the core of the Indian curriculum vision means that ‘experience-based’ curricula (that have students’ and teachers’ daily experiences at its core) or what we know in education as ‘voice discourses’ (Rata, 2014, p. 349) finds no place in the curriculum frameworks. The importance of epistemic knowledge about disciplines (reconceptualized as subjects to be taught in education institutions) in making a human being capable of a livelihood and of contributing to the
national economy is undeniable. But social knowledge (everyday experience, common sense, popular/cultural/gender socialization) makes an individual capable of empathy and impartiality (Rata, 2014, p. 349). There is no denying the fact that knowledge is produced in the socio-cultural context. The primary concern of schooling is to take both into account such as socialization that the students bring with them and sensitize them into a balanced outlook not marred by socio-cultural stereotyping or hierarchy. To that end, education institutions should act as a leveller that can work across socio-cultural and economic backgrounds in shaping sensitized human beings, irrespective of external influences of socio-cultural prejudice (National Education Commission, 1964)—a vision that is being hijacked by realities of competitive market-oriented nation-making projects (Bhosale and Agte, 2021).

Policies and Reports

This section looks at how the vision and mission laid out in India’s education policy is reflected in, or overrides, the NEP as well as other relevant reports prepared by government and/or non-governmental agencies, in the context of addressing questions of gender sensitivity in the HE sector.

National Education Policy (NEP), 2020

India’s NEP 2020 provides an apt study in this act of balancing the global and local education framework, though the inclination is increasingly towards global capitalist demands. As L. Priya observes, “It does not factor in the realities of our society that include providing basic education to every section of the population” (Priya 2020). While, it attempts to incorporate, at least in theory, both constructivist (informed by social construction) and instrumentalized approaches to curriculum, the constructivist approach is primarily in the form of formal representation (and reservation) of socio-cultural diversity rather than ensuring sensitivity in everyday pedagogical practices in classrooms and campuses, or in ensuring a change in attitudes of various stakeholders in education. According to the Jawaharlal Nehru University Teachers Association, despite the vague mention of ‘high-quality education’ and use of ‘language of equality’ (A Critical Assessment of the Draft National Education Policy, 2019, p. 29), the NEP does not venture into providing a blueprint as to the methodology of deploying the same—hinting that the vision is merely inserted into the education policy as a set formula under the global, pressure of rights-discourse and humanitarian laws, and not under any responsibility to comply with Constitutional values (A Critical Assessment, 2019, p. 29). It does not devote any part of its concern to gender questions—sensitivity, curriculum, safety or violence—making women gender-fluid identities and persons with disabilities ‘invisible and irrelevant’ in the education framework (A Critical Assessment, 2019, p. 43).
Questions of gender sensitivity are sporadically mentioned, with no mention of the structural mechanisms of ensuring the same. Women’s education is regarded not as a ‘right’ but founded on the ideal of the “greater good it will yield” (A Critical Assessment, 2019, p.44). Non-gender binary students are the worst affected in the gender-blind environs of the Indian HE sector—neither are the forms of violation faced by them find a mention nor are there any infrastructural mechanisms to address their concerns.

One of the alarming concerns in the NEP 2021 is the clear shift from government-controlled education sector to large-scale privatization founded on the vision of commodifying education (discussed earlier). This, critics note, is a shift from the earlier national education policies of 1986 and 1992, which were marked by tension between state responsibilities and private opportunities in education (A Critical Assessment, 2019, p. 28). This implies, on one hand, a withdrawal of the Government of India from its obligation to ensure every person the right to equitable education and, on the other hand, of opening up education as a tradeable commodity to private players, under the pressures of world organizations like the World Bank, World Trade Organization and GATS (Critical Response to the Draft NEP 2019, 2019, p. 3). One of the fields of research and development in education sector under the Niti Ayog (Planning Commission) vision of Government of India is ‘Reforms in Higher Education: Rebrand India as the Education Destination’ (Niti Ayog, Govt. of India, 2015)—which hints at India’s opening up of its education sector to the global market as an attractive ‘service’ sector controlled and developed by private players. India’s education policy is largely driven by the agenda of marketable skill development, that undermines the commitment towards social justice (Abrol, 2016) and inclusive pedagogical concerns. Consequently, it lessens the importance of the ‘input’ into curriculum and pedagogy than the ‘output’, that is, producing globally marketable labour and skill (Critical Response, 2019).

Ancient Indian heritage and personalities (primarily Brahmin upper-caste) as the only reference point in the tradition of knowledge production, with no mention of any other personalities from other times or other socio-cultural backgrounds, and with no mention of women personalities or their contribution to knowledge production in any age, makes the NEP exclusionist (Critical Response, 2019, p. 4). Neither secularism nor socialism, the two main pillars of the Indian Constitution, find any mention in the education policy (Priya, 2020)—pointing clearly to the skewed foundational vision of the NEP. Lack of a Constitutional focus on social justice and equality in the NEP (Priya, 2020) might translate into lack of access to equitable education, which in turn violates the fundamental right to a ‘Life with Dignity’ (education being integral to such a life) (Critical Response, 2019, p. 4).
The mandatory presence of redressal mechanisms like the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) and laws like UGC (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal of Sexual Harassment of Women Employees and Students in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations 2015 are proofs of very important formal mechanisms which have been put in place in the context of addressing gender questions in HEI. The Justice Verma Committee Report 2013, Vishakha Guidelines 1997, Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act 2013 and the Criminal Amendment Bill 2013 together informed the need for and contributed towards the shaping of a specific act for addressing sexual harassment in higher education institutions (HEIs). The report prepared by the Task Force to review the Measures for Ensuring the Safety of Women on Campuses and Programmes for Gender Sensitization talks in great depth about the gaps in such measures and ways to address them. It emphasizes an intersectional approach towards gender questions in terms of class, caste, region, religion, ability and sexuality—as the core vision to ensure equality, dignity and enabling environment in HEIs (SAKSHAM, 2013, p. 1). One of the basic problems that the report pointed out was the denial of gender discrimination/harassment on campuses by the authorities of a number of HEIs, including women’s colleges and universities, who do not consider gender sensitivity or inequality as an area of concern, despite clear signs of increasing sexual violence within HEIs. The latter also indicates how the question of gender sensitivity is conflated with sexual harassment alone, sans the gender stereotyped classroom practices and gender blindness of teachers and other stakeholders which not just affect students, but are more pervasive in everyday HEI practices.

The weakest aspect of the Indian HEIs, as the report points out correctly, is the lack of recognition that gender sensitivity in HEIs is not just students’ issue but involves teachers, staff, administration personnel too (SAKSHAM, 2013, p. 3). The problematic approach to ensuring safety on campus or what the report calls the ‘problem of protectionism’ is also seen in the deployment of excessive monitoring on female students, including women’s education institutions. Strict disciplining, restrictive hostel timings and restriction on movement are some of the ways female students are ‘controlled’ within the institutional set up. The report drew attention to the importance of educational, preventive and corrective measures to address gender questions on campuses instead of solely focusing on punitive measures. And this seems to be an area that HEIs in India are seen to be lagging behind. While mandatory ICCs are in place in most HEIs, their role in sensitization and educational programmes is not very encouraging. Nor is the role of institutional authorities in ensuring infrastructural services (like counselling, lighting, safe transportation between home and institution, toilet facilities, health, hostel and female security personnel)
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A laudable. Even Women Development Cells, frequently seen to be instituted in HEIs in India, rarely have a guideline as to their scope or to addressing gender questions on the campuses (SAKSHAM, 2013, p. 32). According to the SAKSHAM report, a number of institutions think a course primarily meant for women with vocational potential to provide employment (for example teachers, nutritionist, designers, beautician course) serves the purpose of addressing gender questions in HEIS (SAKSHAM, 2013, p. 32)—an approach that is clearly misguided and, hence, ineffective. Both policy framework and pedagogical concerns need to be incorporated into creating an enabling environment in HEIs, including a gender-sensitive curriculum and a pedagogical practice that acknowledges gender justice as a cross-sectional concern, rather than as a ‘women’s issue’. To that end, the report suggests course modules and themes for workshops on gender sensitization (citizenship, violence, power, equality, masculinity and legal literacy), besides open forums and counselling mechanisms that HEIs could offer (SAKSHAM, 2013, pp. 48–57).

Gender Concerns in Education, National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT)

The NCERT’s report on Gender Concerns in Education specifically focuses on the question of gender disparities in education in India (Srivastava, 2020). Elimination of sex stereotyping in vocational and professional courses and women’s participation in non-traditional occupations and emergent technologies are the important areas of concern in the report. The report emphasizes the need to re-evaluate how textbooks break and/or reinforce gender stereotypes. How textbooks reflect social realities and depict human values, how content, exercises and visuals in textbooks portray gender relations, how they address contributions of men and women and if they promote critical thinking about stereotypes and derogatory practices related to women are some of the fundamental questions that, the report insists, need to be asked (Srivastava, 2020). Pedagogical practices by teachers are also an area that the report talks about. A gender-sensitive outlook and its fruitful dissemination among students have a long-term impact on how students are socialized, and how gender barriers are questioned and broken in educational institutions. To that end, NCERT suggests how a teacher can incorporate gender education in his/her own discipline by incorporating students’ lived realities as examples, through teaching aids and project methods, by making teaching dialogical and by ensuring participation of students in the interaction. Mention of Science disciplines (Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Mathematics) has been specifically made by the report in this context—an area that has been left neglected in our national education policies, yet a concern that plagues higher education curricula in more ways than one can imagine. This is
not to mean that Social Sciences are inherently gender-sensitive in their curriculum design or pedagogical approaches. Including gender questions as part of Social Science disciplines (History, Geography, Political Science, Sociology and Economics) needs as much attention and deliberation as does Sciences.

Conscious usage of gender-inclusive terms in classrooms is of utmost importance and is the first step towards making curriculum and teaching gender sensitive. The report provides an exhaustive list of such terms that teachers might refer to (Srivastava, 2020, p. 14). One of the crucial aspects that the report talks about is ‘hidden curriculum’—the part of the curriculum inside and outside classrooms that is learned but not openly intended. This includes norms, values and beliefs which either reinforce or question socio-cultural ethos and biases. This ‘unintended learning’ is, often, an outcome of interaction between students and educational administrators, teachers, peers and other officials and can, in the long run, play a crucial role in the personality development (including gendered outlook) of the student. It can also, as the report rightly points out, act as an “equalizing agency for addressing paradoxes between policies on gender equality in education and practices” (Srivastava, 2020, p. 14).

**Report of Expert Committee on Gender and Education, 2012**

The Report of Expert Committee on Gender and Education (Walikhanna, 2012), draws our attention to the forms of constraints which affect education of girls and women—undervaluation of female labour and stereotyped domestic socialization being two very important ones, besides poverty (often leading to parents choosing son’s education over daughter’s), gender biases in family and community, discrimination in education institutions, distance between home and education institution, poor sanitation, sexual harassment, hostile public places and unavailability of safe transportation options. Lesser reward in workplaces and bias against seeing women as breadwinners lead to control on women’s mobility which, in turn, affects women’s enrolment and/or continuation in education (Walikhanna, 2012, p. 12). The Report puts forth specific suggestions for the government and the institutions for ensuring gender sensitivity and a gender-friendly environment, including the need to have a Task Force in matters of curriculum design, teacher orientation on gender-sensitive pedagogy, basic legal awareness and human rights concerns as part of curriculum, consideration of cultural variation of urban-rural experiences, monitoring of time-bound implementation of change, ensuring hygiene and safe hostel accommodation, counselling centres, encouraging research on gender, involvement of families and local bodies/communities, reworking of curriculum to include gender issues, awareness and outreach and programmes and parent-teacher sessions (Walikhanna, 2012, pp. 23–31).
Empirical Studies: Responses from Stakeholders

The concerns discussed above find resonances in the responses of the interviewees who shared their valuable experiences, perceptions and suggestions with me during our hour-long conversations. Convenience sampling was chosen as the method to locate, within a limited time and scope, respondents associated in various capacities (majority being teachers/faculty) with HEIs in the state of West Bengal (India), across geographical locations and socio-cultural backgrounds. Cross-disciplinary and multi-level (higher secondary, degree colleges, and universities) responses could be made possible across 25 respondents, over a period of a month, due to the choice of targeted convenience sampling. Open-ended interviews were conducted with a set of thematic questions making up the main framework of the conversations. Voice records of the conversations were made both for documentation and for references. Conversations were mostly in Bangla—the native language of all the respondents and in which most of them were comfortable articulating themselves.

Summary of Thematic Responses

Perception of Gender Sensitivity in Higher Education and if Higher Enrolment of Women in Higher Education Translates into Gender-Sensitive HEIs

Gender sensitivity in the context of HEIs was defined by most respondents as introducing students to the various gender inequalities in society and to encourage them to question such biases. Very few respondents focused, specifically, on HEIs while responding to this question. This was not, according to me, a conscious omission but an outcome of a socialization that drives one to locate gender questions in the larger society and family but not instantly in the context of the education system and institutions. When redirected to the context of HEIs, respondents took time to think about what they understood as gender sensitization in HEI context, and some went straight to addressing it in the context of their own disciplines. Interestingly, all the respondents thought that higher enrolment did not, necessarily, translate into gender sensitivity, despite a number of them having mentioned increasing numbers of women in higher education as one of the important signs of a gender-sensitized higher education sector.

Awareness of India’s Current Education Policy, UGC SAKSHAM Report and UGC Regulations 2015 and whether Redressal Mechanisms, besides Addressing Harassment Cases, Are also Effective in ‘Sensitizing’ and Prevention of Violence

Respondents’ knowledge/awareness of education policy/laws/reports varied from nil (and honest admission of their ignorance) and vague ideas of some
(may have heard about a report or a law but no clear knowledge about it) to recent browsing and going through some (to be able to respond to my question, after the questionnaire was sent to respondents in advance) to clear idea (though very few in number) about most, if not all, relevant documents/laws asked about. Most were vaguely aware of the mandatory regulation of UGC to have an ICC in HEIs. A number of them were hopeful about the role of the ICC (or any other form of committee/board that they had in their own institutions) in sensitizing students and faculty (stemming from their belief that yearly orientation programmes/gender workshops are capable of sensitizing) while some thought otherwise. Gender-sensitization workshops and orientation programmes have been made a part of career advancement schemes and a criteria for assessment of institutions by National Assessment and Accreditation Council. This, a number of respondents (who have attended such programmes) felt, rarely had any impactful outcome as far as gender sensitization is concerned since the institutions and the participants organize/attend these programmes as part of a checklist of criteria to be fulfilled. But some respondents also felt that such programmes might be effective in making participants aware of the gender issues which plague HEIs, even if they do not offer ways to address them.

Perception of Gender-Sensitive Curriculum, Ways of Gender-sensitizing Existing Curriculum in the Context of Respondent’s Own Discipline, if Choice/Preference of Subjects in HEIs Is Gendered, and Role of Student’s Family in the Choice of Subjects

Respondents were not very clear about what a gender-sensitive curriculum might mean, though they all agreed that curriculum plays a vital role in gender sensitization. Respondents from the Social Sciences background (History, Political Science, Sociology, Literature) found it comparatively easier to imagine how they could incorporate ‘gender’ within their subjects and some of them, in fact, already did so. Talking about women in history, in politics, in society at large, gendering fictional characters, questioning the absence or stereotypical portrayal in textbooks were some of the ways respondents thought they could engender their subjects. Interesting responses, though somewhat expected, came from respondents from Science backgrounds (Physics, Mathematics, Biology, Zoology) and Commerce backgrounds—most of whom subscribed to the general notion of Sciences and Commerce subjects as being gender-neutral. Hence, most of them thought there was no need, nor scope, to incorporate gender questions in their subjects. Few respondents from Science backgrounds were the rare ones who acknowledged gender sensitization as a larger concern, beyond what the subject curriculum had scope for and that some insights into gender questions within their subjects were, in fact, possible. They seemed to understand the role of, what the NCERT report calls, ‘hidden curriculum’ and took individual efforts to devote some part of the class to talking about gender questions in the context of their subjects. Whether it be talking
about women personalities and achievers in Sciences, or talking about how simple scientific knowledge (about light, heat, electricity, chemical reaction) might help in everyday household chores (thereby not having to depend on other, usually male, members of the house), or talking about how physiological differences between male and female bodies are just natural phenomenon and does not justify socio-cultural discrimination—these respondents made sure that gender sensitization was integral to their everyday interactive practices.

Most respondents also agreed that the choice of subjects (both offered by institutions and chosen by students) had a gendered aspect. Some subjects and curriculum are considered primarily girl’s/women’s domain, like Nutrition, Home Science, Crafts (co-educational schools have different craft making assignments for male and female students, boys’ institutions have a completely different syllabus for craft courses, if at all they have a subject like Crafts), Fine Arts (music, dance, recitation, painting) and Women’s Studies (most HEIs project the existence of a Women’s Studies Department/Centre, with a disproportionately high number of women students in it, as a sign of fulfilment of the criteria of gender sensitization), while some will be less or not available at all for female students, like Commerce subjects (many girls’ institutions, still, do not have Commerce subjects led by the belief that there will be no takers), Sports subjects/curriculum (not physical training which is part of almost all secondary schools), Mechanics and so on. The skewed understanding of gender roles is what begets these gendered subject choices. The idea that the domestic sphere is, exclusively, a woman’s sphere impacts the decision to offer Home Science/Nutrition only to female students (mostly in women’s colleges/universities). Only medal winners/participants at international and national sporting events (implying that the winners have had opportunities to pursue sports unhindered) are eligible for free/subsidized higher education (UGC Guideline for XIIth Plan, 2012), while the scope and encouragement for pursuing serious sports training in institutions, especially by female students, are rarely addressed. The notion that Crafts and Fine Arts refine women into an ‘ideal women’, or considering craft/arts-related occupations (like tailoring) as ideal vocations for women, impacts choice of such subjects. Occupations that Commerce subjects or Mechanics might offer are not considered suitable for women—hence, not many institutions offer the same for female students, and female students, too, do not opt for these based on such gendered notions. Even Women’s Studies Centres/departments are considered women’s domain—male enrolments or researchers being very few and far between.

Low enrolment of women in STEM subjects, including certain areas of Engineering (like Civil and Mechanical), is also indicative of biases which affect subject choices. A number of respondents, themselves Science students at some points in their lives, shared experiences of being the only female student in a class of 30 students (like some respondents from Sociology
background talked about being the only male student in a class of 30 students). Role of families in influencing students’ choice of subjects also has a clear gendered approach. The ‘prospect-risk-uncertainty’ concerns of parents regarding the kind of jobs that this choice will imply results in encouraging or keeping their ward from choosing or giving up a subject. Matrimonial concerns (like which subject choices might make a prospective bride out of their daughter) impact subject choices (a uniquely Indian phenomenon, commonly seen in middle-class households) were also experienced and noticed by a number of respondents.

Role of Teachers in Addressing Gender Questions in the Classroom, Need for Gender Sensitization/Orientation for Teachers, and Socio-Cultural and Infrastructural Drawbacks which Keep Teachers from Addressing Gender Questions in HEIs

Respondents agreed that in the absence of a clearly laid out blueprint for gender-sensitizing curriculum, it is the role of individual teachers that makes a difference. And so do the prejudices and biases that the teachers might practice in class, albeit not purposely. Biased language and attitude, practising/encouraging segregated seating arrangements in class, discouraging female students from asking questions, focusing on/looking at male students more than female students, misogynist comments are some of the gender-insensitive practices which individual teachers are known to be practising, irrespective of the gender of the teacher (brought to the notice of respondents primarily by students’ feedback/complaints). At the same time, the kind of efforts taken by some individual teachers (discussed earlier) in engendering not just their own subjects, but pedagogical practices at large, are also commendable—especially in the absence of a structured framework or monitoring mechanism.

But examples of sensitized teachers and the number of them taking this effort, is no match for what the situation demands. This makes it imperative to consider the importance of gender-sensitization training/orientation (maybe even mandatory ones) for the teachers, so that the programme of gender-sensitizing HEIs does not merely depend on individual efforts, if and when that happens. Most respondents are of the opinion that mandatory gender-sensitization training should be introduced, and monitoring mechanisms put in place to ensure that the same is being practised in classrooms. The fact that curriculum for the (school) training course (Bachelor in Education), which has now been made mandatory for those wishing to teach in schools, does not have any specific provision for gender-sensitive pedagogy or curriculum. And the situation is even worse for college and university faculties, since there is no teacher-training course at all for HE, let alone gender-sensitization training. Even curriculum for Women’s Studies departments/Centres rarely focus on engendering HEIs or gender concerns in pedagogical training and curriculum framing. Women’s Studies Centres focus on gender/
women’s issues in a wide spectrum, but rarely in the context of education institutions, which they themselves are a part of.

Drawbacks faced by teachers in taking initiatives to incorporate gender questions in teaching are, also, varied. Lack of cooperation (even pressure to stop incorporating issues which are ‘outside’ the syllabus) from institutional authorities, pressure from families of students and local communities/bodies on the teachers to stop discussing such issues in class (questioning gender stereotypes) that may make their wards, especially daughters, errant/rebellious, pressure on teachers to complete syllabus on time (and thus not ‘wasting’ time discussing other ‘irrelevant’ matters), and pressure of workload on teachers besides teaching (including administrative and clerical work) are some of the major drawbacks which leave the teachers with neither the enthusiasm nor the time to invest in gender-sensitization classrooms.

Impact of Students’ Socio-Economic Background in Their Gender Socialization in HEIs and Need to Incorporate Students’ Experiences/Feedback in Framing Gender-Sensitive Curriculum

All respondents agreed on the need for a curriculum to reflect students’ experiences (‘voice discourse’). Interaction with students and feedback in some form (not just about teachers, which some institutions have made operational) might help curriculum experts to frame curriculum with a wider scope where students from diverse socio-cultural and economic backgrounds find some reflection of their experiences, and which pushes the students to see and question the prejudices which their own socialization has resulted in. In this context, the experiences of non-gender binary students in HEIs need to be specially focused on. Respondents agreed that neither the environment and infrastructure, nor the curriculum or pedagogical practices make space for the experiences of gender-fluid identities, which makes it imperative for the agenda of gender-sensitizing HEIs to take into account the question of gender-fluid persons to make the environment equally enabling for them as for others.

If Low Presence of Women in Senior/Administrative/Managerial Positions in the Education Sector Is Indicative of the Gender-Imbalance in HEIs

Most respondents were not aware of the larger picture of low presence of women in senior/administrative/managerial positions in the education sector, though they had personal experiences or anecdotes to share about the incomplete journeys of women (themselves or someone they knew) from being an achiever in higher education to pursuing research and/or taking up senior positions in the education sector. A number of factors were cited by the respondents as causes for this gap, including societal pressure to ‘settle’ (marriage, kids, devoting time to family), accompanying husbands to places
of their jobs, issues with mobility or job risk, belief that some jobs ‘suit’ women better than men (outcome being disproportionately more number of women in some jobs than others), belief that women are not good administrators/managers, men not wanting to have female heads/bosses and unavailability of qualified women due to many of them not completing the required training/degrees.

If the Impact of Digital/Virtual Education during the Pandemic in the Last Two Years Has a Gendered Impact on Students

Almost all respondents agreed that among the various impacts of education turning virtual during the pandemic situation, gendered impact was one of the most visible. The kinds of crisis that students, especially in rural areas and from marginalized communities, faced were doubly felt by female students. Access to smartphones (with an internet connection) was one of the most pressing crises for female students. A number of respondents noticed that the son of the household had access to a smartphone (even if he was in a lower grade than his sister) while the daughter had none (this was confirmed by female students themselves when their login names were seen to be that of a male, and teachers asked them to change it to their own). This meant that the daughter could use the phone only when and if her brother or father did not need/use it. When asked by teachers about the use of the scheme money (given by the Government of West Bengal for girls’ education) to get a phone for their daughter, the parents confessed that the money was being saved for the daughter’s marriage (instead of her education). Some also confessed that the money was being used for running the household after both or one of the parents lost jobs during the pandemic.

Loss of jobs also meant that many households saw a cut in education expenses for their kids, and the daughter’s education expenses were the first to be curtailed, as respondents were informed by their students. Available resources were, often, seen to be used by parents for the son’s education. Lack of access to phones (or machines to be used at home for classes) means that the daughter has to go to the nearest cyber café/hub to access a machine—which in many cases would be a few kilometres away. Timings of classes/examinations resulted in female students returning late from the cafes, which parents did not allow—implying discontinuation of classes by the female students. A number of respondents also confirmed the sharp rise in early marriages during the pandemic (loss of jobs of parents leading them to lessen one member of the family to be fed) as being another crucial factor for the huge increase in drop-outs, at all levels, by female students. Discussion and counselling sessions between teachers and students regarding such household and/or gender problems, most effective when done in person, also faced an abrupt halt during the virtual interaction structure of pandemic times.
Way Forward

Sincere intention and implementation seem to be the most crucial factor in the context of gender-sensitizing higher education sector and institutions, and also the one that is grossly lacking, as far as the Indian education sector is concerned. Inclusion of the vision of gender sensitivity without sincere effort to implement it and a flawed understanding of the sole purpose of education being that of making economic subjects scar the Indian education policies and framework. There is very little desired outcome due to the complete absence of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. In the Indian context, as is globally, physical gender violence and harassment have come to represent the entire spectrum of gender questions. Hence, redressal mechanisms of some effectiveness are seen to be functional in most HEIs.

Consequently, gender sensitivity has come to narrowly mean redressal for harassment/violence or disciplining/controlling of women/girls students as a means to ensure safety. Understanding gender blindness as a ‘system’ including stakeholders and victims across class, caste and gender rather than merely seeing it as a male-female issue needs to be acknowledged, especially by stakeholders in HEIs on whose gender approach the students’ outlook and experiences largely depend. Merely projecting gender parity in enrolment as a sign of gender sensitivity (often practised by the Indian HE sector) is no solution. Nor is manufacturing an insensitive labour force instead of sensitive and empathetic citizens.

Socio-cultural, economic and infrastructural considerations need to be reflected in the curriculum for the students to be able to take home meaningful insights from their learning experiences. Education policies—which are the final word in the education system—need to take heed of the reports and suggestions made by expert committees conducted through in-depth surveys, to make meaningful intervention in curriculum framing. The fact that many of the important curriculum and infrastructural concerns expressed in the reports do not find resonance in the provisions of NEP 2020 shows that enough importance is, often, not placed on expert opinion and field surveys that are made prior to the drafting of the policy. If job-driven subject choice is anything to go by, it is a clear indication of the ‘feminization’ of certain labour—considered low-risk, low-prospect, informal, semi or unskilled—that has a reverse impact on the kind of subjects offered by HEIs and chosen by students. Hence, disproportionate representation of women in particular subjects and, consequently, in certain jobs need not necessarily be an assurance of gender equality and balance. Seeing the higher education sector and institutions as an island does not work, it never has. One needs to acknowledge that HEIs are situated in the society, and in which societal bias/stereotypes/disparities find their way. Students spend a few hours in education institutions, but a lot more time within family, and in society. Understandably, gender socialization happens more outside
Making Higher Education Institutions Gender-Sensitive

education institutions than in it, which makes the work of institutions even more difficult. Hence, the teacher’s role and outlook (especially in terms of a gender-sensitive orientation) and sincere participation of all other stakeholders, including office personnel, family, community and local bodies, need to be ensured to make HEI experiences meaningful. To that end, the Indian experience of gender sensitization in HEIs, along with its efforts and gaps, could act as a point of reference for other countries (especially socio-culturally diverse nations like India) trying to address similar concerns in their education systems. The representation of labour in household chores is one of the positive changes in the Indian school (primary) textbooks that could be used as an example of where to begin implementing the changes from. The teacher-training institutes in India are also trying to bridge the gap by addressing gender-sensitive texts and pedagogy which, in the process, will have positive impacts on HEIs and is something that education policies of other countries can set as examples. Indian experiences of gender-sensitive initiatives, practices and drawbacks in the context of incorporating gendered experiences of not just women but also a range of other gender-fluid and non-binary categories should also act as eye-openers and examples for other education systems trying to address similar concerns. Such changes and initiatives across regions and contexts will, in the long run, help create a gender-inclusive enabling environment in HEIs around the world.

Notes


2 World Declaration on Education for All, Jomtien (Thailand), March 1990, World Education Forum, Dakar (Senegal), April 2000, Incheon Declaration, Incheon (Korea), 2015, Sustainable Development Goals 2015 are some of the global conferences where the global community came together to pledge right to education for all people across socio-cultural contexts.

3 The Right to Education Act was enacted in Indian Parliament in August 2009 and came into effect in April 2010. Article 21-A in the 86th Amendment Act of the Constitution of India ensures Right to Education and its various provisions.

4 The vision of women’s education in India is deeply entrenched in the colonial policy of education in nineteenth century, which saw the need for women’s education less as a form of empowerment and more as a fulfilment of the idea of
the companionate wife and educated mother, capable of producing, and participating in, the creation of learned future citizens. For further reference, see Chatterjee, P. (2010). ‘The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question’, in Empire and Nation: Selected Essays. Columbia University Press.

5 University Grants Commission (UGC) is a statutory body set up by the Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, Government of India in 1956. Its main duty is to decide and maintain standard and quality of higher education in India, provide recognition to universities in India and to disburse funds to such recognized universities and colleges.

6 A Task Force was formed under the aegis of the UGC in 2013 which conducted an expansive survey of the gender questions, including safety and infrastructural issues, hierarchical power relations between the actors, quality of education, evaluation processes and harassment and victimization, which were reported in the UGC-SAKSHAM Report in 2013. The Task Force was chaired by Prof. Meenakshi Gopinath and included other distinguished members such as Prof. Mary E. John, Prof. Yogendra Yadav, Prof. Uma Chakravarti, Prof. Gopal Guru, Prof. Wasbir Hussain, Prof. Sanjay Srivastava, Prof. Susie Tharu, Dr. Kulwinder Kaur and Dr. Archana Thakur.


8 This irony came through clearly from some of the stories of female achievers from India in the Tokyo Olympics 2021. The common trajectory for most of them was the complete absence of encouragement or infrastructural support from educational institutions or government for sports training. It was only after their win at the Olympics that the nation wanted a share of their glory, and wanted to feel proud for its ‘girls’.


10 NCERT’s recent efforts at providing (and uploading in their website) a teacher-training manual on transgender-inclusive school education was met with backlash and social media outrage, in response to which the manual was pulled out from the website. Datta, S. (10 November 2021). NCERT Removes Teacher-Training Manual on Transgender-Inclusive School Education After Backlash. The Wire.

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