

Gender Equality through Life Skills Education



Meenakshi Sharma
Senior Research Fellow,
Deptt. of Education,
University of Lucknow,
Lucknow



Nidhi Bala
Dean & Head,
Deptt. of Education,
University of Lucknow,
Lucknow

Abstract

In this progressive society all nations are heading towards millennium development goals striving to secure equality on all aspects of life including gender equality. Gender equality emphasizes freedom of choice and equality of opportunity for all men and women. Women throughout the globe have to be dependent on their male counterparts for making choices for them in one aspect of life or the other. Life Skills Education can play a significant role in empowering women and thereby bring gender equality in the society. Development of Life Skills in women will make them more informed and knowledgeable regarding their health; their rights and duties; various issues concerning the society and they will have more choices in their employability; in the decision making process; as an effective homemaker; and as a productive member of the society. Development of Life Skills such as Self Awareness, Critical Thinking, Creative Thinking, Decision Making, Problem Solving and Effective Communication, Negotiation skills, Planning ability, Organising ability and so on, can have far reaching effects in this direction. Life Skills Education can open up new avenues for women for dealing with all aspects of their life in a progressive manner thus lessening the man woman divide.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Life Skills Education.

Introduction

Men and women both are integral part of the society, complementing each other in every aspect. They are often termed as two sides of the same coin; two wheels of a cart and so on, in the sense that one part is meaningless without being complemented by the other. A healthy society must be based on the principle of equality and this equality becomes all the more significant in its basic form, that is, equality between genders. This equality can be expected when the genders have same rights and opportunities in the society and both the genders being equally empowered. Empowerment occurs through improvement of conditions, standards, events and a global perspective of life and women still have to go a long way when compared to their dominant male counterparts. Women throughout the globe have to be dependent on their male counterparts for making choices for them in one aspect of life or the other.

Women Empowerment is the key to bring gender equality in our society. The route to women empowerment is not that easy considering the present state of society and it calls for strategic approach to achieve it consistently. On a global level many organizations such as UNDP are coming forward to work towards women empowerment because it is a pathway to achieving millennium development goals and sustainable development.

The concept of empowerment has to be viewed in totality; it has to start from the beginning. Education is a strong weapon to fight against all the ill practices against women. Education should be hurdle free for all girls and should be as important as it is for boys. Girls should not be made to forego their education for one reason or the other. Parents have to ensure that their daughters receive the basic minimum education that improves their status and makes them independent. As emphasized by Jawaharlal Nehru we can ensure the education of whole family by educating women of that family. Educated women can efficiently contribute to the welfare of society. Education to be meaningful and fruitful has to be related to life. The overall development of children can be achieved with a life centered education. According to the National Curriculum Framework (2005), children's life at school must be linked to their life in society so that they develop abilities to adapt to the changing demands and challenges of their environment.¹

Here comes the role of Life Skills. Due to the growing complexities of modernization, liberalization, and globalization importance of life skills has been recognized worldwide and the concept of Life Skills based education has been adopted in many countries. The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (1986) gave importance to life skills in terms of making better health choices. Similarly Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) linked life skills to education and emphasized on the development of child's fullest potential. Again, Jomtien Declaration on Education for all (EFA) (1990) included life skills among essential learning tools.²

Defining Life Skills

The important milestone in the area of life skills education came in the year 1993 when World Health Organization (WHO) clearly defined Life Skills as the "*abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enables individual to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.*"³ "Life skills" are comprised of a large number of specific abilities that have been grouped under three overarching categories. These three interrelated categories are cognitive skills, coping and self-management skills, and social or interpersonal skills.³ WHO has identified ten core life skills that are relevant across cultures. These skills are: Creative thinking and Critical Thinking; Decision Making and Problem Solving; Effective Communication and Interpersonal Relationship; Self Awareness and Empathy; Coping with Stress and Coping with Emotions.

The list given by WHO is not exhaustive and there can be other skills too which can develop an individual's ability to cope with his/her environment. The term 'life skills' is a wider term and includes different psychosocial and interpersonal skills that can help children in making informed decisions, and communicate effectively with their environment. "By weaving life skills into the fabric of our educational systems, we equip children with the necessary tools to cope with challenge and confidently make their way in the world". (UNICEF, 2001)⁴

Life skills education is indispensable for the promotion of healthy child and adolescent development, preparing young people for the dynamic social circumstances, developing good citizenship, democratic values for improving basic education and foster gender equality. The goal is to prepare children to face the complex situations with ease. "These skills are firmly positioned within the context and framework of several recent global agreements and documents, including the World Programme for Human Rights Education, which began in 2005, and World Development Report 2007, published by the World Bank, which identifies "enhancing capabilities through life skills education" as one of the three policy directions recommended to assist youth in developing and contributing to society". (UNICEF, 2008)⁴

Gender Equality and Women Empowerment

Gender is a concept that deals with the roles and relationships between women and men. These roles and relationships are determined not by nature but by society, and conditioned by several religious, political and economic factors. In other words, gender refers to socially constructed roles and responsibilities

assigned to men and women pertaining to a given location and the social structures that support them, all of which vary across cultures, race, ethnicity, caste, nationality, age, class, and social rank.⁵

Gender equality is "*equality between men and women and entails the concept that all human beings, both men and women, are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles and prejudices. Gender equality means that the different behaviour, aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued, and favoured equally. It does not mean women and men have to become the same but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female*"(ILO, 2000).⁷

In the present scenario only equal treatment to both men and women is not sufficient to achieve gender equality rather it can perpetuate the problem per se because the women are lagging behind their male counterparts in so many aspects of life. So to eradicate this inequality, women empowerment is the key. Promoting the equal participation of women in economic, social and political development is essential for achieving gender equality. Equal participation involves women's equal right to address to their needs and interests, as well as their vision of society, and to shape the decisions that affect their lives, regardless of the cultural background.

Education fostering Gender Responsiveness

Providing children with a quality education that fosters gender equality is a valuable end in itself, and it can also create a ripple effect of opportunity that goes on to the future generations. Access to gender-inclusive education is a basic human right. Consequently, our educational system should be geared to incorporate basic principles of gender-equitable teaching and learning. Gender-responsive objectives have been defined as "programme and project objectives that are non-discriminatory, equally benefit women and men and aim at correcting gender imbalances" (UNESCO's Gender Mainstreaming Implementation Framework for 2002-2007).⁵ A number of research findings show the commendable impact of girls' education on various development objectives, including potential increase in family income, improving the health of children, improving family planning and reducing the spread of HIV and AIDS. A single year of primary education can lead to a 10-20 percent increase in women's wages later in life, (UNICEF 2010). Girls and boys should be able to use the available technology and materials on equality basis. Teaching and learning methods should help students to develop skills to confront and question bias, as well as to understand prevailing gender stereotypes and how to address them.⁵

Approach of Education based on Life Skills

Life skills-based education (LSBE) is an approach to education that can promote gender sensitivity which consequently contributes to gender equality in teaching learning process. It can enhance the traditional subjects such as humanities and sciences. Moreover, Life Skills can address to the topics which are highly significant to young people. It includes topics related to Human rights including

gender equity and equality and sustainable development, equality, HIV/AIDS and topics related to health and hygiene. LSBE is defined by UNICEF as “an interactive process of teaching and learning which enables learners to acquire knowledge and to develop attitudes and skills which support the adoption of healthy behaviours.”⁴

The development of life skills is now being considered as an important element of quality education. The Dakar Framework for Action, 2000 has specifically referred to Life Skills education as a basic right of all young people. And, included Life Skills in two of its six goals of Education for All (EFA); Goal 3, focusing on the learning needs of the individual, and Goal 6, focusing on delivery systems.⁸

Life skills education is aimed to achieve positive behavioural change through a balance of knowledge, attitude and skills. Implementation of life skills in teaching learning uses a variety of participatory and interactive techniques (small group discussions, role-playing, debating, community partnerships and projects, and other exploratory learning techniques). The key areas which can be used as examples in life skills training include: peer interaction, family and community involvement, healthy lifestyles, environmental protection, conflict management, and sex education which can empower the youth with unique tools for making informed decisions across several aspects of their life such as career and vocational choices, health, nutrition, safety and leadership and can ensure inclusive access to and participation in education for all children.(UNESCO, 2010)⁶

As emphasized by UNESCO, Life Skills Education becomes more effective with the inclusion of gender responsive strategies in its framework:

1. In the Life Skills based approach, girls and boys from all backgrounds are given equal opportunities for discussion, voicing opinions within the learning context which develops their higher order thinking skills like problem solving and critical thinking.
2. The learning strategy of giving assignments and homework that involve *active engagement* of other family members through discussions, joint activities and tasks can increase the overall community-level impact by affecting various generations in the family system.
3. Gender-responsive strategy in Life Skills education contributes to better and well informed attitudes and practices relating to health and development which ensures and promotes better care, insightful childrearing, disease reduction and health awareness.

LSBE when followed with Gender Responsive approach will help and equip young boys and girls in pursuing their vocational or advance careers after completing their secondary education. These approaches will try to curb gender stereotyping which negatively affects the academic performance for both sexes. This way life skills not only promotes better participation and access, but also have far reaching effects on health and development for all children, and thus will lead to the accumulation of well equipped and well informed human resource.

Benefits of Gender-responsive Approach in LSBE

Implementation of Life Skills Education with Gender responsive approach will lead to the enhancement of:

1. Curriculum and the teaching learning process
2. Family and community participation, and
3. The overall quality of education process

Enhancement of Curriculum and the Teaching Learning Process

Curriculum has to be content-relevant, to everyday activities in the life of a child (NCF, 2005) and gender sensitive for successfully avoiding prejudice and discrimination. The gender roles, beliefs, and actions that tend to create gender stereotypes against girls are often reflected in the teaching materials that are used. Even if reflected unintentionally, it can have a serious effect on children and they may assume to behave in a similar fashion, i.e., girls being passive and boys being aggressive. This can hamper the performance in some subjects for both the sexes alike. In such cases, Life Skills based teaching strategies such as focus groups, role playing; evaluating work of the opposite sex based on an “other” perspective, etc. can serve to be very useful to analyze underlying mechanisms behind poor academic performances. Life Skills Training techniques can prove to be very appropriate as well as effective in delivering Lessons on gender equality and gender sensitivity.

Life Skills Education stimulates young people to think critically about:

1. What beliefs, attitudes and expectations are popularly held about men and women in the local context;
2. Personal understandings and experiences about gender in their childhood, adolescence and adulthood;
3. How society influences gender roles (as reflected in traditions, culture, laws, economy, history, etc.);

It would stimulate young people to share their experiences, views and opinions, and discuss gender-based contradictions and differences that they come across in their routine life.

Enhancement of Family and Community Participation

In many cases, adolescent girls often face discrimination and challenging circumstances that limit their learning opportunities and encourage them to drop out of school and keep them out. If we adopt a framework of “child-friendly” gender sensitive schools, this will not only encourage parents, but also the local government, community organisations, and other civil society institutions to participate in the education process. In India, for example, the more traditional, ‘information-based’ approaches still tend to dominate. These approaches are generally not sufficient to yield change in attitudes and behaviours. The incorporation of Life Skills based approach to teaching learning in core curriculum across various subjects can work to influence community attitudes and contain drop-out rates for both sexes. (UNESCO, 2008)⁶

Enhancement of Overall Quality of Education Process

The life skills-based educational processes when enriched with gender responsive strategies makes participatory teaching and learning methods more equitable. When both boys and girls in the learning experience are allowed equal opportunities to listen to, and learn from, each others' perspectives, their life-skills get enhanced. Experiential and constructivist learning methods empower both sexes, and provide an atmosphere for curiosity and exploration, rather than an atmosphere of intimidation. When children feel free to express their thoughts in a free and safe manner, without fear of retaliation, their creativity and learning get enriched strengthening the overall process of Education.

It calls for a thorough training on the part of teachers to avoid negative classroom practices such as:

1. calling on boys to answer questions more often than girls;
2. assigning gender-biased tasks, such as housekeeping tasks to girls, and tool-using tasks to boys;
3. rewarding boys for right answers and not praising girls more often, or vice versa;
4. criticizing girls or boys more for wrong answers;
5. giving more responsibilities to boys than girls (such as being the monitor of the class or head of a group); or
6. making use of textbooks and other learning materials that reinforce harmful gender stereotypes.

The gender training will equip teachers with changed perspective to provide children an atmosphere of empowerment, and not intimidation, where both students and teacher have intrinsic motivation to enjoy the learning process.

Techniques to promote Gender Equality through Life Skills Education

Development of Life Skills such as Self Awareness, Critical Thinking, Creative Thinking, Decision Making, Problem Solving and Effective Communication, Negotiation skills, Planning ability, Organising ability and so on, can strengthen the efforts to bring gender equality in society. In Life Skills education the techniques used to this end should be to:

1. Provide opportunities for children to express their opinions
2. Promote discussion-based teaching learning methods for both sexes (rather than lecture-based)
3. Encourage gender-sensitive small-group discussions and brainstorming in classrooms
4. Delegation of equal responsibilities to both girls and boys in classrooms
5. Rotate roles of leaders and followers among boys and girls in classrooms
6. Promote student analysis of work of opposite sex
7. Encourage approaches that stimulate empathy in both sexes
8. Provide equal opportunities for role-playing exercises, active imagining and creativity in assignments

9. Develop a gender responsive curriculum
10. Review and revise content of curricula regularly
11. Develop uniform standards for assessment of work, and practice gender- sensitivity in task allocation
12. Provide opportunities for both girls and boys to learn and practice negotiation
13. Organise social events, "role playing" games, structured training in negotiation skills
14. Provide training to develop gender neutral skills for parents and community members
15. Encourage use of co-curricular activities such as music, art and drama to address gender stereotyping
16. Promote steps to reduce violence
17. Organise safety awareness programmes and discussions with local police and health officials
18. Promote and incorporate anti-bullying programmes run by trained counselors for girls and boys
19. Actively promote empowerment strategies such as rewards, and avoid intimidation strategies, such as verbal and physical threats and corporal punishment in classrooms.

Life Skills Education can play a significant role in empowering youth and strengthening the base for a society with gender parity. Development of Life Skills in women will make them more informed and knowledgeable regarding their health; their rights and duties; various issues concerning the society and they will have more choices in their employability; in the decision making process; as an effective homemaker; and as a productive member of the society. In men, Life Skills can sensitize them to be more empathetic, gender sensitive and progressive for a sound societal structure. Life Skills Education can definitely work towards lessening the man woman divide.

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