

The Gendered Classroom: Masculinity and Femininity in Pakistani Universities

Hazir Ullah¹, Ahsun Nisar Khan²

¹International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan

²School of Science and Technology, Middlesex University

Abstract

Our gendering experiences begin with our birth. The formal educational gendering process begins the moment we enter school and continue throughout our educational journey. Sitting in the same classroom, reading the same books, listening to the same teachers at the same time, boys and girls have different experiences. Giving close attention to the temporal, physical/embodied and discursive dimensions of classroom life and relations in Pakistan, I highlight the extent to which the university classroom functions as gendered space in which masculinity and femininity are exhibited by young men and women (students). The data for the paper comes from in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with universities' teachers, focus group discussion with students and classroom observation. Foucauldian discourse analysis will be employed as a methodological and theoretical tool to unpack a number of concerns including the constitutive and constituted nature of teachers' and students' gendered practice and ideology. By employing discourse analysis, I take into account teachers' and students' classroom practices (sitting, walking and talking) as powerful discourses and analyse how these construct frameworks of meaning that define categories and specify domains of what can be said and done. The study, as stated earlier, attempts to delineate how the gendered practices in the classroom contribute to the construction of gendered identities, perpetuation of gendered power structure and disciplining young men and women as gendered individuals. It is pertinent to mention here that some of the study findings challenge the popular assertion regarding 'gendered experience' unpacked by feminist research in the global north.

1. Introduction

Educational institutions are powerful agents of gender socialization. The formal educational gendering process begins the moment we enter school and continues throughout our educational journey. In addition to educating us in subject areas, educational institutions teach girls and boys about the role and status that are open to them [1]. By the

time children enter their first classroom, they are taught that boys and girls are fundamentally and categorically different, that boys are good in math and science, shout in the class, play violently in the playground; girls on the other hand, are good in literature, sit quietly in the class, and speak softly [2]. This gendering process continues throughout our educational lives. Educational institutions, both in the officially approved curriculum-textbooks-and in the parallel hidden curriculum-our interactions with class fellows, other students and teachers, teach us what it means to be men and women [3,4,5]. Keeping in view the constructive power of classroom interaction and its contribution to the production of gendered individuals, classroom became the focus of sociological research [6].

Classroom became one of the key areas of research for educational sociologists, especially in 1980s. Since 1980, there is a long research tradition examining classroom interaction. Sociologists of education looked beyond the structure level, and became interested in examining the socio-cultural space of the classroom [7]. Their interest was to examine the ways school (education institutions) and classrooms work. They paid close attention to who teaches young boys and girls, what they teach them, how they teach them, and how schools, colleges and universities are organized as institutions. Are boys and girls having the same experience in the classroom? They focused on how do instructors and learners influence each other?

These initial studies "resulted in sociologists studying classroom activities, not only in schools, but also in higher educational institutions" [6]. Research in classrooms has unpacked that female students were disadvantaged in pattern of micro level interaction in co-educational institutions, especially in the classroom interaction. Examining classroom, Spender [8] asserted that boys typically dominate classroom interactions marginalizing girls. Graddol and Swann [2] "argue that the majority of classroom interaction studies show that boys talk more than girls". Boys shout in the class, make noise, disturb lecture; on the other hand, girls sit quietly, speak when asked and keep the decorum of the class [4]. Research studies spanning the past thirty years consistently reveal that male students receive more teacher attention than female students [9,4]. Both

female and male students attested that boys get greater teacher time, attention and praises during lectures [10]. Countering Spender and Stan worth, Randall [11] asserted that girls receive the same, or sometimes more, attention than boys. This debate on who gets more time can be summed up with the assertion that there are some significant changes in the classroom culture. Of course, some changes have occurred over the past 30 years. In universities today, there are as many girls as boys. Nevertheless, the gendered experiences that boys and girls receive during schools and colleges still persist. There is still much to be done if we wish our educational institutions to empower young men and women equally. Thus, it will be wrong to argue that studying sexism and gender discrimination in the classroom is an outdated issue, or it only exists for female educators [12].

The stance of this paper is that examining classroom interaction from the point of view of gender, especially in developing countries i.e., Pakistan, is immensely important and useful as gendered practices in classroom reproduce the existing patterns of gender stereotypes by female students graduating school and university with a tacit message of their gendered location in society as less important citizens. It also stresses that gender is a global issue and needs to be studied across societies and in different settings. It will not be a sweeping statement to argue that the consideration that has been received by gender inequalities in classroom in Pakistan has been too little. I argue that analyzing classroom interaction, in Pakistan, from a gender perspective is less investigated area of research and is crucial step toward educational equity and equality. The voice that I raise here is that men and women experience the social world differently, including educational settings. My aim in this study is to examine how young men and women in Pakistan experience classroom settings? Some may be thinking that what is the importance of this study when the higher education in Pakistan faces bigger issues and challenges. It is pertinent to mention here that the fruit of education becomes double when fruitful classroom interaction takes place. This can happen when the classroom becomes a real gender equality space of interaction.

2. Methodology

This study employs qualitative methodology to examine classroom interaction from feminist perspective. The paper draws on classroom observation and focus group discussion with university students, and in-depth interviews with teachers in two universities in the Federal Capital of Pakistan. The research was in 20 different universities classroom settings of two (one public and one private) sector universities in Islamabad,

Pakistan. Of these classes, 10 were taught by male teachers and 10 by female teachers. I shared my key questions with each teacher for observing their classroom interaction from the point of view of gender. Four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), two in each university, were carried out for understanding boys' and girls' experience of classroom interaction. For the classroom observation, I used an observational instrument titled Classroom Interaction Analysis Categories (CIAC). The CIAC was an adapted version of Flanders Interaction Analysis Categories (1970). This instrument consisted of: who, female or male pupils, reply to teacher's question? Who dominates the classroom discussion? Who, male or female, students come up with the most relevant answer to teacher question? Do boys listen to girls' discussion carefully or interrupt them? The observational data on classroom practices and student behaviors was recorded in the form of notes after each class. The second instrument was used in FGDs with students. This instrument consisted of open ended questions to have an insight into male and female students' experience of the classroom interaction. The students, both male and female, were asked about their experience of classroom interaction. They were asked whether male and female teachers related differently to female and male students.

The collected data was subjected to qualitative analysis. After transcribing the data, I analyzed the data collected through observation and FGDs by looking for patterns exhibited among the participants' responses. I analyzed the data from a backward and forward perspective, and an inward and outward perspective. I have employed feminist poststructuralists understanding of gender as theoretical framework to analyze and interpret the findings of this study [13].

3. Findings Discussion

As stated earlier and reiterated here that the purpose of this study was to examine classroom interaction from a feminist standpoint. This section presents classroom observation and responses of boys and girls in FGDs. The main focus is to highlight how boys and girls experienced their classrooms. The findings are significant because classroom interaction from the point of gender is essential for the cause of gender equality in education in Pakistan.

3.1. Young men and masculinity in university classroom

Boys/men continue to exhibit the stereotypical masculinity (shouting in the class, making unnecessary noise, talking, disturbing lecture etc). One of the key objectives of the study was to

highlight who interrupts teacher and class lecture. The study findings unpacked that male students threaten teacher's authority and the functioning of classroom more than female students. Majority of the late comers to the classroom were boys. Male students dominantly requested for early termination of lecturer. It is noteworthy to mention here that male students disturb male teachers' lecture more than that of female teachers. Males try to recede from disturbing female teachers lectures to protect their masculinity-to avoid being scolded by a female teacher. As one boy told "the insult and damage to the self-esteem is double when scolding comes from a female teacher". Male students, by cutting down male teachers and lectures and remaining silent in female teachers' classes, try to demonstrate their perceived masculinity and superiority.

In Pakistan, especially in public sector universities, it has been noticed that a considerable majority of students regularly absent themselves from lectures. Attendance has become a great tool for professors to maintain the strength of the class. Keeping in view the high rate of absenteeism, university authority has made 80 percent attendance compulsory for appearing in examination which compels many students to go for proxy (fake attendance in lectures). It was found that male students bunk classes and remain absent from lectures more than females. Examining the in-class attendance from the point of view of gender revealed that fake attendance is marked by boys for boys. The study did not find a single case in which a girl marked proxy in-class attendance. The proxy by boys for boys shows group solidarity and boys courage to challenge the authority of professors as well as university. This reflects the socially ingrained notion of masculinity.

3.2. Young men's and women's engagement in classroom discussion

One of the keys aims of this study was to examine who speak when and with what authority [14]. Drawing on the Foucauldian work allowed me to look closely at the gender power relation in the classroom discussion. The study found that male students in Pakistani university classrooms dominate class discussions, female students and students from rural background feel hesitant to engage in classroom discussion and debate. Albeit, boys replied to teachers' question more than girls, but girls were found more quick and correct, with genuine interest, in class discussion. One of the professors argued: "boys just speak to be prominent. Girls speak when they have substance to share with their teachers and class fellows". Similarly, a unanimous finding from all classroom observation was that boys cut down girls in their arguments. One of the female students asserted that "most of the girls want to share their

experiences in class and connect these with lecture but male class fellows disturb our argument. The teachers fail to stop them effectively. So we remain silent". The good thing is, females students argued, that teacher interrupt, ignore and dismiss male students' conversations more often than those of female students. When males try to put girls down, as they often do, and teacher do not effectively correct (fix) them, teachers encourage males' notion of superiority. The study findings also revealed that males often spoke loudly with confused statements, whereas girls engaged in conversation with clear mind and opinion. The classroom observation also revealed that males yelled out or snapped the fingers of their raised hands when they wanted to participate and reply to the teacher question. One of the girls argued: "we speak little but speak with correct information and knowledge. Boys just vomit. They do not care if they are wrong". Summarizing the classroom observations, it is concluded that teachers wait longer for girls to explain their point of view. The study findings suggest that men talk more, particularly in formal interaction in the public domain. A female professor, explaining the reason of girls' passive participation in the classroom interaction, asserted that "females' limited participation in the classroom discussion is due to a prolonged sex-segregated education and patriarchal culture in Pakistan". This communicates to students that talking in the public sphere is men prerogative. Male students are expected to assert themselves, whereas females supposed to be quite and polite. They (females) are expected to keep silent and listen carefully. This, explicitly and tacitly, encourages females to be less assertive.

The study's focus was not only to examine who participates more but also to analyze the length, depth and frequency of participation in class discussion. It was unpacked that boys, when engaged in classroom discussion, continued conversation longer than girls. It was also revealed that boys supported their male class fellows for their argument.

3.3. In-and out of class "signaling"

"Signaling" (eagerness to accept and cooperate what teachers say, demonstrating greater docility, showing great interest in learning) in-and-outside classroom was associated with female students. Male students asserted that girls always give "signals" to convince teachers that they are "good students". Male students further claimed that girls flatter teachers. Albeit, it is noteworthy to mention here that this does not cause disturbances in the classroom, but may affect the climate and sense of fairness for all. This does not mean that boys do not flatter. Some boys, girls in the FGDs asserted, flatter male teachers for getting good grades. The study summed up that female students signal more than males do. Female

students' signal convinces teachers that they are interested in what the teacher is teaching and that they are trying hard. It is important to mention here that this study did not explore whether students' "signaling" influences teachers or their assessment at the time of grading. I believe that there should be separate study on the topic which will shed light on these everyday but significant aspects of teaching and learning in educational institutions.

FGDs unpacked that most of the girls have little contact with their male teachers due to variety of reasons, i.e., the fear of scandals and defamation. I deem it important to mention here that at the universities, faculty are predominantly male. Female students asserted that 'male teachers maintain more eye contact with male students. Nevertheless, teachers gave longer and more significant verbal and nonverbal responses to female students' comments than to those of males'.

Female students also pointed out that not only classroom but also other spaces such as library, cafeteria and buses are gendered spaces. Boys try to control these spaces and sometime demonstrate very sexist behaviors in all these places. It is pertinent to point out here that sexist behaviors and harassing comments in the classroom should not be ignored and must be taken seriously as such unnoticeable sexism, if tolerated, may be more dangerous.

Although some of the issues I have highlighted throughout the paper appear small, they function to disempower young female students. Certainly, not all female students are derailed by gendered practices that permeate in higher education classroom. We know that classroom is very dynamic site where power politics among teachers and learners and learners and learners is going on all the time. There may be teachers who are biased towards male students while others may be biased towards female students.

4. Conclusion

The overall claim that I reach from this study is that university classroom is a gendered space which young men/boys and young women/girls experience differently. Boys vividly dominate classroom interaction and see it one of the places where they (boys) demonstrate their masculinities in various ways, i.e. coming late, disrupting lecture, asking for early ending of lecture and distracting teacher from the main subject. I deem it important to mention here that gender issue in classroom is a very complex phenomenon and needs to be examined comparatively in urban and rural as well as public and private universities. My personal experience of teaching to undergraduate and post-graduate in public and private sector universities in Pakistan enables me to argue that girls participate more than boys in postgraduate classroom of private sector

universities. Similarly, girls with good schooling background are outspoken and engage in classroom conversation more than rural boys and boys with poor study habits and educational background.

Of course some changes have come over the past 15 years. There are almost as many female as male students, if not greater in number, in Pakistani urban universities. Today the number of female teachers in university is encouraging when compared to the past. But this should not stop teachers from spotlighting gender dimension in their classroom teaching and interaction with student just because someone thinks of it as less important and worthless. It is asserted that it is teachers' responsibility to assess every pupil, irrespective of their gender and social class status, to fully engage him/herself in class discussion, both as a listener and speaker. The teacher should tell his/her students that they should not only value their class fellows' opinions, but should also listen to each other.

5. References

- [1] Wood. T. J. (2005) *Gendered Lives*. Toronto: Thomson.
- [2] Graddol, D., & Swann J. (1989). *Gender voices*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- [3] Ullah, H. (2013). *Reproduction of Class and Gender Hierarchies through Education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa*. Ph.D Thesis- Main Library University of Peshawar, Pakistan.
- [4] Kimmel, S. M. (2004). *The Gendered Society*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [5] Ullah, H. (2015). *School Teaching as a Feminine Profession: The Legitimization and Naturalization Discourses in Pakistani Context*, Presented at 14th Education Research Conference, The School of Education University of Birmingham, UK, November 28, 2015.
- [6] Burgess, G. R., & Parker, A. (1999). *Education*, in Taylor, S. (ed) *Sociology: Issues and Debates*. London: Macmillan.
- [7] Delamont, S. (1981). All too familiar? A decade of classroom research, *Educational Analysis*, 3(1), 69-83.
- [8] Pender, D. (1983). *Invisible Women: The schooling Scandal*, London: Women's Press.
- [9] Spender, D. (1980). *Man Made Language*. London: Routledge.

[10] Stanworth, M. (1983). *Gender and Schooling*, London, Hutchinson.

[11] Randall, G. (1987). Gender differences in pupils-teacher interaction in workshops and laboratory, in G. Weiner and M. Arnot (eds) *Gender and the politics of schooling*, London: Hutchinson.

[12] Constantinou, P. (2008). Heightening Our Awareness of Gender Stereotypes. *Strategies: A Journal for Physical and Sport Educators*, 21(3), 28-34.

[13] Ullah, H., & Skelton C. (2016). Social Reproduction of Gender Hierarchies in Sports through Schooling in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 36(1), 131-144.

[14] Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Pantheon Book.

6. Acknowledgements

I am thankful to the higher education commission of Pakistan for supporting me in the current research. I am also thankful to Ahsan Nisar Khan (Lecturer Middle Sex University) for his cooperation in literature review and proof reading of the paper.