Still Failing at Fairness: How Gender Bias Cheats Girls and Boys in School and What We can do About it  

Erum Qazi
Independent Researcher
erunkazy@hotmail.com

Despite great strides in eliminating all forms of discrimination in American schools through the enactment of laws such as Title IX and No Child Left Behind, real progress towards achieving gender equity has been slower than anticipated. Although female participation in professional colleges and universities reflect dynamic growth, and relatively more boys are scoring higher on standardized tests, graduating from high school and going on to college more than ever before, current statistics reveal a world where education is marred by extensive gender inequities. Against popular belief, gender bias is alive and schools are not immune from its influence. In fact, they may be germinating the seeds of dissent which imperatively lead to exacerbating gender biases. In this context, ‘Still Failing at Fairness: How Gender Bias Cheats Girls and Boys in School and what we can do about it’ proves a fair addition to further the ensuing debate on the subtle sexism that pervades our classrooms, as it meticulously examines how it impairs the learning outcomes of both boys and girls from grade school to graduate school. Adopting a sociological approach to the issue, authors attempt to prove how apart from other detrimental practices, this may be the biggest determinant for failure of children at school accounting for continuously failing grades and the increasing number of school dropouts. While offering nothing new to a specialist, the book proves to be of special interest to a student of gender studies apart from appealing to the sensibilities of a parent, teacher or a caregiver.

Extensively quoted in gender researches and venerated in academic circles for their unrelenting service as educationists, the authors enjoy a national reputation for work in confronting gender bias and sexual harassment. The bulk of their research in the first edition of Still Failing at Fairness: How Gender Bias Cheats Girls and Boys in School and what we can do about it’ (1994) focused on the problems encountered by girls
only generously pleasing the feminist camp. However, this revised 2009 edition is a manuscript pleading equality for both boys and girls. Reflecting growth in their vision, it bespeaks integration and inclusion of both genders. It also proves their hypothesis that America’s schools have not been completely successful in weeding out sexism from classrooms.

The book has been thoughtfully divided into nine chapters, each ending with a list of further recommended reading, practical suggestions, and online resources to succeed at fairness in the context of the given theme of the chapter. Where the preface explains the purpose for a revised edition and their overall aims, the introductory chapter outlines all the gender issues and challenges that we face today notwithstanding the great strides of both males and female in educational opportunities. The stage for the argument is set in motion by highlighting all the themes that thread along. Chapter one identifies the problems of gender bias, defines people’s stance, highlights the issues and assumptions, points out the problems and challenges, and explores perceptions and reports findings. It thus builds the framework on which the book rests. Chapter nine successfully completes the analysis, resonating the authors’ current goals, successes and failures, and ties up the arguments prolifically.

Chapter two chronicles the social, cultural, and political struggle of females to gain inclusion in education from the 1600s onwards. By documenting their struggles and strides, the authors build a sound base for the incidence of sexist attitudes and practices that have been begotten from Colonial America and are perpetuated to date. We learn of how the entry of women in teaching and education was motivated by capitalist aims, and witness a world wrought with segregation and restrictions for females mostly, despite laws such as Title IX that bar gender discrimination in most educational areas. At best, this chapter traces the creation of women’s colleges and coeducational colleges amidst public resentment and exhaustive efforts of the backlash to restrict female participation in teaching and schooling. Providing a historical analysis to a modern problem, the chapter is both informative and empathic in nature.

Why are we still failing at fairness? Are biases inherent? Why are schools silent? Why are parents silent? Is there nothing we can do to protect our children from the biases of their instructors? What is the role
of parents and teachers in weeding out all causes that contribute? These and many other pertinent questions are answered in the subsequent chapters.

Chapters three through seven critically examine the role of various components of the school system in exacerbating the injustices doled out in the name of equity without undermining the exacting role families and other socialization agencies play in creating attitudes and propagating practices that create gender inequities. Interestingly, the role of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic forces in fostering gender biases are not underscored either. Nevertheless, the nucleus of the responsibility seems to lie with teachers and schools. As it would be tantamount to disservice to separate these chapters as they collectively trace the journey of boys and girls from elementary school to college campuses, the book requires an exclusive space for a cumulative critique (that is taken up subsequently). For now, let us consider the generalities without the peculiarities.

The main argument of the book rests on the premise that gender bias in schools is expressed as subtle sexism in classrooms filtered through pedagogical oversights apart from biased texts that are part of the curriculum. The authors undeniably prove in chapter three how the elementary school becomes host to continuous gender lessons and compromises, and how even well-meaning teachers, through their passivity towards girls, teach boys better and unwittingly transform females into silent spectators. The provocatively ugly process of teachers falling blindly into the trap of indoctrinating stereotypes in their lessons starts here.

Chapters four - on middle schools and five - on high schools, cannot be divorced from each other in content as they have a snowball effect. We find ourselves in the hallways of middle schools and witness the angst faced by students due to daily stereotypical encounters and visible and disguised forms of sexual harassment. Middle school is a period of profound changes encompassing ‘a critical phase of sexual development, ego formation, and ever evolving concepts of self’, and this chapter effectively frames the newer challenges of creating self-esteem through reliance on acceptability of peers and teachers alike. Where boys attempt to steer clear of all traces of feminism, girls try hard to avoid
being ‘targets’. While all the chapters cater to all caregivers, the formative years in middle school and high school can be dedicated solely to parents as it provides them with the much-awaited opportunity to peek into the secret world of their children. However, as one breezes through with their arguments, other social factors emerge that strongly overshadow the blame singularly ascribed to gender bias, but that contention is also put to rest when the reader recalls earlier references of the authors to dealing with this variable only keeping all other factors constant. The struggles of life in high school documented in Chapter five provide nothing new in content. It frames similarity of experiences and contends how the inequities are intensified further. Even the lunchrooms and playing fields become battlegrounds where stricter lines are drawn between the genders. Peer pressure assumes prodigal proportions in high school and conformity to school subcultures becomes a prerequisite to survival. We witness how the hidden curriculum now comes to dictate the lives of our children.

Continuing the debate on disparities between the genders, the authors in Chapter six challenges the role of standardized tests as opposed to school grades. Without underscoring the value of these tests, they vociferously propose plump changes in testing techniques in order to remove disparities between instruction and learning, taking into account the variable of student ability to measure the relativity of performance. What do the tests show? Who scores better? This and many more queries are answered here tactfully.

Chapter seven paints horrific scenes of college life with chauvinistic males and sexist professors dominating the scene with the ever-looming threat of campus rape. Thought provoking, it raises more questions than it answers. The invisible wall of segregation stands taller than ever now. We witness a clash between the social and academic world, but not without answers on how to reconcile the two. Peppered with explicit examples of sexist practices and hair-raising incidents, it aids in our overall understanding of their detrimental consequences, but not without demoralizing the sensitive student who eagerly awaits admission to graduate school.

Chapter eight brings us to an old but newly revived argument. Are single- gender schools the answer? Have coeducational schools failed to
provide our children with the umbrella of security and the promise of fair chances in education? The preoccupation of traditionalists who want to segregate the genders in a bid to improve performance is scrutinized. Without entirely dismissing the potential of single-gender education, the authors weigh the pros and cons of both single-gender and coeducational schools.

Quoting from extensive studies in classroom interaction the authors reveal that the experiences of boys and girls in school differ vastly. Predominantly, boys are at the heart of interactions and occupy a major chunk of a teacher’s time and attention, be it in the form of praise or criticism, encouragement or punishment. Thus, even though sitting in close proximity of each other and taught from the same texts, girls and boys imbibe different lessons. Conformity of girls to school rules is mistaken as sufficient proof that ‘they are doing well’. As these gendered interactions are persistently played out in middle school all through to college, they inadvertently reinforce girls for passivity, making them lose their voice as well their confidence. Among others who are silenced are shy boys, children of color and English language learners.

Without ascribing all blame to the teachers, the authors do prescribe remedies through parental involvement in the reconstructive process apart from the imperative teacher intervention and training. They show how teachers and students are the fundamental actors in schools. Those who learn and those who teach need to unlearn and let go of their biases, however deeply entrenched, and however unconscious, in order to build a hierarchy of prolific learners. Nevertheless, they fail to recognize that teachers too have biases either internalized through personal experiences, or learnt as part of the socialization processes. Inherited as part of a cultural legacy, they are not easy to eliminate. Hence, their prescription of training teachers to recognize and correct their biases through varied practical practices may not be the panacea. A cultural and social overhaul might be a winning argument. The ideal would be to involve whole communities to redirect their thinking, as what is learnt at home goes to school and from schools travels back home trickling into the community. The sheer diversity of community in American society and schools accounts for the biases that each child carries. Conclusively, the answer might be found in a multicultural curriculum to find unity in diversity.
Apart from a few minutes criticism of the book, it can be safely concluded that it is a mini-bible for understanding sexist interactions and practices in schools. Firstly, it is marred by redundancies; similar ideas are oft-repeated chapter after chapter, sometimes within the span of a few pages. However, that could be the effect intended to gently inculcate through positive reinforcement. Another flaw that emerges is that it only focuses on one external factor namely, gender bias without accounting for other social factors that actually may be playing a more potent role in academic attainments. Having said that, it can be argued that the authors outline in their preface that their argument is about gender bias with all other social factors held constant, thus it is a deliberate omission. Moreover, though they profess impartiality towards both genders, their propensity to lean towards female issues is starkly evident. One does wonder at times, if this is a reflection of their own bias either females are short-circuited more than boys or simply put the higher ratio of female population accounts for magnifying their problems.

Despite the few failings mentioned above, ‘Still Failing at Fairness’ is thorough in content and judicious in findings. It is a book worth reading as a precursor for understanding gender bias. A classic study spun from the 1970s to 2009 following thousands of fifth graders from elementary school to mature adults in college campuses, its value as a reliable text cannot be underscored.