

ASSESSING EDUCATOR’S ATTITUDES, BELIEFS AND PERCEPTIONS ON GENDER AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

This research dedicates itself towards comprehending the attitude, beliefs and perceptions of educators on the relationship between gender and academic performance, and briefly explore the consequences of the same at individual as well as community levels. Beginning with providing a concise introduction to gender bias, and its manifestation within the sphere of skills and potentials of a student, this paper moves onto employing the primary research methodology of a survey to study the research statement. Conducted among twenty-seven participants, this study inferred, that even though there is significant progressive change in the way occupations are not as strictly linked with gender as the literature review suggests, there still exist unconscious efforts to link certain abilities and skills with gender. This research finally concludes with making certain policy recommendations which could perhaps aid in tackling these biases.

Introduction

“Twenty-first Century Must Be Century of Women’s Equality”, said the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres at The New School in New York in the beginning of 2020 (“Twenty-first Century,” 2020). However, the pragmatic implementation of this gendered equality requires interference at grass root levels – efforts that can essentially dedicate themselves towards changing the inherent perceptions associated with gender roles, and the consequent biases that they create.

‘Youth Ki Awaaz’, an Indian media platform that centres its work around social issues, recently released a video on their Instagram page that elaborated upon the gendered nature of the internet. The media house translated English sentences such as “I am cooking” and “My nurse is coming” to Hindi with the help of Google Translate, and inferred that these actions and professions were attributed to the female gender. Alternatively, sentences such as “I am driving” and “I want to succeed in my career” – that in a patriarchal set-up are attributed to masculinities – were translated in the context of males (Youth Ki Awaaz, 2021). These notions of patriarchy, that essentially dictate what actions, duties and occupations should be associated with each gender, is

guided by the patriarchal social structure that Indian society functions within. There exists an extensive subordination of women in different spheres of society, implemented through the intersectional social stratification of caste and gender, that essentially places social groups – in this case women – to “humiliating conditions of existence” (Chakravarti, 1998).

To comprehend the persistence of these social structures in the twentieth century, one must revisit these structures at grassroot levels – for the sake of this essay, the study of gender bias in the setting of educational institutions – to comprehend the existence of gender bias in education, which can have consequences on the progress and empowerment of women at individual and community levels. This essay will combine both primary and secondary methodologies to discern educators’ beliefs, perceptions and attitudes on gender, and how this may impact students’ academic performances.

Literature Review

Not only do sites of education, such as schools and universities, provide students with the skills to seek employment, but are also “influential agents of socialization” (Nduagbo, 2020) – which if implemented with bias – can result in disparate learning curves. In a study conducted in the context of countries that are a part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it was inferred that females with low initial skills in mathematics – assigned to teachers who associate subjects such as mathematics with males, and subjects such as literature with females – lag behind in academics (Carlana, 2019). Moreover, this study also inferred that along with a poorer academic performance, female students also suffer from low confidence in male-dominated areas of learning (Carlana, 2019) – essentially reducing female students’ motivation to enter occupations that are only ‘meant’ for males (Nduagbo, 2020).

This gendered approach towards the study of different academic disciplines is evident in another research in the context of West Bengal. Despite the historical positioning of the state as “the land of various political, social, economic and cultural movements” (Mukhopadhyay n.d.) – the fact that the state is one of the most socially and culturally progressive in the country – it is inferred that there still exists a gendered understanding to subjects. In research concerning students who belonged to tenth, eleventh and twelfth grades, it was asserted that the proportion of female students is higher than that of males in the ‘Arts’ stream, and that the contrasting was true in ‘Science’ and ‘Commerce’ (Majumder & Mitra, 2017). Furthermore, it was also established that if the female students were provided with the same opportunities as the male ones – in the form of encouragement in subjects that are traditionally meant for males – there would be an increase in the number of females opting for streams such as ‘Science’ and ‘Commerce’ (Majumder & Mitra, 2017).

While gender biases manifest themselves in the promotion of different academic disciplines for each gender, they can also be reinforced through subtle and unintended methods. Teachers and educationists may not notice that male students participate more in class discussions than their female counterparts, or that the teachers themselves invite more male students to demonstrate mathematics and science work (Stuart, n.d.). These implicit stereotypes – although not outwardly acknowledged – can lead to students identifying themselves within particular gender norms, and may restrict them to pursuing occupations and disciplines which are associated with their gender. In addition, this gendered vision of viewing education and employment can perpetuate the binary comprehension of gender, leading to the deepening and widening of already constructed rules of social stratification.

With the aid of this already established research, it can be implied that gender bias – with either its intentional or unintentional ways – is widely prevalent in the sphere of education and academia. Moreover, this gender bias can have deep-lasting negative consequences on the academic performances of students. This field of study is therefore imperative for one to assess how attitudes and beliefs of educators can have an effect on their students.

Research Methodology

The primary research of this study was conducted by the method of surveys conducted over email among a population size of twenty-seven teachers – ranging from the ages of twenty-four to fifty-five, the average age of the teachers lying close to forty-four years of age. While this research was supposed to include thirty-two participants, five of these responses had to be omitted due to survey response errors. All the participants teach at New Delhi's Bhatnagar International School, except for one, forty-eight year old male teacher who teaches at the all-boys Don Bosco School. It is also important to note that all the other teachers who were surveyed are female, and they appropriately consented to the interview – however, they chose to remain anonymous.

Out of the twenty-five participants, there were only two teachers who taught children as young as six to seven years old, the others, taught children between the fourth and the twelfth grades – roughly between nine and eighteen years of age. They were asked fifteen questions which were based around the notion of academic subjects, occupations and skills of an individual, and the gendered qualities that govern the same. The list of questions that were asked are attached as Appendix 1 at the end of the paper.

Results and Discussion

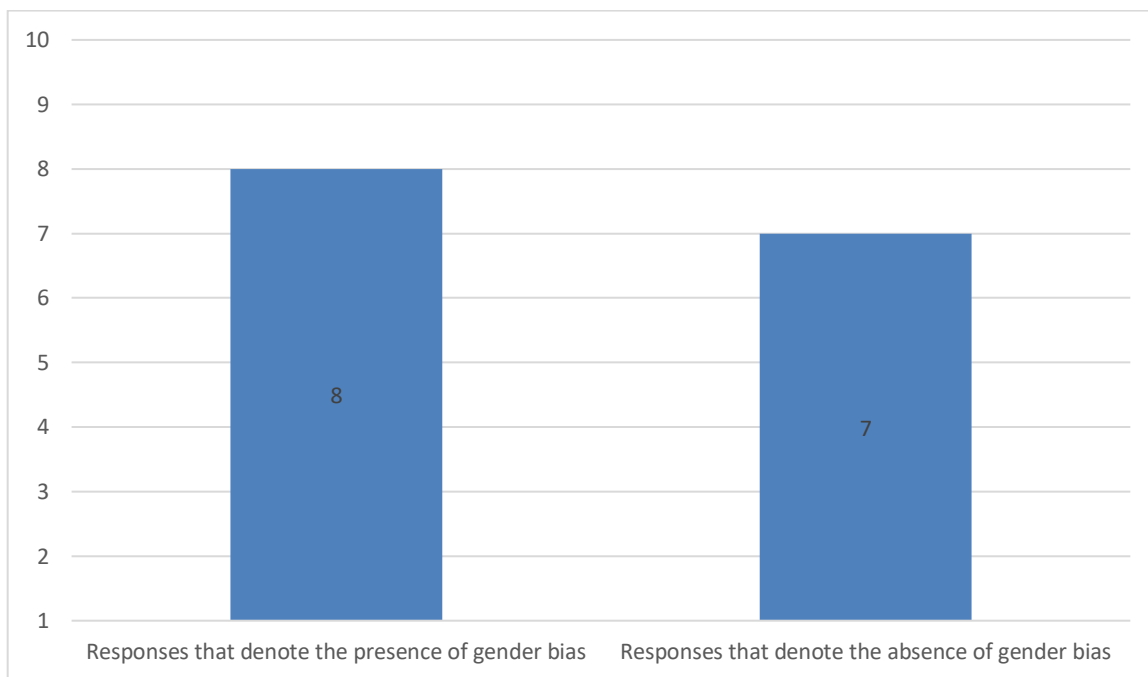
The responses from this study exhibit mixed attitudes and perceptions on the part of the educators. Appendices 2 B, C, D, E, H, K and N reveal that teachers now avoid associating gender with certain occupations and academic subjects – henceforth disproving the literature review of this essay – however, the remainder of the appendices assert the continuance of the relationship between gender and these skills.

For instance, appendix 2 H discloses that a masculine field of study such as astrophysics, which relies heavily on the application of theories of physics to comprehend celestial bodies, is seen by the participants as an occupation for females. Thirteen out of twenty-five participants – a large Forty-eight percent – selected the answer which employed the pronoun “she” to describe astrophysicists. While twenty-two percent of the participants selected the answer with the pronoun “they”, the remaining thirty percent chose the answer with the pronoun “he” – which is still lesser than the number of participants who opted for “she”.

Similarly, appendix 2 K reveals that the perceptions of educators on the occupation of social workers – which is inherently linked with notions of care giving and empathy – is more or less fluid in terms of gender. A large majority of eighty-two percent participants used the pronoun “they”, while only seven and eleven percent of the participants chose the answers with the pronouns “she” and “he” respectively. Although these two examples are successful in gauging the changing perceptions that are associated with gender and skills, the remaining research suggests the contrary.

For instance, appendix 2 A alludes to the notion that educators associate humanities-based subjects such as philosophy and performing arts for females – with not even one educator choosing mathematics or physics as a subject for them. Furthermore appendix 2 L displays educators’ belief that a female researcher should undoubtedly have “technical dexterity” – implying that female researchers lack the skill. Similarly, appendix 2 M portrays that a large fifty-nine percent of subjects believe that a female academic is responsible in the creation of inclusive spaces in the classroom.

This primary research reveals that even though there is some form of change in the perception of educators who view education and skills from a gendered lens, there still exists an unconscious effort to link the two notions together. The graph below demonstrates the summary of the study which broadly categorises the responses received to the questions into two categories – responses that denote that there still exist gender bias and responses that denote that there is a change in the manner in which gender is perceived in educational spaces.



The above table represents that even though there is a decrease in the prevalence of gender bias in education spaces – compared to the standards set by the literature review – there is still a gap that needs to be filled. Moreover, this graph also alludes to the notion that the presence of gender bias is higher than the absence of the same.

This intentional or unintentional effort to incorporate disparate lenses of gender in educative spaces are not only capable of causing a negative effect on children’s academic performances (Terrier, 2016) and demotivating them from studying subjects that do not fit their gender role, but also results in diminishing economic growth. By imposing gender bias in classrooms, many female students either render themselves employed in smaller sectors, or unemployed altogether – which has a direct effect on the average quality of human capital (Moheyuddin, 2005). Therefore, the effects of gender bias in classrooms are multidimensional and require a multidimensional approach to tackle the same.

Policy Recommendations and Conclusion

Although there is a sense of progressiveness that is guiding the discontinuance of viewing occupations from a gendered lens, educators still associate branches of knowledge from gender-biased perspectives. There is a strong need for a cultural shift in reducing negative stereotypes and gender bias amongst educators – and while this shift is not deducible to only improved policies, if new rules can be enforced, this could result in a significant cultural change in attitude,

beliefs and of course, actions. Education institutions can provide gender-diversity workshops to their employees, training them to respectfully tackle situations concerning gender-based bullying and harassment against students (Moheyuddin, 2005). If negative behaviour such as bullying and harassment can be reprimanded appropriately by educationists, this would discourage educators and fellow students from participating in the same – and perhaps even result in cultural change.

Education institutions could possibly set-up individual committees dedicated towards addressing gender-based harassment, bullying and violence, to tackle the same in multifaceted ways. Not only does this include organising regular workshops for educationists and setting-out strong consequences for gender-based verbal and physical abuse, but also establishing approachable and sheltered streams of communication through which students can report such abuse (Moheyuddin, 2005). If the committee is only concerned with meting out justice to the students, but is not involved with making the process of reporting such abuse uncomplicated and approachable for them, it would render the committee worthless.

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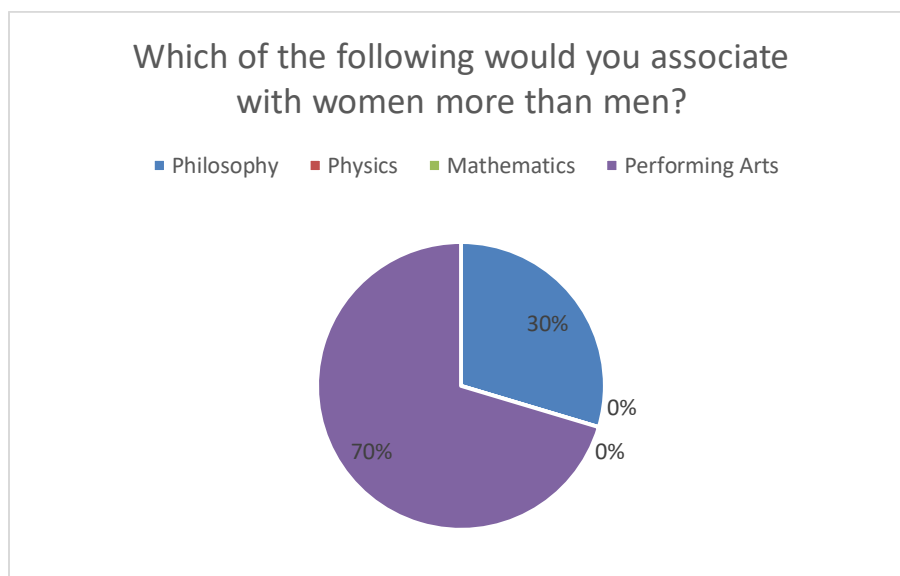
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Appendix 1

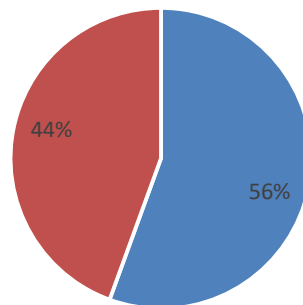
A.



B.

What elements of a nurse's profession do you find the most impressive?

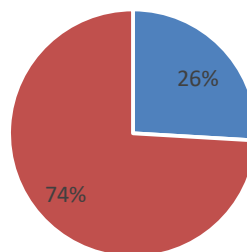
- Their methodical approach to caregiving in unprecedented circumstances
- Her commitment to attending to the needs of patients night and day



C.

What do you think are some of the biggest challenges currently being faced by a highschool teacher?

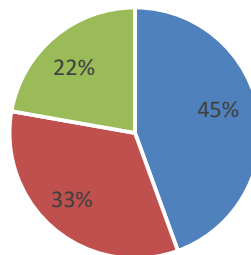
- She has to make an effort to ensure that every student feels cared for and has a safe space to discuss his or her academic and personal concerns
- They have to keep finding innovative methods to keep students committed to virtual learning



D.

Complete the following sentence: A media professional is someone who _____

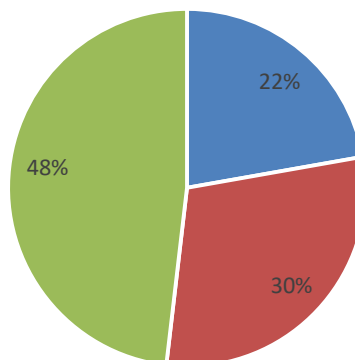
- uses his ability to objective and present an unbiased opinion
- leverages their knowledge of current affairs to add depth to their perspective
- is dedicated to representing her subject in a compassionate and empathetic light



E.

What do you think it takes to become a successful entrepreneur?

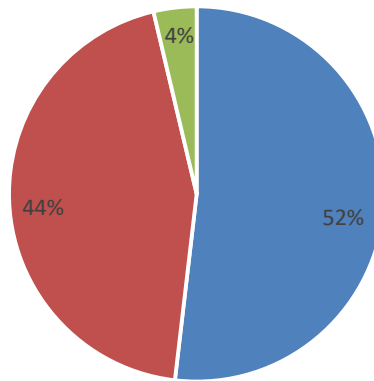
- Cut-throat ambition
- Ethical Ambiguity
- Introspection



F.

Which of the following qualities in a leader can also be a weakness?

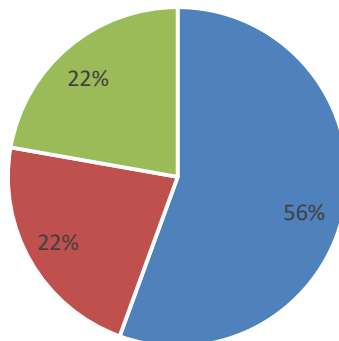
■ Emotional reticence ■ Generosity ■ Foresight



G.

Complete the following sentence: A good writer is someone who _____

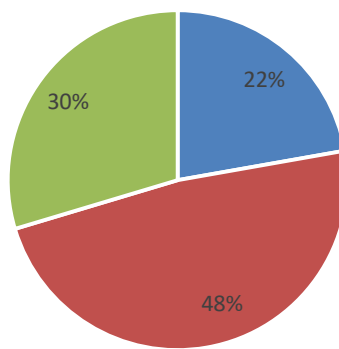
■ stays true to her principles ■ defends their art against any criticism
■ believe that his stories deserve a global audience



H.

How would you describe an astrophysicist?

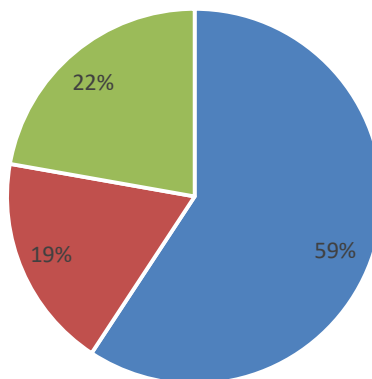
- They often invest their time and energy in long-term projects
- She is passionate about celestial objects and faraway galaxies
- He believes in intensive research to substantiate his findings



I.

Which of the following qualities does a male dancer need to have?

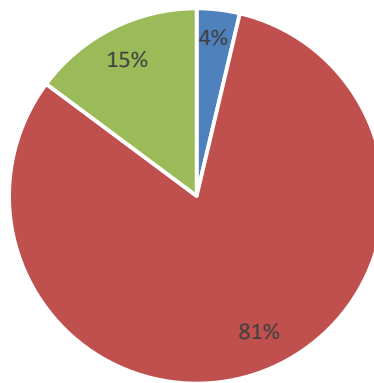
- Grace
- Nuance
- Physical Stamina



J.

The quality of being "likeable" is most important to which of the following professions?

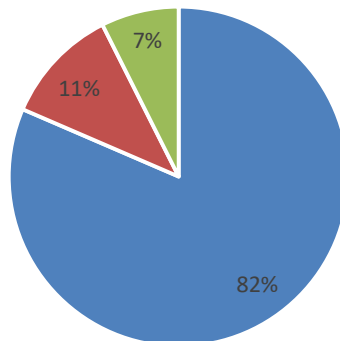
■ Engineers ■ Flight Attendants ■ Photographers



K.

How would you describe a social worker?

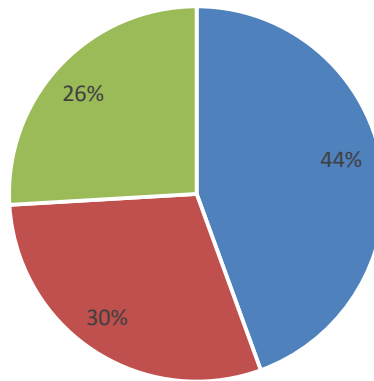
■ They work in the fields of social advocacy and community management
■ He works towards protecting vulnerable families
■ She assists at-risk children in environments conducive to growth and development



L.

Which of the following qualities does a female researcher need to have?

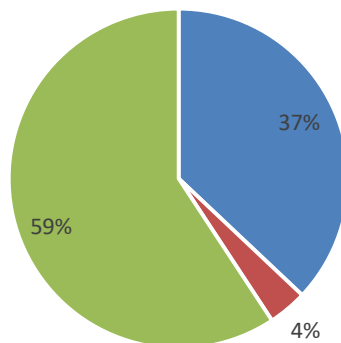
■ Technical dexterity ■ Self-assuredness ■ Patience



M.

Complete the following sentence: An academic must _____

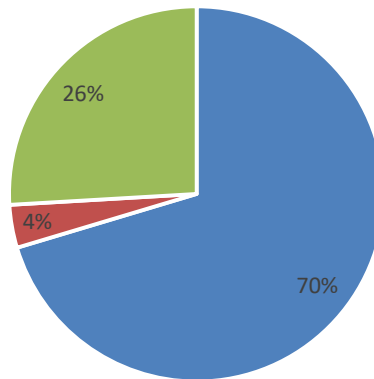
■ embrace the Socratic method in their interactions with their students
■ have published at least two papers in his lifetime
■ establish her classroom as an inclusive space



N.

The quality of being "rational" is most important to which of the following professions?

■ Financial Consultant ■ Gourmet Chef ■ Kindergarten Teacher



O.

Complete the following sentence: A data analyst is responsible for ____

- aiding the process of decision making
- processing information such that it benefits his pre-existing body of work
- excusing errors in judgement by her peers

