

GENDER SOCIALIZATION IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: A STUDY OF TEACHER ATTITUDES AND CLASSROOM PRACTICES

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Abstract : Gender is produced and reproduced through everyday social interactions that take place within powerful institutions. Schools are among the most influential of these institutions because they organize time, space, authority, and recognition in ways that appear natural to students and adults. This study examines how gender socialization occurs in educational institutions through the attitudes of teachers and the classroom practices they manage. The empirical focus is Malappuram District in Kerala, a state known for literacy and progressive policy commitments, including recent gender-neutral initiatives. The study adopts a qualitative design, with classroom observations and semi structured interviews, supported by document review. The analysis shows that teachers affirm gender equality as a value, yet routine practices often reproduce stereotypical expectations. Spatial arrangements separate boys and girls, participation and disciplinary strategies differ by gender, co-curricular activities are coded in masculine and feminine directions, and textbooks continue to present uneven representations. Moments of resistance exist where teachers challenge stereotypes, yet these are isolated efforts that require institutional support to grow. Drawing on Mead, Butler, Connell, and Bourdieu, the discussion interprets these findings as cultural reproduction through hidden curriculum. The article concludes with recommendations for teachers, schools, curriculum developers, and the Government of Kerala, with emphasis on teacher training, community sensitization, and systematic monitoring. The study contributes to sociology of education and gender studies by offering classroom grounded evidence from a region that is often celebrated for social development but still faces subtle forms of gender inequality.

IndexTerms - Gender Socialization, Gender Neutral Education, Education, Attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

Gender is a social construct that develops through participation in cultural norms, institutional routines, and interpersonal relationships across the life course. Among social institutions, the educational system has a special influence because it is often the first sustained public space that children navigate beyond the family. Schools do not simply transmit academic knowledge. They shape identities, values, and social expectations through the organization of time, space, authority, and recognition, and through the stories and symbols present in curriculum materials and rituals of school life. Functionalist accounts, such as Parsons, argue that schools act as a bridge between family and larger society. They teach children to manage universalistic standards in place of particularistic family rules and to adjust to achievement oriented roles where performance is evaluated in a public setting (Parsons, 1951). Within this socialization process, classroom practices and teacher interventions matter in crucial ways.

Gender socialization refers to the ways individuals learn what counts as appropriate roles, behaviours, and identities for boys and girls in a given society, and later for men and women as gendered adults. It is a continuous process that works through gentle signals as much as through explicit directives. Small comments, routine seating plans, praise and correction, task allocation, and a teacher's glance or gesture can shape student self-understanding. These micro processes add up to a hidden curriculum that transmits social meanings without declaring them as formal objectives of schooling (Apple, 1979; Lorber, 1994).

In India, gender norms are anchored in deep historical and cultural patterns. Educational expansion and policy mandates have improved access and participation for girls, and have produced shifts in aspiration and visibility. Yet subtle stereotypes continue within institutions. Kerala is widely recognized for high literacy and positive social indicators, but the coexistence of developmental achievements with persistent gendered expectations has been documented in research and policy debate. These contradictions are especially visible in everyday school life where the public commitment to equality can meet long standing cultural expectations about masculinity and femininity (Devika, 2010; Devika & Thampi, 2020).

Malappuram District presents a distinctive social context for studying these processes. The district is marked by cultural diversity and significant investment in educational participation. It combines traditions of community life with rapid social change. This article asks how teachers in Malappuram understand gender roles, how classroom routines reflect or challenge gender norms, and how policies that encourage gender neutral practices travel into the micro world of the classroom.

Statement of the Problem

Teachers are agents of socialization not only because they teach content but because they personify institutional rules and model appropriate behaviour. Their words, gestures, and expectations communicate values about leadership, responsibility, and emotional expression. Many of these signals are unintentional but have cumulative effects. For example, a class teacher who assigns boys to lead debates and invites girls to maintain notebooks and distribute materials does more than manage logistics. That teacher also communicates who belongs in visible roles and who should take supportive roles. These patterns form the hidden curriculum

through which students learn the social meanings of gender, even when formal policy and textbooks speak of equality and rights (Apple, 1979).

Kerala has introduced gender neutral policies including changes in uniform in selected schools and curriculum revisions that call for inclusive values. However, translation of policy into practice requires a shift in habitus, which Bourdieu describes as durable and learned dispositions. Without training, institutional support, and community dialogue, teachers can feel that such changes conflict with cultural expectations or create classroom management difficulties (Bourdieu, 1977). Hence the problem is not only the presence of stereotypes but the gap between policy intent and everyday practice.

Objectives

1. To examine teachers' attitudes and perceptions regarding gender roles and expectations among students.
2. To explore classroom practices that contribute to gender socialization.
3. To analyze the presence of hidden curriculum that reinforces or challenges gender norms.
4. To suggest strategies for promoting gender sensitive practices in schools.

Research Questions

1. How do teachers perceive gender roles within academic and disciplinary contexts
2. What classroom practices influence students' understanding of gender norms
3. How does hidden curriculum operate in everyday school settings
4. In what ways can educational institutions encourage equitable gender attitudes

Significance

The study contributes to sociology of education and gender studies by providing classroom based empirical evidence from a district that often stands as a symbol of social development. The findings have practical relevance for teacher education, curriculum design, school leadership, and state policy, including Kerala's gender-neutral initiatives.

Scope and Limitations

The focus is on selected government and aided schools in Malappuram District. Data were collected from teachers and through classroom observations and documents. Parents and community-based socialization practices are not directly examined. Findings are analytical rather than statistically generalizable. They provide insight into processes that are likely to exist in comparable contexts.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Understanding Gender and Gender Socialization

Gender is a social and cultural construct. The distinction between sex and gender highlights that biology does not determine the meanings that societies attach to masculinity and femininity. Individuals learn these meanings through socialization, that is, through repeated participation in family routines, peer relations, media narratives, and institutional life. West and Zimmerman describe gender as an ongoing accomplishment that people do in interaction, where accountability to gender norms is constant and situational (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Lorber emphasizes that social institutions organize the expectations that make gender appear natural, even when it is continuously constructed in practice (Lorber, 1994).

School as a Socializing Institution and the Hidden Curriculum

Schools are designed to transmit cultural values and to shape civic participation. In functionalist theory, schools integrate individuals into society by teaching normative expectations and achievement standards (Durkheim, 1956; Parsons, 1951). Yet, as critical scholars argue, not all cultural transmission is explicit. Apple's notion of hidden curriculum underscores how selection of knowledge, organization of classroom space, disciplinary patterns, and the distribution of attention produce social meanings that are not formally stated but are powerfully learned (Apple, 1979). These processes can affirm or challenge inequalities. The same classroom that teaches democratic values through a lesson can reproduce hierarchy through practices of silence and privilege.

Teacher Attitudes and Gender Expectations

Teachers interpret and enact policy in the context of their own socialization. Research indicates that teachers may support equality at the level of principle but still expect boys to be assertive and girls to be neat and cooperative. Such expectations are translated into attention, praise, correction, and task allocation, which have cumulative implications for confidence, participation, and achievement over time (Younger & Warrington, 2006; Borg, 2015). These micro practices matter because students read meaning from them and construct their identities accordingly.

Classroom Interaction and Everyday Practices

Studies show that boys are often called upon more frequently, and are interrupted less often, while girls are praised for behaviour and organization. Seating plans may separate boys and girls, and leadership opportunities can skew toward boys. Discipline can also differ by gender, with boys' restlessness treated as natural and girls' assertiveness read as disrespect. Sadker and Sadker document how such patterns translate into unequal participation and confidence even when test scores look similar (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Sadker & Zittleman, 2009).

Co-curricular Activities and Gender Coding

Beyond the classroom, school rituals and clubs distribute roles and visibility. Sports and debates often draw boys, while cultural programs and backstage organization draw girls. Such distribution can influence subject choice and future aspirations. Charles and Bradley show how gendered self-understanding shapes academic specialization and later occupational pathways (Charles & Bradley, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

Four perspectives guide this study.

Mead argues that self is formed in interaction, through taking the role of the other. Teacher feedback and peer responses help construct what students think is appropriate gender behaviour (Mead, 1934).

Butler describes gender as performative, meaning it is produced through repeated acts that give the impression of stability. Classroom routines therefore make gender through repetition and normalization (Butler, 1990).

Connell proposes that institutions reproduce hegemonic masculinity, that is, a pattern that legitimizes the dominant position of men and the subordination of women, while also shaping hierarchies among boys (Connell, 1995).

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and reproduction explain how social structures become embodied dispositions. Teachers and students carry learned expectations that feel natural, which makes policy change difficult without shifts in practice and perception (Bourdieu, 1977).

India and Kerala: Evidence and Gaps

Indian studies document subtle but persistent stereotypes in classroom practice and in textbooks. Girls are appreciated for obedience and neatness while boys are encouraged to be assertive. Textbooks often present men as public actors and women as carers. Kerala's schools, despite high literacy, mirror these contradictions in teacher expectations and everyday routines (Nayak & Nair, 2005; NCERT, 2019; Devika & Thampi, 2020). There is less research that focuses on Malappuram with fine grained classroom data. This study addresses that gap.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative design that is suitable for examining meanings and interactions that are subtle and contextual. Classroom observations, semi structured interviews with teachers, and document review were used. This approach is consistent with interpretive qualitative traditions that seek depth of understanding rather than statistical representation. It allows the researcher to capture micro level processes through which gender norms are enacted and learned in everyday school life (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Study Area and Rationale

Malappuram District is known for cultural diversity, religious plurality, expanding educational access, and rapid social transformation. The mix of government and aided schools and the presence of urban, semi urban, and rural environments create variation in institutional culture and parental expectations. The district is thus an appropriate setting for examining how teachers negotiate gender norms within conflicting signals from policy, community, and school traditions.

Sampling

A multistage strategy was followed. Six schools were selected, three government and three aided. The set included two urban, two semi urban, and two rural schools. From each school, three teachers were purposively selected, focusing on subjects with high interaction, such as Social Science, Malayalam, English, and Science. In total, eighteen teachers participated, ten women and eight men. Twelve classrooms across levels were observed. The sample is not designed to be statistically representative. It is designed to support interpretive generalization through analytic depth.

Tools and Procedures

The semi structured interview schedule focused on beliefs about appropriate behaviour for boys and girls, expectations regarding participation and discipline, and awareness of gender sensitive pedagogy. Interviews were conducted in a quiet space within the school. Each interview lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour. With consent, notes were taken and then expanded after each session for accuracy and completeness.

Non participant observation recorded seating arrangements, patterns of attention, turn taking, tone of feedback, task allocation, and the distribution of visible and supportive roles in group activities. An observation checklist helped maintain consistency across classrooms while leaving space for field notes that captured context and illustrative episodes.

Document review included textbooks, school handbooks, notices, work allocation charts, and records of participation in events and competitions. These documents were examined for gender representation and for practical rules that might structure distinctions between boys and girls.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used. Interview transcripts and observation notes were coded inductively at first and then organized into conceptually coherent categories, such as leadership encouragement patterns, disciplinary tone differences, emotional expression norms, and gendered responsibilities. The coding frame was refined through repeated reading. Themes were interpreted through the theoretical lenses of Mead, Butler, Connell, and Bourdieu (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Descriptive information about teachers, such as age group, years of service, and subject area, was summarized to provide profile context. The analysis relied on triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents.

Reliability, Validity, and Ethics

Triangulation enhanced reliability. Observations moderated the bias that can accompany self-reporting by teachers. Interpretive validity was strengthened by sharing emerging interpretations with selected respondents in informal debriefings and inviting corrections or clarifications.

Ethical procedures included institutional permission, informed consent from teachers, protection of anonymity, and avoidance of student names in field notes. The study follows ethical guidelines for social science research and respects the dignity of all participants.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of Respondents

Eighteen teachers participated. They were between twenty-five and fifty-two years of age, with two to twenty-eight years of service. The group included ten women and eight men across the focal subjects. Women teachers tended to voice more critical views of traditional expectations during interviews. However, observations indicated that daily practices often remained conventional. Men teachers frequently described gender differences as natural, especially regarding physical activity, communication style, and leadership. This dual pattern, that is, equality as ideology and tradition as practice, recurred throughout the data.

Teacher Perceptions of Gender Roles

Teachers affirmed equality as a principle. Yet, explanatory comments signalled gendered expectations. Girls were described as responsible, disciplined, and mature. Boys were described as assertive and inclined toward leadership, sometimes restless, yet normal in their expressiveness. These beliefs did not always arise from conscious stereotyping. They were presented as practical observations about what works in classroom management. However, when such beliefs guide action, they create different conditions of visibility and voice. Connell's framework helps to interpret the association of leadership and assertiveness with boys as reproduction of hegemonic masculinity within institutional practice (Connell, 1995).

Spatial Organization and Seating

Nine of the twelve observed classrooms placed boys and girls on separate sides. Teachers justified this as a measure to reduce distraction and to maintain discipline. In some classes, boys were moved to the front rows during discussion heavy sessions. Girls were placed where quieter behaviour was expected. Space therefore communicated an invisible script. Students read where they belonged and what was expected of them. In Bourdieu's terms, the arrangement became part of habitus, where dispositions are embodied through routine and feel natural to participants over time (Bourdieu, 1977).

Patterns of Interaction and Attention

Teachers addressed boys more often, both for praise and correction. Boys were given difficult or public questions more frequently, especially in Science and Social Science. Girls were asked to read aloud, to maintain notebooks, and to distribute materials. Such task allocation teaches that public visibility is masculine and backstage organization is feminine. It also affects confidence. Students who repeatedly practice public speaking and debate develop a sense of voice. Students who perform support tasks may internalize the idea that they are valuable when silent and efficient. These patterns match findings in earlier research that classroom attention and expectations are gendered in subtle but durable ways (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Sadker & Zittleman, 2009).

Discipline and Emotional Expression

Disciplinary tone differed by gender. Teachers regarded boys' restlessness as normal. Mild reprimands were common but often delivered with a smile, as though high energy is expected. Girls were asked to be calm, polite, and composed. Assertive speech from girls was sometimes interpreted as disrespect. Emotional expression followed the same pattern. Boys were encouraged to be strong and to avoid displays of sadness or fear. Girls were discouraged from loud disagreement. In Butler's terms, such repetition performs gender by making some emotional registers appropriate and others inappropriate for each gender category (Butler, 1990).

Co-curricular Culture and Leadership

School rituals and clubs distributed visibility along gendered lines. Boys dominated sports, debates, and science exhibitions. Girls were more present in cultural programs, decoration, and coordination. Leadership positions during morning assembly and school unions tilted toward boys. Girls frequently handled backstage organization. Charles and Bradley's observation that gendered self-understanding steers academic and occupational choices is visible here as early rehearsal for adult roles, where public competition signals masculine success and backstage coordination signals feminine service (Charles & Bradley, 2009).

Curriculum Content and Symbolic Representation

Document review indicated uneven representation. Textbooks presented men as professionals, leaders, and inventors. Women appeared as carers, teachers at the elementary level, or as inspirational figures framed by sacrifice rather than agency. While revised materials included more examples of women, the frequency and narrative framing were not balanced. Apple's point that curriculum is never neutral is relevant. Selection of stories and images establishes tacit understanding of whose labour and leadership is more visible and valued (Apple, 1979; NCERT, 2019).

Moments of Resistance and Possibility

Not all practices reproduced stereotypes. Some teachers experimented with mixed seating during group work, rotated leadership roles consciously, and set a norm that all students should speak at least once during discussion. A few teachers supported boys who wanted to express sadness or anxiety without shame. These are important openings. They show that transformation is possible when teachers act reflectively and when schools provide support. However, such efforts were isolated and dependent on individual initiative. There was no systematic program of gender sensitization in the schools studied, and teachers reported limited training related to gender sensitive pedagogy.

Theoretical Interpretation

Across themes, the theoretical lenses align with empirical patterns. Interactionist theory explains how repeated teacher responses shape student identity. Performative theory explains how routines make gender appear stable. Hegemonic masculinity explains the association between leadership and boys and the reading of girls' assertiveness as improper. Cultural reproduction explains why policy change alone is not enough, because habitus makes practices feel natural. The combination of these perspectives shows that gender in school is not a single rule but an ecology of signals that work together over time.

Policy Context in Kerala: Gender Neutral Initiatives and Classroom Reality

Kerala has introduced reforms since two thousand nineteen with emphasis on inclusivity. Selected schools adopted gender neutral uniforms. Social Science modules included gender sensitive content. Clubs and school assemblies were encouraged to promote mixed participation. The intent is to make opportunity independent of gender identity and to encourage cooperation and shared responsibility. Yet this study shows that translation remains uneven. Most schools in the sample used gender differentiated dress codes. Leadership positions remained tilted toward boys. Teachers reported that they had not received systematic training in gender sensitive pedagogy. Mixed seating was rare and often explained as difficult to manage because of parental expectations. The lesson is that reform needs implementation planning that is specific and practical. It must offer teachers strategies that connect ideas to routines. The reform also needs community dialogue so that parents see inclusivity as an educational good rather than a threat to cultural values.

FINDINGS

The findings of the study show a clear tension between stated ideals and everyday practice, with teachers regularly affirming that boys and girls are equal, yet relying on traditional expectations when organizing lessons, allocating tasks, and addressing behaviour. Boys are often understood as energetic, confident, and naturally suited to public performance, while girls are praised for responsibility, neatness, and steady effort, which quietly establishes different pathways of recognition in the same classroom. Spatial organization reinforces this separation. In many rooms boys and girls are seated apart, sometimes with boys placed in more visible positions, which creates distinct zones of attention and opportunity. Over time, this arrangement suggests that voice and initiative belong in one part of the classroom while quiet efficiency belongs in another, and students internalize these signals as normal. Patterns of interaction further amplify the divide. Boys receive more public questions, more corrections, and more invitations to lead, while girls are assigned supportive roles such as distributing materials, maintaining records, or reading aloud, which keeps them active but less visible. Discipline and emotional expression are also regulated by gendered expectations. Boys' restlessness is treated as natural and manageable, while girls are asked to remain composed and polite; boys are told to be strong when they feel anxious or sad, while girls are discouraged from outspoken disagreement, and these contrasting lessons shape confidence, tone, and sense of entitlement to speak. Beyond the classroom, co-curricular culture codes activities in masculine and feminine directions.

Boys dominate sports, debates, and science exhibitions that carry public prestige, while girls participate more in cultural events and backstage coordination that are valuable but less celebrated, which influences self-concept and future aspiration. Curriculum materials do little to counter these signals, since images and narratives continue to present men as inventors, leaders, and professionals, and women as carers or inspirational figures framed by sacrifice rather than agency, thereby reproducing symbolic hierarchies that students absorb during routine study. Yet the picture is not uniform. Instances of gender sensitive pedagogy exist, including rotation of leadership roles, mixed seating during group work, intentional invitations for quieter students to present ideas, and explicit classroom dialogue about fairness and respect. These efforts demonstrate practical routes to change, although they remain isolated, depend on individual initiative, and lack systematic institutional support. Overall, the findings indicate that gender is reproduced through many small routines that appear ordinary, and that transformation requires consistent, school wide strategies that align daily practice with the stated value of equality.

Recommendations

For Teachers

1. Practice reflective teaching by reviewing who is called upon, who receives public questions, and who handles support tasks. Rotate roles consciously.
2. Use mixed seating during collaborative tasks and change seating periodically to break fixed identities.
3. Evaluate students for quality of ideas and effort, and not for conformity to gendered behaviour. Encourage emotional literacy for all students.
4. Include short dialogues within lessons that examine stereotypes in stories, images, and daily events. Encourage students to notice patterns and to propose fair alternatives.

For Schools and Administrators

1. Adopt a whole institution policy on gender sensitive practice. Translate goals into classroom routines and club procedures.
2. Provide regular teacher development workshops that focus on classroom interaction, not only on policy awareness.
3. Audit co-curricular activities and leadership opportunities to ensure balanced participation and visibility.
4. Create simple monitoring tools. For example, track who speaks in assemblies, who leads clubs, who plays which roles in events. Use these data in staff meetings to plan improvements.
5. Recognize and reward teachers who innovate with inclusive practices, so that isolated efforts become shared culture.

For Curriculum Developers

1. Review textbooks for representation of women and men across fields. Include women as scientists, leaders, and innovators with emphasis on agency.
2. Provide classroom tasks that invite all students to present, debate, and lead in rotating fashion.
3. Include teaching notes that help teachers facilitate discussions on gender equity in age-appropriate ways.

For Kerala Government and Education Departments

1. Strengthen implementation of gender-neutral measures with clear instructional guidance that links policy to daily routines, such as sample seating plans, rotation charts for leadership, and inclusive sports schedules.
2. Provide mandatory training in gender sensitive pedagogy for new teachers and regular refresher workshops for in service teachers.
3. Engage parents and community leaders through sensitization programs so that school practices are reinforced at home rather than opposed.
4. Establish district level support teams to mentor schools, share good practices, and review progress through simple indicators of participation and leadership.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study is limited to six schools and a small set of classrooms. Parents and community institutions were not part of the data collection. Future research can combine classroom ethnography with parent interviews and student focus groups to capture the circulation of gender norms between home and school. Longitudinal designs can track the effect of inclusive routines on student confidence and aspiration. Experimental interventions, such as rotation of leadership and structured mixed seating, can be tested and evaluated for impact over a school year. Comparative studies across districts in Kerala can examine how local cultures mediate state policy.

Concluding Reflection

A classroom is a place where children learn to read and write, and it is also a place where they learn to see themselves. The teacher's choice of who speaks, where students sit, and how emotions are received can grow or constrain a child's sense of possibility. The point of gender sensitive education is not to erase difference but to remove hierarchy from difference, so that no child is taught that visibility, leadership, or voice is the natural property of one gender. Kerala's policy environment offers a strong base. With reflective teachers, supportive schools, and engaged families, classrooms can become spaces where equality is not only said but also done, every day.

CONCLUSION

Schools are not neutral spaces. They are social worlds where gender meanings are made through repetition in ordinary routines. In Malappuram District, teachers uphold equality as a public value. However, organization of space, attention, discipline, and leadership continues to reproduce gender hierarchy. The effect is a quiet shaping of identity. Boys learn that confidence and visibility are expected. Girls learn that discipline and service are valued. These learning processes are not the product of animus or conscious bias in most cases. They arise from habitual practices that feel natural because they are repeated and rarely interrupted.

Kerala's policy environment supports gender equality. Yet policy cannot replace practice. To move from commitment to transformation, institutions must help teachers to recognize hidden curriculum and to experiment with inclusive routines. Community engagement is essential so that parents do not see gender neutral measures as cultural threat. The evidence from this study suggests that change is possible when schools, teachers, and families work together, with training, resources, and supportive monitoring.

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