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EFL Female Teachers' and Students' Experiences of Gender Discrimination in Rural Nepali Schools

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Abstract

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Gender discrimination in schools is a serious problem in developed and developing countries including Nepal. Literature shows that gender discrimination in educational institutions, like in other workplaces, is common. My experience as a teacher and the cross-road conversation with some EFL female teachers and students triggered me to study the issue of gender discrimination in schools critically. The purpose of the study reported here was to explore EFL female teachers' and students' experiences of gender discrimination in Nepali schools. Using qualitative phenomenology design, I collected information through semi-structured interviews with eight female teachers and eight students from four schools in a district. The result showed that many female teachers and girls experienced various forms of gender-based discrimination such as psychological and emotional torture, sexual harassment, inequality in assigning roles and responsibilities, discrimination in hiring, unequal wages, disrespect, gender-based bias in grading, and lack of gender-inclusive curriculum and textbooks in schools. Similarly, the paper

suggests the teachers and the stakeholders develop gender-inclusive curricula and promote positive gender socialization for gender equality in schools.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, gender roles, gender inequality, sexual harassment, gender-inclusive

Introduction

Gender-based discrimination in various sectors of human life including school education and other activities is a big issue in many developing and developed countries. Despite the efforts of many international organisations like UNESCO to empower women and ensure gender equality in education as per the Millennium Development Goals, a large number of girls and women continue to

suffer from gender discrimination in the areas like schools (UNESCO, 2015). Some studies in various contexts (López et al., 2020; McGinley, 2019; Poudel, 2019; Rangvid, 2019) show that schools have become a place for practising gender bias roles to discriminate against girls and female teachers by ignoring their capacity in leadership development, selecting a career and making a decision. Among many institutions for gender socialization, school is one of the important agents to play a vital role in shaping gender roles in school children. Unfair treatment of young boys or girls based on their gender is against human rights and social justice. Thus, any kind of gender discrimination in schools can discourage them from learning. The problems like students' poor performance, high dropout rate, irregularity in school, and depression may be the result of gender-based unequal treatment in schools (McGinley, 2019).

The purpose of this article is to explore EFL female teachers' and students' experiences of gender discrimination in schools located in rural Nepal and examine various forms of gender-based discrimination in school activities. The study was based on two research questions how is EFL female teachers' and students' experience of gender discrimination at schools and what forms of gender based discrimination are practised in Nepali schools? To analyze gender discrimination briefly, I have used some social theories such as liberal feminism and critical pedagogy. Liberal feminism focuses on gender equality in all domains by establishing democratic values (Fuller, 2013), and critical pedagogy ensures the power of education to analyze social discrimination and injustice including gender discrimination in schools and reform the social belief through transformation (Gor, 2005). I used these theories to analyze various school activities through gender perspective. Since the nature of the study is phenomenology, I collected 'female teachers and students' experiences of facing various forms of gender-based discrimination through semi-structured interviews. Guided by my research questions, I developed different themes such as gender and schooling, gender discrimination in students' grading, students' experience of gender discrimination, teachers' experience of gender discrimination, gender discrimination in curriculum, textbook, and classroom activities, and sexual harassment. Finally, I concluded some gender bias behaviours in schools and the role the schools can play to minimize such behaviours.

Although gender discrimination in other workplaces has been a focus of many researchers across the world, EFL female teachers' and students' experiences of gender discrimination at schools in rural Nepali schools is a less researched area. So, this paper aims to bridge this gap by exploring the lived experiences of teachers and students. This paper is significant to students, teachers, parents, and all the stakeholders of school education to develop awareness against gender discrimination and the need for gender-inclusive learning materials including curriculum and textbooks at the school level to maintain gender balance and gender parity.

Literature Review

This section presents the review of literature related to gender discrimination in educational institutions. It covers the review of some theories related to gender issues and the related previous studies in various contexts.

Theoretical Review

Miller (2016) states that the social construction of gender influences an individual's interests, activities, appearance, friendships, interpersonal relations, and career decisions. He views that a social

approach to gender development is responsible for treating girls and boys differently in their lives. This approach focuses socialisation in the family, schools, and their broader socio-cultural life. According to this view, males and females have specific gender roles to perform in societies, and displaying behaviours that are not consistent with gender norms is not allowed. For example, the toys for boys and girls are different and their parents provide the toys according to their gender, maybe trucks and balls for boys and dolls and tea sets for girls. In this way, every child develops his or her gender roles in society.

Similarly, Fuller (2013) views that liberal feminism aims to establish equal rights for women in various aspects including property, employment, and access to education. According to feminists, the root cause of gender discrimination is the traditional patriarchal system and socio-cultural structure which continuously suppress the women to achieve their rights. So, liberal feminists view that there is a need for systemic change to overthrow patriarchal oppression that advantaged the male/masculine over the female/feminine (Fuller, 2013). People have had a discriminatory sight of measuring the capacity of women in patriarchal societies in the past. As a result, women rarely get a leadership role in social institutions like schools and universities, government and non-government bodies, and political and social organisations. To minimise the gender gap, there should be equal opportunity for education for girls and boys without discrimination in schools because education has the power to dismantle class barriers for others (Francis, 2012).

Critical pedagogy is an educational movement that primarily aims to support the students in developing a consciousness of freedom so that they can connect the knowledge to power for social reformation (Giroux, 1983). Giroux believes that education has the power to make students agents for social transformation by awakening self-awareness against suppression and domination. The major goals of critical pedagogy as Gor (2005) put are raising awareness among the people and rejecting any kind of discrimination and violation against them. Earlier, Vandrick (1994) views that the goal of critical pedagogy is to emancipate and educate all people irrespective of their class, race, and gender. For example, many schools discourage girls to study subjects like Mathematics and Science thinking that girls cannot do better in these difficult subjects, and critical theory makes them aware of discrimination and motivate reform. In schools, the application of critical theory encourages the students to raise questions against any kind of discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, religion, etc.

Review of Empirical Studies

Under empirical review, I have reviewed various literature found in international and local contexts related to the research topic. I have reviewed them developing sub-themes such as gender discrimination, gender and schooling, and gender discrimination in schools.

Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination is the way of treating an individual or group of individuals unequally based on gender, the social construction of masculinities and femininities, by considering one superior to the other (Young, 2002). Gender discrimination in schools leads to unjust treatment based upon his/her gender in academic activities including grading, class assignment and enrollment, participating in different curricular and extracurricular activities, and discrimination in the workplace and decision-making process. Khanal (2018) found that parents invested more in boys' education than girls in rural

and urban Nepal, and there was gender bias in enrolling students in private schools in Nepal. Similarly, Janani (2018) reported that gender became an important component when making a decision about employment opportunities, enrollment in schools or universities, and providing equal opportunities, liberties, or rewards to a person or a group. In patriarchal societies like Nepal, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, women may suffer from discrimination based on socio-culturally constructed gender roles.

Several studies (Miller, 2016; Standing et al., 2017, Neupane, 2019) reported that the places like homes, communities, media, and schools practise different gender roles as parents give more workload to their daughters than sons; girls may get less support to select the subject and continue their studies in schools. The gender bias teaching methods, examples, and selected lessons in schools may reproduce gender gaps in learning. UNICEF (2019) reported that roughly 1 in 4 girls between the age of 15 and 19 get neither employment nor education compared to 1 in 10 boys. Similarly, it further reported that at workplaces, women do not get equal wages for the same work and have to face sexual harassment and mental torture. So, gender discrimination turns violent. Some 1 in 20 girls between the ages of 15 and 19 have experienced forced sex (UNICEF, 2020). Likewise, McGinley (2019) reported that a large number of girls across the world faced the risk of gender-based violence such as early marriage, unequal treatment at workplaces, schools, and universities, harassment in public places, bullying, and physical and psychological torture.

Gender and Schooling

Despite the efforts of various international organisations to increase educational participation for girls in developing countries by creating a gender-inclusive environment, many schools have become a site for gender discrimination. Several studies (Dunne et al., 2006; Janani, 2018; Popa & Bucur, 2014) in various contexts showed that schools have become a social institution marked by asymmetrical power relations to create discrimination in many social aspects including gender, ethnicity, language, socio-economic and culture. Dunne et al. (2006) indicated that gender identities as masculine and feminine are constructed and reinforced in schools as a part of the hidden curriculum. For example, girls are predominately responsible for cleaning whereas boys are for digging the school grounds in the African schools (Dunne et al., 2006). These are some symbolic activities of gender identification and differentiation continuously practiced in schools where girls and boys perform their gender roles and are silently accepted in schools.

Gender Discrimination in Schools

Schools as social institutions face several challenges to achieve gender equality in education in developing countries like Nepal. Many socio-cultural and psychological barriers like a priority on sons over daughters in education, believing girls and female teachers as weaker agents in decision making, discouraging girls in involving different activities including sports, and considering girls as low-self-esteem were contributing to gender discrimination in schools (Dunne et al., 2006). Similarly, in the African countries, Tuwor and Sossou (2008) explored that many cultural practices such as child marriage, child labour, poverty, and a load of household work for girls were some of the factors to contribute to gender discrimination in school education. They suggested that these cultural beliefs and attitudes should be changed and parents should be made accountable and responsible to ensure gender equality and gender parity in schools for girls. In developing countries like Nepal, there is low

school attainment of girls in secondary schools which can result in unsuccessful in an exam and lead to dropout. Neupane (2017) claimed that the reason behind the low school attainment rate of the girls in Nepal was the household chores, low academic status of parents, lack of priority for education for daughters, and low socio-economic status of the family.

Different studies in international contexts (Kowalski & Kanitkar, 2003; Spears Brown & Bigler, 2004) showed that gender discrimination in school was not only a problem in developing countries, but many children also became the victims of gender discrimination in the developed countries like the USA and Canada. For example, in 2000, the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights got roughly 5000 complaints from elementary and secondary school students and approximately 70% were of the reported gender discrimination (Spears Brown & Bigler, 2004).

The above literature shows that gender discrimination is prevalent in many schools in both developed and developing countries as a global issue. The socio-cultural construction of gender is deeply rooted in schools and many schools practise various forms of gender discrimination there. Although gender-based discrimination is a global issue, there is less research focusing on the EFL female teachers' and students' experiences of gender discrimination in schools in rural Nepal. Thus, this study was conducted to bridge this gap.

Methodology

As suggested by Willis (2007), I employed the qualitative-interpretative paradigm to construct a meaningful reality based on EFL female teachers' and students' experiences and viewpoints on gender-based discrimination in rural Nepali schools. This paradigm helped to investigate gender discrimination in schools and how female teachers and students constructed knowledge about gender discrimination in their schools' overall activities. As suggested by Cohen et al. (2017), I used qualitative phenomenology, particularly existential phenomenology as my research design which allowed me to bring the lived experiences, feelings and emotions of students and teachers about gender-based discrimination in their schools.

Following Cohen et al. (2017), I used semi-structured interviews for collecting data. I developed interview guidelines guided by my research questions. After taking consent from the school headteachers, teachers and students, I explained the process of the interview. I had several informal conversations with the participants in various contexts which supported me to collect rich information for the study. With the participants' consent, I recorded the interviews.

I analysed various documents such as newspapers, reports, books, and articles related to the topic. The review of these documents helped me to find a research gap. I used some search engines such as Google scholar to obtain the required documents. Eight teachers and eight students from four schools located in the rural part of Gandaki province were the participants in this study. I selected the schools and participants purposively. Out of four schools, two were community and two were private schools. I used pseudo names for schools and participants to maintain anonymity and confidentiality in my research.

I followed a thematic approach to analyse the collected information from my participants. I analysed the qualitative information using the thematic approach of qualitative data analysis which allowed me to organise the qualitative information into specific themes. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), I followed six steps of the thematic analysis approach. In the first phase, I transcribed

the interviews by deleting the irrelevant information. In the second phase, I coded the information to organise it systematically into themes. In the third phase, I arranged the codes and quotations and developed some themes. In the fourth phase, I reviewed, refined and merged the themes. In the fifth phase, I renamed some of the themes to make them clear and meaningful. In the sixth phase, I organised the final themes to report in this study.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the result based on the analysis of information and the discussion of the major findings with supporting literature.

Students' Experiences of Gender Discrimination

The students involved in this study reported that they experienced emotional and psychological torture in school. They said that they had to tolerate the harassment such as mistreatment, exposing inappropriate behavior, making sexist comments against girls and behaving girls feel inferior to compete with boys in various curricular and extracurricular activities. For example,

I don't know why teachers behave the girls like inferior creatures in the classroom and in out-of-classroom activities. While taking part in sports competitions or selecting optional subjects, girls are suggested not to take a risk by taking part in outdoor games and studying difficult subjects like Maths and Science whereas boys are encouraged for this. (Anu, a student from Annapurna School)

These comments indicated that girls were considered as inferior to take part in outdoor sports and study difficult subjects like Science and Maths. It reflects the psychological harassment against them in school activities because of socially constructed beliefs against girls. This resonates with Janai (2018) who found that many girls experienced high rates of gender bias and discrimination including emotional harassment and underestimated girls' capacity in leadership. Similarly, Miller (2016) revealed that teachers and parents underestimated the learning ability of girls and discouraged them from taking part in athletics and outdoor games though they had a keen interest in them.

I observed that many schools lacked gender-friendly school infrastructures such as furniture, toilets, playground, and the ladder of the building. The participants reported that they felt uncomfortable using the common furniture and school uniform during their menstrual cycle. They demanded special bathrooms with changing rooms which most of the schools did not have. Nikkhoo (2017) found a gender gap in the use of school furniture, sports, labs, and bathrooms in many rural schools in developing countries. Similarly, Wernick et al. (2017) reported that many schools lacked the infrastructure like bathroom safety suitable for the students of transgender identity. Many schools generally manage the infrastructures without considering the transgender students.

Teachers' Experiences of Gender Discrimination

As girls, many female teachers reported that they faced gender discrimination in schools. They reported that high workload, low salary, and fewer chances for taking leadership opportunities were the major discrimination against female teachers. For example,

Despite equal qualifications and job responsibilities, female teachers have low salaries and a high workload compared to male teachers in my school. While hiring teachers in schools, most of the SMCs gave preference to male teachers than female teachers in both private and

community schools. Such discrimination has increased the high job dissatisfaction among female teachers. (Bimala & Dibya from Bidhya Sagar School)

Teachers' experiences reflected gender discrimination in job placement, wages, and allocating workload to teachers which made many female teachers frustrated and dissatisfied with the teaching profession. Similar to these findings, Vivek (2017) in India and Ali and Khan (2018) in Pakistan found that female teachers faced discrimination in the process of hiring, wages, and support from the administration and school committees. They also found that majority of the female teachers had a high job dissatisfaction rate as they got more disrespectful behaviour from students and parents compared to the male teachers. Likewise, in Zimbabwe, Ndebele and Shava (2019) reported that despite the several efforts made by the country for gender equality, female teachers had a low chance to lead their institutions due to multiple challenges like cultural, structural, economic, and social barriers.

Although the government of Nepal and many non-government organisations raised their voices for gender equality, teachers involved in this study reported that they had double responsibilities: taking care of their family members, and their professional duties. For example,

I have more responsibilities at home to look after my children and family members. As a female teacher, I also have more responsibilities at school compared to male teachers. After completing my regular classes, I have to take junior students for Khaja, look after them, collect them and take them into their classrooms. The overload hinders me in my professional career development. (Madhu from Mamata School)

Madhu's response reflects that biological, socio-cultural, and gender factors hindered many female teachers' professional career development and that they had to bear more responsibilities. The social construction of gender roles is responsible for gender discrimination in Nepali schools. . This finds resonance with Paudyal (2013) who explored that various aspects such as biological, socio-cultural, stereotype gender roles, and patriarchy influence the professional life of a majority of female teachers in Nepal. As a result, many female teachers may compel to avoid the opportunities like leadership at schools and participate in professional development programmes.

Sexual Harassment

The teachers and students involved in the study reported that sexual harassment was serious gender discrimination and violence in schools along with roads and public places. Their stories reflected that sexual harassment was prevalent among female high school students in many schools in developing countries including Nepal. Most of the students experienced some form of sexual harassment from their peers, teachers, and strangers in school. For example,

Some of the teachers try to develop close relationships with girls despite their objections. They come to a close in the classroom and computer lab pretending that they want to support us. I feel uneasy when the male teachers touch my back and head and look at me repeatedly. (Asmita, a student from Annapurna School)

Many girl students complain that they have become victims of sexual harassment from their peers and teachers. Not only them, but sometimes female teachers have to tolerate sexual harassment from male teachers in schools. When we report it to the school administration, they ignore us and take such behavior as normal behavior. (Madhu, teacher from Mamata School)

These comments showed how schools had become a place for gender-based harassment

and the concerned authorities were found ignoring their responsibilities to prevent such activities. This is similar to the findings Kisiel et al. (2020) who compared that found that the ratio of gender discrimination and sexual harassment sharply increased for female compared to male students in Swedish schools. Similarly, due to regular gender-based harassment at schools, I found some girls increased their irregularity and decreased their learning achievement. In Nepal, Standing et al. (2017) explored that majority of the girls had experienced some forms of sexual harassment from their peers, strangers, and sometimes from their teachers in schools, public places, and on roads. One of the reasons behind poor performance and irregularity of girls at schools might be sexual harassment either by their peers or teachers.

Bias in Professional Development Opportunity and Career Development

Teachers involved in this study reported that they were excluded from various professional development opportunities such as participating in teacher training and workshop, leading students in educational excursions and fieldwork, and taking responsibilities like headteacher, programme coordinator, and heads of subject committees. The opportunities were given mostly to the male teachers because the School Management Committees (SMCs) and other stakeholders developed a belief that male teachers had leading capacity compared to female teachers. For example,

When there was a quota for teachers' professional development training in Educational Training Center, the headteacher sent a male teacher without consulting me. I was a senior and the training was essential for my promotion, but the headteacher claimed that the training was not suitable for me as the venue was far from my school. (Anita, a secondary teacher from Aadarsa School)

I was equally capable to take the responsibility of deputy headteacher but the SMC underestimated my leadership capacity and selected male teachers for the post. This situation has frustrated many female teachers like me. Why do the concerned authorities show gender bias behavior frequently? (Bimala from Bidhya Sagar School)

Teachers' comments reflected how gender discrimination has been institutionalised in many Nepali schools and how the policymakers underestimated the female teachers' capacity. It might be due to the influence of the patriarchal society where women are considered weak creatures.

Similar to the teachers, students also shared their experiences of gender bias while taking the opportunity for career development and showing their performance in various extracurricular activities outside school. For example,

Girls are discouraged to take part in various activities outside school. Last month, there was an inter-school speech competition at the district headquarters. I was interested to take part in the competition as I secured the first position in the inter-house competition in my school. But the teachers sent the boy who was after me in a school competition saying that going to the district headquarters could be difficult for a girl. (Shiwani, a student from Sunlight School)

It was found that female teachers and students faced gender bias problems while taking responsibilities and getting career development opportunities in many schools in Nepal. This is consistent with the study by Mate et al. (2018) who identified how gender roles became a barrier to career development and leadership opportunity for many female teachers and students in Australia and Vietnam. Thus, gender discrimination in schools has become a barrier for many female teachers

and students from getting the opportunity for their professional and career development in developing countries.

Curriculum and Gender Discrimination

Teachers reported that the school curriculum, textbooks, and instructional materials lacked gender inclusiveness as they favoured one gender. For example, male characters in different fictions perform a superior role whereas women characters are always sentimental, sympathetic, and loving. While teaching, teachers may use gender bias language and examples. For example,

Many textbooks contain males who have the professions like doctors, policemen, and headteachers whereas the jobs like teachers and nurses are for females. Similarly, some sports like football, cricket, and hockey are characterized as masculine games. Many textbooks have gender bias language which may teach children to adopt gender bias behavior in society. (Madhabi, a teacher from Mamata School)

These comments reflected the lack of gender-inclusive curriculum and textbooks in Nepali schools. The study found that the traditional curriculum and textbooks based on a patriarchal society are responsible to promote gender discrimination in society. This finding aligns with the finding of Hashmi and Mohsin (2017) who identified gender inequality in school curricula and textbooks and found that language, pictures, and posters used in the textbooks had gender-biased roles.

Conclusion and Implications

To examine the various nature of gender discrimination in Rural Nepali schools, this study explored and examined some gender-based discrimination from EFL female teachers' and students' perspectives based on their experiences. Gender discrimination may be prevalent in many schools; however, the nature and level of discrimination may be context-specific. In schools, gender-based discrimination has become institutionalised and accepted indirectly where boys and girls receive different behaviours at home from their parents and in schools by their teachers. Even female teachers have to face discrimination compared to male teachers in schools.

Treating boys and girls differently based on their gender is a serious challenge to achieving gender parity, especially in developing countries. Such discrimination can create problems like irregularity at school, high dropout of the students, poor performance, low classroom participation, and depression and stress. It may be associated with some aspects like socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, language, and religion. To make the schools' environment gender-friendly, harmonious, peaceful, and developing, teachers may have a key role to play as the agents in interventions for change. However, teachers alone cannot change the deeply rooted issue of gender discrimination; they need the support of the school management committee, students, parents, and all the stakeholders to transform the existing condition of gender issues. Teachers, who are gendered beings themselves, need to be prepared to change their behaviours about gender issues and should be changed themselves. Teachers should make students aware through critical pedagogy. Similarly, several research activities and training in schools against gender bias can reduce gender discrimination. Moreover, the teachers and the stakeholders should work for developing gender-inclusive curricula, textbooks, and instructional materials to promote positive gender socialisation for gender equality.

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