

Gender Studies in Teacher Education: An Empirical Research

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Abstract

Gender studies is an interdisciplinary field of study which focuses the phenomenon of gender. The study of gender helps us to broaden our understanding of gender identity and culture, the intersection of gender with race and ethnicity, class and sexuality. Gender has become a very important word in discussions on development. From this approach, University Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) has developed a module namely Gender Studies in Malaysia. Sultan Idris University of Education (UPSI) is a Public Institution of Higher Education (IPTA) which is basically an institution for school teacher. The article argued that this course has important impact on teacher education as they directly deal with human. The primary objective of this course is to provide knowledge and skills related to the concept and theories of gender and gender relation. The course is intended to enhance students understanding of gender from socio-cultural and religious perspective. This course also discusses how gender relations have influenced in the fields of international relations, international development, and education. Hence, this course plays an important role in the process of learning and developing human behaviour among the students at UPSI. Gender Studies has an important impact on the development of human behaviour among UPSI students as it expands knowledge and skills on gender issue. Although the course has an important aspect in the process of learning, there are obstacles behind of its full implementation. The article discusses problems and prospects of Gender Studies in the process of learning based on author's own experience and preliminary investigation.

Keywords: Gender ideology, Patriarchal norms, Gender relation, Traditional ideology, Socio-cultural norms, Masculinity, Femininity, Gender based equality, Human behavior

1. Introduction

Gender Studies is becoming a central concern in various universities and research institutes in all over the world as it has an important impact on the process of learning (Pearson., T A & RookeP T., 1993). The aims of Gender Studies are to educate students with the issue of gender from a social, cultural and psychological level and teach them to use the gender issues within their own disciplines. It does not only investigate the actual differences between women and men, but also assists students to think critically about what these differences mean in belief system in a socio-cultural context. It is related to studies of class, inequality, race, ethnicity and sexuality. Gender studies focuses on both gender behaviour and its relation to each other. Understanding of gender and gender relations is crucial as gender behaviour is everywhere. Thus, the importance of Gender studies in our education system as well as in society is great and obvious.

The article argues that Gender Studies is very important especially for teacher education programs as it helps to develop the attitudes, knowledge, and skills in the practice of teaching. The article attempts to discuss some of the key concepts of gender issues which are not only important for the process of learning but also has an impact on developing human behaviours. In general, gender refers to the biological and social differences between men and women. Gender is a socio-economic and cultural construct for differentiating between roles, responsibilities, constraints, opportunities and needs of women and men in a given context. A basic distinction between men and women which is socially and culturally determined creates unequal power relation in our social life. Thus, an understanding of the unequal power relations between women and men is necessary to be familiar with the basic problems in gender relations. Power is directly related to gender with regard to the access, distribution and use of

resources, which are unequally distributed between women and men. It is hoped that Gender Studies assists students to understand an unequal power relation and also shows the way power can be distributed equally.

Similarly, the proper understanding of masculinity and femininity is necessary since it may affect individual's behaviour. Generally, masculinity and femininity are the biological fact of being either male or female. The article discusses the characteristics and behaviours, roles and values – which are socially and culturally determined. It is said that traditional gender roles influence negatively to masculinity and femininity. On the other hand, negative masculine and feminine behaviours affect on family and society. Due to traditional gender ideology, patriarchal ideology can be viewed on masculine behaviour which may arise many problems to our family as well as society. Hence, it is important to develop the real characteristics of masculinity and femininity. It is expected that this course would provide insight in developing the appropriate traits among the students.

Achieving gender equality has become a great concern for the world today. It is considered as a part of development strategy in many countries. When both men and women have equal access to services and resources, enjoy equal rights, and get equal opportunity to develop capabilities without any bias or preferences, then the development of the country would be faster. Although gender based equality is considered as a part of development strategy, inequality is occurring in many societies where equal rights are not given to women as men. Due to gender based inequality, women are unable to take part in many development activities. Promoting gender equality is seen as an encouragement to greater economic and social prosperity. Thus, it is obvious for students to know the real concept of equality and its impact on development activities through Gender Studies.

Gender is an international issue. It is an important issue especially in developing countries where inequality is the possible cause of various social problems. Therefore, students are required to know the challenges of gender from global perspective. In addition, gender has an important impact on family system. Due to socio-cultural practice, gender based inequality is common in family system. The article attempts to discuss how socio-cultural norms may effect on gender based inequality in family.

Most importantly, students are required to know what is gender, gender based equality and the difference between men and women. Is there any difference between men and women? What is the real meaning of masculinity and femininity? It would be impossible to state the answer in terms of simple roles, since many of these are culture-dependent. It is expected that students will create the appropriate definitions of gender, masculinity and femininity, gender based equality and inequality through class lecture and discussion. Students are able to know how does gender impact on people's life. Gender Studies will develop critical thinking, research and writing skills and the ability to speak about gender issues with confidence. It may also enhance the understanding of gender from cross-cultural, international and contemporary perspectives. It also emphasizes the importance of applying critical gender analysis in all areas of social life. Although the course has an important aspect in the process of learning, there are obstacles behind its implementation. The article focuses some of the important contents, which are related to the process of learning and well-being. There are some problems behind its implementation as this course is taught in English and students do not have enough background on gender issue. Thus, the article attempts to identify some problems and some possible solutions based on author's own experience.

2. Objectives and Methods

The article argues that Gender Studies serves as an explanatory module to the study of gender. It is said that this course can be considered as a platform of learning for the process of learning. This article looks at how Gender Studies is important in the process of learning and developing appropriate traits for students in various ways. The article is divided into three major sections. The first section analyzes some of the important contents of Gender Studies and its impact on the process of learning. The article focuses some of the components that might have a huge impact in the process of learning and developing appropriate behaviors among the students. From this approach, a mini research has been conducted in order to examine student's perception and understanding on Gender Studies which has been discussed in section two. The third section identifies some problems behind its full implementations. Some recommendations are also made based on researcher's personal experiences and observation. The study is based on both primary and secondary information. In order to achieve the research objectives, a multi-method approach was employed in this study. Besides, primary data was collected from students, while secondary information such as analyzing content of Gender Studies were analyzed from books, journals and reading materials for class lectures that are related to this article.

3. Analyzing the Important Contents of Gender Studies

Before analyzing some of the important contents of Gender Studies, it is important to discuss the main objectives of the course. Student's learning outcomes are linked to how the objective of the module is handled, structured and presented (Pang et al., 2006). The course intends to provide students' knowledge related to gender and its

implication. The main objectives of this course are to discuss concept and theories of gender, gender based equality and inequality. It includes masculinity and femininity, feminist movement, gender gap in education and gender discrimination in family as well as society. The course also discusses gender from socio-cultural and religious perspectives. The article discusses some of the key concepts related to Gender Studies and its entire objectives in the process of learning.

3.1 Understanding of Gender, Gender Role, Gender Relation and Its Appropriate Practice

In the literature, gender usually focuses on women. In general, gender can be defined as both men and women. It is understood about the two sexes, male and female, within the context of society. As a concept, gender can be defined in two ways in which maleness and femaleness are perceived, evaluated and stratified in a society: biological and social. At the biological level, men and women are typically distinguished by the presence of a Y-chromosome in male cells, and its absence in female cells. From social perspective, gender refers to the social differences and relations between men and women, which are learned, vary widely among societies and cultures, and change over time. Gender is also a belief system. It is a belief system about the characteristics of men and women. These beliefs may or may not be accurate, but these are powerful tool influencing how we perceive women and men, how we interpret what they do and how we interact with members of both groups. These beliefs even influence how we perceive and evaluate ourselves? How we think about others? Hence, it is important for every individual to develop the appropriate understanding of gender in order to analyze the roles, responsibilities, constraints, opportunities and needs of women and men from a social context.

Similarly, gender roles are the attitudes, behaviors, rights, and responsibilities that a society associates with each sex (Holt and Ellis, 1998). It can be further defined as individuals' roles which influence how men and women interact and the attitudes and behaviors expected of each (Lindsey, 1994). Gender roles can be learned in order to perform the appropriate role towards family, society and community or other social group. In addition, gender relation is an important phenomenon which may effect on family as well as society. Gender relation defines the relation between men and women. Gender relations' are characterized by unequal power. 'Gender norms' assign specific entitlements and responsibilities to men and women - for example, women might be expected to take on caring or domestic duties and remain close to home, while men may be expected to be the main breadwinner, working outside the home, with greater freedom to move around in public places. This traditional ideology may negatively affect gender relation. It is said that power is directly related to gender relation with regard to the distribution of responsibility and resources. Thus, an understanding of the unequal power relations between women and men is necessary to understand the basic problem in gender relations.

3.2 Understanding of Masculinity and Femininity and Its Appropriate Practice

This article explains how predominant masculinity and femininity, which contribute to the development of student's behaviours. Masculine and feminine roles are not opposite instead of two separate dimensions (Bem, 1977). Differences between man and woman are originally believed to be natural and genetically determined (Loving D, Aragón and Sánchez, 1994). Physical differences cannot be changed but people can change their behavior (Gilligan, 1982). In general, masculinity is often associated with characteristics such as aggressiveness, competitiveness, dominance, strength, courage and control. These characteristics result from a combination of biological, cultural and social influences, and relate to our understanding of power in society as a whole (Maldonado & García G, 1994).

There are two ways masculinity and femininity can be viewed such as "traditional" and "conservative". We use the terms "traditional" and "conservative" to describe the belief that men's and women's roles are distinct, and the terms "modern" and "liberal" to describe the belief that roles are not ascribed according to sex. According to the traditional point of view, men are more assertive, competitive, decisive, confident, ambitious, and instrumentally oriented, whereas women are more nurturing, empathetic, helpful, sympathetic, gentle, affectionate, and expressively oriented (Lueptow et al., 2001; Hoffman & Borders, 2001). Traditional gender roles emphasize separate spheres of influence for women and men, with women inside the home and men outside the home (Duncan et al., 1997). The traditional gender roles influence negatively to masculinity and femininity. On the other hand, negative masculine and feminine behaviors affect family and society. One of the traditional ideologies is patriarchy that creates many problems in our family as well as society. Generally, patriarchy is defined as a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women (Batiwala. 1995)

Due to patriarchy, masculinity is often associated with characteristics such as aggressiveness, competitiveness, dominance, strength, courage and control. These characteristics result from a combination of biological, cultural and social influences and affect family and society as a whole. Patriarchal behavior is also one kind of

socio-cultural belief that limits equality in society. In many societies, the root structure of gender inequality is often visible at household levels and this creates many problems in family especially violence against women. It is an ancient and universal problem occurring because of patriarchy. Power inequalities between women and men and the negative masculine culture are the major sources of this violence. It can be said that patriarchal ideology and cultural practice in the masculinity is an important reason for men's violence against women (Williams & Best, 1982).

Based on the above-mentioned discussions, it is important to note that developing the appropriate characteristics of masculinity and femininity are important to overcome many problems currently happening in our society. Thus the course is important especially for the students who are considered as trainers and future leaders of our society. The article also argues that this course does not only help to develop the appropriate behaviors but also helps to understand the influence of socio-cultural values that shape masculine and feminine behavior.

3.3 Gender from Socio-cultural Perspective

One of the important components of Gender Studies is an understanding of gender from socio-cultural perspective. There is a positive relation between socio-cultural and gender role. We know that gender is a set of male and female behavioral and mental potentials that are shaped and developed by particular societies. On the other hand, gender roles are socially and culturally defined prescriptions and beliefs about the behavior and emotions of men and women. In every society, the social and cultural norms play an important role in the development of the behavior and attitude of the people. Socio-culture in the anthropological sense of broad patterns are thinking, feeling and acting. More broadly culture can be understood as a people's "way of life" or tradition. Gender can be referred to different ways that men and women are culturally defined and evaluated (Kabeer, 2001; Bisnath and Elson 1999; Sen and Grown 1999).

In various developing countries, socio-cultural norms negatively affect gender relations. Due to socio-cultural belief system, gender based inequality is often visible at the household level. Gender gap in education is one of the suitable examples, which are currently happening in various countries. It has been argued that socio-cultural norms as the barrier against the advancement of women education. It has been noted that in various countries, due to socio-cultural practice women receive lower education than men. On the other hand, equality between men and women is important for the overall development of the country. Thus, an understanding of gender based equality and its relation to the development are crucial for the process of learning.

3.4 Gender from Religious Perspective

Gender from Islamic perspective has an important impact on the process of learning as in some cases religious beliefs are dominated by the socio-cultural norms and values. Due to socio-cultural belief sometimes Islam is misunderstood and various types of discrimination can be viewed in our society. We know that Islam is a progressive religion. Gender is determined by the principles of Islam. There is no discrimination between men and women in Islam. Any discrimination based on gender is a grave offense and against the teachings of the Qur'an. In the Qur'an, men and women are viewed as complementary to each other. The objective of this content is to provide students' knowledge on how men and women are treated in Islam. Are men and women being treated equally or is there any difference between men and women in Islam? More specifically, the objective of the content is to provide a clear understanding of what Islam says about men and women's dignity and rights. Thus this section has an important impact on developing knowledge of gender from religious perspectives.

4. Students' Perception on Gender Studies

This section attempts to examine students' general understanding and perception about Gender studies. A total of 200 students from Gender Studies (Sem 1 & 2, 1010/2011) class were interviewed. Students' perception and understanding have been measured using on the issue 8 items on a four-point Likert format. In this format, the responses agree, strongly agree, disagree and strongly disagree were presented with the values of 1, 2, 3 and 4 respectively. In response to each of the items, students were asked to choose the values that best represent their feeling and perception regarding the module of Gender Studies. Besides, measuring students' opinion, principle researcher's personal experiences had been added for deeper understanding. Since beginning of my teaching at UPSI for Gender Studies class, I observed that most of students usually did well in both coursework and the final examination and a good number of students achieved A. This may happen as students understand what is taught in the lectures and they read the reading materials distributed by the lecturer. It was also found that some students who achieved grade B in the final exam did not perform well. It is expected that lack of interest and lack of background of Gender Studies may results in obtaining B grade in the final examination. These students may not be attentive in class. This also might be the reason that they did not read the reading material distributed by the lecturer. However, it can be said that attentive students obtained good marks in both course work and final

examination, which initially reflect students' general understanding about Gender Studies.

The understanding among the students on the selected contents of Gender Studies is also encouraging. It is noted that students are able to know what gender analysis is. They are also familiar with the importance of gender analysis. It is expected that the important components which had been discussed in the class bring creative and critical success when students are able to analyze gender issue creatively and critically. The improvements for the other sections are also notable. Students are able to identify socio-cultural influence on gender gap in education, which shows the creative and critical thinking. At the end of the session, it was also observed that students were able to examine the socio-cultural influence on gender gap in education in various countries, which reflect to valuing and responding the issues successfully. Students also showed the diversity of innovation in their presentations. However, a notable achievement has been achieved in the selected contents on Gender Studies. Therefore, it can be said that the course is effective in the process of learning and it has achieved its entire objectives.

For deeper understanding student's perception were presented in Table 1. It shows that among a total of 200 students, a majority of students agreed and strongly agreed that Gender Studies helped them in developing their knowledge skills. A total of eight statements had been constructed to measure students' understanding about the issues of Gender Studies. Regarding the meaning and value of gender, a majority of the students stated that this course increased their knowledge on the selected issues.

<Insert Table 1 Here>

The results show that majority of students agreed that gender based equality is important for family as well as society. Thus, it can be said that students are not only aware about the basic understanding of gender based equality but also familiar with its implication that shape family as well as society. As motioned earlier, gender is an international issue. Therefore, these issues have been discussed from both historical and modern perspectives that may develop a strong background on gender. Regarding on this statement, it can be said that it has an impact on the process of learning as only few students (64 & 27) disagreed. Socio-cultural values have an important impact on gender relation. However, because of traditional socio-cultural belief system, gender based inequalities are occurring in many societies which negatively affect on the process of development. Therefore, it is important to know for students about the appropriate gender relation. It is assumed that the course has helped students to understand the social and cultural values that shape gender relation as majority of students agree and strongly agree (98 & 61) to this statement. In addition, this course has increased students' communication skills as it is taught in English which can be seen in results where majority of students (104 & 67) agreed and strongly agreed respectively. Indeed to say that this course has also a high impact on student's communication skill as the lecture is delivered the lecture in English.

5. Some Problems of Gender Studies' Full Implementation: UPSI Experiences

Although Gender Studies has an important impact on the process of teacher learning, there are some problems behind its full implementation. This course is taught in English. Based on my experience and being a lecturer it was noticed that at the beginning, due to lack of English students were not attentive in the class. However, after few weeks, students were becoming attentive in class lecture. At end of the session, there was no major communication problem between the lecturer and students. From this observation, it can be said that practicing English can be an effective tool for the process of learning more about Gender Studies. In addition, students' good command of English is necessary for its full implementation.

In order to gather depth knowledge of gender, more research oriented components could be included in the course outline. Students are required to conduct research which may increase their knowledge on gender issue. Students may show innovative work and skills if students are asked to do a mini research on gender issue. Thus, research could be considered as the key element for mini research, which could be a better way of learning in future. It is believed that research has the power to effective learning.

Gender refers to both men and women; but it focuses more about favoring women. Therefore, male students are less attentive in the class. It was also noticed that female students in general perform better than male students in various activities of Gender studies class. Sometimes, it is felt that male students are forced to take this course. They do not have enough intention to be the part of the class. Thus, the lecturer may take initiative to make interesting for both groups so that the process of learning run smoothly without gender bias.

Although basic knowledge of gender issues is necessary for the overall process of learning, most of students do not have basic knowledge of gender. Therefore seminars, forums and discussions can be held relating to gender issue. It is also suggested that in order to motivate students at least one seminar can be organized by students. It might increase students' knowledge on gender from various perspectives.

6. Conclusions

Based on the discussions it can be concluded that Gender Studies is an important aspect in the process of learning and developing appropriate traits among UPSI students who become teacher in future. This course might be helpful especially for teachers as they deal with developing human capital. Based on primary information (mini research among Gender Studies Students) it can be said that Gender Studies has an important impact on the process of learning. A general understanding of gender is necessary to move towards a more transformative gender approach. Thus, this course would contribute to increase students' general knowledge. Some of the important components of Gender Studies were analyzed which indicate the important aspects for the process of teacher learning. Moreover, Gender Studies could emerge as a higher investment priority in the process of learning. It is not only important for process of learning but also important for the overall development of the society. Overall, it is hoped that this course would contribute to making a person a better teacher and leader. This research was limited with a small number of students (200) in the selected area UPSI. Hence the findings cannot be generalized all educational institutions in Malaysia. A similar study might be expanded to include a larger number of students in various educational institutions which would help in finding the impact of Gender studies in the process of overall learning.

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Table 1. Measuring the general understanding of gender studies among the students

Variables	Agree		Strongly Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Total
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
This course has increased my general understanding about gender.	60	30	96	48	34	17	10	5	200
Through this course I know the appropriate meaning of gender.	72	36	89	44	16	8	23	12	200
The course has increased my understanding about the value of gender.	84	42	78	39	21	11	17	8	200
The course has helped me to learn how gender based equality is important for family as well as well society.	78	39	98	49	15	8	9	4	200
I have gained knowledge of gender from historical and modern perspectives.	73	37	64	32	36	18	27	13	200
The course has helped me to understand the social and cultural values that shape gender relation.	98	49	61	30	17	9	24	12	200
Now I clearly understand the appropriate gender relation.	61	30	79	40	39	19	21	11	200
This course has increased my communication skills as it is taught in English.	104	52	67	34	20	10	9	4	200