

PROGRESSIVE opinion in India has tended towards the belief that coeducation is a hallmark of a less oppressive society and that separate schools for girls are a sign of backwardness. The basis for this belief is the idea that segregation leads to ignorance of and hostility towards the other sex whereas coeducation makes for better understanding between the sexes. This sounds on the surface a convincing argument but seems to me to be based on unsound logic.

Is men's hostility towards women explicable by their ignorance of women or segregation from women? There is no evidence to show that in supposedly less segregated societies in the west, violence against women such as rape and wife beating are on the decline. Nor, on a microlevel, is there any evidence that boys who have sisters grow up to be less oppressive towards women than boys who do not have sisters.

If merely being together makes men behave with more understanding towards women and treat them as equals, then why do men behave violently towards women of their own families with whom they live? Certain kinds of violence could well be said to be bred of the kind of togetherness enforced in the male dominated family. The crucial question would appear to be not togetherness but rather togetherness on what terms? The terms on which men and women live together in the family and other institutions such as schools are defined not by each unit alone, although they vary from one unit to another, but by the dominance of men in society as a whole.

The faith that boys and girls who study together will somehow grow up in pristine and 'natural' acknowledgement of each other as equals, rather than duplicating the patterns of dominance and deference that are so all pervasive in society around them, seems to be based partly on lingering beliefs in the 'innocence' of children, by which is meant their untouched state. But children of schoolgoing age are far from untouched by society. They have imbibed from their

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## Some Disadvantages Of Coeducation

elders many ways of seeing, behaving and relating to others.

In a society that is actively hostile to women and in which this hostility is manifested in different forms within most families from birth onwards, I feel that a separate space for girls' education has some positive effect on a girl's development.

There is no doubt that same sex schools have come into existence partly to allay anxious parents' desire to safeguard their daughters' reputation for chastity. But, on the other hand, coeducational schools have not come into being in response to women's articulated need for freedom nor do they necessarily conduce to more freedom for women.

### Special Attention

In mixed schools, girls are teased and harassed by boys from an early age, and this continues as they grow older. Among my earliest memories of nursery school is of myself, at age three, standing stock still, petrified, in the school verandah during recess, while a boy my own age accosted me and opened the buttons of my jersey one by one, repeating as he opened each one: "Kuthi, Kuthi" (bitch, bitch) I do not think this was in any way an unusual incident. Most girls, if they searched their memories, could recall similar happenings.

Apart from direct aggression (poking pencils under one's skirt, chasing, jostling, stamping on toes), there was also a great deal of sexual teasing. In class two, in another mixed school, I remember a group

of boys asking several girls, one by one, to go through some finger exercises, and laughing loudly as each one did so. We girls were puzzled, thought we must be doing it incorrectly and redoubled our efforts, only to be laughed at even more. It was much later than we realised the boys had invested the exercise with some innuendo. Telling smutty jokes and riddles and laughing at our bewilderment was also common.

The overall effect of such aggression is to bewilder the girl and make her unsure of herself as she is not yet aware of what in her as a girl is laughable or abusable. The only way she can think of avoiding mockery is to avoid being noticed or doing anything that calls for comment. Although the idea that her body is something to be ashamed of and covered may not be articulated in so many words at this stage, it does imbed itself in her reflex actions. For example, when playing games or dancing or even running down corridors or climbing a wall or tree or stairway, one has to be careful that one's skirt did not fly too high. Boys had to contend with no such inhibition regarding clothing.

Boy's tendency to tease and nickname girls by aspects of their appearance, for example, to call a girl wearing specs 'four eyes', a dark girl 'Kali', and a fat girl 'Moti', quite effectively made several girls miserable. No matter how vigilant teachers are, it is not possible or desirable for them to watch every moment of student's interaction, and some teachers even

encourage certain kinds of teasing as a way of getting a laugh.

Girls are, of course, exposed to all this even outside the school—at home, from brothers and cousins, in the park, from neighbours' children, and so on. Precisely for this reason, it is more important that the atmosphere in school not become an extension of the battleground. In order to learn, one needs to relax. A state of tension and self consciousness is not conducive to learning. Any kind of embarrassment regarding one's body and clothing, particularly when a child is growing, can be fatal to free participation.

In later stages, this takes on heightened forms. Particularly in professional colleges, where girls are in a tiny minority, they become a target for open aggression and slander. Several friends have narrated in detail how in engineering and medical colleges, girls, since they are a mere handful, are harassed in numerous ways. Every action of theirs is noticed and commented upon. A girl who talks to a boy is immediately 'paired off' with him by other boys. Rude remarks are scribbled on girls' desks or passed on to them in other ways. This reaches its climax at the end of the year when the boys collectively draw up lists in which each girl is rated by her physical attributes and given an insulting title or nickname. These lists are put up on notice boards or even printed in newsletters. All this takes a heavy toll of the girls' academic performance. Any girl who outshines boys in academics is resented and specially mocked.

Despite all the disadvantages of women's institutions, springing from their more repressive rules and authoritarian practices, one positive feature of studying and working in a women's college for me was not having to be constantly alert about how much arm and leg was showing, not having to be stared at by men while in the college, being able to sit or lie on the lawn in a relaxed fashion. This was an important component of an environment conducive to discussion.



### Participation

While I would agree that in a society which did not make gender the basis for social categorisation and differentiation, and in which gender was not the primary basis for identifying an individual, it would be natural for children to be educated together, I do not think it follows, as many people assume, that coeducation in today's society, in and of itself, conduces to less sex role stereotyping.

On the contrary, in a mixed school, the division of roles automatically tends to take place on the basis of gender. This may be more or less overt, but is inevitably present. Even in supposedly progressive schools, where, as a policy, girls are encouraged to assume leadership roles, if the number of boys and girls are equal, boys tend to outnumber girls in such roles. This happens not so much because of teachers' biases as because the children act out the parts of assertiveness and passivity that they have learnt to play—because the primary school for this learning is the family.

Only a minority of girls is able to respond to the training given in school and to compete with boys. Even this minority learns to be a good as boys', that is, to compete on terms defined by the boys. In this race, girls are bound to be losers, particularly as they grow older. In middle and high school, the work burden on girls in the family grows heavier and more restrictions are laid on them. They are at a disadvantage vis a vis boys, in extracurricular activities.

On the other hand, in a girls' school, girls have to take on all the roles, whether in class or in the playground or on the stage or in organising activities. At one stage, when I was simultaneously studying law in a mixed college and teaching in a women's college, both at Delhi University, the difference became strikingly clear to me. In the law college, women formed about a quarter of the class. Women hardly ever spoke in class. In the election, a token woman was put up for the post of joint secretary, an unimportant post, but the

entire operation from campaigning to counting the votes was entirely run by men. Most girls treated election day as a holiday and did not even come to vote.

The faculty was heavily male dominated and at least a couple of teachers were in the habit of making nasty antiwomen jokes which set all the men roaring while women students squirmed and giggled uncertainly. This behaviour by men teachers seems to be fairly common in most faculties. All sports, functions and committees were monopolised by men students. Girls had little visibility in community life. They sat in the library or in the tiny dark 'ladies' common room', inconveniently placed next to the lavatories, because they felt embarrassed to sit on the lawns or on the steps with groups of men hanging around everywhere.

This pattern is duplicated all over the university campus. Men habitually loiter in groups or singly, lie on the lawns, stand around tea shops, sit at street corners. Women walk purposefully, going from one place to another. Unless they are in mixed groups, girls on their own do not feel free to behave as if the campus belongs to them.

In the women's college where I teach, on the other hand, despite the many constraints on their active participation, girls do run all the committees and societies, organise functions and elections and feel responsible, to a greater or lesser extent, for college life, because no gender based division of roles is possible.

Girls also speak and discuss more in class. Colleagues teaching in mixed colleges confirm that it is far more difficult to get girls to talk in class. An exception is when girls heavily outnumber boys. In one MA class, I observed that girls did talk freely despite the mixed class. There was only one boy in the class and he was by no means silenced. The crucial difference seems to be that boys are never silenced, whether in a majority or a minority, but girls, unless in a large majority, tend to get



silenced. They are so much in the habit of listening to men talk, not interrupting or speaking in a public situation unless specially called upon, that even in a 50: 50, or 60: 40 (in favour of girls) situation, they tend to be outtalked by boys.

There are usually some exceptions to this rule—one girl or a small coterie of girls with more self assurance, who interacts with boys on apparently equal terms and participate actively in class as well as in other activities. However, these 'stars', who are accepted, even admired by the boys, are usually alienated from the mass of less articulate girls who are made to feel even more inferior by virtue of their inability to join this elite group.

This is true of staff too. In mixed colleges, women tend to take a much less active role in staff council meetings and in political decision making than they do in women's colleges. When, occasionally, a women's college students' or teachers' union organises effectively, it can then operate from a position of strength in the mixed union at the university level. Significantly, although administrative staff in all colleges in mixed, no woman in the last decade has played a leadership role in karamchari union elections or other political activity.

## Friendships

In primary and middle school, it was common practice for teachers to make a boy and a girl share a desk. This was done to minimise talking in class, as it was observed that two boys\* or two girls sharing a desk would chatter much more. I remember girls being subjected to considerable bullying due to this seating arrangement. Most girls would go to great lengths to man oeuvre to sit next to a girl friend.

By the high school and college stage, however, in a mixed environment, some girls and boys pair off and others begin to feel they must be undesirable and unattractive if they do not manage to pair off. The pressure of the peer group results in a great deal of energy going into dressing and behaving in ways that are supposed to attract attention from members of the other sex. This happens with both boys and girls but my impression is that girls allow their academic and other pursuits only a secondary importance because the entire environment encourages them to believe that a woman's success lies primarily in her ability to please a man. On the other hand, for a man, the ability to attract women (preferably several) is socially defined as only one component of achievement. This is one reason why, on the whole, girls' academic performance begins to deteriorate as they grow older. Throughout school, I remember girls in our class consistently scoring higher than boys. But, in college, the trend began to change. This reversal can be observed by comparing high school results in any year with graduate results. The push for academic success is evidently discouraged by a number of factors in a girl's environment, both at home and outside. The few girls who manage to weather these discouragements and go on to post-graduate level begin to score again.

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\*I am not commenting on the advantages and disadvantages of boy's schools for boys, as I have not studied or thought about the question sufficiently.

It is not as if girls in all-women institutions are immune to all these pressures. But at least those pressures are physically limited to after class hours. It is for the individual girl to decide, relatively more freely, how much time and energy she wants to put into courtship activities. The educational institution becomes a space where other activities come to the fore. But in a mixed college, every moment, in class, on the playground, in the cafe, in the library, is pervaded with tension. No activity is free of the tension of noticing and being noticed, and no girl has the choice to escape it.

Further, in women's colleges, schools

and hostels, women learn to observe each other as individuals leading their own lives. In every other situation, women observe each other as somebody's mother, daughter, sister, sister-in-law. In a mixed college, women pay relatively less attention to each other.

In a women's institution, women learn to interact independently, to build relationships on their own terms. It is an atmosphere and a way of relating that occurs nowhere else, not even in the family. I know of several women whose close friendships with other women began in a girls' school and continued through college and into adulthood, providing a

strong emotional base.

One could write another essay on the problems and repressions, peculiar to women's institutions, but the solution to these seems to be not to do away with women's institutions but to make them more conducive to women's freedom. In a society where every woman has to deal with varied situations of combat not of her creation, every day, in the family, at work, in public places, it seems to me that women's institutions can provide a valuable space for a woman to grow, to define her identity independently and to learn to relate to other women in a supportive, strengthening way.