

School As Space For Affirming Cultures of Gender Justice

The #MeToo campaign, with its “naming and shaming” of several prominent and not so prominent academics in institutions of higher education opened Pandora’s box that brought out how widespread, and deeply entrenched is a culture of sexual violence, both in the society at large and also within educational institutions. In this piece, I will be focusing not on this particular episode and its ramifications, but on the larger culture that it is symptomatic of and the ways in which the educational system is complicit in this culture of patriarchal violence. It is indeed necessary to start with critical self-reflection, even as many of us, teachers and educationists, work within and outside the system to resist and rewrite the dominant discourses around gender and patriarchy.

A culture of silence on matters related to sex and sexuality tends to characterise our social institutions, whether it is the family, the workplace or the school. Even where sex education exists, in schools, it is often imparted as a scientific, medicalised discourse, and not located within a framework of gender justice, of questioning the ways in which certain gender roles are naturalised. From nursery rhymes to school textbooks, there are both explicit and implicit assumptions about the construction of gender: little boys are made of “frogs and snails and puppy dogs’ tails”, while little girls are full of “sugar and spice and all that is nice”, as a popular nursery rhyme would have us believe. Textbooks often have stereotypical images and stories of mothers who stay at home, fathers who go out to work, girls who play with dolls and boys who play with cars. When my daughter was in Std, III, her history book was titled “The Story of Man”. She went up to the teacher and asked, “ But Miss, what about the story of women?” She was reprimanded and told not to ask stupid questions. The teacher was only faithfully reproducing a hierarchy that she had herself internalised, a hierarchy that discourages students from active inquiry and looks at learning as a rote driven activity. Students should listen and obey and reproduce what teachers tell them.

This disciplinary regime of the classroom, when superimposed on gender hierarchies, works towards the construction of docile feminine subjects. These relations of power impinge on the body itself in insidious and pervasive ways. When in kindergarten, my daughter was once rehearsing at home for an Independence Day event at school, where she played the role of a Malayali woman in a parade consisting of couples from different regions of the country. To my bemusement, she was walking with her knees bent, making herself shorter than she was. When I asked her why, she said that the teacher had instructed her to do so, because her male partner was shorter than her, and husbands can’t be shorter than wives! Injunctions, about how to sit, dress, direct one’s gaze, speak, laugh and play, shape how female (and male) bodies experience themselves and the world they inhabit. In fact, one can draw upon the work of Judith Butler (1990) who regards gender itself not as pre-determined but as constructed through performative acts:

We act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or something that is simply true about us, a fact about us. Still, it’s actually a phenomenon produced all the time and reproduced all the time, so to say gender is performative is to say that nobody really is a gender from the start (Butler, cited in Byron, 2014).

This formation of male and female bodies and identities that conform to dominant social scripts is reinforced both within and outside the classroom. For instance, social pressure and bullying by peers (particularly males) on the playground works towards shaping notions of an aggressive masculinity and a docile femininity. One needs to ask what kind of role teachers can play here in facilitating a process of questioning dominant gender norms and preventing the imposition of rigid gender scripts, particularly the violence and discrimination meted out to non-heteronormative students; “girlish” boys and “boyish” girls. In conjunction with hierarchical gender roles, the culture of silence results in a situation of often blaming and shaming not the perpetrator of sexual violence but the survivor.

There are countless stories about how girls and women are told that it is their fault that they were assaulted. Their dress, behaviour, conduct or lack of Judgement was responsible for the violence they experienced.

Often, boys' violent behaviour is condoned, concluding that "boys will be boys" as if it were "natural" for males to be predators. It is here that teachers can play a key role in questioning these gendered hierarchies by encouraging more sensitivity and respect on the part of boys and greater assertiveness and agency on the part of girls. Education aimed at greater gender sensitivity and reworking of gender relations of power can be integrated into every aspect of academic life and need not be a separate "subject".

More than anything else, the classroom can become a space where both boys and girls are taught the importance of consent. Given the relative absence of such education within the space of the family within our culture, teachers could play an important role in helping children develop a sense of their own bodily autonomy, agency and their rights in this regard:

Children should be taught that they are the only person allowed to look at and touch their bodies, unless they permit another person. When another person touches their body without first receiving permission or consent from that person, a crime is being committed. Learning to give and receive consent, or even just being aware of the concept of consent, can help children and young adults better understand their bodily rights while also giving them the courage to speak up if those rights are ever violated.

There is some data to show that sexual harassment of school girls is alarmingly high; for instance, a Breakthrough study reports that over 50% of girls have been harassed on their way to school. Some data demonstrate high levels of harassment in residential schools, particularly in poor tribal areas. All this points to the need for sex education, to adequately equip children, both boys and girls, to handle and report sexual abuse. At times, teachers themselves are subject to sexual harassment and violence within the school system. Every school, indeed every public institution and workplace should have a sexual harassment committee as per the law. Sadly, this is not the case, and parent-teacher associations and teachers' unions need to take up this issue on an urgent footing. We need more organisations such as RAHI in Delhi, which works with teachers, students and parents in schools and colleges to prevent and handle cases of Child Sexual Abuse.

The dominant culture, where sexual predators function with impunity within our institutions, educational or otherwise, will not change overnight.

Beginning with questioning our own prejudices and attitudes to gender, teachers and school managements have a crucial role to play in bringing about changes towards a more gender-just and gender-equal classroom, and in creating safe spaces within the school where children can express themselves and share their problems without fear of being silenced, shamed or ignored. This will go a long way towards addressing the rampant issue of sexual violence, the fear of which shapes the subjectivities of girls and women, curtailing their agency and denying them access to public space and social participation.

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II. Butler, Judith., 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

III. Byron, Experience. 2014. *Integrative Performance: Practice and Theory for the Interdisciplinary Performer*. New York: Routledge. Butler goes on to critique the very notion of gender as a binary of male/female, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper

IV. In fact, boys are also often the survivors of sexual violence by other boys/men, and this is a little talked about problem.

V. <http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/sexinfo/article/teaching-consent-your-classroom>

(<http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/sexinfo/article/teaching-consent-your-classroom>) accessed on October 23, 2017.

VI. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/50-of-girls-sexually-harassed-on-way-to-school-32-stalked-Study/articleshow/51130446.cms> (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/50-of-girls-sexually-harassed-on-way-to-school-32-stalked-Study/articleshow/51130446.cms>) accessed on October 24, 2017

VII. The Vishakha guidelines, promulgated in 1997 sought to regulate the handling of cases of sexual harassment at the workplace. They were replaced by the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013.

VIII. "RAHI is a feminist group that has created a supportive environment for survivors. It goes beyond 'breaking the silence' and has developed a powerful voice that strives to mainstream the discussion about Incest/ CSA in India and include it in social dialogue." Refer to <http://www.rahifoundation.org> (<http://www.rahifoundation.org>) for more details.

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