

Gender, space, and education: Insights from Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

School is a space where all children, without discrimination and fear, can grow together. Apart from formal learning, school can give children peer group and friendship experiences. This space can be simultaneously structured and restructured by individuals. Space provides opportunities for people, but it can also create constraints for individual action. Gender-friendly spaces can increase the participation of girls' students and can bridge the gender gap. This article is an attempt to understand the school space in terms of gender and education participation. This qualitative study was conducted in four schools (two government and two private) of Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh. The data was collected from head-teachers, teachers and students from class VIII to X through semi – structured interviews, informal interactions, and observation schedules. For deep understanding, the case study method has also been used. The analysis of data was done through the thematic analysis method. Finding exhibits that schools are not gender friendly for both girls' and boys' students, some students are being discriminated based on gender, caste, and class.

Keywords – Gender, School, Space, Inequality, Gwalior

INTRODUCTION

School is a space of learning and construction, the very basis of equality building begins from the school itself, and the children are most diverse and in the process of physical and cognitive development at this stage, so the responsibility of schools is to impart values of equality, justice without any discrimination. The focus of this paper is to understand the space of school and how the gender roles influence it. Accordingly in the upcoming sections first there is a deliberation on the concept of space (Particularly from the lenses of structuration theory), and relation between space and gender, then rationale of this study, then methodology and at last empirical evidences from the field has been discussed.

What is Space?

Space is an essential depiction, a priori, and premise of all outer institutions (Low 2016, p 20: Kant 1998, 158), things which people grasp by the senses becomes an “intuition” by being brought in consciousness into an order or form and which is given the name space (Low ,2016). Taylor (2013, 689) referred to Massey’s (2005) understanding of space which is “practiced Place” and defined space as “always open, contemporaneously plural, emergent and under construction” (Taylor, 2013).

Structuration Theory and Space

Structuration theory intended to avoid the polarity of separate analyses of structure and agency in sociology (Shilling, 1991). As per the theory of structuration field of social science, is neither the experience of individual, nor the presence of any kind of societal totality, but it is social practice ordered across space and

time (Giddens, 1984). He also added that the human activities are like self-reproducing items, and those activities are repetitive. These activities are not brought by social actors but also repeatedly recreated by them. Shilling (1991, 24) argues that structures are not external forces rather they are directives and means which are continuously practiced by the actors in their social interaction, Shilling further argues that these directives give a set of 'tools' which can be extensively vary from directives of language and procedures, these tools are responsible of informing common expectations as to how specific group of people may have to act in certain situations. Shilling further argues that rules which practice by society are supposed to be followed by other members as well and if they won't they might experience punishment for the same. On the formation of practices and rules Giddens (1984, 23) took the reference of Garfinkel's 'experiment with trust' and argues that people should not ignore the casually applied sanctions which can be used in everyday life. These rules are habitually practiced by actors and they become routinized and institutionalised feature of society (Shilling 1991, 25).

As per Shilling (1991) Giddens' concern with space is, as a socially produced context which provide prospects and limitations for individuals to use and reproduce structural rules and resources in the paths of their day-to-day lives. Because all social interactions happen in a space and it is not possible to think of social life outside of spatial context. But space does not only provide chances to people to act but it also limits the possibilities of individual action (Shilling, 1991). Giddens (1984 pp. 110-144) discussed the role of space in structuration theory through numbers of related concepts, for this paper concept of 'locale' has been taken in to consideration to understand the relation of space and gender.

Locale is the utilization of space for having interaction, this setting is significant to specify contextuality (Giddens 1984, 118). According to Giddens locales can anything from a room in a house, street corner, shops, towns, cities, to the territorially demarcated area occupied by nations but he said that locale are typically internally regionalized, and the regions within them are vital in designing the interactions. Shilling (1991) took the reference of Giddens and opined that these regions should not be understood only as localization in space but as referring to the zoning of time-space in relation to routinized social practice. These locales are internally regionalised, this refers to the way in which the spatial features of locales are ordered within, and connected to, continuous social practice.

Another way of describing regionalisation is as the 'zoning' of space in relation to routinised social practices; the combining of spatial areas with social relations which have created them and occur within them (Giddens, 1984, pp. 119-129). Thus, spatial settings are central to the practice and production of 'structural' rules and resources. Spain (1993) also argued how space is constructed by the social institutions and vice versa, Spain opined that the houses in which we live and the building shows assumptions about the relations among people who live there and also shapes the behavior of inhabitants. Therefore, space or spatial perspective is grounded in the structuration approach where social institutions are practiced and expressed through daily activities even while those activities shaped and reshaped the structural characteristics of society.

Interrelation between Space, and Gender

There are many different opinions around the term ‘gender’, Scott said that it a “perceived differences between the sexes and a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott 1988, p. 42), while Butler discussed the concept of doing gender, she argued that there is no “interior truth” of gender or gendered body, it is only a “style of the flesh” that congealed through repetitive performances, it means that gender is not biological instead it is repeated “doing” or “performing” of socially approved feminine and masculine behavior (Butler 2004 p.1). Rezeanu argued that, based on the idea that biological differences are the basis of gender differences, functionalist thinkers believed that men and women have contradictory though complimentary psycho – socio- cultural features, which later on categorized them as masculinity and femineity (Rezeanu 2015, p.11).

Low (2006) contends that gender within space is produced by the interactions, it influenced and also influencing by the social structure. Deeply rooted gender ideologies which legitimized masculine hegemony are the basis of gendered space, and these spaces could be a place where women and people with different sexual identity are not allowed to access their human right. Datta (2021) argued that gendered performances have a certain spatiality as well which condition and limit the possibilities of gender, consequently character of space or location defined the manner in which gender are performed.

Gender and School Space

The mundane everyday spaces in school for example school corridors, playground, classrooms, the periphery of school, and the practice, communication, and, learning that occur within them are a pertinent part of every student. A school is a place where children spend most of their time, they attend school five or six days a week and, spend six to seven hours a day, so their conversations with each other in places like classrooms, playground, or school premise are the foundation of building respectful relationships with each other, hence these places become most important to address the issue of gender equity (Spark et.al 2018). Hopkins (2010) opined that for many young people places within the school and related to school are an important part of their life, he added that these places are not static or fixed but these places are continuing, relational, and in the process of being made (Hopkins 2010, 183), as children are the active participants in social construction (Spark et. al 2018), therefore they learn and construct relations within themselves inside the school premise. According to Spark et. al (2018) the concern of space being gendered has been discussed by many feminists and children’s geographer, along with other places like markets, public gardens, etc., school is one of the places where the space inside the school is gendered, for example, a playground which is less frequently used by girls as compared to boys, they took less space to play and spend less time and usually play in small groups. Spark et al (2018) referred to Young (1980) who discussed that women tend to limit their bodily movements and also do not use the full physical space available for them and, this generates the idea of different capacities of female bodies – like their strength, stamina, pace are limited as compare to male bodies. These practices of using limited space and having low stamina as compare to their male counterparts is coming from the patriarchal structure of society which defined the rules and regulations for people. So the understanding that women tend to shy or feel uneasy and inhibited from claiming or

using space as theirs is not because of physiological differences but because of the construction of the gendered self which they learn from society itself.

Rationale of the study

Gender inequality is one of the significant problems, which is a major challenge of contemporary society and for the educational system. Deep-rooted societal faith perpetuates discriminatory practices of girls and boys, and these practices not only deter girls from accessing their educational rights but also unconsciously reinforce them to accept the gender role, defined by the patriarchal society. For a child, school is not just a place where she can gain academic knowledge but it's a life-long experience hence it is the responsibility of our society to make the school beautiful where she can build dreams without any fear and discrimination. Though there are ample studies on gender inequality in education but their major focus is on numbers in terms of accessibility of schools, toilets, or availability of teachers but there are very few studies that touched upon the daily experiences of teachers and pupils regarding gender. When it comes to space and gender some studies have discussed the experiences of women in different public spaces but there is a dearth of studies which are focusing on school space. If we talk about Madhya Pradesh and specifically Gwalior, not even a single study has discussed the issue of gender-based discrimination from the perspective of space. So, this is the gap I found in the literature which motivates me to work around this subject.

Objectives

1. To understand the participation of students in school space on the basis of pre-defined gender role.
2. To analyse the role of teachers in creating gender free school space.

METHODOLOGY

To understand the gender unfolding within the school space qualitative research method has been adopted. This study has conducted in Morar a block of Gwalior district of Madhya Pradesh. Two village Utila and Sirol were selected, further in each village one government and one private school were selected.

Sample

The data was collected from head teachers, teachers and students.

Total Participants

- Head Teachers – 4 (1 from each school)
- Teachers – 20 (5 from each school)
- Students – 24 (6 from each school)

Data collection tools

Semi structured interview schedule, observation schedule and non- formal interactions method (specifically for students) for collection of data has been used.

Sampling Method

Purposive sampling method has been used for the selection of all sample. Block was selected on the basis of literacy rate and better education facilities. Then with the help of U-Dise villages were selected based on availability of both private and government school. Teachers who taught class VI to X were part of the study. One girl student from each grades (VIII to X) have been chosen, because it has been assumed that, as compared to the students of lower grades, these students would be more experienced and comfortable in sharing their thoughts.

Since this study has used the interview and observation method which requires in-depth engagement with the sample so the size of the sample was small and the objective was fulfilled by above-mentioned number of interviews.

Procedure

The data has been collected by the researcher only. Thematic analysis, case study and non – formal interaction method has been employed for the analysis of data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section will discuss the empirical findings from the field, these findings has been discussed in detail through different themes, case study and a narrative.

Division of accessibility of physical Space on the basis of Gender

| Space within and outside of school | Physical Accessibility to Girls (Division according to class) | | | Physical Accessibility to Boys (Division according to class) | | |
|------------------------------------|---|-----------------------|--------------------|--|---------------|---------------|
| | I to V | VI to IX | X to XII | I to V | VI to IX | X to XII |
| Classroom | Access by all | Access by all | Access by a few | Access by all | Access by all | Access by all |
| Corridor (Area outside Classroom) | Access by all | Access by all | Access by a few | Access by all | Access by all | Access by all |
| Playground | Access by all | Partial accessibility | Access by very few | Access by all | Access by all | Access by all |
| Area near Drinking water place | Access by all | Full accessibility | Access by a few | Access by all | Access by all | Access by all |
| Area just outside of school | Access by very few | Partial accessibility | Access by none | Access by very few | Access by all | Access by all |

Developed by Researcher from observations inside the school

The above table depicts the observation of accessibility of physical space it was significant to understand the participation of students in social space. It was observed that there were very few physical spaces all girls could access. The age of girls students has increased, and the accessibility of physical space for them has decreased. While the scenario was the opposite for boys, their accessibility has increased according to their age. The same situation was observed in village also, space like shops, chabutra (platforms near home or

tree), and area right outside the house were restricted to girls, they could access according to their age, below 15 can sit or play around these areas but above 15 were not allowed.

School space and participation of students in games and extracurricular activities

There were different extracurricular activities organized by schools, in which most girls were interested in music or dance but the number of boys were very few. During functions, teachers were also promoting girls to use their Art and Craft skills, giving guests garlands, while boys' role during celebration days is limited to only moving heavy things like table or chair. 18 teachers opined that girls are good in organizing festivals and decorations. Nambissan (2005) also said that girls in schools are supposed to perform 'light' and decorative work, while boys are called when work is perceived as acquiring 'strength'. It implied that in the classroom space, girls are chosen for "feminine" work, which is fragile and doesn't need any muscular efforts, while boys need to perform only "masculine" work, which requires some physical strength. The same thinking about girls being delicate and boys being muscular was observed during the teachers' interviews on the games played by students in the school playground. 17 teachers believed that boys are rougher and more interested in playing harsh games. Both girls' and boys' play kabbadi, but boys match is much more aggressive than girls. In one private school sports teacher said, girls also play, but they don't show much interest. In another private school, out of five teachers, four said that they encourage girls to participate in every activity, while one male teacher said that these are village girls, they won't learn to play badminton. The head teacher of the same school said that we focus primarily on the boys because senior girls are hesitant and there is always a risk of injury for primary girls. On the contrary, groups of girls in all schools were more athletic and playing the 'rough games'. Similarly, there were boys in class 5th and 8th who were good at making rangoli and designing, which, according to teachers, is the expertise of girls. It implies teachers themselves segregated playground space for students, and this perception of teachers is also influencing the students' interest. One of the teachers said that her boy is good at crafting Mehndi designs, and she always supports him, but he never shows his designs to other classmates because he has experienced bullying from his peers. This not only affects student hobbies but also imbibing gendered behavior in them.

Students Construction of their Social Space

In sports activities, if a teacher used to organize games, the competition would be between alike groups (girls would play with girls only and same for boys) not inclusive groups (both girls and boys would be in a same team). During these competitions, even the students' cheering was gendered, meaning girls would cheer only for girl participants. Similarly, boys would appreciate only boy participants. Primary grader also follows this trend. 21 girls said that they don't like to play kabbadi or running games in school because other boys make fun of them. It has observed that the division between the groups in one school was very high. Senior students used to practice badminton, basketball, and other games in an isolated place where the senior girl students were not allowed. This shows that students has created their own space within the school. They decided to whom they should cheer, division of space on the basis of gender. This gendered space even teach students that playing in inclusive group is not something appreciable and acceptable.

In the next section one case study and one in-formal interaction has been discussed to understand the social space.

Social Space – according to Bourdieu (1985), social world can be considered as a space which consist several dimensions, it could be a place where particular number of actors and positions are present and associated with each other (Liu & Emirbayer, 2016, p 63).

Case Study (Government Middle School, Utila)

The objective to study this particular case was the irregular school attendance.

Pooja (Name Changed), a 14-year-old girl, was enrolled in Government Middle School, Utila, in the IX standard. She lives in a stranded house on the outskirts of the village Khera, a small habitat four km away from Utila. She has one older brother and two younger brothers. Her father is a farmer, and her mother is a home maker. Her father studied up to the secondary level, and her mother till the primary level. Her family belongs to the Scheduled Caste category. She has two elder cousin sisters, and both are school dropouts. Pooja's younger brothers live with their grandmother in another village where the school facility is in the neighbourhood. Both of them attend private schools. According to the class teacher, she hardly attended school for more than one week every month. After an interaction with her parents, it was found that Pooja worked on the farm along with her older brother and father. According to her mother, it was easier for pooja to attend school regularly when it was nearer to their house. The reasons she shared included no conveyance from her place to school and that no one from her family, mainly her grandfather and her father, wants to educate her. There are certain household responsibilities she needs to take care of. Her mother also said that Pooja is not good in studies. Pooja is facing not only economic but social barriers as well, to access education. Her school, which is three kilometres away from where she lives, is far. According to her mother, in contrast, she goes across the village to feed cattle. It implies that the social space in family as well as in school is gendered, the space is not giving the opportunity to her to get education the same space is giving preference to her brother's education. Patriarchal values that structured her home's space play a vital role in deciding whether education is essential for her or her brothers.

Informal Conversation - Head Teacher, Government school, Sirol

Manju Sharma (Name Changed), was a 48-year-old Hindu woman. She was the only female head out of all the sample schools. She said that she has experienced discrimination by male teachers not only in her school but also in other meetings and training workshops. She said that at every place, whether in the management of physical resources or the management of funds received by the school, she needs to be more vigilant and have to prove herself in front of other teachers that she is doing the right things. Which implies that she does not feel very safe in school space. She said that she tried her best to give every student opportunities without biases. But there were few instances and dialogues where the head teacher was contradicting her own idea of gender equality. During informal conversation she said that the difference between girls and boys cannot and should not be mitigated because it will disturb the hierarchy and values of "Hindu Dharam" (Hindu Religion). She said that increasing Suicide and Divorce rates result from Gender Equality in Society. She

tried to highlight the anatomy of both girls and boys and said that gender equality could not be a reality, and the gap between the genders cannot be breached. According to her, there are differences in the genes of males and females, which make men more intellectual and powerful. She said that in our religion women are treated as goddess Laxmi; motherhood makes them emotional and fragile. It was analysed that she herself facing challenges in her school because the male counterparts used to doubt her abilities but in the same place with her misogynist thinking she was creating the space which was not giving gender friendly environment to both boys and girls student.

Implication of the Research

This paper intends to understand the school space and how gender interplays inside this space. From the above findings, we can say that space inside the school is very gendered. Common space like playground or area outside of school was visibly more accessed by the boys' students as compared to girls' students. The accessibility of these spaces depended upon the age of girls, as the age of girls has increased their presence in these spaces has decreased. The activities within the school space were also assigned according to the gender role which hinders the opportunity for many students. The division of games was also according to the masculine and feminine characteristics, because of this many students could not play the games in which they were interested. The gendered space was constructed by both teachers and students. Many teachers were practicing patriarchal rules and regulations, and students learn from them. This whole practice and use of space construct the gendered environment. So, the school which was supposed to be discrimination-free was a space of discriminating students according to their gender.

Conclusion

It can be argued that space which consist different components of society, create and recreate practices and rules which are supposed to be followed by the agents. Discrimination on the basis of gender is also one of the practices which has been created in the social space. School which is also a part of this social space has not been untouched by these practices. School can be a place for both gender discriminated or gender sensitization. Both teacher and parents can make gender friendly space within the school. According to Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian (2008), most of the girls still find impediments in entering schools and continue their education. Because the patriarchal structure of society is not giving the equal space to girls where they can learn and aspire to become something. Even students' reflections about gendered structure of their own school playground which indicates that they have very precise spatiality of their own belonging and inclusion. The girls who were part of this study were facing discrimination they could not play whatever they want and wherever they want. It was observed that they were stuck in their own little space. These findings demonstrate that policy makers need to be more aware of self-thoughts and actions before they design any policy, because unless the space won't be equal how can we achieve equality in other fields. Here the role of teacher is also equally significant, they need to be more vigilant about every drop out case, if they could trace their children from school to college and can guide them for future endeavours, the participation of girls can be increased in rural areas as well.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that no competing interests exist.

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