

# GENDER BIAS IN EDUCATIONAL SPACES

COMMITTEE FOR MANAGING GENDER ISSUES



Gender-based discrimination in educational spaces takes place in myriad ways – some are overt while other forms of bias happen in a subtle manner. The most visible case of discrimination is the issue of access to education itself. India has witnessed an increase in enrolment rates of girls, partly through schemes such as the Mid-day meal, free cycles and textbooks for girl children, and incentives. However, these also have to be read in conjunction with the dropout rates to get the larger picture (Kingdon 2005; Singh and Mukherjee 2018; Taneja 2018; Yadav 2022). Studies have cited different reasons for this phenomenon – economic constraints leading to the boys being sent to school while the girls provide labour, notions of investing in a girl's education being a waste, early marriages, lack of access to toilets and so on (Saha 2013).

*While denial of access is an evident form of discrimination, female students also face multiple instances of subtle sexism, making educational spaces less inclusive for them. In this edition of the newsletter, **Therese Abraham**, CMGI research associate, writes about gender-based discrimination or biases in educational institutions based on conversations with the IIMA community members.*

Sexualisation of female bodies starts from a very young age, as has been corroborated by research as well as most IIMA community members we talked to. They were either subject to it themselves or knew a fellow student who was asked to dress or behave 'appropriately'. Raveena, a research assistant, was asked by her lecturer to stop wearing leggings to class as it would 'distract' the male students who were there for serious studies. She remarks wryly as to why no one bothers to change the mindset of the people who feel the need to look at her but would rather slut shame her for the choice of clothing. A schoolteacher in Kerala was [dismissed](#) for insisting that authorities ensure that students get proper sex education instead of forcing the teachers to wear a waistcoat over their saree (Vats 2022).

Another research assistant shares how a dance teacher would pad their chest with folded sarees to make them look more feminine. She adds laughingly, "it's like we need to switch it to what they want on command". Along with sexist dress codes, hostel curfews placing restrictions only on women is another mode of discrimination couched in the language of protection (Choudhury 2022). In both instances, the onus of creating safe spaces is placed on women- by locking them up or policing what they wear. There is no effort made to create safer environments.

Two winter school participants at IIMA recounted separate incidents where their female colleagues were forced to drop out of school for no fault of theirs. While one student was expelled citing two boys fighting over her in the washroom, the other had to leave school following backlash from a sexual harassment complaint. This is in a country where we see worrying numbers of school dropout rates among female children.

Inherent sexist norms see their impact on male students as well. Navin, a PGP student, mentions an incident in school where a couple of boys would constantly taunt a male classmate for wearing floral shirts. Once, they even locked him in the girl's washroom to put him where he 'belongs'. Another community member laments how these rigid norms are often supported by authority figures; she recalls a teacher who would constantly advise the boys to 'man up' and not display any emotion. There is also undue pressure on male students to stick to conventional employment and score higher as they will be 'bread winners' of their family one day. According to Aastha, a PGP student, "While educational spaces may not be the origin of such inherently held beliefs, they sure can either break the cycle or further perpetuate these."

When we look at educational institutions as agents of change, it is imperative to critically analyse what they impart. There have been multiple cases where the teaching material has been found to carry stereotypical depictions furthering patriarchal concepts (Cocorada 2018; Košir and Lakshminarayanan 2022). While the impact of such teaching material may be reduced at higher levels of education, such representations can leave a lasting impression on young minds leading to the formation of stereotypical gender roles (Zaina 2022).



Often, casual remarks pertaining to education can also lead to issues related to confidence. Leela, a research associate, recalls how a teacher once told her that her brother would soon score higher in math - 'after all, boys are better at application subjects'. She triumphantly states that she ensured this never happened. However, it did affect her confidence for a while, she adds.

Apart from sartorial choices, there also seems to be disproportionate amount of focus on 'appropriate conduct' and propriety at several educational spaces. A research associate mentioned how the rumour mill in classrooms and staffrooms would portray her as 'loose' for hanging out with male peers after class. She was deemed 'unladylike' for being opinionated and loud, traits she felt was appreciated in her male friends. The rigid norms of 'decent' and accepted female behaviour don't spare female faculty as well. The forced [resignation](#) of a college lecturer in Kolkata over her private Instagram photos is the most recent example of this (Pandey 2022).

Saira, an FABM student, says she saw the starkest bias at play at the physical education classes. The girls would be left to their own devices and asked to play in the field while the sports amenities would be given to the boys. She remarks how some sports competitions at IIMA don't have enough women's events, and mixed competitions seem to have token representation. The counter here, of course, is that there are not enough girls to participate in these events. The fact is, as children, girls simply do not get the encouragement or the necessary opportunities to participate in sports. Bhanu, an academic associate, notes that she would be the first to volunteer for heavy lifting duties when fests happened at school, only to be turned down saying these are work to be done by the boys. She would watch weaker classmates struggle while she was put into decorations or greeting committees.

In most instances, casual sexism is accepted as the standard norm and the people who call these out are often vilified for creating an issue over nothing. A study undertaken in one of the leading institutions in the country reports that 63% of students ignore casual sexism and do not consider it a serious issue (Bhatkhande 2018).

It is telling that one of the respondent mentions that she has been 'lucky' enough not to face any discrimination thereby underlining the pervasiveness of the issue. The fact that it has become so ingrained in our psyche is a bleak prospect.



Research emphasizes that there can be a long term negative impact of gender bias in education (Alan, Ertac, and Mumcu 2018; Klasen and Lamanna 2009; Lavy and Sand 2018). In India, educational spaces, particularly schools and colleges, inadvertently perpetuate patriarchal values. As a community, we can start by unlearning what we learnt at such spaces!

# From the Field

Nirmohi Shukla, an academic associate at IIMA narrates a few incidents from her fieldwork:

During an internship in Surendranagar in Gujarat, I came across many girls who narrated their lived experiences. A recurring theme that emerged was the precariousness of their access to education. Any inconvenience-restrictions caused - either in the family or at school, they would be the ones to bear the brunt. If the family does not have enough money to pay the children's fees, girls have to take a step back. If the school is located at a distance, they would have to drop out because of the commute and safety issues. If the school didn't have washrooms with running water, they would miss out on classes every month. The girls were additionally burdened with household tasks after coming back from school.

One particular incident still stays with me. A girl was repeatedly subject to 'eve-teasing' by her male classmates. The administration dismissed her complaints with a 'boys will be boys' remark. Eventually, she was forced to drop out by her family.

It is only when we become aware of our biases, that we will be able to create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment for all students.

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The monthly newsletter from the [Committee for Managing Gender Issues \(CMGI\)](#) is an attempt to initiate conversations on discrimination, gender bias, sexual harassment, and related issues. We would love to have the community participate. Please reach out to Therese Abraham at [theresea@iima.ac.in](mailto:theresea@iima.ac.in) for submissions, queries, and/or feedback.

If you feel you have been subjected to sexual harassment or if you would like to make any suggestions regarding curbing sexual harassment or gender bias on campus, please reach out to us at:  
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Please note that any communication with the CMGI is strictly confidential.