

Understanding the State of Gender Discrimination toward the Female Students of Rajshahi University

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Abstract

Male and female students may attain a very different education, even reading the same book in the same classroom from the same teachers. This subtle difference is caused due to gender discrimination in classrooms which has been a devastating reality in countries like Bangladesh. Literature suggests that gender discrimination victimizes female students in different forms, i.e., stereotypes, segregation, biases, etc. Therefore, international forums have sought inclusiveness in classrooms as a strategy to eradicate gender discrimination. Given that, before implementing such a strategy, this paper emphasizes examining the reality of the context regarding this issue. However, it is hard to find any study that has considered different forms of gender discrimination while gauging the issue in the Bangladeshi context so that the actual scenario could be illustrated. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the state of gender discrimination in the university context, considering its different forms. In that direction, this qualitative study has collected data from twenty female students of Rajshahi University through four sessions of Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Findings reveal that different forms of gender discrimination constitute a relationship among themselves by reinforcing each other to lead female students toward inequality in opportunity. The study also indicates that gender discrimination negatively affects female students regarding educational and psychological attainment, which this study emphasizes to conduct further research.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, stereotype, biases, segregation, inequality of opportunity

Introduction

Gender discrimination has been perceived as an insidious problem and a devastating reality in countries like Bangladesh in every aspect of society, such as workplaces, education, family, etc.¹ It starts right after birth and goes on throughout the life cycle, establishing a hierarchical relationship between male and female, and helps to pave the way for many

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¹ VS Sumi, 'Education and Gender Discrimination' (Two Day National Seminar on Women's Human Rights - A Feminist Discourse, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad, March 2012)

rigid gender norms which restrict opportunities and impact all aspects of a female's life.² In the educational context, female students experience psychologically harmful consequences, and their capacity to participate freely and fully in academic activities is affected due to gender discrimination, for which their academic achievements get impeded.³ Even after their educational experiences, gender discrimination affects female students.⁴ The consequences of such discrimination are such harsh that male and female students may attain a very different education, even reading the same book in the same classroom from the same teachers.⁵ As it appears, such discrimination might lead to social injustice in the society we live in.

International forums have come up to eradicate such discrimination against females, eyeing the consequences of gender discrimination. Toward that path, inclusiveness in classrooms can be an effective strategy, as it involves changing values, attitudes, and practices within the schools to maximize the participation of all and minimize exclusion and discriminatory practices.⁶ This paper argues that the success of such inclusive strategy and policy requires a well understanding of the context regarding the issue. Given that, before developing and implementing any inclusive policy and strategy, it seems important to examine the state of gender discrimination in the Bangladeshi academic context.

Literature suggests that gender discrimination is perceived as a unison of its different forms, such as gender segregation, stereotype, biases, etc. However, as manifested in the Bangladeshi literature, gender discrimination has been gauged by considering one form of gender discrimination into account at a time rather than considering its different forms altogether in the academic context. Thus, it makes the realization of gender discrimination in the Bangladeshi academic context bit incomplete to understand. Therefore, this paper argues that investigating the phenomenon in terms of its different forms altogether might help illustrate the actual scenario regarding gender discrimination.

Such an exploration may provide inputs for understanding whether all these forms reinforce each other to lead female students toward gender discrimination. However, it is hard to find any study that has considered different forms of gender discrimination

² Samidha Pokharel, 'Gender Discrimination: Women Perspectives' (2008) 5 Nepalese Journal of Development and Rural Studies 80; Georgina M Hosang and Kamaldeep Bhui, 'Gender Discrimination, Victimization and Women's Mental Health' (2018) 213 The British Journal of Psychiatry 682

³ Pokharel (n 3); Adina C Cooper and Bernadette Sánchez, 'The Roles of Racial Discrimination, Cultural Mistrust, and Gender in Latina/o Youth's School Attitudes and Academic Achievement' (2016) 26 Journal of Research on Adolescence 1036; V Paul Poteat, Jillian R Scheer and Ethan H Mereish, 'Factors Affecting Academic Achievement among Sexual Minority and Gender-Variant Youth' (2014) 47 Advances in Child Development and Behavior 261

⁴ Sumi (n 1)

⁵ David Sadker and Myra Sadker, *Falling in Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls* (Scribner, 1st Touchstone Edition 1995)

⁶ Tony Booth, 'Keeping the Future Alive: Putting Inclusive Values into Action' (North-South Dialogue Conference, Delhi, 2005)

altogether while gauging the issue in the Bangladeshi context. Consequently, it is hoped that this study will fill such a gap by exploring the evidence of gender discrimination in the Bangladeshi academic context reported by a group of female students. Therefore, this study has considered the following research question:

- a. To what extent do different forms of gender discrimination lead female students towards inequality in opportunity in the Bangladeshi university context?

Review of the Literature

Gender discrimination can be referred to as the unfair behavior or unjust treatment toward an individual or a group due to gender identity, which causes one gender to be prioritized and privileged over another resulting in the denial of rights, opportunities, and equality as well as suppression.⁷ Generally, gender discrimination is commonly used for "women" as they are considered the most inferior section of our society and victimized largely.⁸ Tragically, females are the most defenseless against the trauma caused due to gender discrimination⁹. Therefore, in this study, the aspects of gender discrimination revolve around female students.

As it appears, gender discrimination refers to a unison of different forms, i.e., gender segregation, stereotypes, biases, etc. Literature suggests that gender segregation has a strong link with gender discrimination, as segregation by gender is seen to pave the way for stereotypes regarding gender roles in classroom socialization. The tendency of segregation by gender is a pervasive social phenomenon that often occurs.¹⁰ Societal emphasis (e.g., parents, teachers, etc.) on gender and gender differences increases and provides a context for these gender segregation preferences.¹¹ For instance, in classroom reality, teachers are

⁷ Andrey Shastri, 'Gender Inequality and Women Discrimination' (2014) 19 IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science 27; Save the Children, 'Gender Discrimination Causes Inequality Between Girls and Boys Around the World' (*Save the Children*) <<https://www.savethechildren.org/us/charity-stories/how-gender-discrimination-impacts-boys-and-girls>> accessed 12 May 2022

⁸ Shastri (n 7)

⁹ Sumi (n 1)

¹⁰ Richard A Fabes, Carol Lynn Martin and Laura D Hanish, 'Gender Integration and the Promotion of Inclusive Classroom Climates' (2019) 54 Educational Psychologist 271; Eleanor E Maccoby, *The Two Sexes: Growing up Apart, Coming Together* (5th edn, The Belknap Press 1998); Eleanor E Maccoby, 'Gender as a Social Category' (1988) 24 Developmental Psychology 755; Eleanor E Maccoby and Carol Nagy Jacklin, 'Gender Segregation in Childhood', *Advances in Child Development and Behavior* (Vol 20, Elsevier Science 1987); Carol Lynn Martin and Richard A Fabes, 'The Stability and Consequences of Young Children's Same-Sex Peer Interactions.' (2001) 37 Developmental Psychology 431; Clare M Mehta and JoNell Strough, 'Sex Segregation in Friendships and Normative Contexts Across the Life Span' (2009) 29 Developmental Review 201

¹¹ Fabes, Martin and Hanish (n 10)

seen to play a role in reinforcing gender segregation by having male and female students compete against each other or lining up students by gender, etc.¹²

Sultana has reported a similar type of classroom socialization. In this qualitative study conducted in the Bangladeshi private university context, 25 teachers' practices were studied through question paper analysis, interviews, and observations. The study reported that girls sit in separate rows, teachers prefer boys more than girls in classroom questioning, and maintains eye contact with boys more than girls. She implicated that teachers' unwillingness to challenge socially accepted norms, values, and stereotypes is one of the reasons why the issue of gender bias becomes more dynamic.¹³

Segregation in classroom reality is so harsh that mixed-gendered seating adjacency is often seen as a punishment designed to reduce student interaction.¹⁴ When students are lined up by their gender identity, teachers are somehow affirming that female and male students should be treated differently, and thereby, such socialization of gender in classrooms entails a stereotypical perception that female students are unequal to male ones. In addition, the sense of inequality based on gender also paves the stereotypical expectations regarding their ability, e.g., female students are less capable in math than male students.¹⁵ Such stereotypical perceptions and expectations not only point out teachers' discriminative practices but also pave the way for discrimination towards women for their gender identity.

Similarly, such discriminative perceptions and expectations of teachers based on gender identity also emerged in Becker's study. This study explains the gender differences in teacher-student classroom interactions in which ten high school teachers were studied using Brophy-Good Teacher-Child Dyadic Interaction System. She found that teachers hold different expectations and perceptions for their students based on gender, according to which teachers treat students differently, and the students also respond differentially in the class following their teachers' perceptions and expectations.¹⁶

This sense of inequality leads to another form of gender discrimination, that is, biases. This form of discrimination has been perceived as the most challenging thing to eliminate

¹² Rebecca S Bigler, 'The Role of Classification Skill in Moderating Environmental Influences on Children's Gender Stereotyping: A Study of the Functional Use of Gender in the Classroom' (1995) 66 *Child Development* 1072; Lacey J Hilliard and Lynn S Liben, 'Differing Levels of Gender Salience in Preschool Classrooms: Effects on Children's Gender Attitudes and Intergroup Bias' (2010) 81 *Child Development* 1787

¹³ Syeda Farzana Sultana, 'Dealing with Gender Bias inside Bangladeshi Classrooms an Overview of Teachers' Perspectives' (2011) 11 *Language in India* 249

¹⁴ Marlaine E Lockheed and Abigail M Harris, 'Cross-Sex Collaborative Learning in Elementary Classrooms' (1984) 21 *American educational research journal* 275

¹⁵ Amanda Chapman, 'Gender Bias in Education' (EdChange, 2002)

<<http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/papers/genderbias.html>> accessed 27 May 2022; Sumi (n 1)

¹⁶ Joanne Rossi Becker, 'Differential Treatment of Females and Males in Mathematics Classes' (1981) 12 *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education* 40

from education settings.¹⁷ Literature suggests that the consequence of these biases entails harmful to female students' academic achievement. For instance, due to the unequal distribution of teachers' time, energy and attention, male students get the lion's share and female students' education gets affected.¹⁸ Similarly, gender inequality caused by biases promotes hostility, poor school performance, alienation, failure, and despair in academic settings.¹⁹ In addition, it is seen that male students are encouraged to be active, speak up, and think independently, whereas female students are praised for being neat, quiet, and calm.²⁰ Due to this bias, male students are far more likely to be praised by teachers than girls.²¹ As it appears, such biased expectations result from teachers' stereotypical perceptions. Due to such perceptions, teachers hold biases by giving male students greater opportunities than female students and reinforcing male students more for general responses than female students.²²

Similarly, Alice Christie also reported such biased and stereotypical expectations and perceptions. In this qualitative study, she reported teachers' stereotypical behaviors that female students are expected to behave nicely, kindly, and be helping ones. She found that male students are more dominant and get attention, praise, and help from teachers compared to female ones, and it costs female students they remain mostly silent in the classroom. The study also reveals that each time female students are ignored by teachers and expected to be helpful, nice, and quiet in classrooms, they learn to remain silent, which means that female students are less worthy than male ones.²³

Methodology

As this study is engaged in understanding students' experiences and exploring their learning activities, it requires detailed, rich, and qualitative data extracted from the participants' narration of experience. Therefore, this study has used focus group discussions (FGDs) for data collection, mainly to garner an in-depth understanding of participants' discussions, opinions, and perspectives from personal experiences.²⁴ Additionally, FGDs involve collecting more data within a shorter time as it involves several participants in the discussions simultaneously.

¹⁷ Alice Christie, 'Recognizing (Almost) Invisible Gender Bias in Technology Use and Teacher-Student Interactions' (Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference, Phoenix, AZ USA 2005)

¹⁸ Sadker and Sadker (n 5)

¹⁹ Sultana (n 13)

²⁰ Chapman (n 15); Sumi (n 1)

²¹ Sadker and Sadker (n 5)

²² Thomas L Good and Jere E Brophy, *Looking in Classrooms* (4th edn, Harper & Row 1987)

²³ Christie (n 18)

²⁴ Richard A Powell and Helen M Single, 'Focus Groups' (1996) 8 *International Journal for Quality in Healthcare* 499; David L Morgan and Richard A Krueger, 'When to Use Focus Groups and Why' in David L Morgan (ed), *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the State of the Art* (Sage Publications 1993)

A total of 20 female students from Rajshahi University studying in different academic years of different faculties have been selected for the FGDs using the purposive sampling method. Four FGD groups have been formed to collect data from the participants. Due to privacy concerns, code words (e.g., S01, S02, S03, etc.) have been used instead of participants' real names. For considering further ethical issues, the ethical guideline suggested by the British Educational Research Association [BERA], as well as the ethics checklists introduced by Braun & Clarke, have been followed.²⁵

The FGD tools for data collection were developed based on the definitions and concepts and the theoretical and empirical studies regarding gender discrimination. In doing so, some themes have been selected in line with the different forms of gender discrimination to frame tentative tools for the FGDs. Subsequently, participants were asked to respond to the framed FGD tools. For instance, segregation was selected as one of the major themes under which participants were asked to discuss their seating arrangements. Thereby, the tool development and the data collection parts were accomplished.

As this study analyzes qualitative data, it followed the data transcribing, coding, and interpreting procedure suggested by Dörnyei.²⁶ This study followed thematic analysis, introduced by Braun & Clarke, for data analysis.²⁷ Firstly, the FGDs' audio tapes were transcribed. Then, the thematic analysis, introduced by Braun & Clarke, was followed at the coding phase, in which the data transcripts were read and analyzed in line with the research questions and the selected themes.²⁸ Finally, the analyzed data were interpreted following the literature review in the interpreting phase. Intra-data reliability was followed to avoid possible biases regarding the data analysis procedure of this study. Thus, all the data collection and analysis procedures have been performed.

Results and Discussion

Students attain a very different education in the very same classroom due to gender discrimination.²⁹ As it appears, similar indications regarding the discriminative attainment in the classroom also have been identified in the references of the participants of this study. They have reported profound references in support of the view that they experience discrimination in their academic setting in terms of its different forms. At this point, the significant findings will be discussed thoroughly in this section.

Participants were asked to discuss the seating arrangement in their class to understand gender segregation. Most participants have reported that they do not share the same bench

²⁵ British Educational Research Association (BERA), *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (BERA 2018); Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology' (2006) 3 *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 77

²⁶ Zoltán Dörnyei, *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics* (Oxford University Press 2007).

²⁷ Braun and Clarke (n 26)

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ Sadker and Sadker (n 5)

with the male students. For instance, *S3* reported that they sit on separate benches in the class. This kind of seating arrangement indicates the existence of gender segregation in the classroom as such a seating arrangement creates discrimination among students by segregating them.³⁰ Similar findings have been found in Sultana's study, in which she reported that Bangladeshi female students sit in separate rows in the classroom.³¹ In this case, teachers play roles in upholding such a gender salience by lining up students based on their gender identity in classrooms.³² Similarly, the participants of this study have made reference that indicates that their teachers play a role in reinforcing gender segregation among the students in the classroom. For instance, participants reported the reasons behind such separate seating arrangements. Among the participants, *S04* stated:

...there are single desks. Even if you sit side by side on the desks, teachers ask why you are sitting side by side with the boys.

In this statement, what the participant reported points out teachers' role in such segregated seating arrangements. It is manifested in the literature that mixed-gendered seating adjacency is often seen as a punishment designed to reduce student interaction.³³ However, in the case study, the participants reported that their mixed-gendered interaction is considered an offence to the teachers. For instance, *S18* stated:

In the orientation class, the teachers instructed us that male and female students should sit in separate rows... when male and female students sit together, the teachers gossip and laugh among themselves. They taunt us that we have become too modern, and that's why we want to sit together in class.

As it appears, this statement indicates that teachers discourage female students from sitting with male students to reduce mixed-gendered interaction.³⁴ Thus, it indicates that such discouragement ultimately up-holds gender segregation in classrooms. Some of the other participants' statements identified such a tendency of teachers. In addition, the salience of gender segregation in the classroom somehow affirms the perception that students should be treated differently based on their gender identity.³⁵ Such a perception seems to pave the way for other forms of gender discrimination, e.g., stereotypes.³⁶ The participants have also reported that they are treated differently by their teachers. For instance, *S02* stated:

...during our fieldwork, teachers tell us that this task is difficult. Let the boys do it. You do anything else easier.

³⁰ Bigler (n 12)

³¹ Sultana (n 13)

³² Fabes, Martin and Hanish (n 10)

³³ Lockheed and Harris (n 14)

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ Chapman (n 15)

³⁶ Bigler (n 12)

This statement indicates teachers' discriminative practices in academic participation, which points out gender segregation and stereotype. As it appears, the segregation might have caused due to teachers' stereotypical perception of female students' capability, therefore divided with the different tasks, which seem very similar to what several studies have argued.³⁷ Similarly, Becker's study found that teachers possession of different perceptions and expectations based on students' gender identity, according to which teachers treat students differently as well as expect to respond to them differentially in the class.³⁸ As it seems, such stereotypes and segregation pave the way for gender biases. Similarly, the participants reported experiencing biases regarding their classroom representative (CR) selection process. For instance, *S02* stated:

Boys are selected as CR in our class. When we are to be informed about papers, class, exams, etc., boys are informed comparatively more than girls.

This statement indicates teachers' biases as male students are reported to be more prioritized here by the teachers compared to female students. This sense of inequality eventually discriminates against female students by giving male students more privilege in terms of access to the opportunity of being CRs.³⁹ Similarly, the participants reported biases in terms of access to the teachers. For instance, *S07* stated that:

Teachers give more access to boys, even if they don't say it specifically. Boys go more (to teachers).

This statement demonstrates the participants' evaluation that male students get more access to teachers than female students. As it appears, this statement indicates the biases and inequality in time and attention distribution by teachers for which female students get fewer opportunities than male students.⁴⁰ Thus, male students secure the lion's share, whereas female students get affected academically.⁴¹ For instance, *S04* stated:

If the groupmate is a boy, then boys are sent. Girls do not usually go unless it is mandatory.

This statement appears to be pointing out teachers' biases and indicating that female students fall behind in educational attainment as they keep out of their full potential in participating in academic tasks.⁴² Besides that, due to such biases, male students are more reinforced for general responses than female students.⁴³ For instance, *S02* stated:

Teachers asked to participate in such work by looking at the boys. That's why the girls don't get interested in participating.

³⁷ Chapman (n 16); Sumi (n 1); Fabes, Martin and Hanish (n 10)

³⁸ Becker (n 18)

³⁹ Save the Children (n 7)

⁴⁰ Good and Brophy (n 23)

⁴¹ *ibid*

⁴² Sadker and Sadker (n 5)

⁴³ Good and Brophy (n 23)

As it appears, this statement indicates teachers' subtle biases regarding access to academic participation by only making eye contact with male students. Similar findings also have been found in Sultan's study in which she reported that Bangladeshi teachers prefer male students more than female girls for questioning in the classroom but also maintain eye contact with male students more than female students.⁴⁴ In addition, the statement also reports that female students are likely to be less interested in participating in academic work, which indicates that they get negatively affected psychologically due to teachers' biased eye contact. Similarly, the American Association of University Women's (AAUW) report found that female students draw less attraction and attention from teachers compared to male students, which eventually affects female students psychologically.⁴⁵ The following statements indicate such psychological effects of gender discrimination in the educational context. For instance, participants were asked to put their opinion on the labor division among male and female students in organizing departmental events. *S16* stated:

We have a division of labor in such a way that heavy or sensitive work is done by male students. Basically, almost everything is done by male students. And the indoor tasks are done by us.

This statement reflects the stereotypical gender roles prevailing among the students where the male one is to do the 'heavy' and 'sensitive' tasks, and the female student is to do the indoor tasks. Even the participants also reported accepting such gendered roles. For instance, *S14* stated:

Even if female students are offered, they do not want to participate. Maybe for lack of experience or due to a communication gap. And female students are good at decoration work, so they do this work.

The statement indicates that the female students have accepted that they are only good at decoration-related tasks and are not interested in doing the tasks that male ones do. As it appears, this acceptance of such stereotypical labor division in terms of gender identities reflects the harmful psychological consequences of gender discrimination that female students perceive subtly. As students reflect on their education throughout life, such acceptance of gender stereotypical roles may remain in their psychology for the rest of life. Since students reflect throughout their lives on what they learn in their classrooms, it seems likely that they will carry such acceptance of gender stereotypical roles and reflect throughout their lives.

⁴⁴ Sharmin Sultana, 'Why and How Promoting Learners' Autonomy in TESL in Bangladesh?' (2017) 7 International Journal of Social Science & Education 1

⁴⁵ Shruti Raina, 'Gender Bias in Education' (2012) 1 International Journal of Research Pedagogy and Technology in Education and Movement Sciences

Conclusion

The study aimed to understand how different forms of gender discrimination lead female students toward unequal opportunity. This study has investigated a group of Bangladeshi female students' reported evidence of gender discrimination in their academic context. Therefore, data were collected by examining the learning practices of nine female students of Rajshahi University through FGDs. The study has found some significant findings.

Firstly, the participants have reported ample references which demonstrate that they perceive discrimination due to their gender identity in terms of segregation, stereotype, biases, etc., in their learning context. In this case, teachers' role has emerged as influential in reinforcing different forms of gender discrimination. Findings also indicate that female students get affected academically and psychologically. Secondly, findings also indicate a relationship among different forms of gender discrimination. As it appears, female students are victimized by gender segregation resulting from gender stereotypes. Thus, segregation and stereotypes lead to biases. Eventually, all these forms lead female students toward inequality in opportunity. Therefore, it can be claimed that different forms of gender discrimination constitute a relationship among themselves by reinforcing each other to lead female students toward inequality in opportunity.

In additions raise a few pedagogical concerns. The primary concern is that Bangladeshi female students face gender discrimination in their academic context, for which students may achieve different education in the same classroom based on their gender identity.⁴⁶ In other words, in the context of Bangladeshi university, classrooms are still struggling with over-inclusiveness and equal opportunity. In addition, the study reveals that different forms of gender discrimination reinforce each other in which teachers are identified as the prime agent. Therefore, this paper suggests that teachers should be conscious that their teaching practices possess no discrimination. Additionally, what extent female students get affected academically and psychologically by gender discrimination needs to be addressed in further studies.

The researcher felt the existence of a limitation of this study. Due to the qualitative nature, the study has been done on a relatively small scale, for which the results may not be representative of the whole Bangladeshi university context. However, this study does not intend to generalize its findings but rather to understand the issue. Secondly, based solely on students' perspectives, this study reveals that teachers play an influential role in reinforcing gender discrimination. This study argues that if both the teachers' and the students' perspectives could be studied here, the issue would be better understood, therefore, recognizes further research studies in that regard.

⁴⁶ ibid

In fine, this study concludes with the urging dispatch that necessary steps and further research initiatives should be taken regarding this issue to establish a discrimination-free classroom reality by eradicating all kinds of discrimination toward women.

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