

**REPORT ON THE USE OF -  
“TOWARDS THE WORLD OF EQUALS -  
A BILINGUAL TEXTBOOK ON GENDER”**

Understanding the student and teacher perspectives

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## **Purpose:**

In the academic year 2015-16 as an initiative from UGC and the Government of Telangana, JNTU Hyderabad was the first University to introduce a course on Gender for all BTech and BPharm students. For this two-credit mandatory course on 'Gender Sensitization,' a textbook has been put together titled "Towards a World of Equals: A Bilingual Textbook on Gender" by experienced teachers and researchers from EFLU, Central University of Hyderabad, Osmania University and Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies in Hyderabad which is published by Telugu Akademi. This textbook is being used ever since this to teach the gender sensitization course.

The main intention of introducing this textbook is to create spaces to discuss and deal with changes, resulting in confusions and anxieties. As a part of this project, we want to understand the use of this course and textbook in the classroom space, how it was delivered by the teachers and received by the students. This textbook was published in a bilingual form to make it accessible to the students who find it easy to articulate and understand in Telugu. With this project, we also want to understand if it helped the students and teachers in creating interactive and participative spaces.

## **Teachers**

Based on the interviews of the professors who taught the Gender Sensitization course from three different Engineering colleges. We interviewed three professors from Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Technology, CMR College of Engineering and JNTU.

## **Introduction of the course**

This course was majorly assigned by the college administration to the English or the Humanities faculty which is taught for 2nd-year Btech students of all branches. All of them had to attend orientation programs for the introduction of the book, 'Towards the World of Equals' which was conducted by the Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies at JNTU main campus. According to them, the orientation program helped understand the content of the book and was also able to know the efforts that were put in framing this course from the authors themselves. All of them felt confident in teaching the course right from the introduction because of its content and the additional resources like videos, articles and case studies provided along with the textbook. It was a new experience for them away from teaching their routine English subject.

Initially, it was a two-credit lab course with end semester examinations and assignments which were also given from the textbook. Then it was made a non-credit course with mandatory attendance and end sem exam. The result of pass or fail is displayed on the report card and students who failed were supposed to repeat the exam which was an open book. During our interviews, we understood that a few professors from JNTU and CMR did not find any difference between the course being credited or not as they made sure every class was interesting and attendance was

always above 80% for every class. On the other side as attendance is not mandatory and as there are no credits students are demotivated from attending the classes. The efforts put by the professors for every class is also translated into the attendance and participation of the students. All three professors stress the importance of this course for engineering students while one of them focus on making the concepts of the course familiar while the others focus on connecting it to their experiences.

### **Classroom Discussions**

According to our interviews, most of the classes had discussions, debates than lectures and readings. For them, the textbook was the base and they built discussions with examples relevant to every day. All of them agreed on the difficulties of grabbing students' attention for these classes and had to use other methods like asking them to collect information, data and examples on a given topic. They used mixed methods of teaching like reading from the textbook, giving a summary of it, reading stories and using videos from the additional sources, PowerPoint presentations for a few topics, asking the students to make presentations or posters. It was important to connect these topics to students' personal experiences, so they took examples from their context and gave a space for students to share their personal stories which helped them be more participative in the class. The points of discussion given in the textbook were used to start a discussion in the classroom and as a precap for the next class to hold the students' interest.

According to the interviews, the topics like domestic violence, housework - sharing the load, writing other histories, missing pages from the Telangana movement were widely discussed with interest and all the related activities were also done by the students. While few classes needed deep analysis and detailed discussions to understand the relevance of the context like taking back the night campaign or acid attacks, other classes had heated arguments on sexual harassment, domestic violence. In colleges like MGIT, even topics like differences in bringing up a boy and girl were not relevant for them. Though there were debates and arguments, a change can be noticed in the way the class interacted with one another. The classes were more interactive and participative when the teachers connected the topics with their own experiences of growing up as a girl or everyday sexual harassment in local transport or stories of domestic violence of people they know. This in a way helped students to open up and share their personal experiences in the classroom.

The topics like sexuality, gender spectrum, transgenders, were particularly difficult to discuss in the classroom because for many students it was their first interaction with these terms and they are not comfortable because of the taboo surrounding it. It was also because they did not know people from different sexualities and they didn't have any exposure before. Also, it was difficult for the teachers to break the limitations and restrictions of each student and normalise these topics. Though the reproductive health topic was only for reading, a few of them discussed topics like menstruation and the taboo surrounding it to which the students initially felt uncomfortable but were open to understanding it.

## **Bilingual textbook**

All the professors agreed that the textbook being in both Telugu and English was helpful to the students as many students were from non-English or rural backgrounds. Some students were first-generation learners with minimum to no exposure to English. This gave students a choice to read in whichever language they are comfortable with and even the teachers were open to discussions having discussions in their native language which increased participation and gave a space for everyone to share without any language restrictions. The content was also accessible to a large group of students as it is in Telugu. The excerpt from Radam that was in pure Telangana accent was read by a native student in the classroom which the whole class enjoyed and found interesting. Whenever there were assignments given, students brought paper cuttings and texts from Telugu newspapers which helped them relate easily. According to a professor in JNTU, even a few parents were able to go through the textbook because it was in Telugu.

The text in Telugu can be easily read and understood which has the potential to reach a larger number of students. But there is also a limitation that comes with these English medium engineering colleges where the professors push the students to converse and discuss strictly in English. As the professors teaching this course are mostly English teachers, the chances of using Telugu text in the classroom can be limited.

## **Feedbacks and Experiences**

All the professors had a good overall experience where they could understand their students and the context they were coming from. They could know many insightful stories from their student's lives. The students also interacted with them outside the classroom by asking questions, showing relevant information, having conversations about the textbook and topics. They even had conversations with the students who felt uncomfortable in a particular class to understand their problem. Though this course is well received by the teachers and necessary efforts are made, the one common feedback from all three professors is that the book focuses only on the struggles of women not addressing the false cases and problems men face. This was also a question that came up in the class when they were discussing topics like domestic violence and sexual harassment. The textbook was praised for its topics, resources and relevant examples suiting the context of the students from Telangana but they also expressed a need to update the book with recent statistics and examples from the current context.

## **Students**

### **Introduction**

As part of our research project, we also undertook interviews of students who were either currently in University or graduated. Our interactions with the student gave us a set of diverse responses, giving us a small glimpse of how classes were conducted by the professors and how students

responded differently to the curriculum based on their interest level, how they managed time between different subjects, engaged with the textbook and the conversation they had with their peers and faculty after classes. We mostly interviewed students belonging to the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Technology, belonging to the Information Technology Department. The course was offered to the students as a non-credited course which they had to attend, interested students had to maintain an attendance average of 75% if they wished to be graded and have the results reflected on their report card. The course was a lab-oriented course which allowed the students to engage with the topics via documentaries, posters, images and the textbook. In subsequent sections, we will discuss the different factors that played important roles in how the students engaged with the course.

### **Non-Credited Course.**

As informed by the students, the course was a non-credit course which the students had to attend with the attendance not being mandatory per se, only if students wished to be graded would they have to maintain an attendance of 75% and attend an offline open-book examination at the end of the semester. This played a huge role in how many students engaged with the course. As we saw from our interviews, many students did not attend the classes of Gender course regularly as they knew it was not compulsory. The reasons for this range from not being able to manage between the different technical courses they had to attend to not being very interested in the contents of the course. The students who attended the classes rigorously mentioned how some of their classmates used to treat the period as downtime and leave the classroom. However, this was not the case for all as many used to sit back and take part in the discussions that took place.

The majority of the students we interviewed emphasised that even though the course was not mandatory, they and their batchmates still made time and made an effort to take part even though there was no push or direction from the administration to do so. It is very important to note that due to the course being non-credited, the seriousness that a student devotes to their credited compulsory courses would not be present for a subject that was considered as an additional subject. One student mentioned how in their batch most people would casually sit in the classroom and not engage at all with any of the topics, cultivating a very lethargic classroom atmosphere.

### **Nature of Classroom Discussions**

The classroom discussions were considered excellent by the students. The students praised the effort that was put in by the faculty to make this course as engaging as possible through the use of documentaries, advertisements, songs and story excerpts. This played a huge role in the betterment of the understanding of the students and increasing their attentiveness, who instead of having to study complicated theory could engage with the ideas of the intersections of gender, caste and class through narrations of life stories or real-life examples making it easier to relate with one own's context. The students also mentioned how the faculty themselves would narrate life experiences of their own in the classroom.

A very important point that came up during the topic of classroom discussions was the space that was created which facilitated discussion among the students. It was described by some as a safe space where both boys and girls could narrate their experiences without disregarding the experiences of the other. The faculty played a huge role in facilitating and guiding these discussions. The students we interviewed from MGIT mentioned how the faculty would ask the students to form groups and choose a topic they would wish to present. This allowed the students to engage more in-depth with topics they could emotionally relate to and then showcase in front of their peers. The classroom discussions allowed the students to expand their thought beyond their social location and understand how everyone's reality is different from their own.

### **Use of the Textbook.**

The textbook played an important role in the confines of the classroom and the discussions that took place within it. Many students spoke about how the textbook would be extensively discussed in the classroom. However, a point that was mentioned was that it was read-only in English during class as the course would usually be conducted by the English Literature faculty. The contents of the textbook were widely appreciated by the students who went through the textbook during and after class. The various stories and how the topics had been discussed were found interesting and easy to understand for the students. The social scenarios that had been described in the book resonated with many of the students when the discussion was about the state of Telangana.

Regarding the bi-lingual nature of the book, the students we interviewed from MGIT maintained that they read the book in English and very few read the book in Telugu. It was mostly discussed in English and read in English. However, some of the faculty we interviewed from a different college emphasised the need for a bi-lingual textbook as it helped to understand the narratives of local scenarios of Telangana, reading the poems which were written in Telegu so that the meaning is not lost in translation. The book also played an important role in the end-semester examinations that the students who wished to be graded took. As it was an open book examination, the students had to read the book before and during the exam.

Few of the students we spoke to described never having gone through the textbook even though it was available in their libraries, citing that they did not have the time or that they only used to listen to the faculty narrate the text in the classroom. The non-credit nature of the course has a huge role in this lack of engagement with the textbook. As many students knew it was not compulsory to go through the text, they chose not to and thus, many missed out on the textbook. It is important to note that many sitting for the end semester examination would also only read the textbook before and during the examination time and otherwise would not. However, the one positive in this situation is that the few students who actively read the textbook would engage in further reading of materials, enquiring from their faculty or the internet on what to read to further better their understanding on topics they felt attached to.

### **Impact on the Students**

The one major insight we can take from the introduction of the course for the MGIT students is how the ability to self-reflect has been vastly developed. Many students after having gone through the course, engaging in classroom discussions and the contents of the textbook have been able to think beyond their social location and empathize with the challenges that others go through. This is an especially important component as any solidarity and communication between people belonging to different communities happens through an understanding of the situations the other goes through. One of the students noted how they were able to contextualise how gender biases exist in institutions such as schools and colleges by introspecting within their childhoods. The students were also able to understand the politics of the household, where after going through the sections which discussed how the responsibilities of the household were very unevenly and unfairly allocated due to social norms, women are immensely oppressed in the Indian social context.

Many of the students also felt much more at ease to discuss topics that would otherwise be considered taboo with their peers and faculty. Many of the students would take part in the discussions, while initially, they might have differing views which later might not be changed, it is important to note that it is a major stepping stone that such discussions have started to take place in the first place. The sections which discussed the importance of consent and harassment faced by women also proved to be greatly beneficial as many who are influenced by the social culture in which women are spoken to and treated in a demeaning manner could identify their actions as wrong and begin a process of self-reflection and un-learning.

One of the students spoke in great detail about how the course was very beneficial and should be made compulsory for all as it leads to character development for the students. The student spoke about how the course helps one to understand that difference exists in society and how one must ensure that after graduating from college, that one treats everyone fairly and compassionately. Even the students who did not attend all the classes and did not read the book spoke about how during their classroom interactions they were able to relate to the examples being shown by the faculty, helping them understand and relate to their social realities. Overall, the major component is the ability to learn and unlearn and be self-reflective, which albeit might seem small plays a huge role in the larger context.

## **Conclusion:**

Based on the project we carried out, we were able to understand how important the dynamic between the faculty and student is for the course on Gender to have an impact. The professors we interviewed were passionate about the subject and devoted a lot of their time and resources to reach the students, even giving narrations of their life examples while simultaneously giving the students space and ensuring they felt too safe to share and discuss within the confines of the classroom and then later engage outside of it. The professors were extremely confident in their understanding of the textbook and how they could use the contents of the book to reach out to the students saying

that the book covered all essential and necessary topics which the youth of today must be educated about and should imbibe in their daily practices.

Creating understanding through the use of life narratives, poems and songs instead of only relying on complicated theory is a success of the textbook which many students resonated with. It is also observed that textbooks being bilingual helped teachers to create spaces for students to share and engage in discussions without restricting them to a particular language. The readings and text in Telugu also made the arguments contextual which the students could relate with. It is how the textbook has been written at the end of the day which allows the students and faculty to engage in difficult conversations and leave with more understanding and empathy.

The interest from the side of the students we interviewed, even though the course was of a non-credit nature shows that students are willing to engage with their social locations and the relations that dictate the nature in which society operates. The ability to question and introspect is what will ensure that the students do not accept oppression that has been normalized in our everyday context and will instead contest them to first-generation better the conditions that plague our society. It is important to ensure that more support must be given to the faculty engaging in the activity of teaching this course while also making sure that the students are given more incentive to focus on such a course which is not their primary concern as they have enrolled for Information and technology. If structurally it could be ensured that students are made more enthusiastic to participate in such a course, the lethargy that exists among some students could be eliminated.