

Time to rethink single-sex schools in India?

Gender-based segregation can't curb hormones, only stunts wholesome development, say experts

Geetika Mantri | Friday, May 27, 2016 - 11:36

Vineetha Saikumar went to Balalok Matriculation, a co-ed school in Chennai which practiced strict segregation between boys and girls. Now at 21 years of age, she recounts how awkward she felt around boys because of the restrictive environment.

"I thought that if someone saw me talking to a boy, they would think I am an undisciplined child. I was so awkward around them."

Not only was she afraid of being looked down upon for talking to a boy, she was not even sure if she could have male friends. "I was scared to bring home boys who were my friends from outside school," she says, "But then I spoke to my parents about it and they said it was alright to have boys as friends."

It was only after reassurance from her parents, Vineetha says, that she was able to interact with the opposite sex without guilt.

With numerous schools and colleges in India still practicing gender-based segregation, her story is hardly an uncommon one, as numerous students feel similarly handicapped around the opposite sex.

According to Baladevan Rangaraju, education policy expert and director of the India Institute in Delhi, segregation has historical roots from times when educating girls was considered taboo. When it finally came to be accepted, parents were worried about their daughters interacting with boys. "It was like choosing the lesser of the evils. They needed to have access to education, hence the separation was introduced," he says.

But now that girls' education has become more mainstream, why do some educational institutes still practice this segregation?

"From a policy point of view, private schools are catering to the demand because some parents still prefer to send their kids to all-girls or all-boys schools. As for government schools (which still have segregation), I think it's simply because it's been there for a very long time and also because in some places, parents are still wary of their children mingling with the opposite sex," explains Prashant Narang, senior manager of iJustice, a public interest law initiative by the Center for Civil Society.

In such a case, he adds, the policy makers must decide in the favour of providing access to education over enforcing co-education.

However, the General Secretary for the State Platform for Common School Systems, Prince Gajendra Babu, feels that the demand for segregation also has to do with intersections of gender, caste and community.

“[Parents] often want to maintain the purity of their caste, which is why they don’t want their child to interact with boys or girls from other caste, religion or community. It is a way of maintaining social hegemony. It is a feudal concept that continues to persist,” he argues.

Sanjeeban Sarkar, who graduated from St. Joseph’s College in Tiruchipalli in 2014, says that while the rest of the college was co-ed, the English department was boys-only at the time. “The only representation we had of interaction with women was in films, and that was hardly ever accurate. A lot of times, they are just shown as “yes-machines” which is what many of my friends would expect from women,” he says.

The skewed perception works against both sexes.

“I had a deathly fear of boys till I was in class 12,” says Diya (name changed on request), who went to Vidyodaya, an all-girls school in Chennai.

Rangaraju says that such an environment proves to be restrictive and students are not sensitized to the other gender. “If boys and girls are not allowed to mix among themselves, how can they understand each other’s issues? How will they develop a healthy social relationship?” he questions.

While there a lacuna of studies to discern the effect of single-sex schools in the Indian context, foreign studies refute the argument that segregation results in better academic performance. A study undertaken by the American Psychological Association analysed data from 184 researches across students from 21 countries and found only trivial differences in academic results between single-sex and co-ed schools.

Another research carried out in Trinidad and Tobago found similar results and also suggested single-sex schools did not create an environment conducive to breaking gender norms. It was observed that girls from single-sex schools were more likely to conform to gender roles and tended to take “traditionally female subjects.”

Apart from depriving children of developing gender sensitivity, another problem arbitrary segregation creates is that it reduces gender to binaries. “What about say, the transgenders? Between girls’ schools and boys’ schools, where does this child go? There should be equitable access with equitable opportunity in education,” says Gajendra.

Further, many parents fear that their adolescent children will get into romantic relationships and hence, prefer to send them to all-boys or all-girls schools and colleges once they hit puberty. However, Rangaraju maintains that restricting them is futile as it does not control their physiological development.

“By restricting them from sitting next to the opposite sex, you cannot control their hormones. The only thing it restricts is wholesome development,” he says.

Meanwhile, S. Indumati who works at the Resource Center at Azim Premji University, highlights a much scarier effect of forceful segregation. “Due to their stunted interaction with the opposite sex, they may not know how to respond in a situation where they may be bullied or abused too,” she warns.