

# ‘Gender-Neutrality’ Against ‘Gender Equality:’ Evading the Anti-feminist Backlash

Abu Saleh Md. Rafi

**Abstract—** This research primarily investigates the complexities of gender-biased policy in education discourse in the name of promoting ‘gender-equality’ which envisions to empowering women. This study also vigilances the inevitable antifeminist backlash resulted from the implementation of these policies in the socio-economical context of any developing country. Further, it traces out the patterns of transformations required exploring two other policy areas; media discourse and social work. Undertaking extensive theoretical research and empirical evidences, this study contributes a new conceptual framework to the established discourse of gender and policy by redressing the so called ‘equality concept’ of feminism.

**Keywords-** gender and education; gender-neutrality; gender-equality; backlash; feminism; masculinity.

## I. EDUCATION AND GENDER: A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

In Bangladesh feminism has probably reached its peak, where the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Oppositions are both women, so are the deputy leader of the House, and the Heads of other important ministries such as foreign, defense, agriculture, energy and home. This country has been ruled back and forth for more than 20 years by women leaders since its birth in 1971. The triumph of such post-feminism in Bangladesh does not only thrust for equality for all women blurring the boundaries between traditional ascription of gender, but it also ensures a gender quota system which favours women not only in parliament, but in all developmental programmes and policies in the country.

Last Spring, I incorporated a simple PBL (project-based learning) in one of my undergraduate classes, where I asked my students to survey the pictures in elementary schoolbooks. Among a range of similar findings, one picture says, “Hello! I am Mina, I am a teacher; you are Mr. Sameer, you are a postman.” Another picture of four different activities shows a girl “studies”, “plays”, and “dances”, where the boy only “sits”! The students noticed that even if there are many female revolutionary figures like Mother Teresa or Madame Curie in those books, there

was not a single mention of any revolutionary male figures. This research considers this perpetuation of female images alarming in the sense that they have the power to diminish the spaces and places where the male students can also flourish and experience success in schooling. Previous researches showed that curriculum, books, and learning materials/activities that fail to adequately portray the contributions of any of the genders and that, by implication, provide subtle stereotypical messages to that particular gender about limited career prospects and horizons. The current curriculum clearly highlights the aspects of resource imbalance which will plague men in academe and profession in near future. I do ponder these catastrophic consequences on the psychology of my current young male students in the long run in my country.

This PBL led us to realize that men have been “visibly” discriminated in those textbooks. As in every nation, the national education system basically mimics the decrees of the entire political system of a country, consequently the gender discrimination located in education sector mirrors the similar discrimination in many essential discourses of Bangladesh, which this research proposes, will generate “backlash”—a reaction to the force like feminism, threatening the status quo of post capitalist democracy and presumably perpetuate the social system which propagates free market ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter and Leslie). Hence, the Bangladeshi policy-makers need to comprehend the side-effects of gender-biased policies, and also the aftermaths. This research contributes new insights in decision making, policy planning, coordinating management of assets with other programs to maximize gender integration and leveraging activities with a view to establishing a gender-neutral Bangladesh.

## II. WHAT ABOUT THE BOYS?: A CONTEMPORARY DEBATE IN GLOBAL POLICY MAKING

While exploring the international organizational dynamics of revenue-seeking behavior in higher education in ‘Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets,

DOI: 10.5176/2345-7163\_3.1.76

States, and Higher Education' (2004), Metcalfe and Slaughter observed the link between the theory of academic capitalism and radical feminism, suggesting that both theories postulate a radical restructuring of colleges and universities may be necessary to abolish the patriarchy that is embedded in Western systems of higher education. However, Sweden had already materialized this view long back in 1980 when the country was undergoing its third curriculum change to treat boys and girls equally and to challenge traditional sex roles. Sweden's educational policies had been followed by almost all the western countries to ensure gender-equality. Today at the level of national education systems, there is an institutionalized culture of gender equality that is rapidly becoming an institutionalized norm (Baker & LeTendre, 2005). This means that gender equality is no longer a conscious decision or an overt goal that requires extra effort to achieve in many parts of the world.

However, my question is if gender-equality is achieved then why this noticeable alarm has developed and grown around the education of boys, that is not only in Bangladesh, but it also has become an oft-heard refrain from Australia to England, from the United States to Canada, and from Iceland to Germany. Grabbing newspaper headlines, taking up bookstore shelves, and even capturing major attention from the research community and practitioners, boys' educational issues have in many ways overshadowed the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s much-needed focus on girls' education. A 2006 Newsweek cover decries a "Boy Crisis." An Education Week editorial proclaims a "Silent Gender Gap: Reading, Writing, and Other Problems for Boys." A headline in the Chicago Sun-Times distinguishes that "Boys, Not Girls, on Worse End of Education Gap." A bestselling book by Christine Hoff Sommers appears in 2000 trumpeting *The War Against Boys*. World Report and U.S. News weigh up "Are Boys the Weaker Sex?" A USA Today contributor argues that "Girls Get Extra School Help While Boys Get Ritalin." Gradually more and more frequently, media outlets and pundits are focusing their concern on the so-called "boy problem" in schools that holds boys are not faring well in two categories: (a) academic and (b) social, physical, and medical. Within the category of academic problems for boys, concern has centered largely on literacy. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2003), a group representing 30 "Western," industrialized countries, finds that in all its member nations, females in the fourth grade have a statistically significant advantage over boys in tested literacy. Many other cross-national studies similarly find that girls outperform boys on nearly every measure of literacy tested.

The second category of concern, encompassing social, physical, and medical issues, has been treated as if interconnected with academic issues. Much concern has been expressed over attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity (ADD/ADHD) in popular discussion, particularly because the majority of those diagnosed and

medicated for it are males. Males are also more likely than females to be diagnosed for special education, to be diagnosed with autism and dyslexia, to have drug and alcohol problems, to engage in risk-taking behavior, to be the victims and perpetrators of violence and crime, and to complete suicide attempts. Violence, particularly, sometimes in the form of rampage school shootings in the United States, has been a central issue that propels boys and their problems to the public stage. Clearly, such physical, emotional, and medical indicators have relevance to schools and to the general state of males during school.

Hence, countries adopting the so called 'gender-equality' is again put into question and the ongoing debates over it concerning the problems for boys have been called the "boy turn" in gender and education research and practice (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). While it can be taken in many ways, it has largely come to represent the position of antifeminist 'backlash' against the gains made for girls in schools. These tendencies were brought into wider debate by the American journalist Susan Faludi in her book *Backlash* where she coined the term 'backlash' that has become used to describe a fierce rejection of an ideology by forcefully reiterated counter-arguments. Faludi does not assert that the backlash against feminism is part of a united attack on feminism, but she apparently argues that its impact can be felt in all aspects of political, social and cultural life. Regardless of their intentions, Faludi observes all the individuals caught up in backlash rhetoric as helping to create an atmosphere where the term feminism will be once again regarded with profound suspicion- which, we see, has already come through.

### III. "BOY-TURN" DEBATES AND THINGS TO PONDER

The "boy turn" debate in gender and education research and practice demonstrates that equal access to the same educational institution is no guarantee that girls and boys will have equal opportunities within that institution, will be treated equally while attending, will have equally good educational outcomes or will participate in social institutions equally. Hence this research draws attention from man-women dichotomy to the broader, more complex issues surrounding the many social interpretations of "gender-equality". The ways gender is always embedded in educational and all other social institutions; this research finds it next to impossible defining what gender-equality is. Does this "equality" mean that women have to take on masculine norms, values and lifestyles? If yes, then which men should strive to be equal? And if it is about having access to the power of the most privileged men, this would just presumably perpetuate the social system that propagates free market capitalism.

Even if the table is turned to the 'boy problem', it is again the very concept of equality is in debate. Since the rise of the 'boy-turn' the (pro) feminists have been questioning "Which boys?" This question asks advocates for boys to disaggregate the category "boys" or, in other

words, to break this category down by race, socioeconomic class, sexuality, disability and ability, and so on. This (pro)feminist intervention reminds that not all boys are having problems and, perhaps more importantly, that some boys suffer more than others- which altogether makes it even harder to define the notion of 'equality'.

Considering the shortcomings of the so-called 'gender-equality' concept, this research addresses the following issues:

- a) What is the validity of the so-called equality policies based on the traditional male-female dichotomy that tends to lump together all males and all females instead of talking about differences between men and women?
- b) If the gender-equality concept of feminist discourse can be questioned with profound suspicion, then can there be any alternative way that will emerge from the same discourse to resolve the anti-feminist backlash?
- c) What/how could be the new ways that would not possibly lead to any 'boy-turn' or 'girl-turn' all-over again in theoretical or empirical discourse? And, how to apply those new ways into practice?

#### IV. REDRESSING "GENDER-EQUALITY" CONCEPT

If gender equality is to be achieved, gender must be at the center of the analysis that informs policy and practice (Moser, 1993). This current research refutes this very concept of gender equality; hence it requires a new analysis of power that does not focus so crucially on gender as its determinant. In this analysis, the true salvation lies in a movement away from sexual polarization, male-female dichotomy and the prison of gender. Instead of gender-biased 'equality' policies, this research aims to suggest an approach strategically where individual roles and the modes of personal behavior can be freely chosen. This strategy is best described by the term 'androgyny' or gender-neutrality. It heralded the possibility of "a much broader range of sex-role possibilities for members of both sexes" (Harris, 1974) within second wave feminism. During the late 1960s and 1970s androgyny became even more protean, serving as the expression of a range of sexual identities, social possibilities and imaginative freedoms. Although it is considered to be 'the blending of *positive* masculine and feminine characteristics within a given person', but its meaning can also depend on its function in a given discourse. This research integrates 'androgyny' as the new analysis of power.

Attempting an interdisciplinary postmodern methodologies of 'reading' and analyzing data in dualistic categories such as male/female, masculinity/femininity, rationality/ emotionality, or heterosexual/homosexual which are never neutral or natural, instead, they create and maintain power relations with an underlying assumption

that one side of the dichotomy is superior to the other, this research has accommodated postmodernist approach as it itself is unfolding, multi-vocal and multi-narrative in support of promoting androgyny.

#### A. Theoretical Contribution

The promotion of androgyny in different discourses is at once desirable and also to be feared, as it has the power to disrupt and disturb hetero-normative relationships. Foucault's 'model of power' has been useful in this regard as it very different from the models of prior discourses like Marxism or feminism where power was largely seen as a 'thing' which was 'held' by certain dominant groups. But for Foucault, power simply cannot be *held* by one group, rather power is something that *flows through* relationships or networks of relationships and it is *exercised* within interactions. Foucault says that we may find 'states of domination' where power relations have become so entrenched that they can seem entirely one-sided and unchangeable but such situations can be changed as 'where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault, 1998: 95). So by means of "force relations" it is possible to form a 'reverse' discourse where androgyny can speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged.

Judith Butler's notion of *gender trouble* is a particularly useful, relevant and exciting tool to implement androgyny as by causing it this project can challenge the traditional views of masculinity and femininity, and sexuality. For Butler, 'gender', like other aspects of identity, is a performance (though not necessarily a consciously chosen one) and this is reinforced through repetition. If gender is a performance, then, it can be turned on its head – or turned into *anything*. A feminist revolution is not necessary for that nor has the society to become more liberal or different before gender roles can be transformed. Butler suggests *gender trouble* can be made through mobilization, subversive confusion and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity.

Subversive confusion can be created by breaking certain masculine and feminine formations by destabilizing the taken-for granted assumptions about the supposedly binary divide between female and male, masculinity and femininity, gay and straight whatsoever and the idea of a 'proliferation' is spreading a variety of non-traditional images and ideas everywhere about how people can shatter the unhelpful moulds of 'male' and 'female' roles which continue to apply constraints upon their ability to be expressive and emotionally literate beings.

#### B. Empirical Observation and further scopes:

By merging Butler's idea of 'subversive confusion' and 'proliferation of non-traditional images', this research opens scopes for mixed qualitative and quantities analysis, participatory research and discourse analysis particularly in three areas:

- i) media policy (advertising in print and audio-visual media, film and tv shows, billboards, magazines)
- ii) education policy (curriculum and material development, attuning feminine schooling and education to boyishness, gender-neutral instead of gender-segregated employment)
- iii) social policy (different government and non-government organization)

To maximize the richness and accuracy of data, as well as transferability of the findings several independent case studies (based on face-to face interviews and questionnaires) can be carried out in those three sectors with a view to gain a holistic understanding of the strength and loopholes of their gender policies in support of the proliferation of androgenic identities. Based on the success and dilemmas observed in those case-studies, in future I will model my campaign on the promotion of androgyny and discuss how it will contribute in the social and cultural good creating a new spectrum where people will not be imprisoned by gender binary, rather will feel free to work out their own issues, be frank about it, acknowledge it, and move on. By teaching non-codified androgynous materials, screening posters, pamphlets, and videos featuring women in nontraditional work that makes young girls to aspire skilled trades or designing specialized programs for boys that inspire them to understand gender relations or develop their empathetic, caring side under the banner of “be all that you can be”, this research outcome will create an androgenic environment where everybody can participate without any hindrance. A number of consciousness rising (CR) groups both for men and women will also be organized. This empirical research will finally incorporate three civic projects featuring androgynous celebrity in mass-media, academic textbooks and social gathering. Few thousands of people including media personalities and Government and NGO workers and my university students will participate in those proposed research. Data gathered from those case studies, CR groups and community projects will be analyzed and interpreted which will in turn emerge specific themes in support of promoting androgynous identities.

## V. FINAL THOUGHTS

The further proceedings of this research involve the entire socio-political system of my country which seems to be a challenge. On top of that there is no clear strategy offered in Butler's theory through which people can cause 'gender trouble'. However, this research already finds the solution in the idea of a 'proliferation' of identities in education, media and social discourse. David Gauntlett's idea of six different types of “role models (among them particularly the ‘challenging stereotypes’ role model, the ‘wholesome’ role model, the ‘outsider’ role model)” can be

the working device here as people popularly understand the ‘role model’ as ‘someone to look up to’, and someone to base their character, values or aspirations upon. Besides in case of promoting gender-neutrality, people would not necessarily be re-embodied as androgynes but they could be androgynous in their behavior, which means people can still retain the appearance of ‘men’ and ‘women’ whilst all behavioral characteristics might be open to all, not assigned on the basis of their anatomical difference.

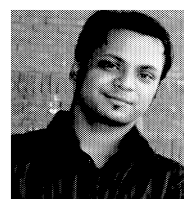
I proposed gender neutrality or androgyny instead of ‘gender-differentiated’ equality in this current study, which invites the assimilation of subordinated groups (women, gay men, lesbians) to the values, institutions and life-styles of dominant groups (menheterosexuals, suffragettes). I find, redefining difference is more important than separating them. Many Asian countries like China, Japan, Korea or Thailand have an acceptance of androgyny, where the differences between men and women are either thin or none. My previous publication entitled “Re-Channeling the Myth of Masculinity: The Emergence of Androgyny in the Bangladeshi Media” has located a shift in the conceptualization of masculinity curiously evident also in Bangladeshi advertising discourse. In our country it is necessary to take the same alley also in education and social policy to rescue ourselves from a backlash swing that simply cannot tolerate man-centered or woman-centred politics. In this proposed study I advocated for the revision of ‘role-learning theory’ in gender-socialization. Along with women's consciousness raising (CR) groups, men's CR groups will also proposed to be organized both in private and public levels as gender oppresses all individuals and that men need liberation from ‘hegemonic masculinity’, similarly the women need to be liberated from the thrall of the patriarchy. The policy-makers also need the women to confront the problems men face in our changing social context; only then we can embrace and celebrate gender-neutrality in all the essential discourses of a country including education, media and social works.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Alloway, N., & Gilbert, P. (Eds.). (1997). *Boys and literacy—teaching units*. Carlton, Australia: Curriculum Corporation.
- [2] Arnot, M., & Dillabough, J. (Eds.). (2000). *Challenging democracy: International perspectives on gender, education and citizenship*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- [3] Bornstein, Kate, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- [4] Brod, H. (Ed.). (1987). *The making of masculinities: The new men's studies*. St. Leonards, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- [5] Browne, R., & Fletcher, R. (Eds.). (1995). *Boys in schools: Addressing the real issues—behaviour, values, and relationships*. Sydney: Finch.
- [6] Busst, A.J.L., ‘The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century’, in Ian Butler, Judith (1990), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge.

- [7] Butler, Judith (2004), *Undoing Gender*, London: Routledge. Butler, Judith (1999), 'Revisiting Bodies and Pleasures', in Bell, Vikki, ed., *Performativity and Belonging*, London: Sage.
- [8] Davies, B. (1993). Shards of glass: Children reading and writing beyond gendered identities. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.
- [9] Davies, B. (1997). The subject of post-structuralism: A reply to Alison Jones. *Gender & Education*, 9(3), 271–283.
- [10] Equal Opportunities Commission (2006), 'Free to Choose – Tackling Gender Barriers to Better Jobs', 31 March, [www.eoc.org.uk/Default.aspx?page=17332](http://www.eoc.org.uk/Default.aspx?page=17332)
- [11] Faithfull, Theodor J. *The Mystery of the Androgyne: Three Papers on the Theory and Practice of Psycho-Analysis*, London: Forum Publishing Company, 1938
- [12] Faludi, Susan (1991), *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, London: Vintage
- [13] Faludi, Susan (1999), *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man*, London: Chatto & Windus.
- [14] Foucault, Michel (1980), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, edited by Colin Gordon, New York: Pantheon.
- [15] Foucault, Michel (1990), *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality Volume Three*, translated by Robert Hurley, London: Penguin.
- [16] Gauntlett, David (2002), *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction* [first edition], Routledge, London.
- [17] Harris, Daniel, 'Androgyny: The Sexist Myth in Disguise', in special issue, 'The Androgyny Papers', *Women's Studies* 2, 1974
- [18] Kaplan, Alexandra and Mary Anne Sedney, *Psychology and Sex Roles: An Androgynous Perspective*, New York: Little, Brown, 1980
- [19] MacLeod, Catriona, *Embodying Ambiguity: Androgyny and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Keller*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998
- [20] National Agency for Education. (2001). Sweden curriculum: Compulsory school syllabuses. Stockholm: Author.
- [21] National Center for Education Statistics. (2000). NAEP 1999 trends in academic progress: Three decades of student performance (No. NCES 2000-469). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- [22] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2003). *Education at a glance: OECD indicators 2003*. Paris: OECD.
- [23] Paglia, Camille, Review of Towards a Recognition of Androgyny, *Yale Review* LXII:4, 1973
- [24] Rao, A., & Kelleher, D. (2000). Leadership for social transformation: Some ideas and questions on institutions and feminist leadership. *Gender and Development*, 8(3), 74–79.
- [26] Slaughter, S., & Leslie, L. (1997). *Academic capitalism: Politics, policies, and the entrepreneurial university*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- [27] Slaughter, S., & Rhoades, G. (2004). *Academic capitalism in the new economy: Markets, state, and higher education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press
- [28] Smyth, J., & Hattam, R. (with Cannon, J., Edwards, J., Wilson, N., & Wurst, S.). (2004). "Dropping out," drifting off, being excluded: Becoming somebody without school. New York: Peter Lang.
- [29] Statistics Sweden. (2004). SCB, women and men in Sweden, facts and figures 2004. Stockholm: Author.
- [30] Teese, R., Davies, B., Charlton, M., & Polesel, J. (1997). Who wins at school; which boys, which girls? In J. Kenway (Ed.), *Will boys be boys? Boys' education in the context of gender reform* (pp. 8–12). Deakin West: Australian Curriculum Studies Association.
- [31] UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2005). *Education trends in perspective: Analysis of the world education indicators*. Paris: UNESCO
- [32] Vetterling-Bruggin, Mary, 'Femininity', 'Masculinity', and 'Androgyny': A Modern Philosophical Discussion, New Jersey: Littlefield, Adam and Co., 1982
- [33] Weaver-Hightower, M.B. (2003). The "boy turn" in research on gender and education. *Review of Educational Research*, 73(4), 471–498.
- [34] Wernersson, I. (1989). Gender equality—Ideology and reality. In S. Ball & S. Larsson (Eds.), *The struggle for democratic education. equality and participation in Sweden* (pp. 88–102). New York: Falmer Press.
- [35] G. Eason, B. Noble, and I. N. Sneddon, "On certain integrals of Lipschitz-Hankel type involving products of Bessel functions," *Phil. Trans. Roy. Soc. London*, vol. A247, pp. 529–551, April 1955. (references)
- [36] J. Clerk Maxwell, *A Treatise on Electricity and Magnetism*, 3rd ed., vol. 2. Oxford: Clarendon, 1892, pp.68–73.
- [37] I. S. Jacobs and C. P. Bean, "Fine particles, thin films and exchange anisotropy," in *Magnetism*, vol. III, G. T. Rado and H. Suhl, Eds. New York: Academic, 1963, pp. 271–350.
- [38] K. Elissa, "Title of paper if known," unpublished.
- [39] R. Nicole, "Title of paper with only first word capitalized," *J. Name Stand. Abbrev.*, in press.
- [40] M. Young, *The Technical Writer's Handbook*. Mill Valley, CA: University Science, 1989.

## AUTHOR'S PROFILE



**Abu Saleh Md. Rafi** works as a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English, Daffodil International University, Dhaka. His research interest includes Education, Gender Studies, Sociolinguistics, Global Literature and Cultural Studies. In a relatively young career of three years, he already has four international and three national publications in his credit. Currently Mr. Rafi is pursuing his second Masters in English Language from the United Kingdom.