

Understanding Students' Classroom Participation in Universities through Gender Perspective: A Case Study of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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ABSTRACT

Students' lack of participation in the classroom can be associated with gender disparities, which has remained the focus of researchers' attention, especially in the field of education for long time. This research looks into students' classroom participation in the context of cultural influences and differential level of participation in the classrooms. Qualitative data were collected through observation and semi-structured interviews from nine sample universities. Male and female students and their teachers from selected departments were interviewed. Convenience sampling technique was used for conducting interviews and classrooms observations. Similarly, 02 observations were conducted in the sampled universities, in order to see the inter relationship of gender and its effects on students' participation in the classroom. The results illustrated that gender disparity, cultural constraints and negative attitude towards female's education impinge upon female students' classroom participation. Female students according to the results are also considered less intelligent as compared to the male students.

Keywords: Classroom participation, Gender, male dominance, Cultural norms

Introduction

Understanding students' classroom participation has been of immense interest to researchers. Students' lack of participation can be associated with a number of issues. For example, Nunn (1996)

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found a direct link between students' classroom participation and the size of classroom. Karp and Yoels in Rocca (2010) "*found that while the number of students who participate in any given classroom is often the same, courses which have more than 40 students have fewer overall interactions per class period*" (p. 5). Similarly, students' seating arrangement has also been found as a contributing factor in students' classroom participation. Brown and Pruis (1958), Mc Croskey and Mcvetta, (1978), Bowers (1986), Fassinger (1978) and Ferguson (1986) are of the opinion that students' seating arrangements in the classroom is also a responsible factor for students' low classroom participation. In their opinion, those students who are seated in the front seats get more chance of gaining teacher's attention and they also equally feel more responsible for answering general questions in the classroom.

According to Meeks et al. (2013) seating proximity to the instructor can encourage attentive behavior, classroom engagement, and discussion participation. Montello's (1988), research findings show that "*students sitting toward the front and center participate most. Participation decreases as one moves back or to the sides*" (p.2). Moreover, as has been quoted by Montello (1988) "61% of the students volunteer statement from the front and center location but only 31% made statement from the back and side locations." However, class size has also been found as a factor affecting students' active classroom participation. Crawford and MacLeod's (1990) research finding shows that "*class size is significantly related to students' experience of whether a particular course allows participation, whether ... they can participate or assert their opinions, and whether the teacher uses humor and language positively or offensively*" (p.120). Furthermore, Krupnick's (1985) research findings show that male students participate actively when there is a male professor teaching or the number of male students is higher than female students and vice versa.

Apart from contextual factors, gender has also been found to be affecting students' classroom participation and has been the focus of researchers' attention for long time. The term 'chilly climate' was used by Sandler, Bernice Resnick, and Roberta M. Hall (1982) to point out different biases that disadvantage women in the academic environment. These disadvantages include, for example, male students' differential behavior towards female students and teachers' biased expectations based on gender from male and female students. Furthermore, male students' sexist and stereotypical behaviors also add to the chilly climate that female students face in their everyday life in academic environment. Similarly, other researchers, like

Canada and Pringle (1995) and Janz and Pyke (2000), also worked on the issue in order to see the unfriendly environment and inequities that the female students face.

Pyke (1997) believes that one factor for the differential treatment is the social mind-set framing the roles of men and women; and the consequences of this mind-set is that although women have been admitted gradually into mainstream higher education, they have been 'made participants in a system which prepares men to take a leading role in the man-centered society'. However, most of the studies that had been conducted on gender in the context of academics are found to have been conducted either in European or other technologically and socially advanced countries. That was why this research was undertaken in order to see the interplay between gender and student classroom participation in the context of Pakistan and especially Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Research Methodology

Qualitative case study research design was used for this research. The study looked at the students' classroom participation through gender perspective. The researchers' approach towards interpretation of the events under study was etic, as the researchers were interpreting participants' perspectives according to the participants' approach towards those events so as to ensure maximum objectivity.

Sample Group

Of the total 19 universities, eight (08) universities were selected for data collection. Universities were selected on the basis of location and cultural variations. Out of the 08 universities, 04 universities were located in urban areas, while 04 universities were situated in rural areas. Moreover, some universities were under the influence of tribal cultural practices due its location, which was why it was important to give it representation so as to cover maximum variation within the sample area. Furthermore, sample universities have been pseudo named, so as to conceal their identity.

Table 1. Interviews breakdown:

S.No	Total no. of universities	Total no. of departments	Number of students from selected departments	Number of teachers from selected departments	Total number of interviews
01	08	16	64	32	96

Instrument of the Study

The researchers used interview as instrument for data collection from the respondents of the study. The interviews were semi-structured and 13 items were included in the study. The respondents were provided a serene and trustworthy environment for interviews; they were provided enough time to think and respond regarding the statements asked. If the respondents had any doubt, the researchers provided clarification and the statements were rephrased for them for their better understanding. Moreover, elaboration and further details were welcomed as semi structured interviews allow the researchers for such useful digression.

Furthermore, the respondents were assured that their personal information will be kept confidential and their institutional names will be replaced with pseudonyms. All other ethical considerations were duly considered during data collection and in report writing.

Analysis of the Data

This section has interpreted responses of the students and teachers and has grouped them under the following themes.

Male students as dominant participants

During the interviews, the students' were asked as to who usually dominated the classroom participation. The answer to this question from most of the participants was that male students mostly dominated the classroom participation. Students' responses in terms of numbers are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Students' Classroom Participation

Statements	N	Percentage
Male students' dominate classroom participation.	71	68.16
Female students dominate classroom participation.	25	24
Total	96	100

A majority i.e. 68.16% of the students believed that participation mostly came from male students, while 24 % students were of the opinion that it's female students who are the dominant participants.

Perceptions of students and teachers for male dominant behavior

Similarly, in response to the question, when students were asked about the reasons for male students' dominant participation, the following responses were given.

Fear of being wrong in front of male students

When a female student was asked about the reasons for male students' dominant participation, she recorded her views in the following words;

...reason for this is that female students are usually quiet. They do not speak or take part in the activities at the classroom, thinking that what if they said anything wrong.

The above response shows that cultural dominant views are so deep rooted in Pakhtun society that female students, instead of recording their concerns about the situation, happily accept the social constraints and are contented with getting the opportunity of having access to higher education, even if it is in an unfriendly environment.

Another female student noted that;

This is how our society is. Males are given importance and priority and this is what they carry in their minds that they are dominant and it is because of the society.

Her concerns were proved correct by gender critical incident (Sunderland, 2001) that occurred in Knowledge House University (Pseudo name) where a male teacher was trying to explain a female student query; a male student commented by saying "oh I wish" and after the class is finished the researchers asked him that what did he mean by his comment?

He said that:

"male students (without mentioning himself) sometimes say this when they find a male teacher or any male giving too much/ undue attention to a female student or a female student speaking too much. It means that I wish if I were a female then I would have been equally the center of attention" 12/30/2014.

In classroom environment, where female students have fear of such comments in their mind, they would prefer being silent instead of participating in any manner. A female student, arguing about the reasons of male students' dominant behavior, said;

...its different [from general treatment of society] here in university but they [males students] think that they are males and they can do anything and everything.

This respondent, however, was happy about the university environment as compared to that of the environment outside

university but she noted that the male representatives still pollute the university academic environment in a manner where equal participation for female students' become difficult.

In Attock University (pseudonym) a gender critical incident occurred when a teacher in marketing class praised a female student by saying that;

very good it is called attentive listening and smart thinking like the one you need in marketing.

To this, the researchers observed that a group of male students sitting in back benches exchanged smiles with each other, while male students' commented loud enough and could be heard by saying,

"Yes she is very good and smart"(25/09/2014)

However, the teacher seemed to ignore their comments, which were meant to tease female student.

Home environment

A female teacher explained the reasons of differential treatment that female students face in higher educational institutes in the following words;

Reasons are like this is the general environment of the area. Even if you see at home female would not come in front of the male family members much, so then here [in university] for them standing in the classroom during activities or speaking up, you see.

Patriarchal standards as only standards

Male students also take it upon themselves to keep on reminding female students about the appropriate behavior they need to follow as noted by a female student;

They [male students] would say that female should behave like this and that female students should wear hijab, stay at home and not interact with males.

The above-mentioned concerns show the extent of social expectations female students need to fulfill, even if it is concerning their private lives and even if they are from a person not directly related to them. A female respondent when asked about the reasons of female students' inactive participation responded in the following words about male students' perceptions of female students studying in universities/higher education institutes;

They [male students] think that those female students who come here to the university they do not have any respect/honor because in their view only those students who stay back at home are honorable and respected because they are in Hijab from males. Those who are educated their character is not good in their (male students) view.

A female teacher also narrated an incident about such mindsets in the following words;

Like one of examples that I can give you about the general mindset is that once there was argument between a male and a female students of my class and when I inquire about it the female student told me that the male students accused her saying that “if I [female student] was a good girl [character wise] I would be sitting at home instead of coming to University and that my [male student] sister sits at home.

Comments as mentioned above not only reflect the social mindset of the society but it also serves to discourage female students from classroom participation and put them at a disadvantage, when compared to male students.

During the classroom observations in University of Education (pseudonym) a teacher was observed to have asked a total of 12 questions from the students. Out of the total 12 questions, only two questions were answered by female students while the rest of the questions were answered by male students (Field notes 16/04/2015). Similarly, in the same university, in Communication skills class, (6 female & 24 male students), the teacher did not ask a single question from female students. However, on the other hand, in Sajjad Hussain Memorial University (pseudonym) in a female dominant class, (19 female & 7 male students), participation of female students was dominant, which could probably be attributed to their being more in number that leads to the reason of their becoming at ease, resulting in active participation (29/5/2015).

During observation, while noting gender critical incidents in classroom discourse, a differential comment that strengthens stereotypical attitude towards female students was noted. A female teacher said;

The girls [women] are good only for talking, they say, but ours (female students of my class), are not even good for that because talking is all I want them to do 16/10/2014.

During data collection, 72 respondents were asked about the factors responsible for female students low classroom participation as compared to male students. 62 respondents believed that gender is the only factor responsible for female students' low participation in the classroom, while 2 respondents termed "shyness" and the other 02 believed that "the fear of being wrong" is responsible that put female students at disadvantage when it comes to participation in the classroom activities.

A male teacher commented in the following words, when asked the above- mentioned question:

"the biggest difficulty for female students' is that they are females" which indicates that in Pakhtun social structure females are regarded as optional not substantial part and thus discriminated against not only in everyday life but also in universities and higher educational institutes, which are regarded the high seats of learning. This mindset has penetrated so strongly into the social structure that even female students also believe that males are dominant and superior to females.

A female student noted when asked about the dominant behavior of male students in the following words;

"females cannot become independent as males would. It's like the man is to order and the woman is to obey".

In a similar vein, male students said that;

"female students consider themselves inferior to male [and added] that some of them are in fact inferior".

Commenting on the reasons of female students low classroom participation, a female teacher recorded her views in the following words;

"Aaa, well in my view you can attribute it to the general views of people in our society that female should try to remain withdrawn and not to present themselves dominantly in front of the male members"

In one case, during the data collection process, a very experienced professor shared his views on differential and biased treatment with female students in the following words;

“I usually try during the class to ask questions from male students only and keep on encouraging them for participation”.

And the reason he gave to the researchers for his belief was that he was of the opinion that since it is males who will have to face the economic burden of the family members in future in practical life, therefore, it was appropriate to do so. Such beliefs would lead a person to believe that there are coordinated efforts for putting woman at disadvantage in Pakhtun culture. Overall, 51 respondents out of the total 72 respondents were of the opinion that females are inferior to males.

A male student endorsed the above-mentioned mentality in the following words;

“No matter how hard they study, female students will be inferior to us and scared of us”. This mindset is not only prevalent in the male members of the society but also in the female members of male dominant Pakhtun society.

Religious Interpretation

Religious interpretations are also used by male members of societies in order to give weightage to whatever opinion they want to express about what is good and what is bad for females. As an example, an excerpt of discussion of the researcher with a female student respondent is presented below;

Interviewee: some people say that female should stay at home in parda (Hijab) while others think that they should not get education.

Interviewer: tell me about academic perceptions?

Interviewee: They think that females are good only in rote memorization.

Interviewer: what do you think? Is it so?

Interviewee: I believe male students are conceptually very strong but they just don't work hard enough while female students are only hard working otherwise they are not as

intelligent as male students. It is also in the Holy Quran that females are ignorant (Naqisullm) means that females are not as knowing as males are.

Interviewer: where is it in Quran?

Interviewee: I don't know

Interviewer: Then why are you saying this? Who told you?

Interviewee: A mulvi (religious scholar) in our village says this.

According to the researchers' understanding, the above discussion has two aspects in terms of the present study. One is that although this particular student is studying in university, in a co-educational environment, she still holds beliefs that she had hardly bothered to verify. The second aspect is that university education or in other words modern education fails to make her change the views that she holds. The truth is that according to the saying of the Holy Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) as mentioned in Musnad Ahmad bin Hanbal (2001):

Whoever has three daughters or three sisters and he feared God about them and brought them up well, he will be in Paradise with me like this and showed up his 'SWA' four fingers together. (p.20)

In the same vein, in terms of the economic status, the Holy Quran cautions that;

Covet not that whereby Allah has made some of you excel others. Men shall have a portion of that which they earn and women shall have a portion of that which they earn. Ask Allah alone of His bounty. Surely Allah has perfect knowledge of all things.

Similarly, about the equal educational opportunities, according to the saying of the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) in Sahih Ibn. e.Maja by Ibn.e.Maja Mohammad (nd):

“Seeking Knowledge is obligation upon every Muslim”

Every Muslim, as mentioned above, includes both males and females and the Hadith does not mention about the inferiority or superiority of one sex over the other as long as where getting education is concerned at least. However, there are still those who

believe otherwise and this includes not only students but also teachers. For instance, according to a male teacher respondent;

They can neither make a state nor can they run one because they are neither analytical nor independent thinker. They are neither physically strong nor mentally strong and also that they easily forget things.

Although, not necessarily based on scientific research, the views of the faculty member do give an insight into the Pakhtun culture and into the status it accords to its female members. More specifically, if such views are propagated by faculty members who are responsible for teaching students irrespective of their gender and sexuality, the outcome will be nothing more than differentiated treatment, non-conducive and unfriendly environment and resultant stereotypical attitudes.

In such circumstances as mentioned by Rocca (2010) males students see their participation more valuable as compared to that of female students. This scenario leads to the situation where, as noted by Jule (2004, p. 21), “*the girls were learning to lose at the game of education, undemanding of teacher time, passive, observer of boys’ active learning*”.

Conclusion

Findings of the paper indicate that male students disproportionately dominate classroom proceedings and that females students’ low participation mainly is due to male students’ dominant behavior, thus denying female students equal learning opportunities. Moreover, dominant and patriarchal cultural expectations from the female students compel them to behave according to the cultural norms and according to the culturally appropriate female role model at the cost of denying themselves learning opportunities. The research data shows that for female students, it is either choosing to avail the opportunity of access and survival in higher education institutes or going against the established norms and be labeled as digressing from the culturally appropriate role model and become the reason for bringing bad name to herself and her family members. Thus, female students are happy to avail the much valued opportunity of getting university education. Furthermore, social and parental expectations also compel female students to be least visible as far as classroom participation is concerned.

However, the findings also show that female’s participation increases when classroom composition in terms of gender is in favor

of female students. Female students were found more participating and relaxed in classrooms where the number of male students was less than the female students. Yet, another influencing factor regarding female students' participation was female students' urban or rural background. Students who belonged to urban background showed relatively more freedom from the male students influence as compared to those who were from rural background with strong cultural influences.

Recommendations

Gender discrimination is a deep rooted phenomenon in the patriarchal society of Pakistan and especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; however, it is particularly more worrying for such practices to take place in the high seats of learning. While education is considered emancipatory in nature, due to such discriminatory practices, it is becoming the tool of suppression for female students. Therefore, in order to make Universities and higher educational institutes as true seats of learning catering to the needs of all students irrespective of their, sex, gender or sexuality, the following recommendations are suggested to the policy makers and practitioners.

1. As shown during data analysis, the male students' and teachers' treatment of the female students was due to their lack of awareness about gender related issues, therefore, a pre-service training for newly recruited teachers should be made a part of their career path, so as to impart them basic knowledge about gender related problems for ensuring equal treatment of both the sexes. Such training could be imparted through Staff Training Institutes wherein gender studies should be made a compulsory part of it.
2. Students' lack of awareness could be tackled through making gender studies an essential component of the curriculum which will help create awareness among students about gender and its associated problems. Moreover, apart from this, a guide book that contains certain basic knowledge about gender should also be made part of the admission pack, so that students are sensitized before they have started classes.
3. Establishment of universities in rural areas could not only help students in accessing higher education but could also acclimatize them to the mixed sex environment and resultantly help them to overcome their fear of male students or opposite sex in general. Furthermore, establishment of new universities in disadvantaged

areas will also help in influencing local cultures and awareness about gender sensitive issues and education.

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Al-Quran 4:32

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