

Beyond the Symbolism: Reimagining Gender Sensitisation in Contemporary India

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Abstract

This paper examines the prevalent gender inequality and bias in contemporary Indian society, focusing specifically on stereotypes and violence against women. It seeks to understand these issues through the lens of student-led movements across Indian universities, while highlighting both the critical role of education in raising gender awareness beyond the classroom and the need to reimagine gender sensitization in India. Gender understanding is often based on the family and society in which we belong. So, the accountability of building a gender sensitive society also relies on the individual, the family, society and educators. In this regard, various student communities started campaigning in many cities in India. The student community is organising various programs to percolate gender sensitivity into society, like the “Pinjra Tod” movement by the students of Delhi University, which denies patriarchal thoughts. “Sanitary pad campaign” organised by Jamia Millia Islamia University to Jadavpur University, this series of movement to spread awareness about rape and sexism; “GSCASH” in JNU, against sexual harassment. These movements show us that education can play a vital role in raising awareness of gender equality and promoting sensitisation. Awareness changes the attitude of society towards gender bias and is a remedy for developing a gender-sensitive society.

Keywords: Gender, Binary, Education, India

Introduction

India is a vast and diverse country in terms of religion, race, caste, colour, ethnicity, class, language, etc., and this diversity is the beauty and strength of India, but at the same time, the country is divided on many grounds, gender is one of them (Gure Govind, 2016, p. 117). Gender means those social values and stereotypes which a society attaches to the biological distinction of male and female. Gender is the cultural and social distinction between males and females. India is a rigid and traditional society where females have been discriminated against since ancient times. In ancient times, they were barred from reading the Vedas along with the Shudras. This discrimination continues in many forms even after 70 years of India’s Independence. The Indian Constitution took many steps and introduced various provisions to

Published: 30 June 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2026.v3.i3.301183>

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sustain this diverse country, united by giving equal rights to all its citizens. Making the rules is not enough, but effective implementation and regular monitoring of the system are paramount. Gender discrimination and Gender based violence are not rampant in India only, but it is the story of most of the developing or third-world countries (Women's News, 6 November 2003).

Gender based discrimination is one of the major lacunae in our society, which is very much prevalent because of the lack of gender sensitisation in our society. Society assigns different roles to men and women, and it also gives different values to the roles men and women play, which forms a basis for inequality and discrimination. Our understanding of gender is often based on the family, peers, and society. Hence, the responsibility of building a gender sensitive individual is also based on the family, society and educators. Gender Sensitisation means feeling sensitive towards the needs of a particular gender. Gender Sensitisation is about changing behaviour and instilling empathy into the views that we hold about our own and others' gender (Iyengar, 2016, p. 74). It can be achieved through Gender sensitive education, which will help in realising the responsibility to make the socio-cultural surrounding Gender Sensitive. The need of the hour is to work on some innovative ways to help Gender sensitivity penetrate the attitude, behaviour, and mind of society and which can be achieved successfully through various student movements, awareness campaigns and introduction of compulsory Gender sensitive text books and curriculum in the schools and colleges.

Mismeasuring capabilities

For centuries, boys and girls have been receiving differential treatment not just in their homes but also in schools and the workplace. This biased treatment towards boys makes them feel superior, with the right to do anything against the other gender. Society teaches them that girls are inferior and incapable. They grow up with such a conception which encourages them to offer inhumane treatments and crimes against women, like domestic violence, rape, dowry deaths, and eve-teasing, which are considered normal to men. These types of people are not aware that girls/women also have equal capabilities. There is a need to make them aware that the girls are not less than the boys in any field of life if provided with equal opportunity. The difference lies in the mental outlook, and there is an urgent need to promote awareness regarding the capabilities and potentiality women possess. They should also be taught that women can never be weaker or less capable than men. They should also be informed that the son alone can never carry forward the clan (It is being considered that the clan is carried forward by the son only) without the support of a female partner who conceives a baby, and after getting delivered, the men would only be able to carry forward the so-called Vansh ka naam (Name of clan). There is a need to make them realise that men and women both carry equal value and capabilities. The difference only lies in the way of treatment they met because of the false measurement of their capabilities, which led women to feel inferior to men and vice versa. It gives birth to the gruesome act of violence and cruelty against women.

Let us understand it through a real-life example, Rani Rudramma Devi of the Kakatiya Dynasty was brought up as a son, and no one except three of his family members knew that she was a girl child. She was no less capable than a man. She was widely acknowledged. She fought many wars and saved her kingdom from enemies, but as soon as the truth became public, the people stopped recognising Rudradev by saying that the other kingdom would laugh at them

just because of having a female as the head of the Kingdom. Later, when the situation worsened, and the kingdom became unsafe, and the people could not save themselves from the enemy, they requested Rudhramadevi to save them, and she did. This story is enough for us to understand that if a girl is nurtured like a boy with all the facilities and opportunities, then she would not be less capable than a boy. So, only providing gender sensitive education will help them learn about the importance of women.

The critical role of education

Education does not mean only knowing about history, geography, society, ideology, physics, chemistry, biology, but it also means being aware of the problems in society that it is going through and trying to find a solution for them. Social and Gender education is the need to live a healthy and dignified life, just like vocational education is needed to eradicate unemployment. A science student is never expected to know about political thinkers and their ideologies; similarly, a person can never be expected to behave in a gender sensitized manner if he is not taught about it, neither in family nor in society nor in schools and universities. Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen, maintains that “if we continue to leave vast sections of the people of the world outside the orbit of education, we make the world not only less just, but also less secure” (UN Chronicle, 2013). A study shows that if the education gap decreases by 1 year, then cruelty against women decreases by 19.5 points. Therefore, the education gap between males and females has a positive relation with cruelty against women, and if males' years of education rise by one year, then assaults on women fall by 6 points. Although violence has no link with education, as some other factors work for it like unemployment, etc. (UNFPA, 2016). But at the same time, education and crime against women have a negative relation, as Studies done by the International Center for Research on Women of Washington in collaboration with independent Indian researchers found that In India domestic violence rose along with women's level of education because educated women are more aware of their rights so they do not follow the command blindly which causes conflict and finally leads to violence. The reason for such kind of violence is a patriarchal mindset because in India, cultural bias exists against women, and whenever they challenge their husband's right to control their every activity, conflicts are bound to rise, and these crimes rise from the existing social perception that men are superior to women, and they are taught to perceive themselves as a superior sex. Studies show that 42 per cent of men with one to five years of education and 57 per cent of men with 6 to 10 years of education, and with high school and higher, reported sexual violence (Women's News, 6 November 2003). In India, stereotypes, patriarchal mindset, and prejudices are very much prevalent, and these can be addressed by providing gender sensitive education by bringing an attitudinal change in society.

Methods to promote Gender sensitization:

- 1. Student Movements:** Gender sensitive education can aware student about the prevailing social prejudice against women and about the equality of men and women. Once they become aware, they would have the capacity to revolutionise the traditional mindset of society, which considers women weak and less capable than men and prescribes a fixed role for them. Two recent examples of informed student communities are:

- i) **Pinjra Tod campaign:** It was started in early August 2015 by female students of Delhi University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Ambedkar University, National Law University and Jawaharlal Nehru University. The word “Pinjra Tod” means “break the cage” developed as a reaction to an online campaign started by female students by sharing on Facebook page their bitter experiences with guards, wardens, principals and landlords, against biased rules in women’s hostels and PGs, particularly those that disallow women from staying out late. They asked why the freedom of women was being curtailed every time in the name of safety by putting restrictions on them. They campaigned against the moral policing in the name of concern. They demanded proper implementation of the anti-sexual harassment law and a healthy environment for women (The Indian Express, 22 September 2015).
 - ii) **Sanitary Pad campaign:** This campaign started in September 2014 against rape and sexism on campus because a girl was molested in the campus and after that she used to be looked down upon by others, by taking inspiration from the international “Pads Against Sexism” campaign stated by Elone Kastratia, a German woman by sticking the pads at public places with messages against rape and sexism on them her town Karlsruhe in Germany. The campaign even reaches Jadavpur University of Kolkata from New Delhi’s Jamia Millia Islamia. JMI students put up sanitary pads with messages on them, “Victim blaming is also called gender violence”, and “Naming and shaming the victim is sexual violence”, at public places on the whole Campus. It was a protest against the culture of blaming the victims of molestation to tell the people that rape or molestation was not a woman’s fault. It was a protest to spread anti-gender discrimination and gender-sensitisation messages (The Indian Express, 29 March 2015).
2. **Awareness programs for students:** Girls' education programs in Uttar Pradesh show that the right and good schooling has the capacity to change gender norms even in the most deprived sections of the society. A study Hall Foundation, founded by Urvashi Sahni, is running several schools to provide education at the same or at a lower cost than the government schools to empower women. “Prerna” is one of those schools. Girls of this school organised a discussion at the community level on violence against women and played an important role in changing the gender norms and perceptions in their society. They organised a street protest and also persuaded their parents through discussion to let them study and not marry them off at an early age. Sahni says that “Gender equality needs to be taught like math, science and other subjects”. In “Prerna”, gender equality curriculum is regularly taught along with the government curriculum (Brookings Institution, 2013).
 3. **Gender sensitisation bodies in educational institutions:** Bodies like GSCASH, constituted in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, in 1999, were a Gender sensitization committee against sexual harassment, which used to sensitise and create discussion on gender and sexual politics in the university. It was the first elected committee set up by the university to deal with sexual harassment cases inside the campus, in line with the Supreme Court’s landmark “Vishaka” case in 1997. But this

body was dissolved by the university authority in 2017. As per UGC (Prevention, prohibition and redressal of sexual harassment of women employees and students in higher educational institutions) regulation act 2015, JNU replaced GSCASH with the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) to address sexual harassment cases on campus. This committee is supposed to be formed in all universities and workplaces (The Wire, 3 October 2017).

4. **Awareness programs and activities for teachers, parents and school staff to make them Gender sensitive:** Ensuring gender equality is one of the steps towards an inclusive and safe society. A major role can be played by the parents in ensuring equality and justice with their sons and daughters. Special and compulsory workshops and seminars must be organised for parents and teachers, and if possible, for the community as well, as a first step to build a gender sensitive society. B.R. Ambedkar said, “I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved”. It’s high time to struggle for a gender sensitive society, which is possible only through education.
5. **Government’s initiatives:** We cannot make a gender sensitive society without gender sensitive education, so gender-based courses, gender sensitive curriculum, organising gender-based programs, activities, workshops and plays must be made compulsory by the government in all schools, either public or private, to spread awareness on gender issues to build up a pro-women society.

Conclusion

Thus, in the last it can be concluded that home is the first school of a child, so if a child observes at home that his mother is being scolded by his father and observes that she is being disrespected by the male member of the family, then he grows up learning this thing that women are meant to live under men. There is an urgent need to develop a family atmosphere where all members are respected, cared for, and treated equally. Schools and families can become the foundation towards a society which is more egalitarian for both genders. As Nicholas D. Kristof pointed out, “In the 19th century, the central moral challenge was slavery. In the 20th century, it was the battle against totalitarianism. We believe that in this century, the paramount moral challenge will be the struggle for gender equality around the world”. And this struggle can become successful by using education as a tool to achieve the goal of a gender-sensitive society.

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