



## GENDERED CLASSROOM INTERACTIONS IN INDIA: PATRIARCHY REPRODUCED AND RESISTED

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines how everyday teacher-student interactions in Indian classrooms preserve patriarchal norms, often marginalising girls' voices and shaping their academic self-concept. Focusing specifically on verbal feedback and classroom questioning patterns. It explores how these micro-level practices function as ideological tools that instil gendered expectations in students, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses and feminist pedagogy. This article engages with data from the Time Use Survey, ASER, UNESCO, and ethnographic classroom observations. It proves that teachers often unconsciously convey lower expectations toward girls, limiting their participation, especially in STEM subjects, and eroding their self-efficacy over time. This article concludes by proposing reflexive pedagogical training and gender responsive classroom audits as tools to transform classroom culture into one of substantive gender equality.*

**Keywords:** Gendered Feedback, Teacher Expectations, Feminist Pedagogy, Habitus, Classroom Patriarchy.

### INTRODUCTION

Although the Right to Education Act 2009 guarantees equal, non-discriminatory access to schooling, classroom experiences for girls across India remain deeply shaped by social hierarchies.<sup>1</sup> While the gender gap in enrollment has narrowed significantly, the quality of engagement and teaching interactions remains gendered. Often subtly reinforcing existing power structures. This article examines a specific but powerful dynamic, how verbal feedback and

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<sup>1</sup> The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009, s 3.

questioning patterns in co-educational classrooms act as a mechanism through which gender roles are reproduced. Rather than focusing broadly on gender and education, the aim here is to analyse how teacher behaviour, special expectations embedded in language shape girls' academic identities and long-term aspirations.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* explains how social structures are internalised as personal dispositions.<sup>2</sup> Within classrooms, students learn what kind of behaviour is expected and acceptable, not just from textbooks, but from the subtle social cues. Including the way teachers interact with them. Over time, these experiences form gendered academic identities. Girls consistently encouraged to be quiet and neat, rather than analytical or assertive, develop a *habitus* that aligns with submissiveness rather than intellectual engagement.

**Althusser's ideological state apparatus:** Louis Althusser posits that schools serve as ideological state apparatuses, institutions that shape individuals' worldviews, in line with dominant ideologies.<sup>3</sup> In this context, classroom routines such as differential feedback function to normalise the idea that girls are inherently less capable in subjects like mathematics or science. These ideologies are not explicitly taught; they are performed through everyday classroom practices.

**Feminist pedagogy:** Feminist pedagogy challenges hierarchical knowledge transmission and seeks to create participatory, empowering spaces for all learners.<sup>4</sup> Informed by the framework, the article views classrooms not just as instructional spaces but as arenas of social reproduction where agency can also be reclaimed if teachers are trained to recognise and address their implicit biases.

**Gendered questioning and feedback patterns:** In the ecology of the classroom, the nature and the distribution of questions are powerful indicators of how teachers perceive students' capabilities. Empirical research has consistently revealed gendered stratification in questioning practices. In a comprehensive field study conducted in government schools across Rajasthan, boys received nearly 60% of all higher-order questions. Those that required analysis, synthesis,

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press 1977) 72–78.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (Monthly Review Press 1971) 127–186.

<sup>4</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge 1994) 16–24.

or evaluation.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, girls were predominantly asked lower-order questions, often requiring mere recall of facts or rote responses.

This distinction is far from inconsequential. Here, higher-order questions do not simply test ability; they develop it. They encourage students to think independently, construct arguments, and apply logic. Skills that are fundamental to success in subjects like mathematics, science and social studies. When boys are consistently invited into this realm of cognitive engagement and girls are relegated to reproductive tasks, the result is a deeply gendered distribution of intellectual opportunities.

Moreover, this pattern reflects not just what is asked, but how teachers respond to students' answers. Boys who give incorrect or partial answers are more likely to be driven, guided or encouraged to rethink their responses. Teachers are observed rephrasing questions or offering hints, implying that the boys' reasoning process is valued even if the outcome is flawed. Girls, however, are often corrected quickly or have the question answered on their behalf. This kind of differential response pattern subtly communicates that boys are worth investing in cognitively, while girls are not.

This phenomenon also reflects what feminist theorist Nancy Fraser refers to as misrecognition, a form of injustice that occurs when individuals are not afforded the same level of respect or value in social interactions. The repeated experience of being intellectually sidelined discourages girls from volunteering answers or engaging with challenging material. Over time, girls internalise the belief that making mistakes is unacceptable and that risk-taking is not for them, a troubling lesson given that academic growth depends heavily on trial, error, and experimentation.

Furthermore, the practice of gendered questioning intersects with social hierarchies beyond gender. Studies indicate that Dalit and Adivasi girls in particular are even less likely to be asked higher-order questions, where teachers assume a lack of intellectual capacity due to both caste and gender stereotypes.<sup>6</sup> This layered bias illustrates how intersectionality further compounds classroom exclusions, turning verbal interactions into vehicles for both gendered and caste-based marginalisation. In sum, questioning is not a neutral instructional act, but a disciplinary

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<sup>5</sup> Manjula Batra, 'Gender Bias in the Classroom: A Field Study' (2006) 41(16) Economic and Political Weekly 1536.

<sup>6</sup> Geetha B Nambissan, 'Schooling Dalit Children in India' (1996) 31(16–17) Economic and Political Weekly 1011.

mechanism that shapes academic identities. By distributing cognitive challenges unequally, teachers often and intentionally, as gatekeepers of intellectual development. Privileging boys as thinkers and relegating girls to the margins of knowledgeable discourse.

## FEEDBACK AND RECOGNITION

If questioning practices regulate access to cognitive engagement, verbal feedback functions to construct and reinforce the model of the “ideal student”, and this model is deeply gendered. In extensive classroom observations across schools in Bihar and Rajasthan, girls were routinely praised for traits such as neat handwriting, cleanliness, silence and obedience.<sup>7</sup> When girls raised their hands or completed tasks, the typical response was along the lines of very neat, well-behaved or quiet and attentive. Boys, on the other hand, were more likely to be commended for confidence, originality, and initiative, terms that implicitly link masculinity with cognitive competence and leadership.

This bifurcation in praise constructs two archetypes, the ideal girl student is compliant, obedient, visually presentable and emotionally contained. The ideal boy student is intellectually curious, outspoken, and confident, even disruptive behaviour is often reframed as leadership potential.

These distinctions are not mere linguistic habits. They are social messages about what is valued and who is seen as capable. From a Bourdieusian perspective, these Micropedagogical practices form part of the symbolic capital conferred differently upon boys and girls. Girls accumulate symbolic capital through aesthetic and behavioural conformity, while boys do so through intellectual recognition. These shapes gendered habitus, wherein students unconsciously internalise and reproduce these roles in their academic performance and aspirations.

From the standpoint of feminist pedagogy, this feedback system is not just biased. It is a form of symbolic violence, as defined by Bourdieu. Symbolic violence operates by making arbitrary social hierarchies appear natural or deserved. Girls who consistently receive praise for being quiet and tidy begin to associate these traits with success and self-worth. While also absorbing the notion that critical thinking or assertiveness is. Not for them. These gendered patterns are also visible in formal assessment comments. Analysis of student report cards in Delhi's

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<sup>7</sup> Shailaja Fennell, 'Gender, Mobility and Classroom Management in Indian Schools' (2014) 93 Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education 117.

government schools found that feedback for girls often included behavioural observations, well-mannered, disciplined, pleasant, even in math or science assessments. For boys, academic performance was foregrounded. Quick thinker, strong and problem-solving. The systematic misrecognition of girls' cognitive abilities contributes to what Carol Gilligan calls the muting of girls' voices in institutional settings.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, feedback is not simply motivating students; it is about defining their place in the academic hierarchy. Without critical intervention, these verbal practices serve to legitimise gender hierarchies in educational outcomes, reinforcing structural inequality under the guise of routine instruction.

### **PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES: THE EROSION OF SELF-EFFICACY**

**Academic confidence and STEM avoidance:** The long-term impact of gendered feedback manifests most clearly in declining academic self-efficacy. According to a 2015 UNESCO study in Uttar Pradesh, girls' confidence in mathematics fell by 30% between grades five and eight, despite performing on par with boys in earlier years.<sup>9</sup> Focus group discussions revealed that many girls described feeling scared or stupid when asked to answer questions, particularly in front of male peers.<sup>10</sup> Teachers' dismissive or hurried responses when girls answered incorrectly intensified this anxiety. In contrast, boys recalled being encouraged to think harder or take a guess. Small gestures that reinforced belief in one's potential.

**Subject choices and future aspirations:** These early experiences shape major academic and career decisions. A 2020 study conducted in Delhi's low-income schools found that only 12% of adolescent girls expressed interest in STEM careers, compared to 28% of boys.<sup>11</sup> Most girls cited low confidence or fear of failure rather than lack of interest. The study concluded that teacher expectations and verbal cues during formative years played a pivotal role in shaping these attitudes.

**Towards gender responsive pedagogy:** The reproduction of patriarchal norms in classrooms is often unconscious. Therefore, reflexivity, the ability to critically examine one's behaviour, is

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<sup>8</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Harvard University Press 1982).

<sup>9</sup> UNESCO, *Gender and Education for All: The Leap to Equality* (Global Monitoring Report 2003/04) 78.

<sup>10</sup> UNESCO, *Education and Gender Equality in Uttar Pradesh: A Study* (2015) 53.

<sup>11</sup> Anita Govil, 'Aspirations and Gender in Delhi's Slum Schools' (2020) 15(1) *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 45.

central to change. Teacher training programs in Tamil Nadu have piloted initiatives where educators record their teaching and analyse the gender dynamics in the questioning and feedback.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, role reversal workshops, where teachers assume the role of female students, have been instrumental in building empathy. Participants report being shocked at how easily they dismissed girls' contributions or reserved cognitive tasks for boys.<sup>13</sup> These programs have led to a measurable increase in the distribution of higher-order questions to girls and improved self-reported confidence among students.

### **CLASSROOM AUDITS AND STUDENT FEEDBACK**

Gender audits, supported by the World Bank in Madurai, have introduced systematic tracking of who gets called upon, the types of questions asked, and the nature of praise or discipline administered.<sup>14</sup> In just six months, schools that implemented audits saw a 25% reduction in gendered discipline actions and a 15% rise in girl-led group presentations. Anonymous student surveys were also critical in shaping these reforms. When girls were asked how often they felt their opinions were valued or whether they felt confident asking questions, their feedback became a direct input into school improvement plans.

### **CONCLUSION**

This article has shown how verbal classroom practices, especially questioning and feedback, serve as vehicles for the reproduction of gender habitus. Teachers, often unknowingly, uphold patriarchal expectations that position boys as thinkers and girls as followers. These practices limit girls' engagement in cognitive tasks, erode confidence, and contribute to long-term gender disparities in education and employment.

To transform classrooms into spaces of genuine equality, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Mandate gender-equity training in all teacher education and certification programs.
- Integrate classroom gender audits as part of school inspection and evaluation.

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<sup>12</sup> Tamil Nadu Education Department, Gender-Sensitivity Training Manual (2022) 12–17.

<sup>13</sup> Vidya Ramachandran, 'Role Reversal Workshops: A Pedagogical Tool' (2019) 8(4) Gender and Education 423.

<sup>14</sup> World Bank, Gender-Equitable Classroom Practice: Tamil Nadu Pilot Report (2021) 34–39.

- Encourage reflexivity through video-based observation and peer review practices.
- Incorporate student feedback mechanisms to ensure classrooms are inclusive.
- Recognise feedback and questioning as policy-relevant metrics, not just pedagogical tools.

By consciously reshaping these micro-interactions, schools can interrupt the reproduction of patriarchal norms and instead cultivate a culture of substantive equality where every student is recognised as capable, deserving, and heard.