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Doing Sociology of Gender in the Classroom: Re-imagining Pedagogies

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Abstract

While curriculum constitutes an important facet of teaching and learning, what is of critical importance is how we engage with the curriculum and what pedagogical strategies we use to engage students. This article is an attempt to engage in a serious dialogue on how we do Sociology of Gender in our classrooms. How students effectively construct, represent and transform knowledge and how they develop competence in and beyond the learning areas depend much on the pedagogical insights that instructors employ in classrooms. The article argues for a critical feminist pedagogy that sees the classroom as a site of possibilities, believes in engaged student learning and recovers students' voices.

Keywords

Gender, pedagogies, curriculum, feminism

This article is largely informed by my experiences of doing Sociology of Gender at the undergraduate level in Mumbai University for the last 10 years, of my involvement in curriculum design and development and of my innumerable engagements and deliberations with students and fellow colleagues over the years. Since the publication of Das's (1993) article on the State of Sociology in India, sociologists have articulated and located the crisis in Sociology in pedagogy, research, curriculum and epistemology (Deshpande, 1994; Giri, 1993; Rege, 1997; Rodrigues, 2011). My article is situated in this broader framework of a crisis in Sociology especially in a course like Sociology of Gender.

While curriculum constitutes an important facet of teaching and learning, what is of critical importance is how we engage with the curriculum and what pedagogical strategies we use to engage students. This article is an attempt to engage in a serious dialogue on how we do Sociology of Gender in our classrooms. The intent is not to offend or cast aspersions but to introspect on the perspectives and

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insights that inform our teaching of a course on Gender and as Deshpande (1994, p. 1) writes ‘the need for ruthless self-examination’.

The article argues for a critical feminist pedagogy that sees the classroom as a site of possibilities, believes in engaged student learning and recovers students’ voices. The article is broadly divided into three sections. First section is an attempt to situate the crisis, where I look at the site of pedagogy itself, that is the classroom and then I share my experiences of employing a critical feminist pedagogy in my classroom and finally the challenges and the rewards of such pedagogical practices.

Sociology of Gender at the Undergraduate Level

Introduced in the 1990s as a compulsory paper at the third-year level of the 3-year undergraduate course in Mumbai University, Sociology of Gender was then known as ‘Women and Society’ and has since undergone several changes of nomenclatures. Soon it was made into an optional article and remained so for a long time till about 6 years ago when it was re-introduced as a compulsory article. The curriculum over the years was all encompassing and covered a wide range of issues reflecting both contemporary realities as well as locating a sense of history. Topics included feminist theories, status of women, women’s movement, women and media, personal laws, women and work and a tiny section on sexuality.

This is one of the most popular courses, and students connect easily since the curriculum reflects their lived experiences. However, this can be both an advantage as well as a disadvantage, since too much of familiarity with the course content leads to a disavowal of theoretical analysis. This became amply clear during paper assessment. Questions and doubts about the efficacy of pedagogical practices began to surface around this time. One issue that some of us, as examiners, confronted was the quality of answers written by the students. One could discern two distinct patterns in the way questions were being answered in the university exams. One set of answers was the traditional academic essays that used heavy theoretical jargon that perhaps students could not relate to, for certain words would be missing from sentences and the sentences did not make sense.

The other pattern exhibited a casual approach, a tendency to belittle and trivialise. Answers were marked by a complete absence of feminist understanding of issues with simplistic notions and binaries of men as oppressors and women as oppressed. There was no attempt to problematise and complicate issues or to link topics to larger issues. Women were shown as victims with stories of their oppression/subordination highlighted in great detail. The so-called ‘WS buzzwords’ as Vimal Balasubrahmanyam (1993, p. 1572) writes.

We never read about stories of triumph or about women in agential roles. Answers were located within a patriarchal framework and lacked theoretical rigour. This led some of us to introspect on how we do Sociology of Gender in the classroom. It was time for us to look within and reflect on how we disseminate feminist messages. Perhaps, we did not reflect adequately on the necessity of using a feminist pedagogy with its emphasis on a liberatory and transformative politics

to engage with a paper on gender issues. After all Sociology of Gender was not just any subject. It had deep links with the women's movement and feminist politics. As Rege (2003) writes courses on gender and society were introduced to have a subversive impact on the academy. Must we not ask ourselves if we have come even close to generating such an impact? We seem to be doing the course without an understanding of the underlying epistemology (Sreerexha, 2016).

Situating the Crisis

Let me begin with my impressions of the crisis that unfolds in Sociology of Gender classrooms at the undergraduate level and then I shall briefly touch upon curriculum design and development. Feminist scholars (McIntosh, 1983; Warren et al., 1989 as cited in Briskin & Coulter, 1992) have traced the evolution of 'Gender Studies' through several stages. From being completely invisible in the curriculum to women being included as an 'add on' category, followed by the reconceptualisation of knowledge from the woman's viewpoint and then recognising diverse and multiple voices of women and men and now to 'mainstreaming' gender, gender studies has indeed traversed a long distance. However, most of us have not moved beyond the second stage. We have simply included 'woman' as an 'add on category' without posing a feminist challenge to sociological categories.

We still practice a value neutral, liberal sociology set within a positivist, empirical, patriarchal framework that does not stimulate students' sociological imagination, makes a simplistic analysis of complex realities and does a disinterested and disengaged sociology, where there is a disconnect between what we teach students and their lived experiences.

If Sociology is considered a soft discipline with loosely defined concepts, the crisis is all the more acute in a paper like 'Sociology of Gender' where uncritical and unexamined, commonsensical notions abound. Essentialism, victimisation and 'women as monolith' notions are rampant. Topics are dealt with, in a general and descriptive fashion with no attempt to problematise and complicate issues or to infuse a theoretical rigour into the discussion. As feminist pedagogues, we need to ask ourselves, why are we so apologetic when we disseminate feminist ideas and messages. Why do we, for instance, talk about Section 498 (A) that penalises the husband and in laws for dowry-related violence and then add how women often misuse this Act. Or for instance why do we say 'I am a feminist but I believe in the institution of marriage'. Are we not sending out conflicting and confusing signals to students? As teachers, are we not complicit of reinforcing these misconceived notions about feminism? These are questions that merit a serious consideration. This kind of ideological confusion does not really further the cause of women's studies.

There is a pedagogy of silence and exclusion that is at work. Certain topics, such as family, marriage, socialisation and violence against women are foregrounded and some very contentious issues that merit a rigorous analysis backgrounded. Topics that deal with sexuality and sexual orientation are routinely ignored. In fact, teachers have expressed their discomfort in engaging with a topic on sexual orientation. Even when we are dealing with a topic on violence against

women, the focus is more on reeling off statistics, presenting gory details rather than a theoretical analysis in terms of violence as a continuum and the caste and class dynamics of violence.

The absence of an intersectional analysis is glaring. The discussion and analysis are structured primarily in terms of patriarchy rather than interrogating the complexities of caste, class, gender and ethnicity. The interplay between agency and structure and negotiations within patriarchy remain unexplored or at best touched upon. Terms such as 'autonomy' and 'choices' are rarely invoked in classrooms lest they be interpreted as 'unlicensed freedom'.

Standard, formulaic models of pedagogy, curricula, readings and evaluation are preferred because it makes one's job easier. There is a sense of unease about adopting radical and activist approaches to learning. There are fears and deep anxieties about whether it will be perceived as too liberating. Hence, the standard, conservative approach to learning is preferred, which of course is the lecture mode of teaching with the teacher as the active subject and students as passive listeners. There is a propensity to simplify and make everything fall into neat categories for ease of understanding. It seems as though we are preparing students only for the exams rather than producing critical thinking minds. At teachers' orientation workshops, we are flooded with requests for providing paper patterns and question banks. Curriculum design lacks a critical focus and perspective. Significant and substantial revisions in syllabi are resisted. There is a certain comfort level with over familiar terrain and a fear to explore unfamiliar terrain. It is dictated more by concerns of making the subject saleable, marketable and easy for the students, rather than a genuine desire to expand the horizons of knowledge (Kumar, 2011). We pick and choose topics from particular books just because it is easy to find reading material.

Thus, a pedagogy that is disengaged from the feminist underpinnings of the subject and without a suitable knowledge and appreciation of the feminist struggles leads to a depoliticisation of the feminist agenda (Pandhe, 1988; Poonacha, 2003). Some of these issues were brought to the fore and the Board of Studies, the apex body for curriculum design and development in Sociology made some efforts to re-envision the paper with the necessary pedagogical insights into how to engage with the curriculum.

Initiatives by the Board of Studies in Sociology

The constitution of a new Board of Studies in Sociology in 2006 signalled some significant shifts in curriculum design. The first step in this direction was to democratise the process of curriculum design and make it a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down approach. While designing the curriculum is the prerogative of the Board of Studies in Sociology, an attempt was made to involve the teachers in curriculum design. Committees of teachers were formed with one representative from the Board of Studies in each committee. Workshops were organised to gather feedback from the teachers on how to revise the curriculum to enable effective teaching and learning. The teachers in turn were asked to gather feedback from the students on the curriculum. After the curriculum was designed

and passed by the Board of Studies and Academic Council of the University of Mumbai, Orientation workshops were held to orient the teachers to the revised curriculum with detailed guidelines on how to engage with the curriculum and the perspective that should inform their teaching.

Study packs¹ were compiled so as to ensure equitable access to good readings and produce uniformity of understanding of the subject matter among faculty and students. Many colleges especially in the interiors of Maharashtra lack access to good readings primarily because of paucity of funds. An additional challenge for vernacular colleges is the critical need for translated works in Marathi. Absence of adequate and good readings in Marathi poses a serious challenge to students of vernacular medium. While some of these challenges have been addressed, new ones have come to the fore with the introduction of the credit-based semester grading system since 2011. I shall address these later in the article.

My Pedagogic Experiments

If Sociology of Gender has to have a liberatory and emancipatory potential, then it is imperative that we re-imagine pedagogies in ways that liberates the course from the positivist, standardised ways of teaching. Building upon the insights of Freire (1970) and hooks (1994), what I propose here are different pedagogical strategies that can be used to stimulate, invigorate and get students to reflect on what they are learning. These are my pedagogic experiments that I have introduced in my classroom. For me and I am sure for many others, teaching a course like Sociology of Gender is a political project where one is striving for praxis, seeking transformations and interventions in the lives of students and their communities. I see the classroom as a site of activism for spearheading change in society.

My College is located in South Mumbai, a premium location in Mumbai. Our students come primarily from the middle class and from different religious backgrounds with a substantial number coming from the religious minority groups, such as the Muslims, Parsees, Jains and Catholics. However, these groups do not constitute a monolith. There is considerable diversity in terms of sects, village and community affiliation. Barring a few exceptions, most of them come from extremely patriarchal, joint or nuclear households, where either the father or some male member is the head of the household with complete decision-making power and where discriminations are 'normalised' and 'silenced'. The existence of multiple and overlapping patriarchies of class, caste, gender and religion further complicate their lives. However, the classroom dynamics change in the unaided sections² where students come from privileged backgrounds and feel they have entered a post-feminist stage where all contradictions have been resolved. 'What is this feminism' they ask me, 'Do we need it today'?

Years of engaged deliberations and discussions with my students have brought me close to the disjuncture between abstract feminist ideals of equality and justice and their everyday gendered experiences. The intricate, subtle and nuanced ways in which they resist and transgress patriarchy in their everyday lives without necessarily engaging in a politics of transformation never ceases to amaze me and challenges my understanding of agency.

In a classroom on Sociology of Gender, I generally set the tone with certain basic premises. That we shall unlearn and relearn from multiple perspectives. Therefore, students must shed the baggage of preconceived ideas and widely shared cultural beliefs that clog their mind. That we are co-partners in knowledge production and we shall adopt a dialogic, participatory and experiential method of learning and not a top-down approach where the teachers teach and students become passive learners. As Freire (1970) says ‘to teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities of production or construction of knowledge’.

A course on Sociology of Gender is an attempt to understand the complex and multi-layered nature of gender oppression. To assume that women are the oppressed and men are the perpetrators is too simplistic a notion in a system where both men and women can be oppressors. The gender order is hierarchal in that, overall, men dominate women in terms of power and privilege; yet, multiple and conflicting sources of power and oppression are intertwined, given our caste, class and ethnic locations and therefore not all men dominate all women. This makes the classroom inclusive, especially for the boys and puts them at ease. A reference to marginalised genders and the gender galaxy that we inhabit complicates an otherwise simplistic binary of men and women (Shah, Merchant, Mahajan, & Nevatia, 2015). I make a fervent plea that the course is not just about learning and reproducing the same in examinations but how to use the knowledge to transcend, negotiate and resist multiple and overlapping patriarchies. Self-reflexivity, therefore, is an important component of the classroom structure and we reflect on what we are learning rather than simply documenting facts.

I begin by disrupting the idea of a clear, uncomplicated truth wherein I problematise simple harmonious ideas that are picked up from magazines, newspapers, social networking sites and other sites of popular culture, including casual conversations. As Smith (1992) writes feminist work begins with a concern for the everyday. In feminist teaching, one can find issues to bring to the classroom from the everyday world of one’s own life, community or local area, making authentic points of connection between academic study and our students’ everyday lives. These are the sites where misogynist ideas are taking shape or an illusion of freedom and empowerment is created and stereotyping is so pervasive that it is hard to be conscious of the ways in which we become agents of our own subordination.

Some statements that I often use in classroom discussion include ‘Women have privileges in Korum Mall every Wednesday’, (picked up from a billboard outside a mall in Thane, Maharashtra), ‘When men are frustrated they go to war when women are frustrated they love to shop’ (scribbled in the parking lot of a mall in Mumbai), Mafatlal and Sons Ltd, (bill board of a shop in Mumbai) ‘Celebrate womanhood, she is a caring daughter, loving wife and selfless mother’ (message on a social networking site), besides, of course, many others. A discussion on these not only reveal gender assumptions of the students but also help impart a nuanced understanding of gender stereotypes.

A significant aspect of my pedagogic experiments has been to forge links with the women’s movement. Collaborative projects and campaigns with women’s rights and advocacy groups further accentuate students’ understanding of gender issues. The need for such linkages cannot be emphasised enough in the present

context where rapid social transformations are fast reconfiguring notions of feminism and women's rights among the students. There is a real danger of women's studies losing its critical and transformative impulse.

Vina Mazumdar described women's studies as 'the academic arm of the women's movement' (1994, p. 10). Both have gained immensely from each other. While women's studies provided the academic inputs to the resurgence of the women's movement in the post-1977 period, the women's movement brought a certain dynamism to women's studies in the late 1970s. Issues of violence, fundamentalism, communalism and concerns raised by the ecological movements are some of the issues that the movement brought to women's studies. However, since the 1990s, a growing chasm between academics and activism has undermined the radicalism of feminist politics. Increased academisation and institutionalisation may have contributed to this. Some scholars have expressed apprehensions that this disjuncture with activism may not augur well for a subject like Sociology of Gender which when stripped of its action component becomes like any other subject taught at the university (Pandhe, 1988; Poonacha, 1994).

I also keep referring to other courses in Sociology, particularly social theory to help students understand the gendered nature of the subject and the biases within. Sociological theory remains largely a male endeavour. Sociology has developed around the works of Comte, Durkheim, Weber, Spencer, Marx and Parsons. Feminist theorists have long drawn upon and reworked various traditions of social theory, especially Marxism, liberalism, critical theory, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism and, more recently, post-structuralism. Feminist analysis, for instance, has questioned the conventional sociological analysis between macro- and micro-levels of analysis and sought to show their interconnectedness. How everyday lived experiences connect with and are shaped by larger structures and forces. Dorothy Smith's insider's sociology and Patricia Hills Collins articulation of Black feminism are particularly revealing in this context. Weber's concept of power has been critiqued. Defining power in terms of the ability of one person or group to prevail over others focuses attention on the actions of dominants. Does this mean that those who are hegemonised are completely powerless? Such a conception of power is limited. Feminist scholars have focussed on different forms of power. The power to create and nurture, the power to resist, to defy, to survive, to witness, to negotiate the demands of everyday life. A critique of the founders of the discipline thus helps focus attention on 'malestream' sociological theory.

Multiple Pedagogic Tools

My constant endeavour has been to get the students to have a sustained engagement with knowledge, a process that facilitates reflection and introspection and helps them to make connections between key concepts and ideas and their everyday struggles. Hence, I use multiple pedagogic tools to create an engaged and passionate learning environment.

Documentaries and short films are an important medium to understand feminist concepts and various feminist campaigns. Documentaries such as 'Unlimited Girls' (Vohra, 2011), 'Something Like a War' (Dhanraj, 1991) and 'Father,

Son and Holy War' (Patwardhan, 1995), can aid in a feminist understanding of concepts, such as masculinity, patriarchy, sex and gender and sexual harassment. Case studies and court judgements on sexual assault, property rights and maintenance are useful when one is doing a critique of the criminal justice system.

Simple essays, articles and chapter readings are given to students considering the resistance to reading on the part of most students. I ask students to link the readings to their lives, perhaps by commenting on something they have observed or experienced. By requiring students to reflect systematically and personally, feminist ideas become real to them. Books on, *Understanding Gender* (2000), *What is Patriarchy?* (1993) by Kamala Bhasin replete with examples, and charts and sketches are useful readings on the subject. Nivedita Menon's *Seeing like a Feminist* (2013) is of course a mandatory reading.

Personal narratives and sharing of experiences add greater depth and breadth to the concepts and terminologies and enable students to make connections between their lives and the abstract theoretical formulations. This allows me to enrich the learning environment by tapping into what hooks (1994) calls the 'passion of experience': the unique personal experiences of each learner.

For instance, the complex intersections between community and gender were captured in a student's narrative of how her location as a north Indian in a predominantly Maharashtrian neighbourhood made it difficult for her to resist street harassment in her area because she felt doubly oppressed as a woman and as a North Indian, given the bias against North Indians in Mumbai during that time. Similarly, the idea of negotiation within patriarchy was amplified by a student's narrative of how she kept her parents in the dark about an instance of sexual harassment on the streets at 12 midnight for that would have meant greater curbs on her mobility.

Storytelling is another pedagogic tool that I employ, asking students to write and share their own biographies. From these emerge stories of triumph, of negotiation and of agency. One can discern the use of multiple strategies of consent, resistance, negotiation to counter the hegemonic presence of multiple and overlapping patriarchies of class, religion and gender. There seems to be no continuum of resistance. In a series of self-other interactions, there is resistance in some and affirmation in others.

While in some cases resistance is overt, visible and intended, for others given the overarching patriarchal norms, trying to alter male behaviour or the power structure was asking for social change in a big way and so they have developed ways to negotiate interpersonal relations in non-threatening ways within the existing gender paradigms. Thus, they object only to their particular situation, not to the system in itself. Here, resistance is covert, non-confrontational and subtle and may even go unnoticed. For instance, one student who had witnessed violence between her parents mentioned how she had left a book on domestic violence on the dining table for her father to see it. Another student argued 'I keep breaking and bending rules all the time. But I avoid an open confrontation as I do not want things to end on a bad note'.

These stories also reveal how deeply embedded they are within their familial structures. Family, kinship and community bonds may be experienced as

oppressive but the fact that they provide the securities of identity and cultural self-worth makes it that difficult to rupture them. As one of them said 'I hate my father for marrying the second time but I still love him and I cannot walk out of the house' or as another echoed 'I am religious and I observe fasts during *paryushan*. It gives me a certain solace and peace and I am not willing to forgo that'.

Thus, what we see are the myriad ways in which patriarchy is contested or negotiated in individualised ways rather than a collective, 'expressing solidarity' kind of contestation. In this context to assume that they have a false class consciousness and have no concept of a rights-based discourse would be problematic. They may not be as politicised as in previous generations but they are not entirely individualised and apolitical either.

While it is true that very few have an explicit commitment to undoing gender differentiation, some in fact believe that gender is innate and immutable. But interestingly, co-occurring with this somewhat paradoxically, are attempts at carving out an identity, one's own autonomous space and being independent. As one of them wrote 'We women are like that. We like to compromise and adjust'. But the same girl broke off a relationship because she found the boy 'too overbearing and protective'. Thus, storytelling becomes an effective tool to recover individual and multiple voices and to also understand contemporary feminist politics.

I often use satire and humour to make the familiar strange and to get the students thinking. For instance should boys change their surname after marriage? Why must we use Miss and Mrs in case of unmarried and married girls? Why don't men live with their wives' families after marriage? The typical reaction that follows this statement is laughter. I ask them why should this evoke laughter. This presents an occasion to think and reflect upon what is normative, given and taken for granted. Readings from texts like 'A comparison between men and women' (O'Hanlon, 1994), Gloria Steinem's essay 'If men could menstruate?' (1978) not only evoke laughter but also mainstream the non-normative discourses. Role plays are used to understand the nuances of a topic like sexual harassment.

For every concept, I have a set of questions that disrupt their comfort zone. For instance, commercial sex work (victim, sympathetic, immoral and wrong), change of surname (legal, required, important and those who refuse think no end of themselves) and feminism (man haters, family destroyers, voluble, too smart, etc.).

Plays like Nandita Das' 'Between the Lines'³ helps students to capture the nuances of gender bias within an urban-educated middle class location. Similarly, the play 'Resurrecting Draupadi and Sita'⁴ provides a subversive reading of popular Hindu mythologies of Ramayana and Mahabharat and questions certain dominant ideologies that operate to silence women's voices.

A dialogue encouraging boys to understand their privileges as men and to name them through discussions of their everyday experiences, as opposed to girls', in a variety of settings, such as home, streets, buses, local trains, etc. is quite revealing. This brings to the fore privileges that they often take for granted. For instance, how unmindful they are of sexual division of labour within the home. Who does what at home and who benefits? Or the unrestricted mobility that they enjoy in public spaces.

I undertake a self-reflexive exercise at the end of the semester to help them reflect on how the course has shaped their understanding of gender issues and whether the

course has had a visible transformative effect on them and the larger space within which they are located. As part of this exercise, intensive focus group discussions are carried out after class hours with small groups consisting of five to six students. These discussions cover a range of issues from mobility, sexuality, marriage and religion to career choices and their identities. Since, we have had a close interaction in the classroom where sharing of experiences is an important pedagogic tool, students repose trust in me and share their thoughts and experiences.

As a feminist pedagogue, it is imperative that I interrogate my own location. I enter the classroom from several social locations that shape my engagement with the subject and the questions that I pose. I am acutely conscious of the fact that it is from a position of privilege that I ask my students to resist conventional oppressive hierarchies. How easy is this, considering that they are still grappling with issues that we thought we have resolved long back. For instance, the need to adhere to religious mandates, household responsibilities in terms of caring for the old and infirm, cooking, pressure of marriage etc., lack of support structures outside the family are crucial challenges that they confront.

Pedagogical Challenges

What I have outlined above are a set of pedagogic strategies/tools that I have used to have an engaged and meaningful discourse in the classroom. Are these easy to implement? No, they do present formidable challenges but they are not insurmountable.

Students resist a dialogic, participatory style of learning. It is difficult to effect a transition for students, from being passive knowledge consumers to active knowledge producers and to be informed participants in the class. They are so used to the standard lecture format and note taking that they refuse to enter into a dialogic style of learning.

Although this is a course that students identify with and enjoy the teaching learning process, at times, one does encounter students' resistance to the course content. Their reaction ranges from outright denial to 'mam isn't this a bit too much' to 'this does not happen in my family' to a typical functionalist explanation 'this arrangement (read patriarchal) is good for society'.

In my attempt to create a democratic space within the classroom, to do away with hierarchy and recover students' voices, some students misinterpret my familiarity. Some take advantage of the feminist classroom, seeing the course content as soft and high grades as automatic. They want to be marked high irrespective of their efforts. I also face the daunting task of breaking down hierarchies among students on the basis of language, class and community.

Does a feminist understanding necessarily translate into feminist writing or a sociologically informed way of writing? I am afraid not. Students are either writing general essays marked by an absence of feminist ideas or essays full of jargon that seem so distant and far removed from their lived experiences. The challenge for me as a teacher is, how do I infuse academic rigour into my teaching and ensure at the same time that these do not remain mere abstractions and actually translate into feminist writing. Given a choice I would like my students

to adopt novel writing styles interspersed with their own lived experiences rather than writing traditional academic essays. But the grading practices are so standardised that there is always a fear of falling grades if students experiment with something different.

Large classes with sometimes fifty or more students pose a huge challenge. Engaged student learning becomes a herculean task since a lot of time and energy is consumed in enforcing discipline. One is often accused of not doing serious academic work if one is trying to experiment with alternative pedagogic tools, such as role play, using video clips, etc., to illustrate and so, many teachers take the safer route in their teaching practices as well as the topics they take up for class discussions.

How do I capture the complexities of a course on Sociology of Gender and bring in the idea of agency, negotiation, resistance, centre and margin, personal is political, without being reductionist, given the increasing pressure to dilute and simplify.

The introduction of credit based semester grading system since 2011 has brought new challenges to the fore. Teachers are saddled with examination work throughout the year leaving little time for research and teaching, leave alone experimenting with new pedagogic styles. The obsession with standardised pattern of assessment and evaluation has also diminished the research base of the courses. Online tests and multiple choice questions have replaced research assignments which neither provoke nor compel students to think analytically. Research assignments especially in a course on Sociology of Gender afforded an opportunity for community engagement and a hands on experience of ground realities. Such an exploration is rare these days given the course structure and pattern of examination.

Since a non-graded approach to learning is not possible in a structured university course, we attempted something similar in a Certificate Course on Gender Studies that we designed for our undergraduate students. The entire course is premised on making teaching and learning an interesting experience for students without the pressures of assignments, projects, and class tests. The main emphasis is on participatory approaches and experiential learning without a grading system since the obsession with grades often makes learning a reductionist venture. This course is open to undergraduate students across all disciplines and seeks to build a critical feminist perspective. With its small class size it affords an opportunity to have a deeper engagement with gender issues and to foster a more meaningful debate.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the challenges, teaching a course on Sociology of Gender has been immensely gratifying. The feminist conversations that I have shared with students reveal the varied possibilities that a course on gender has to offer. Some of the students say that they have always challenged the gendered norms but never realised that those were individual feminist acts of resistance. Some said a course like Gender and Society had deepened their understanding on women's issues.

They challenge gender boundaries even though they are pushing from the margins. A large section of students feel that even though they do not challenge the masculinist discourse the course has forced a rethinking on key aspects of their lives. It has enabled some to start conversations among friends, family and relatives about property rights, legal rights, the evils of dowry, female circumcision and female foeticide and infanticide. One student whose father made an unsuccessful attempt to kill her while she was in her mother's womb and later when she was born, works today to raise awareness on female foeticide and infanticide.

What gives me hope as a teacher are these oppositional discourses which may be marginal to the dominant formations but offer the possibility of challenge. As Kalpagam (2000) writes 'breaking the doxic silence on patriarchal oppression can happen in a number of sites and locations'. For me as a teacher, classroom is one such site. When I see that happening one feels vindicated and validated.

If we believe in the transformatory potential of Sociology of Gender classrooms and want to engage students in a transformative inquiry that is at the heart of feminist pedagogy, then it is imperative that we overcome the resistance to activist approaches to learning and effect a paradigm shift in pedagogy. From a positivist, patriarchal and conformist pedagogy steeped in ideas of 'all women are oppressed and all men are oppressors' to a critical and radical feminist pedagogy that does what Kalpana Kannabiran (2011, p. 2) in her essay titled 'A New Beginning' refers to as 'a radical and subversive interpretation of the syllabi'.

Notes

1. A compilation of photocopies of essential readings.
2. Courses, such as Bachelor of Mass Media, Accounts and Finance, Banking and Insurance, etc., are offered in the unaided section.
3. Nandita Das and Divya Jagdale's 'Between the Lines' is a play that captures the gendered nuances of a lawyer couple's relationship.
4. The play was presented by an experimental theatre group that seeks to create a dialogue with students. The play has been scripted and directed by Omkar Bhatia.

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