

**EXPLORING GENDER IDENTITY AT PRIMARY STAGE: STORIES SPEAK****Ritu Bakshi, Ph. D.***Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Studies, Central University of Jammu, J&K***Abstract**

*The researcher through data collection and responsive investigation show the school time experiences and exposure of boys and girls in their story dictation and dramatization. The present study highlights and emphasises the vital role of narrative in play and how it can be a rich venue to explore the facts of difference and similarity, particularly relating to gender identities and expression. The study explores how the children's stories tell the influence of cultural stereotypes and the potential to move beyond rigid gender boundaries as well. In the ancient era in India, the grandparents used to tell the stories to the kids to enhance their vision about culture and society. But with time, the art of storytelling and of stories has diminished in early childhood as well as in school education. The present paper is an attempt to remind us of the power of story to empower children to value both their own voices and those of their peers.*

**Keywords:** *Story- telling, school, sensitization, gender.*



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**Introduction**

Story transcription is an inspiring literacy and educational activity, and opens up a world of insight for both teachers and children (Daitsman 2009). It has been noticed that when preschool students dictated and dramatized stories in the classroom they tended to use gender stereotypes and isolate themselves by gender. Research supports that the process of story - telling can be a medium for their expression of gender identity, gender sensitization and social relationships in the classroom. From a very premature age children attempt to categorize the world around them according to the socialisation they are countering around. One of the most obvious ways that they are able to categorize people is by gender and this mainly happens through gender socialisation. "Children have absorbed gender stereotyping by the time they are two years old because the clothing and toys a baby is given are chosen by adults 'with an eye toward gender'" (Flatter, as cited in Hinitz & Hewes 2011, 25–26). As they reach preschool age, children begin to develop their sense of self in relation to others.

Fine reveals that “even before they reach school, children can go well beyond the surface of gender associations and make inferences about nothing less than male and female inner nature itself” (2010, 224).

Couchenour and Chrisman state, “When boys or girls are overly concerned about gender-specific behavioral expectations, they may be unwilling to consider befriending a child of the opposite sex” (2011, 200). Estola suggests that “it is important that all play domains are not culturally divided into separate ‘boys’ or ‘girls’ games since this narrows children’s possibilities to develop their full potential” (2011, 48). Despite the fact that her kindergarten boys and girls preferred to be separated for activities, Paley discovered that, “Playing together makes the girls livelier and the boys more agreeable” (1984, 37). This is consistent with Vygotsky’s social-constructivist concept that “children are capable of doing much more in collective activity” (1978, 88).

Eckert & McConnell-Ginet indicate that “With differential treatment, boys and girls eventually learn to be different” (2003, 18) and Groot Kim demonstrates how children can be “at a very early, impressionable age, exposed to gender-related messages in classrooms run by competent, caring, and conscientious teachers who seemed to be unaware of sending these messages” (2011, 245). Jacobson reveals that teachers “have the power to reinforce gender stereotypes or we can choose to abandon those stereotypes and develop more humane, just, and fulfilling ways of relating to one another. . . . Self-reflection, therefore, is key to unlearning systems and traditions that are no longer useful for us and that cause discrimination, social inequality, and injustice” (2011, 18).

Our newspapers are daily printing disheartening stories of sexual assaults and the perpetuation of violence against women. Distressing cases of unjustified social conditioning have also not stopped coming to the fore.

The Rohtak sisters who displayed sheer bravery by beating up their molesters are now becoming the victims of blame. People are coming with up with every possible absurd reason to prove the girls ‘aggressive’ and the boys, innocent. No one wishes to get into dirty fights with polluted minds without any reason; how can the society overlook this very basic fact?

What would happen if this moral deterioration becomes rampant? A state of anarchy has always existed for women; they have been conveniently blamed and victimized for whatever

they do or whatever they don't. Is this disorder going to take us anywhere? With such recurring shameful incidents we are eclipsing the healthy survival of our society.

### **The deep roots of violence against women**

The problem lies in the deep seated bias which is a gift of our proud patriarchal mindset. We are still celebrating the birth of a male child and killing female foetuses. Our society suffers from a sad case of social conditioning where we teach girls to keep quiet and encourage the sick attitude of "boys will be boys". Even educated couples indulge in superstitious offerings of prayers to bear a male child. We are becoming meek spectators to the worsening sex ratio, ever increasing cases of female foeticides and the never ending cases of child marriages. When our politicians mention their daughters as liabilities and actors display an unwarranted extravaganza in the marriage of their sisters, how are the claims of reducing wastage during the fat Indian weddings and considering the girl child an asset, going to materialize?

Not just chapters but story books dedicated to uplifting the status of women in society must be introduced to children at a young age. With such books and material introduced in schools, girls will become more confident and responsible of their duties. This will help them understand the vital role they will play in enhancing the worth of our social survival. At the same time boys will learn that girls are not just the softer sex. This will make them understand their responsibility to make our patriarchal society more encompassing and just. It will make them realize that the "boys are boys" attitude will harm not just their lives but will also break the delicate thread society is interwoven with.

### **Stories told to children can make a difference**

Researchers have proved that stories have a very strong control on children's thoughtful process of cultural and gender roles. Stories do not just develop children's literacy; they convey values, beliefs, attitudes and social norms which shape children's perceptions of reality. The children at a very early age learn how to behave, think, and act through the characters that they meet through stories.

The present paper attempts how stories shape children's perspectives about gender roles and identities?

### **Why stories matter in Gender Sensitization?**

**"Khoob Ladi Mardani Woh Toh Jhansi Wali Rani Thi"**

Stories, whether told through picture books, dance, images, math equations, songs or orally, are one of the most fundamental ways in which we communicate the ideas and transfer the ideas to the next generation or peers.

Nearly 80 years ago, Louise Rosenblatt, a widely known scholar of literature, articulated that we understand ourselves through the lives of characters in stories. She argued that stories help readers understand how authors and their characters think and why they act in the way they do and these stories tend to provide the role models to the children at very early stage.

Similarly, research conducted by Kathy Short, a scholar of children's literature, also shows that children learn to develop through stories a critical perspective about how to engage in social action. Stories help children develop empathy and cultivate imaginative and divergent thinking – that is, thinking that generates a range of possible ideas and/or solutions around story events, rather than looking for single or literal responses. For example, stories from Panchtantra, Vikram Baital and Malgudi days have a great impact on the thinking process of children.

Primary school educators can help children develop a positive sense of their own gender. Teachers who are familiar with the factors that influence gender identity and stereotype development, and who understand the child's active role in gender identity formation, can more effectively counteract and even neutralize gender bias in their classrooms and attempt to prevent the formation of children's gender stereotypes (Zaman, 2007).

### **Early childhood education**

The role of schools has become more prominent in the lives of children younger than 5 years of age (Sales, Spjeldnes, & Koeshe, 2010). Many children spend up to 10 hours a day in child care (Grafwallner, Fontaine, Torre, & Underhill, 2006).

Two main aspects of the early childhood environment influence perceptions of young children's gender and gender stereotypes:

- classroom materials and
- the instruction of teachers (Gee & Gee, 2005).

Several gender inequities were found in one preschool, the most obvious being the proliferation of gender-typed toys, such as pink kitchen sets. Further scrutiny revealed a large proportion of books in the library that showed gender bias of some kind (Chick, HeilmanHouser, & Hunter, 2002).

*“The stories of the brave and determined women inspire us everyday to redouble our efforts until true equality is achieved.” – Musimbi Kanyoro, President & CEO, Global Fund for Women*

**Sharing the inspirational stories of courageous women and girls around the world who are fighting for power over their own lives, creates a sense of respect and responsibility for the females in children.**

We are mentioning a list of eight small fascinating documentaries that bring the stories of women and girls to life. Many are free (or available on Netflix) and feature additional resources for getting involved and educating yourself on the issues facing your own community. These following small documentaries are a sort of inspiration for small children to value both the genders.

**1. I am a Girl – 2013, 1 hour 28 minutes**

“I am a Girl” shows what it truly means to be a girl in the 21st century. The reality is that girls make up almost a quarter of the world’s population yet still face the greatest discrimination of any group in the world. Featuring girls from across the world representing Cambodia, Papua New Guinea, Cameroon, Afghanistan, the U.S. and Australia, the film’s interwoven narratives capture the day-to-day realities of being a girl.

**2. Honor Diaries – 2014, 1 hour 1 minute**

With a focus on female genital mutilation, forced marriage and violence against women in honor-based societies, “Honor Diaries” profiles nine women activists and follows their journeys in enacting change in communities throughout the Muslim and non-Muslim world.

**3. Half the Sky Movement: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide – 2012, 4 hour series**

Filmed in Cambodia, Kenya, India, Sierra Leone, Somaliland, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Liberia and the U.S., “Half the Sky” introduces women and girls who are fighting to survive in the world’s toughest circumstances. Featuring reporter Nicholas Kristof and celebrity advocates America Ferrera, Diane Lane, Eva Mendes, Meg Ryan, Gabrielle Union and Olivia Wilde, the film focuses on actionable steps toward global empowerment and solutions.

**4. Brave Miss World – 2013, 1 hour 28 minutes**

Linor Abargil was abducted, stabbed and raped in Milan, Italy at age 18—just six weeks before representing Israel in and winning the Miss World competition. “Brave Miss World” follows Linor from the rape to her journey to fight for justice and empower others to stand against sexual violence.

**5. It’s a Girl – 2012, 1 hour 4 minutes**

Filmed on location in India and China, “It’s a Girl” spotlights the everyday occurrence of girls being killed, aborted and abandoned...simply because they are girls. Featuring global experts and grassroots activists, the film explores paths toward change and what can be done to fight this deep-seeded gendercide.

**6. The Children Next Door – 2013, 36 minutes**

“The Children Next Door” is a short film that follows a family’s journey to discover what lies beneath the cycle of violence—all through the eyes of the children who experienced it firsthand and in their own home. Based in Tennessee, the film chronicles a 10-year marriage plagued by domestic violence and the struggles, solutions and healing that followed one terrible night.

**Discussion**

The moral lessons from stories and documentaries on women empowerment will help boys realize at a very young age that they have proved to be harbingers of women empowerment in the past and should now develop a view that females are equals, not those to be dominated or suppressed. They will also understand that women are not the ones who always need to be protected. In fact, they will come to accept this obvious fact that the need for protection and the subsequent perpetuation of violence are related and form a vicious circle.

In this way we are dealing with this situation in the most logical way. Rather than leaving children to learn from their own bitter or sweet experiences later in life, there is a need to put in additional efforts on bringing the experiences of others to help. This way, a systematic approach will be in place, where children are taught at a young age to understand their responsibilities rather than later punishing them in courts. While this may stand true for every crime that is committed and every ethical aspect of life that is skipped, the issue of gender equality is the fundamental of social living. Rather than making it implicit to boys and girls, there is a need to deal with it explicitly. With this, a number of serious crimes and unacceptable practices will find a vent automatically.



Gender sensitization programmes through storytelling, dramatization, short documentaries, etc must be formally launched in schools. When parents and teachers do not get enough time to interact with children about the important role they are going to play as future active members of society, such formal associations will go a long way to revamp society in totality. In such gender sensitization programmes and classes, children must be explicitly taught the negative effects of biased and primitive social conditioning. Parents and teachers must come up with innovative methods of enhancing the understanding of their children and their own idea of living in a just society.

Only such a targeted approach can lead to a better future. We certainly don't want the continuance of such horrifying incidents of violence being perpetrated against one sex and the other sex being the perpetrator of such gruesome acts. While all the moral efforts and social legislations have failed to establish balance, let us refurbish our approach and take the pledge of doing our bit to remove injustice and gender bias from our society.

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