

The Second Sex? | A Conversation on Gender in a Rural Classroom

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Being a social science teacher in a class of students where 19 out of the 30 students are female, this topic was certainly not an easy one to deal with. Children in the class also come from different socioeconomic backgrounds. While teaching the chapter 'Society and Role of Women' to class VII, the children would be reminded of many experiences they live with and endure every day in their homes. Patriarchy still reigns supreme in their households. Many differences can be seen in the way boys and girls are brought up, such as the practice of sending the male child to a private, English-medium school while the girl child is sent to a government school. The children were soon to become very aware of many other forms and modes of discrimination.

The first day of my plan for this topic began with a discussion on gender roles. The children were asked to list the tasks and roles that men and women take up in the village and the society at large. All children were a part of this discussion.

The discussion began with the boys. All the twelve boys present on that day proclaimed their views on men's roles. The chief amongst these were: men handle the non-domestic affairs, they go out to seek work, they work in the fields, and they take the decisions of the family. As the boys presented their views, they were noted on the blackboard. The tasks performed by men had taken up one-tenth of the space of the blackboard.

Then, it was the girls' turn. They began recounting all the tasks from the beginning of the day - getting up to fetch water, sweeping the house, feeding the animals, cooking breakfast for all members of the house, getting children ready for school, cooking lunch, washing utensils, looking after the children and the elders of the house, helping men in the fields and so on. The tasks they recounted filled up the entire blackboard. I questioned the children whether women are remunerated for all this labour. There was no answer. I posed a second question and enquired whether men are remunerated for their labour outside the household. All the children replied in the affirmative.

As homework, children were assigned two questions. Firstly, to find out the reason why women are not paid wages for their work. Secondly, they were asked to observe any discrimination in the upbringing of men and women (especially young boys and girls) in their homes and their neighbourhood. As a start, the children were able to understand that women provide a lot of unpaid labour and even then, they are not granted the same respect at home as the men are.

The next day, the lesson began with a discussion on the questions that had been assigned for homework. Many children pointed out that women are not paid wages for their labour because it is their duty to carry out domestic tasks. They were baffled as to who else could perform these tasks, if not women. Other children countered this with the view that when women did the same work outside, they are paid wages for it.

During the discussion, more questions arose: should domestic tasks not be considered as worthy as other labour? Is it really only the woman's duty to carry out domestic tasks? In the end, there was a consensus amongst the children that domestic tasks are the duty of both men and women, and they should share these equally. I also put forward my point that the Constitution of India recognises that equal wages be paid for equal work and therefore, it is wrong to discriminate on the basis of gender.

Then, the second question was addressed. Girls presented the myriad forms of discrimination they observed and encountered. While boys are given toy planes and cars to play with, girls are given dolls. While boys are given plenty of food to eat, girls are given leftovers. Girls are taught to speak in a submissive manner, but boys are not. While boys are free to roam around and play outside wherever and whenever they please, the movement of girls is strictly monitored and going out at night is forbidden. Boys are given good clothes to wear, sent to a good school and even tuition classes. Girls are rarely afforded the same treatment. Girls are married off at a young age, but not boys.

Post the dialogue, I laid out the principle of equality for the children, especially that people are equal, and gender has no bearing on it. However, our social system decreed that men and women are not treated as equals. Domestic tasks were assigned a lower value and written off simply as a private family matter to be taken care of by females. This gave rise to gender-based discrimination in our society. Despite the Constitution rejecting gender discrimination and there being provisions for legal action against the same, gender discrimination has persisted. Due to many such reasons, girls are not able to go to school and get an education, they are not able to get jobs and a respectable and fulfilling life remains a far-fetched dream for most of them.

Our society is eager to assign women the role of a devi and put them on a pedestal. However, it never engages in a dialogue about their socio-economic status. The class discussion revolved around these issues. Children raised several questions: 'Why do men act like this?', 'Who made these rules and assigned these roles in the society?', 'Why is the birth of a girl child considered inauspicious?' 'Why are girls either killed in the womb or after their birth?'



Image source: SCERT

The homework assignment for the day was to find and collect information about women who have contributed towards the development of the nation.

The third day began with the children's responses again. The children named many women who had contributed to the nation's growth: Indira Gandhi, Sania Mirza, P.V. Sindhu, Saina Nehwal, Manisha Thakur, Kalpana Chawla, Kamla Bhasin and more. With this, I added that the driving force behind these women's success and their contributions was their education and their awareness of their rights.

The plan for the day also included bringing to the children's attention the injustice being meted out to women in the present day as well as making them aware of the laws that protect women from harassment and sexual violence. Children were also introduced to the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005. They were told how under the purview of this Act, women who face physical violence or mental abuse in a domestic space are provided with legal protection. The Vishaka Guidelines were discussed which lay down provisions to protect women from sexual harassment at the workplace. Lastly, they were made aware that the Constitution accords equal rights to all citizens of the country and that legally, they cannot be discriminated on the grounds of gender, caste or creed.

The biggest challenge that I encountered while teaching this lesson was to acquaint children with gender-based discriminatory behaviour in their own families. Sharing their personal and family affairs was not easy for the children. Making them aware and empowered enough to raise their voice against the ill-treatment and violence meted out to them (as girls) was a herculean task in itself. The children's experiences were eye-opening, thought-provoking and poignant. They opened the doors to learning about different forms of discrimination.

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