

# **SCHOOL TEACHING AS A FEMININE PROFESSION: THE LEGITIMIZATION AND NATURALIZATION DISCOURSES IN PAKISTANI CONEXT**

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## **Abstract**

School teaching has long been associated with women. There has been an ideological link between women's domestic role and their career as school teacher. Taking care of younger children in school is traditionally seen as an "extension of motherhood" and therefore considered a "natural" job for women. Keeping in view this firmly rooted global phenomenon, I focus to examine what ideology idealizes and legitimizes school teaching as the best career for women in Pakistan? The study is informed by social constructionist understanding of gender and therefore draws on feminist post-structuralist. Drawing on insights from feminist post-structuralist, I give particular consideration to the discourses embedded into school textbooks and the people who author and approve school knowledge. Employing qualitative methodology, I focus on two key questions: what ideology informs school textbooks? How do school textbooks legitimize school teaching as the only appropriate job for women? The study findings suggest that school textbooks in Pakistan have been used to naturalize and legitimize school teaching as the best career for women.

**Keywords:** Ideology, domestic role, Social constructionist, feminist poststructuralist, discourse analysis

## **Introduction:**

The teaching of young children has long been dominated by women. Women's predominance in school teaching is to be found in most countries throughout the world (Drudy 2008). In a study of 41 countries, [school] teaching ranks as one of the typically female occupations (Anker, 1998). In most countries in North America, South America, Europe, and in much of Asia and the South Pacific women constitute up to 80 percent of the primary school teaching (United Nation Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2004). In Canada, women are 67 percent of the primary teachers. Similarly, in Brazil, Russia, Austria, Germany and the UK, women make up more than 80 percent of teaching staff in public and private schools (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2005). Figures from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization reveal that the proportion of women in primary school teaching has increased in all geographical regions worldwide, except the least developed countries (UNESCO, 2003). In China, India and Pakistan, women make up 49, 36 and 49 percent of primary teachers respectively. In many African countries, women compose less than a third of the teaching staff (OCED 2005 cited in Gaskell and Mullen 2006, p. 455). It can be argued that this pattern is shared worldwide. Regions such as South and East Asia, the Arab states, and Sub-Saharan Africa not only have less number of female in teaching but have the highest levels of occupational segregation by gender (see Padavic and Reskin, 2002; Gaskell and Mullen, 2006). However, the overall claim is that primary school teaching, both in the technologically developed and developing societies, is a female dominated field. Contrary to primary school teaching,

postsecondary teaching is a male-dominated enterprise. There are fewer women at the college and university level and they are in less senior positions than men (Gaskell and Mullen 2006). At the higher levels of education, where the position of teacher has more status, the number of females decreases (Spade 2001). This communicates a very powerful message that “women are more likely than men to teach young children...and to have positions with little power or intellectual authority” (Gaskell and Mullen 2006, p. 159).

### **Why are so many women in school teaching?**

Teaching of young children is considered as a ‘soft option’ when it comes to a job in the public domain (Groskop 2006). However, the beliefs which buttress this global phenomenon vary across society. School teaching has long been believed and thought of as a woman’s profession and job because working with children was associated with child-care rather than teaching (Skelton 2009). School teaching has been seen as a suitable job for women who perpetuate the traditional stereotype that women, and not men, are responsible for young children (Oyler *et al.* 2001). Teaching is a caring profession that offers women “quasi-familial roles and identities around a core of male hierarchies and privileges” (Newman 1994, p 193).

Smulyan (2006) argues that joining school teaching was one of the options for women to be economically independent. She further states that it was also the result of women choosing to become economically self-sufficient and redefining their role in society. Similarly, the hegemonic traditions and culture of a society oblige women to accept positions in teaching (Cubillio 2003). School teaching was/is one of the few socially acceptable careers for middle class women because teaching could be considered an extension of women’s domestic role (Joncich 1991). All these and many more explanations reveal that women become teachers for several reasons: they may need to earn and contribute to the family economy, teaching is the only acceptable profession for them; they are not yet married and are killing time or don’t want to marry. ‘They wanted to be more independent, and they were more interested in fostering political and spiritual change’ (Smulyan, 2006, p 471; Foster 1993; Hoffman, 2003).

These exhaustive and multiple explanations coming from the Western scholarship do not mean that the study of feminization of school teaching is a low-profile gender issue. I acknowledge that the feminization of teaching has been studied in a serious academic tone over the last hundred years or so, but much of these studies have been carried out by western scholars on the feminization of school teaching in the western context with little attention to developing countries. Thus, a study from a developing country like Pakistan would significantly contribute to the existing scholarship on what ideological cannons are used to idealize and legitimize school teaching as the best career for women.

### **Feminization of School Teaching in Pakistani**

Pakistan is a developing country in South Asia. Along with economic class, society is stratified by gender, with women often holding a lower social position than men (Ullah, 2013). The gender division of labour is supported on biological differences between men and women as well as moral grounds. Public domain is men’s

prerogative where it is the women job to oversee the regulation of the household, both morally and economically (Ullah, 2013). Nevertheless, the last two decades have seen a considerable increase of women entry into the public domain. However, the entry of women into the public domain is dominantly selective; more and more women are entering school teaching.

Single-sex education is the norm up to college level. Female and male students attend separate classes in separate buildings or within the same building. Female and male students are taught by male and female teachers. Females constitute almost 49 percent of the total teachers at the primary level in the public sector. Nevertheless, private schools dominantly employ women as teachers. The feminization of teaching has been gradual throughout the years, yet has led to a significant female population within the teaching force in the schools. School teaching is the largest domain employing females (see Government of Pakistan (GoP), 2009; UNESCO, 2004). This paper is an attempt to highlight the feminization of school teaching as an emerging social issue in Pakistani society and situate the issue in the broader gender equality debate.

## **Data Sources and Methodology**

The data for this study comes from a larger study on gender hierarchies in Pakistan. The data is derived from 24 textbooks (*Urdu*, English and Social Studies from class 1 to 8) and qualitative interviews with 28 educationists-curriculum designers, textbooks writers and school teachers (see Ullah 2013). The research used qualitative approach and employed purposive sampling for the selection of textbooks and educationists.

The paper employed Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) as the main methodological and theoretical approach. Discourse analysis is a flexible term and can be used in different ways depending on the field and purposes of the analyst. I have used discourse as it was used by Foucauldian feminist (see Davies 1989; Paechter, 2001) and taken into account the textbooks knowledge and educationists' views as powerful discourses and analyze how these construct 'frameworks of meaning that define categories and specify domains of what can be said and done' (Paechter 2001, p 41). I have tried to delineate how school knowledge and educationists' beliefs contribute to the legitimization and naturalization of school teaching as feminine profession which, in turn, perpetuate the gendered power structure. Doing discourse analysis I have attempted to highlight the way textbooks perpetuate gender stereotypes and reinforce the existing social and cultural power structures. It also highlights how gender identities are constructed through textbooks knowledge. The deconstruction and interpretation of texts and illustrations as well as educationists' views show that school textbooks are ideologically invested and serve men's interest by reproducing the status quo.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **The hierarchical division of teaching profession**

The analysis of school textbooks revealed two types of teaching: (a) 'school teaching' in which females were observed more than males; and (b) 'university

teaching' in which only men were observed (see Figure-I & Figure II). Textbooks vividly reinforce the ideology that women's career in public domain must be compatible with their homemaking responsibilities.

### Women's Career as school teachers and its compatibility with homemaking

School textbooks portray women in traditional gender roles in the private sphere of home (see Ullah, 2013). If women are depicted in the public domain they did appear in limited number of occupations, predominately school teaching" (Ullah and Skelton 2013, p. 188). Textbooks and educationists idealized and naturalized school teaching as the best job for women. Textbooks depict school teaching as a profession for women that is compatible with their homemaking responsibilities and maternal role.

Figure-I is one of the several pictures and texts from public school textbooks that essentialize the nurturing role of women and their assumed greater suitability for school teaching. It also reinforces the domestic ideology and legitimize that women's careers should be compatible with homemaking responsibilities. The text in Figure-I communicates three important messages regarding defining parameters of females' career choices. First, it creates a metaphoric similarity between the role of a mother / female and a teacher. It tells the children that a female / mother can be a good school teacher. This is because mothering and school teaching both require the "essential" female qualities, i.e. loving, caring and nurturing.

The second message being communicated in Figure-1 is that, it is best for women to teach in schools in their own communities and localities so that they are close to their homes which are their 'primary spaces of existence'. Third, building on point two, the text in Figure-1 communicates that it is important for women that they should be close to their homes so that their domestic responsibility is not affected. The message communicated in the last line of Figure-1 reinforces the ideological link between women's domestic roles and their commitment to teaching. The last line in Figure-1 is the most common explanation that educationists gave to justify school teaching as the best career for women.



This is my mother.

My mother is a teacher.

She teaches in the village school.

She also carries out all domestic chores

Source: *New Textbooks for Class II*, p 4

Majority of the respondents believed that, "School teaching suits women as it is a job between breakfast and lunch time which does not affect their mothering role. It allows women to manage their domestic chores after school time".

Another common explanation for associating school teaching with women was, "Teaching is the best profession for women as it has lots of vacations which give women the edge to look after their household".

These discourses very explicitly embody an ideological link between women career as school teachers and domestic ideology. These discourses place the responsibilities of homemaking, socialization of children and other family obligation on women's shoulders as their natural role.

**Cultural basis of associating school teaching with women:** women as school teachers are also justified through cultural discourses. By culture discourses here refer to sets of socially and historically constructed rules [norms] telling members of society "what is" and "what is not" (Carrabine, 200). Men and women meeting together, mixing, and intermingling freely are not appreciated by social cultural norms. Several respondents declared 'school teaching' as the best profession for women as it enables them to do their job in gender segregated environment.

A senior subject specialist of textbook board stated, "School teaching is the best career for women as it involves less interaction with male members. It keeps the *purda* [*Hijab*] intact.

A great majority of respondents *reinforced the notion of Purda by stating*, Women cannot avoid interaction with men when do job other than teaching. Society does not encourage women in all jobs due to their *purda*, therefore, parents and other social forces compel them to join school teaching and work in sex segregated environment.

These discourses convey three messages: first, it puts forth *purda* or veil as a symbol that defines the ideal female and her appropriate social space of operation. Various dimensions of *purda* as perceived in the research locale are: physical segregation between men and women, symbolic invisibility of women in the public domain, inappropriateness of *namehram*<sup>1</sup> men hearing women's voices and inappropriateness of women gazing at *namehram* men. Second, since school teaching is perceived as an extension of mothering role, thus school teaching is a social field and space and thus upholds of the principles of *purda*. Third, since school teaching protects women from interaction with *namehram* men, women's modesty and chastity is protected. Thus, school teaching for females is believed and approved as being the best profession as it ensures "physical and symbolic invisibility and concealment of women's bodies and being" (Ullah 2006, p132). The message that emanates from the aforementioned discussion is that if the societal equilibrium is to be maintained and moral evils are to be controlled women should not be allowed in professions that allow free intermingling of men and women. A senior female educationist viewed women's participation in all fields of public sphere, indiscriminately, as a potential threat and polluting factor for the moral fabric of society. She stated,

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<sup>1</sup>Male with whom a woman can enter into marriage/*Nikh*

“Women’s participation in all fields of public domain has given birth to too many moral evils in our society. I think it is better that they should be encouraged to enter selected fields such as [school] teaching and medicine”.

The above quotation suggests that women must be restricted to the private sphere or may be allowed to teach in school to protect societal morality.

### **Feminization of teaching: the mothering instinct**

The study respondents emphatically stated that women were best suited for the school teaching because of their natural love for children.

School teaching needs *payar* (love) not *mar* (beating). Women are very kind hearted and, therefore, very suitable for teaching children. (*Extract from interviews*)

The respondents also naturalized school teaching as women profession by stressing the nurturing role of women and their assumed greater suitability for school teaching. A considerable number of the respondents, irrespective of their sex, unanimously argued:

Teaching, both in public and private schools, is the best career for women as this gives them an opportunity to educate and socialize their children in the best way.

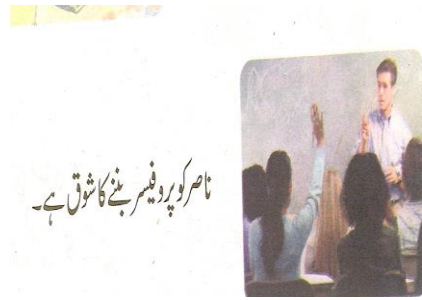
Another common response derived from the interviews is, “females have to look after children and manage the household. [School] teaching helps them in children rearing and homemaking.”

These discourses justify teaching as the best and most “suitable job for women as it resonates with the stereotyped view of women being the ones who are responsible for young children and [homemaking]” (Ullah and Skelton 2013, p. 188). Women greater suitability for school teaching was also justified on the basis of biological differences between men and women. Many respondents opined that women’s biological weakness and psychological makeup also render them incapable to pursue any career they wish.

“... women, due to their physiological and biological weakness, cannot carry out many tough jobs such as digging roads, constructing buildings etc. Women are best suited for teaching and nursing.”

The above quote, an extract from many interviews, reinforces the belief that women are biologically weak and should not enter jobs that are physically strenuous as they cannot do jobs that require rigorous work, energy and input of long hours. These essentialist beliefs when embedded into textbooks, as incorporated into the current

Figure II



textbooks, function as powerful discourses that shape gender identities and perpetuate male's domination in the larger public domain by restricting females into the narrow public domain: school teaching which is believed to be an extension of women's nurturing and caring role to the public domain.

### **University teaching as Men's Prerogative**

Contrary to the association of school teaching with women, textbooks associate professorial teaching with men and masculinity. Figure-II not only depicts men as university teacher but also communicate a strong motivational message to the learners that public domain, including university teaching, are the privileges and advantages available to male in society.

The depiction of men in professorial teaching is the manifestation of the ideology that university teaching has more power, prestige and intellectual authority and, therefore, needs to be done by men. It is also argued that teaching at the university level involves 'better pay, more autonomy and more association with intellectual than social development' (Gaskell and Mullen, 2006). The complete invisibility of women as university teachers may not only be linked to the social construction of masculinity and femininity but also a threatening problem. Thus, teaching in school and university can be seen as a manifestation of gender hierarchies within the public domain.

These are simple messages but ones that provide a female teacher and her students with a sealed cultural framework within which women teachers have to fix their womanhood and respectability and lead their students to do likewise (see Ullah 2015). This means that these ideologically invested discourses and school structures create complex sites in which women are constructed as subjects by the hegemonic masculine processes. These women teachers, unaware of the ways in which they are constructed, not only develop a gendered self but practice as an active agent in the construction of female pupils according to explicit and implicit dictates of patriarchal ideology. Thus, neither these women nor their female students develop an agency to negotiate, understand, and redefine their identities against or within the existing historical, institutional, and dominant cultural framework. The findings lead me to argue that women's entry to the public domain is under constant surveillance / gaze of the men and closely policed with the dominant hegemonic discourses in the textbooks. Discourses here are similarly positioned as power/knowledge relation as argued by Foucault (1980).

### **Conclusion**

Feminization of school teaching is an institutionalized process which the patriarchal social structure of society has been encouraging for some time now. Idealizing and naturalizing women greater suitability for school teaching through textbooks discourses may be seen as men's strategy to maintain their hegemony. The belief-women's careers should be compatible with homemaking responsibilities-explicitly and tacitly offers preferred forms of subjectivity so that children take up their subject position according to their socially constructed 'gender category' (see Walkerdine, 1990). Presenting women as school teachers and men as university teachers may contribute to the image young children develop of their own appropriate role and that of their gender in society.

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## Biography



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