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Article:	The Co-ed Conundrum: Unraveling Gender Identities in Private Schools of Muzaffarabad
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ABSTRACT

This article explores the dynamics of gender identity construction in educational settings, specifically focusing on private schools in Muzaffarabad, Pakistan. It provides a comprehensive analysis of how gender identity constructions are shaped within the school environment, considering the social, political, and economic contexts that influence these processes. Through qualitative analysis and data collected from teachers and students, the study examines how classroom dynamics, extra-curricular activities and teaching approaches contribute to the shaping of gender identities. Findings show different perspectives among teachers and students where some teachers support gender-neutral approaches others accentuate traditional gender roles, relating education to societal needs and responsibilities. Student responses reflect variety of experiences, from challenging gender stereotypes to negotiating the already build identities by navigating societal expectations. Hence, the study witnesses a positive shift in school perspectives around gender identity as compared to the literature being reviewed, with teachers working towards a more impartial approach in the construction of gender identity. The study calls for more exploration on students' self-perceptions, career choices, and the challenges they face with a focus on promoting gender equity.

Keywords: Femininity, Gender roles, Gender identities, Identity Constructionism, Gender socialization

Introduction:

In educational setting, the formation of gender identity amongst students involves an intricate relationship of socio-cultural, and educational factors (Andersen & Smith, 2022; Al Baqi, 2023). Classrooms, as microcosms of society, influence the formation of individuals' perceptions, interpretations, and incorporation of gender roles and gender expectations (Höppner, 2017). Understanding these distinctions is not only scholastically intriguing but also critical for promoting inclusive and equitable learning environments (Alam & Mohanty, 2023; Vantieghem et al., 2014).

Research shows that though young students may already developed personal gender identity upon entering the school, without being familiar with societal expectations and gender characteristics (Daniolos, 2018). This calls for the detailed investigations to seek the role of schools in constructing and reinforcing gender identities among students as well as the students' negotiation of these identities (De la Torre-Sierra & Guichot-Reina, 2022).

Social scientists believe that gender is socially constructed (Johfre & Saperstein, 2023; Mazzuca et al., 2023) and varies from one culture to another. Hirschfeld, 2018; Warin & Adriany, (2015) argues that gender construction is often supposed to be a natural in spite of being socially constructed that can be deconstructed. One's experiences and interaction with peers and educators, and broader societal norms shape up an individual's understanding of gender identity (Pollock & Eyre, 2012).

Gender identity construction in schools is intricate and prejudiced by the factors like societal standards, personal understandings, experiences, and interactions within the educational environment (Katz-Wise et al., 2017). From the very early years, students are exposed to stereotyped gender roles and are expected to behave accordingly. (Baig, 2014; Verhoeven et al., 2018). In this regard, teachers' experience also reinforce their identity (Denessen et al., 2015; Dessel et al., 2017; Pardhan, 2011).

Educators and administrators should create supportive, inclusive environments where students can explore and express their gender identity without fear of discrimination (Harnischfeger, 2015; Johns et al., 2019; Russell et al., 2021). By promoting acceptance, schools contribute to healthy identity development and foster a sense of belonging (Francis et al., 2022)

Children realize the role of gender in this phase of life and adopt it accordingly. Much of the research has been done on the role of schools in constructing the gender identity in west in general (Khandagale et al., 2019) and Pakistan in particular. However, there remains a notable gap in understanding gender identity dynamics in regions like Azad Jammu and Kashmir. This study aims to bridge this gap by delving into the construction of gender identities among school-going children in AJK. By focusing on how gender is socially constructed rather than biologically determined (Jacobs & George , 2023), and incorporating feminist perspectives, this research contributes significantly to global scholarship on gender and youth. Feminism, as a theoretical lens, highlights the unequal division of power, social norms, and established practices that not only shape but also strengthen the gender identities. It accentuates the need to challenge the existing traditional gender roles and promote gender equity in all realms of life, including education (Bhandari, n.d.; Usmani et al., 2023). Past researches on this topic shows how gender identity is formed in the result of student-teacher and student-peer interaction. Moreover, by investigating teachers' roles in inclusivity and challenging

stereotypes, more equitable educational practices can be achieved, both in Pakistan and globally. Xiao et al., (2019) explores the characteristics and consequences of gender enforcers in preschool settings. The study investigates that in coeducation how some students affiliate and feel comfortable with same gender students, and socialize gender related behavior that labeled those students as “gender enforcers”.

A study conducted by Nielsen & Davies, (2017) on classroom discourses and role practicing in shaping gender identity. The study found that these procedures are often unseen, but strongly leads to the internalization of assigned gender roles among children. The research highlighted that classroom interactions have an evident impact on gendered identities, with differences been noticed in teacher-student interactions and children's roles in constructing their gendered worlds.

In a study by Baig, (2014) on single-sex educational settings, gender identity formation was explored by observing teacher-student and student-student interactions. The study revealed that girls were guided towards easiest, “soft” subjects while boys were directed towards difficult, “hard” subjects, shaped the gender identity of both girls and boys. And hence teachers' own actions, both verbal and non-verbal based on their societal norms and expectations, also influenced students' gender identity formation.

Andersen & Smith, (2022) explored how social contexts impact gender disparities in education. They focused on gender-stereotypical beliefs (GSB) among students, peers, and teachers, and their influence on students' self-concept in language and math. The study emphasizes the role of social interactions in schools, stressing that peers and teachers play their role as main agent of gender socialization. Gonick & Conrads, (2022) accentuate that social relations among youth are important to be studied, but other factors such as curriculum, policies of schools, and teacher-student interactions, all contribute in shaping gender and sexuality within a specific context. Schools not only teach the formal curriculum but also convey an informal curriculum through interactions.

Another significant study by Hazir Ullah et al., (2018) conducted in schools in Pakistan revealed that young individuals' interactions with society are significantly influenced by learned gender norms and stereotypes from family, school, and secondary socialization. These gender identities shape young people's choices, aspirations, and leisure activities, that often leads to restrict the options for girls and leave more possibilities and opportunities for boys.

In another study conducted by Q. Khan et al., (2014), on analysis of textbooks in English, Urdu and Pakhtu, been taught to students from grades 1 to 10 in a public and privately based Pakistani schools, unravels a repeated patterns of gender identity formation reflects in textbooks' language, including English, Urdu, and Pakhtu. Outcomes of the study showed that regardless of the language of instruction, textbooks constantly conveyed gender identity to school children using similar linguistic classification and expressions.

Focusing on primary level Sindhi textbooks in Pakistan by Agha et al., 2018; Agha & Shaikh, (2022) delved into gender representation and identity portrayal and highlighted the impact of educational materials and narratives on shaping gender roles and perceptions from an early age. Both the studies assert the need to revise textbooks as they thought textbooks can have a greater influence on how students perceive gender norms and roles within the school environment, contributing to the construction of gender identities among students.

In one more study Baig, (2014) conducted in Pakistan, researcher examined how teacher-student and student-student interactions in a Karachi school influence gender identity formation. It found that single-sex settings tend to reinforce gender stereotypes, impacting how students perceive and adopt gender roles. Teachers' experiences and students' preconceptions from home also contribute to this dynamic, reflecting broader societal norms regarding gender roles and responsibilities.

Literature highlights the studying gender identity dynamics in educational settings is widely recognized globally (Koch & Farquhar, 2015) and in context of Pakistan. And how these dynamics impact individuals' perceptions, opportunities, and experiences in schools, influencing societal norms and expectations regarding gender roles especially in children and youth (McGinn, 2014). Despite existing research, there's still much to explore, especially in diverse cultural and regional contexts like Muzaffarabad. Hence, this study aims to delve deeper into these dynamics within private schools, examining how classroom environments, teacher-student interactions, and extracurricular activities contribute to shaping gender identities among students.

Methods:

The qualitative study focused on exploring how gender identity is constructed in three private schools in Muzaffarabad, Azad Kashmir. The study included 21 boys, 23 girls, and 9 teachers from grade 5 to 8 across these schools as shown in Table 1. Ethical considerations were prioritized, with primary consent obtained from teachers and students' homes. Interviews were conducted on school premises, from January, 2023 to July 2023, lasting 30 to 40 minutes each, to gather rich narratives on gender identity experiences.

Field notes from observations were taken alongside interviews, capturing non-verbal cues and environmental factors. Primary data collection methods included observation, interviews, and document analysis, focusing on behaviors, auditory elements, and visual aspects influencing identity development. We used thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, that provides deep insights into gender identity formation within private school settings.

Rationale of the study:

The study was conducted in the private schools in Muzaffarabad city with coeducation as Government schools in the region are mainly gender segregated. This setting allows for an exploration of gender identity construction among boys and girls where they are studied together with different teacher-student interactions, curricular activities and classroom environments. (Tayyaba et al., 2022). It also provides a deeper understanding of how school structures and dynamics influence gender norms and self-perceptions.

For this purpose, students from grades 5 to 8 is selected for several reasons. Firstly, this age group is considered as a critical stage in gender identity development, as this stage is prone to be affected by the external factors such as classroom interactions, peer group friendships and other social influences. Secondly, this stage is seen as a transitional period, that is marked by heightened exposure and socialization to diverse range of perspectives. And so studying this phase will allow the researchers to explore the influences that contributes in the construction of gender identities among students in Muzaffarabad's educational context (Qu, 2023).

Table 2 Population of the study

School	Total Students Grade 5-8	Girls	Boys	F Teachers	M Teachers
School A	65	8	6	2	1
School B	54	7	8	2	1
School C	71	8	7	1	2
Total	190	23	21	5	4

Findings:

According to the theory of Social Cognitive Career proposed by Lent & Brown, (2019), social cognitive career theory (SCCT), the career aspirations are closely tied to one's identity, including gender identity. Students expressing their interests in specific professions, doesn't only reflect their skills and interests but also their perceptions about themselves as what they can achieve based on the societal expectations from their gender identity (Lenta & Brown, 2019). A recent study emphasized the impact of socialization processes within schools, where gendered messages and stereotypes influenced students' career aspirations (Elmosaad, 2024; Patall et al., 2018).

Keeping this debate in view, this study attempted to know how the study's respondents approach the upper mention issue. Some of the extract from data are presented here as evidence of how academics subjects are gendered. Table 3 summarizes the percentages of male and female teachers' perspectives on gendered professions and subjects.

Table 3 Career and Subject Choices

Table: 2 Career and subject choices		
Perspective on Career for Girls	Male Teachers (%)	Female Teachers (%)
Girls should study subjects like mathematics to pursue professions equal to boys	55%	45%
Girls should choose professions aligned with societal needs and family roles	46%	54%
Encouraging girls to compete with boys academically, believing girls are inherently brilliant	40%	60%.

The table illustrates the diverse perspectives among male and female teachers regarding girls' career and subject choices, reflecting varying beliefs on encouraging girls in STEM fields, aligning professions with societal needs, and recognizing girls' academic capabilities.

"My mother is a government officer and so I also want to become a CSP officer as I idealise my mother".

Upon asking about her preferred subjects, or the ones she is interested in studying. She mentioned her liking for mathematics and computer sciences.

The same questions were asked from the teachers too, that what subjects they want students to opt. And so, we found a response of a male teacher very significant. He said:

"Girls are no less than the boys, we should encourage girls to opt subjects like mathematics, computer sciences and different other professions."

The statement reflects a very different and progressive perspective on gender equality. By acknowledging the equal capabilities of girls and boys and emphasizing their potential to

excel in diverse professions, the teacher is challenging the traditional gender stereotypes and encouraging girls to challenge and break free from limited career options. This viewpoint of a teacher promotes gender inclusivity and empowerment. It also highlights the importance of adopting environments that support and nurture individuals regardless of their gender and more based on their skills and interests (Stewart et al., 2021).

Overall, 40%, but similar responses came from male teachers' respondents, who did not approve the specification of subjects along the axis of gender. They were of the views:

"Boy are no longer considered as the only contributor in national development. Our girls are also doing great in every field almost. In fact, girls are believed to be more brilliant than the boys. And they should be encouraged more by us".

This statement indicates a change in the perspective on gender roles and need to have an equal contribution of both the gender to national development. It challenges traditional ideas and advocates to empower girls to reach their full potential in order to make significant contributions to societal progress.

Suitable gendered profession:

The aspirations of career choices start during childhood and become practical in adulthood. Family background and school organization continue to effect perceptions of career opportunities and appropriate roles for females and males (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021; Karsten, 2003). At schools level especially private schools in Pakistan, teachers are pre-dominantly females. These females while believing in the essentialist dichotomy of male and female strongly reinforce stereotypically gender roles by declaring certain profession as appropriate for boys where is other for girls. The study found that 54% female teachers and 46% male teachers viewed that girls and boys should have different career choices like subjects' selection. The great majority like 54% of the respondents (male and female teachers) argued:

"Female students should opt the profession that help them managing their personal life as well especially after wedding and shouldn't opt profession as bankers and engineers as they demand maximum time outside of house."

The female teachers' responses likely reflect their personal experiences navigating a patriarchal society. This societal conditioning can shape individuals' beliefs and perceptions, leading female teachers to advocate for career paths that align with traditional gender roles. We believe that these teachers may have encountered challenges or limitations in pursuing non-traditional professions themselves, reinforcing their beliefs about what is suitable or appropriate for girls. Their responses thus reflect a broader pattern of internalized gender expectations and societal norms that influence how they view and advise female students regarding their academic and career choices.

A male teacher, in contrast to that, expressed:

"Female should opt professions equivalent to male students as they are not less than them and can manage both home and profession easily."

The advocacy of male teachers for female students to pursue professions equivalent to male students' choices challenges the traditional gender norms and promotes a broader view of gender roles. These responses are not different from what Ullah et al., (2020) studies found in the context of Khyber Pakhtun Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

Teaching Approaches

The study emphasizes the importance of understanding teaching strategies' impact on gender identity construction in education. It highlights Pakistan's gendered society, where segregation between genders in public domains starts early in schooling. The findings show that 60% of teachers discourage co-education, underlining the need to consider teaching approaches' influence on students' self-perception and gender understanding (Al Baqi, 2023).

Respondents argued:

“it's good to have gendered segregated classrooms for boys and girls as it allows the tailored content for both the gender”

Some of them rejected co-education on religious grounds. They asserted:

“Our religion also doesn't support the idea of coeducation even for the Islamic teachings and the Quranic class. Not only because of the concept of the pardah but also because both genders need different ways of socialization. You can't teach girls the same ways as boys. As their habits develops for the life time and for girls it becomes very crucial matter.

The reference to religion and the concept of pardah (segregation) underscores how cultural and religious beliefs shape perceptions of gender roles and interactions. The idea that both genders require different socialization methods aligns with sociological theories such as social learning theory, which suggest that individuals acquire behaviors and attitudes through social interactions and cultural influence. However, we argue that while religious and cultural norms may emphasize gender segregation and different socialization methods for boys and girls, this approach can contribute to reinforcing traditional gender roles and stereotypes (De Vries et al., 2022). Contrary to that, a more inclusive and equitable educational environment, where diverse perspectives and experiences are valued regardless of gender, can foster a more nuanced understanding of gender identity and promote greater gender equality.

Similarly, another female teacher respondent supported the idea of co-education on the grounds that students get the sense of competition and also become more confident as it also helps them preparing for the practical lives where both male and female have to work together.

“Coeducation is a good way to make students confident. We find some girls shy expressing and participating in the presence of boys and same with the boys. So, it's good to prepare them for their practical lives”

In terms of who should be their instructors, 40 % of the girls expressed a preference for female teachers because they *"would hesitate to talk to any male teacher"*. Both teachers and students implied concerns about hesitation in communication when it comes to teaching the science subjects like biology, one of the male teachers expressed:

“There are some concepts that I can explain to boys in a comfortable way, but in the presence of girls, I have to be very careful, so at times I have to give boys extra class, which is obviously unfair with girls. In such matters there should be a female teacher for girls”.

As studied by (Nielsen & Davies, 2017) gender identities intersect with age, class, ethnicity, and sexuality, and each of these are shaped in turn by cultural and economic forces, as well as the micro-moments in peer group and classroom interaction. Robinson also expressed the need of questioning teachers' own gender class, sexuality, and ethnicity in the process (Robinson, 2013). Teachers feeling hesitant to explain biological concepts to female students due to cultural norms reflects a complex interplay between cultural expectations, professional conduct, and gender identity construction in schools.

However, we argue that the hesitation expressed by male teacher can also lead to unintended discrimination or unequal treatment, particularly if male students receive additional explanations or resources that female students do not. This disparity in treatment based on gender can contribute to reinforcing traditional gender roles and stereotypes, where male students are perceived as more capable or deserving of certain educational opportunities compared to their female counterparts (Sankalaite et al., 2023).

The Gendered Extra-Curricular activities:

Extracurricular activities are also important component of students' social lives as well as key contributor to their cognitive development. There is a clear gender difference in the degree and type of the participation in extracurricular activities. The boys' and girls' extracurricular activities are clearly gendered. The study's respondents 68% (female teachers) strongly believed and practised gendered based activities to male and female students. Table 4 vividly shows the allocations and practises of gender-based division of extracurricular activities.

Table 4 Gendered based curricular activities for boys and girls

Table 3: Gendered based curricular activities for boys and girls:	
Curricular activities for girls	Curricular activities for girls
<i>Indoor games, short races, badminton, table tennis, indoor cricket</i>	<i>Outdoor games, hockey, football, long races, outdoor cricket</i>
<i>Teacher, role of house maid, doctor,</i>	<i>Police man, army officer, head of home, doctor, engineer</i>
<i>Cleanliness of class, managing morning assembly</i>	<i>Management of outdoor activities/recreational trips</i>
	<i>Managing morning assembly</i>
<i>Meena Bazaar stalls</i>	<i>Managing sports club</i>
<i>Decoration at events because it's easy for girls</i>	<i>Arrangements of logistics</i>
	<i>Helping girls in decoration</i>

The roles and duties assigned to male and female students in extracurricular activities as shown in, reveals underlying dynamics of gender identity construction within the school environment. The allocation of soft roles/tasks to girls and hard/tough tasks to boys reflects traditional gender stereotypes that associate masculinity with physical strength, but on the other hand this has also been observed that girls are given leadership tasks which is very interesting to know as compared to the past studies done in Pakistan, where femininity is associated with nurturing, assistance, and indoor activities (Baig, 2014).

Researchers observed during the field work that: (note from diary, 20 March, 2023)

From a recent spring festival at the school, I observed a fascinating shift in leadership dynamics. Initially, boys were prominently engaged in decision making and leadership roles. However, as the event proceeded, some girls from three senior grades 6th, 7th and 8th joined in with interest, and brought some creative ideas, assuming leadership positions in a very natural and confident manner

The girls' action observed more as a reaction and response of challenging the traditional social beliefs that encourage only boys to lead in all life spheres and activities. By actively participating and leading during the festival, these girls challenge the notion that leadership is inherently male-dominated. Their preparedness to step into leadership positions also indicates a broader movement towards gender equality and inclusivity within educational settings. It highlights the potential for a revolutionary change when individuals, regardless of gender, are encouraged to express and present themselves truly and contribute eloquently in various aspects of school life (Stewart et al., 2021).

Asking about the girls' choices in games and teachers view about it. s A response of one of the female teachers holds significance, as she expressed:

"We encourage Female students to select the games according to their body type, and physiology. Girls can find it challenging to play football and hockey". A response of female teacher reflects the societal perceptions of gender roles and physical abilities that contributes in constructing gender identity among students. By suggesting that girls are limited in their choice of sports due to their physique, the teacher reinforces the idea that certain activities are more suitable for boys based on perceived physical strengths. This reinforces traditional gender norms that associate masculinity with physical strength and athleticism, while femininity is associated with a more delicate or less physically demanding role (Liu et al., 2023). This can influence how students perceive their own capabilities and interests, shaping their gender identity in relation to physical activities and societal expectations.

On further inquiring from teachers, we came to know that all three schools have a sports teacher and each school has a game period. And in that games period, only boys are given special assistance from the sports teachers, whereas girls play other games either in class or they utilize that time for other activities. However, three specific girls expressed that they like to play football and so they practice on their own.

"I play football at home with brother and my father and so I found my girls company who likes to play it too"

The segregation of games based on gender, such as indoor cricket for girls and outdoor cricket for boys, reinforces these stereotypes and limits opportunities for girls to engage in physically demanding or competitive sports (Fernandez-Lasa et al., 2020). Similarly, the assignment of logistical responsibilities and outdoor activities to boys during recreational trips, while girls are asked to assist, perpetuates the notion of male dominance in decision-making and physical exertion.

Teacher-Student Interactions:

Teacher-student interaction plays a pivotal role in shaping academic outcomes, influenced by teachers' conscious and unconscious handling of gender dynamics, use of gender-specific language, perpetuation of gender stereotypes, and differential treatment based on gender. This interaction directly impacts students' academic experiences. Qureshi, (2007) emphasizes that classrooms play a significant role in shaping students' understanding of gender roles and identities. Students were asked to share any specific interaction they remember or behaviors they experienced either with themselves or they observed with other fellows in their classroom environment that reinforce traditional gender stereotypes.

A female student expressed:

I remember that whenever I try to take leadership roles, some boys make fun of me and other girls too or ignore my instructions as a class monitor. It makes us feel that only we can listen and follow their instructions when they become monitor or head boys”

This experience highlights the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the challenges girls face in navigating male-controlled expectations. The fact that boys make fun of or ignore the girl's attempts at leadership can be seen as a form of gender-based judgement and discrimination that reinforces the idea that girls are expected to conform to traditional gender roles.

Another female student's response:

“I have observed that when girls speak up or proclaim themselves confidently, they're labeled as 'bossy' and strong headed. It's like even if we have strong opinions, we're expected to be quiet and agreeable.”

This has also been observed by (Habib et al., 2022) in one of the university campuses of Muzaffarabad, AJK while observing incivility among university students, that women are expected to behave in a very stereotypical way and are being judged by opposite sex and teachers.

And a male student of grade 8th expressed:

“I was over because of the fight I had with my best friend. Our teacher entered in the class and asked the reason as I usually don't sit quiet in the class. My fellows told him about the fight. The teacher laughed and said boys don't bother these things. It always happens that when boys show emotions, like sad or tears, they get teased by others. Even at homes. It makes me feel like I should hide my emotions”.

The vignette highlights an important aspect of how the class environment constructs gender identity. The observation that boys are teased when expressing emotions like sadness or vulnerability reveals a traditional social standard not only the classroom but general in society that values stoicism and roughness in boys (Reichert et al., 2012). This standardized norm as a behavior reinforces traditional gender stereotypes that expect boys to be strong, tough, and unemotional. The teasing can create pressure for boys to not express their emotions to avoid any negative reaction, and further contributes in the construction of a masculine identity.

Further analysing these responses through the gender identity lens, we can see how the classroom environment and interactions can shape individuals' perceptions of themselves and their gender roles. The practice of strengthening of traditional gender norms, by expecting girls to be quiet and boys be hiding vulnerability, reflects wider societal expectations that is being practiced and preserved in educational settings. Researchers assert the need for inclusive and supportive environments that allow individuals to explore and express their identities without conforming to rigid gender stereotypes. Such environments can foster authentic self-expression and contribute positively to the development of diverse gender identities within educational settings.

Conclusion:

The exploration of gender identity construction within the educational realm has unveiled multifaceted dynamics that shape students' experiences. Through the observation and analyses of class environment, teacher-student interaction and extracurricular activities, it becomes evident that while traditional gender roles continue, there are instances of both

students and teachers, challenging these norms that are associated with the opposite gender (Rosen et al., 2017). This highlights the complex dynamics between societal expectations and individual's activity and perspective in shaping gender identities. Furthermore, the study also revealed that teachers own personal experiences play eminent role in the gender identity consecution of students (Denessen et al., 2015; Pardhan, 2011).

This study marks a substantial change in understanding and addressing gender identity construction in schools. It asserts the importance of developing inclusivity, challenging the stereotypes, and promoting open interchange to create environments that empower both the genders to navigate their identities freely (Rauf et al., 2016). Moreover, it suggests that educators and policymakers in Muzaffarabad should be supported to continue advocating equality and diversity, fostering the environments that encourage the uniqueness of each student and provides the way for a more gender-equitable society.

Limitations of the study

The limitation of this study is that it targeted specific schools and grade level that may limit the generalizability of findings to a broader educational context.

Conflicts of Interest: There is no such conflict of interest declared by researchers of this study.

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