

A SMALL STEP TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY: THE MUKTANGAN WAY

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Abstract:

The worth of a civilization can be judged by the place given to women in the society. Though India has examples of great women writers, rulers, scientists, social workers, freedom fighters etc but unfortunately these are very few.

The idea of an 'Equal society' especially in terms of Gender Equality as envisaged by the Indian Constitution is still far from reality. Practices like female foeticide, illiteracy, dowry, economic slavery etc are stopping us from achieving this dream even after 71 years of independence. The reason, we are all aware of. So let's see what can be done by us especially as teachers to create a society where men and women are seen as 'Equal' not only in the eyes of law but also in reality.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of the practices followed in Muktangan to bring about an attitudinal change in all the stakeholders which will gradually help in creating an attitude among all to see/treat both the groups as equal.

The 'Teacher Learner Society' course in the pre-service training, daily routine practices and co-curricular activities with students are some of the ways Muktangan is trying to promote 'Gender Equality'. All these practices motivate the teachers as well as the students to reflect on their own attitude and behaviour, question their beliefs and change their own attitudes.

Keywords: Muktangan, attitudinal change, Teacher Learner Society course, daily routine practices, Gender equality, Reflect.

The worth of a civilization can be judged by the place given to its women in the society. Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra, Mirabai, Razia Sultan, Bachindri Pal, Kiran Bedi, Indira Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Sania Mirza, Geeta Phogat, Mithali Raj, Mary Kom and many more are the names of females that have made India proud. Unfortunately, these are only a few examples of the females who have managed to break the stereotype of weak, dependent women. They had to work extremely hard and overcome all the obstacles and the stereotypes that tried to pull them back. They had to create their own opportunities.

India is a diverse country with a rich cultural heritage; a wonderful past going back to a highly developed civilization more than 5000 years ago. In the Vedic period women had equal opportunities in some fields of life. Gradually, a change took place in the way women were seen. They were no longer regarded as strong, independent, intelligent, equal beings. In spite of this, in the Medieval and the Modern periods we had some examples of strong, independent women who got some equal opportunities. However, the attitude towards women changed over a period of time and it made them inferior to their counterparts. Their status became subordinate. Practices like female foeticide, illiteracy, dowry and dowry deaths, economic slavery etc is practiced even today. Every day, newspapers carry various stories of such horrific incidences.

The Constitution makers wanted to lawfully put an end to this discrimination based on gender and therefore adopted the policy of Equality in the Constitution. Various laws and policies are created in the Indian Constitution like the Fundamental Right of Equality, Right to Freedom, and Right against exploitation etc. Various committees and institutions are created to support women. However, the idea of an 'Equal society' especially in terms of Gender Equality as envisaged by the Indian Constitution is still far from reality.

The reasons, we are all aware of. To list a few as observed in majority of the households across India: having grand celebrations for the birth of a male child, using terms like 'raja beta' even for the daughters, giving fresh food to the sons and acts like admitting sons to private hospitals for treatment and English medium schools for their better future, giving them permission for everything to accepting their behaviour as it is. These are some of the realities that majority of the girls observe around them and these small-small acts makes a big lasting impression on their minds. These small acts give certain ideas to both the groups and that is where it starts.

So, what is the solution? Let's see what can be done by us as teachers to create a society where men and women are seen as 'Equal' not only in the eyes of law but also in reality. What can the teachers do to bring back the attitude that both the genders are equals? True, biologically there are certain tasks that only a particular gender can do because they are created in that manner; otherwise there is no difference!

The school curriculum plays a big role in bringing about this attitudinal change. The role of a teacher goes far beyond communicating the syllabus to the child. Along with teaching course content, teachers also communicate attitudes and values to children, and have a powerful impact as role models for the children. The practices followed in school often become habit for many individuals in their later life.

Early childhood is a time when developmental changes are happening that can have profound and lasting consequences for a child's future. Studies have shown that much more is going on cognitively, socially, and emotionally in young children than previously known. As children progress from infancy to preschool and through their early elementary years, it is important for them to have continuous, consistent, high-quality support for their overall personality development and learning. So, if we want to make a difference it is better to start from the beginning rather than try to make changes later on and this is what Muktangan believes in and follows – making equality and inclusion a very integral part of every process & practise that happens in Muktangan from Pre-school onwards.

Muktangan is a not-for-profit organisation working in the field of Education since its inception in 2003. It is working with a vision of having 'An inclusive, empowered world in which all live in harmony with freedom of expression, respect and with integrity'. Starting with just 7 teachers and 90 students from local, under-served communities it has now grown into a successful 'hub and spoke' model of school education with more than 815 teachers, 3729 students and with 15 years of experience in experimentation and innovations in the education system. Supported through the Paragon Charitable Trust in partnership with the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM), Muktangan works with seven Municipal Public Schools in the G/South ward.

The organization, celebrating diversity, is inclusive in its philosophy. Leadership is participatory, critical thinking is encouraged and the potential for learning and growth of all stakeholders is respected. Mukhtangan's core values include openness, transparency and respect.

Some of the practices followed in Mukhtangan to bring about an attitudinal change in all the stakeholders are:

1. Teacher Learner Society (TLS) course: The Teacher Learner Society course, is a compulsory course which the trainees undergo in their pre-service training of one year in Mukhtangan. The main topics covered in this course are Human Rights, Marginalization (caste, gender and minorities), Mass-Media, Democracy and Secularism. The underlying values for all the topics are based on the values of Equality, Liberty, Justice, Fraternity and Integrity as mentioned in the Constitution of India.

The course aims at expanding teacher's awareness of social issues by providing an opportunity for discussion and debate on matters that are of contemporary concern and which can strengthen their position as good role models for children. It also aims to provide information which can help the trainees understand an issue, discuss values that should guide their interaction with students and others, and develop a self questioning attitude as part of their personality and development.

The Main Idea of having sessions on Gender is to make the trainees aware that Gender is a cultural construction, which refers to ideas of what it means to be male or female in our culture. These ideas reflect a hierarchy in which masculine is considered superior to feminine. Gender roles are changing, and should in fact change since in our society gender roles are very restrictive, especially for women. Gender roles are reinforced by media, text books, and other cultural practices.

The Learning Outcome of the sessions are a) Trainees distinguish between the biological fact of being male or female and the cultural ideas associated with this b) Trainees recognise how society constructs and reproduces the ideas associated with being male or female and c) Trainees reflect how the school and the education system can reinforce gender stereotypes and explore ways to counter them.

In an active constructive manner through various activities, observations and role-play the trainees construct their own understanding of what is Gender, Gender discrimination, how deeply this idea of males superior and better than females are rooted in our society and reflect on their own attitudes and behaviours. It also gives them a chance to think on how they have to make sure that they don't bring in their own Gender prejudice and bias in the classroom.

Once they are aware about this, it gradually becomes a part of their behaviour especially in the school to treat both the groups equally. There are tracking tools (observation, tutorial) to track this especially the attitude and skills of the trainees and a regular feedback is shared with the trainees. This helps the trainees to go to the schools as teachers with a more open mind, attitude and behaviour.

2. Daily Practices:

2.1 Pre-School: In pre-school all the students are encouraged to explore the 'home' area and it is observed in Muktangan that more boys compared to girls explore this area. Maybe, because at home they are not allowed or encouraged to do so. Even the clean-up practice after the activities are done by all the students. So, right from pre-school onwards they get a taste of a equality in class.

2.2. Sitting in a circle and its importance: In Muktangan everyone sits in a circle for all the activities. Compared to traditional schools seating arrangement of rows one after the other and separate rows for boys and girls, children & teachers here in Muktangan sit at same height either on floor, stools / chairs in circles in schools and at the training centre. The reason behind this is to be 'Inclusive and Democratic' and to demonstrate that everyone is equal -teacher and students, boys and girls etc. All voices are heard and everyone gets an opportunity to express their ideas and opinions. It encourages one to one interaction between individual student and teacher and also between students.

It has slowly become a habit in all the stakeholders at Muktangan to always sit in a circle and make sure that the democratic value of giving equal opportunities to all is practised in school.

2.3. Cleaning Duties: In Muktangan it is believed that the idea of equality starts by taking ownership of the resources used and by doing your work independently. Though the

school have a pantry, everyone in Mukhtangan is expected to wash their own cup of tea, bowl of fruits and khichdi on their own. So, all members' students (from standard three till standard 10), teachers and faculty do their own washing. To maintain hygiene the pantry staff once again rinse the bowls washed by the students. All students and teachers also have classroom sweeping duties everyday because in Mukhtangan it is believed that 'my classroom is my home and I must keep it clean'.

These small practices encourage the students to see that the washing and cleaning are not the work of only the female members but of everyone. This helps them to see & experience that male and females can be equal partners in taking up the responsibilities.

Many parents have shared in the parents meetings and also during home-visits how their sons have now started helping them with household work and also show more respect towards them. These practices will gradually help the students to share household responsibilities with their partners and not feel that 'this is not my work' or 'cleaning and mopping is to be done only by the females'.

2.4. Quality Circle Time (QCT): In Mukhtangan QCT is the time where all classmates sit together in a circle along with the teacher to discuss issues, recent events, class behaviour etc following the rules of the circle time. Students are free to choose the topic for discussion. Everyone is encouraged to share their opinions and give solutions to the problems raised.

This promotes positive relationships in the class. It gives encouragement to positive behaviour and creation of respectful and caring environment in the school. It also helps in building up self-esteem and confidence of the students who are usually shy and also gives them a platform to share their feelings which they are not able to share in a regular class.

It is believed that this practise will demonstrate to students how to be inclusive and treat everyone equally and consider all members opinion before making a final decision – a practise which is rarely seen in the common middle class households where all decisions are mainly taken by the male members.

3. Co-curricular Activities with the students: In Mukhtangan, all students are encouraged to be part of the annual days, sports days and project day. The teachers in discussion with the students

create a plan of what they would like to do for the project day and the annual day. The teachers continuously demonstrate the values of inclusion and equality for the students. Even for the career guidance, Muktangnan have programmes like the 'World of Exposure' programme for the standard 8 students and the 'MuktMinds' programme for the standard 10 students where all the students are given an exposure to the unlimited types of work and career they can take up.

It was also felt that having one-year module of TLS will not be sufficient enough for the teachers to understand the society and reflect on their behaviour. The students too need to be aware of some the practices that are there in the society which is holding us back from creating an equal society. Therefore, Muktangnan adopted the Avehi Abacus project created by the Sangati foundation especially for the students.

Through various interactive sessions students get an understanding of differences and issues in the society. They also get a chance to reflect and share remedies to the issues like gender discrimination, caste system, changing world etc. The idea behind having this project was to reiterate the teachings of the TLS course and make sure that these issues are covered with the students as well because many times these topics are not elaborately done in the regular textbooks. These sessions are clubbed with regular Social Studies classes and are conducted with students across the standards to make it even more effective and meaningful.

4. Professional Development of the teachers and the subject faculty: Gender issues are such that sessions for a year in the training period will not be enough to grasp and reflect on. Therefore, regular professional development of the teachers is conducted during the vacations where many of these issues are revised with the teachers and the subject faculty members connecting it with the current issues going in the country like Sabrimala Temple entry issue, Shanishingnapur temple issue etc. It helps the teachers to refresh their knowledge and have an opinion on the issue. During the 'film festival' women empowerment is discussed through films, the understanding of the issue, changes happening and what more needs to be done are discussed with the teachers. There is a group of discussants who discusses the film, the dialogues, ideas, attitude etc with the teachers giving the teachers a chance to see the film from a fresh perspective.

From the beginning, Muktangnan is working towards achieving its vision by demonstrating these small yet very important and powerful practices. It is said that every small step leads to a bigger

destination. These practices when followed everyday and year after year from a tender age till the time the students are adolescents and they leave the school, they will be going out in the world with a different perspective. These small acts, I believe, later on guide them and motivate them to respect themselves and the others and treat everyone equally.

There will definitely be an attitudinal change especially in the students and these future citizens will surely create an equal society wherever they go, with whoever they interact and work with. This bunch of students will be the change makers in the society.

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