

Building an Inclusive Society with a Gender-Sensitive Approach through Adult Learning Education

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Abstract

The paper deals with gender discourse in the adult learning approach by examining intersectional identities based on gender issues. The study is conducted through the lens of relevant critical social theory, i.e., the intersectionality approach in gender discourse, to examine the ALE perspective in detail. However, the paper shifts to the author's own autobiographical experience in both personal and professional life, explaining his experiences, aspirations, and further approach to making it a revolutionary concept in the field of Adult and Lifelong Learning discourse. Finally, the empirical evidence collected through literature research, along with the author's personal and professional experiences in the field of Adult Learning and Education, successfully addresses the central research question: How does a gender-sensitive approach in Adult Learning and Education play an effective role in an individual's personal and professional life? An auto-ethnographic inquiry.

Keywords: *Gender, adult learning and education, intersectionality.*

Introduction

The gender-sensitive approach deals with the awareness of the different types of gender roles played by an individual in society. However, there have been various schools of thought in defining gender and its functioning in society. In contemporary times, gender has become a much more advanced idea, going beyond men and women, and is defining itself broadly under the performative acts of other dimensions like LGBTQ(I), masculinity, and its different types. However, through this paper, we are going to deal with the gender-sensitive approach in Adult Education, i.e., talking about the inclusive approach of gender in providing easy access to learning to all genders for building an inclusive society. Since it is an accepted fact that society has been specifically man-centered in all its aspects, so is education in terms of participation, practice, and research. Therefore, there is a need to bring the gender

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dimension of learning into the core areas of education, with attempts to bring those people to the mainstream realm of societies through adult learning and sensitization. The study has been done in two parts.

The first part deals with all kinds of gender-related theories. It addresses the debates related to sex, gender, femininity, masculinity, and heteronormativity by going through various literature reviews. These theories are correlated with their contribution to Adult Learning and Education. The second part deals with the individual approach to applying a sensitive approach in his professional career.

Gender sensitization has been a core issue in making a gender-sensitive approach to Adult Education by addressing the unique needs, challenges, and opportunities of learners according to their gender (UNESCO Toolkit, 2007–2008). This approach aims to promote a supportive learning environment for learners, irrespective of the gender they belong to. The idea behind reading is to understand the gender dynamics addressed by various methods, such as inclusive curricula, which advocate an inclusive approach and represent diverse gender identities in their content. It also provides flexibility in its learning approach, where adult learners find themselves comfortable in choosing the appropriate time for learning and can be accommodated under various schedules and commitments, especially when gender constraints come as an obstacle in their learning objectives. Finally, this paper will talk about the gender-sensitive approach in the professional practice of an individual, which will be based largely on personal views and will be very contextual as well. The study is focused on finding the answer to the research question: *How can a gender-sensitive approach in Adult Learning and Education play an effective role in an individual's personal and professional life?*

Literature Review

What is a Gender-Sensitive Approach?

The gender-sensitive approach can be debated under the framework of sex, gender, femininity, masculinity, and heteronormativity as its core areas. For gender discussion, there has been a strong feminist voice engaged in activism on the ground. Feminist theory has often been critical of naturalistic explanations of sexuality that assume the meaning of women's social existence can be derived from some fact of their physiology (Butler, 1988). In differentiating sex from gender, feminist theorists have debated causal explanations that assume sex dictates or necessitates certain social meanings for women's experiences. Gender theorists like Simone de Beauvoir, in her text *The Second Sex* (1949), clearly expressed the concept of women as a historical idea and not a natural fact, with the famous quote: "*One is not born, but becomes a woman.*" She highlighted the distinction, referring to sex as a biological construct and gender as a social construct.

The Feminist Movement and Differences Among Them

The feminist movement can be traced back to the 19th and 20th centuries throughout the Western world. The main focus of this movement had been on legal issues, primarily securing women's right to vote. The movement was an outcome of Western Enlightenment thought applied to women's argument for the right to freedom, personal independence, achievement through merit, and equal opportunity. Many feminist authors such as Wollstonecraft, Taylor, J. S. Mill, and Stanton were key liberal feminists who contributed to the feminist voice by advocating various "ways of being women." Alison Jaggar, in Loretta Kensing's *Liberal Quest of Feminism* (1997), described the main thrust of the liberal feminist argument: that an individual woman should be able to determine her social role with as much freedom as a man. It traditionally saw a need for a division of human endeavours into public and private spheres. In the public sphere, the goals of reason (for example, the discovery of what is morally good and what the individual's self-interest is) were the most prevalent aspects of these feminist movements. Women, in this view, could be liberated when the constraints on their ability to partake in activities in the public realm were removed and their civil rights were guaranteed (1977, pp. 6–7).

With social change, feminist theory also evolved. Radical feminism and socialist feminism emerged, whose achievements respectively included U.S. state legislation's revelation of abortion law in 1969 and the concept of "Nine to Five" at the workplace as a legal right, including family leave (Echols, 1989). However, it is clear that in all these movements the authors focused largely on white women and neglected the oppression of Black women, i.e., "women of colour," by white women.

Role of Feminist Theories and Movements in Adult Learning, Education, Research and Practice

As quoted by Walker and Butterwick in Simoes, Amaral, and Santos (2021): "*A growing field of adult education is addressing social movements as an important site of learning, since it has a long tradition that goes back to decades of struggles for equality and social justice.*" It is within this context of "feminist consciousness-raising circles" that women learn from each other about civic education, such as human rights, gender equality, and social justice. In content, this means learning about various women's movements and women activists, both from today and from the past. In process, it involves paying conscious attention to the types of learning we undergo through involvement in social movements—feminist and otherwise—that privilege both informal learning more generally, and embodied, experiential, affective, and artistic ways of knowing, learning, and teaching more

specifically. These are often divided into theoretical categories—most commonly liberal, radical, and socialist feminism—and expand to Marxist, psychoanalytical, or women of colour feminism, depending on the context.

Masculinity and Various Debates

Masculinity is another performative act of gender, since it is an accepted social belief that men are strong and emotionally tough. However, the reality is that men are often more emotionally vulnerable because they repress their feelings and emotions in performing their gender roles. Mental illness among men in the community is more stigmatized and constructed as a feminized illness. Such stereotypes have serious implications on men's mental health due to socially accepted values, with different consequences for different groups. However, a new trend in expressing masculinity in a positive way argues for enacting masculinity differently. Traditionally, men were stereotyped as inexpressive toward their emotions or reluctant to seek help. Scholars have challenged this notion, showing that men can be expressive when asked privately and often reveal their emotions insightfully.

According to Connell (1995), masculinities have two key ideas: (1) *pluralist masculinity*, which encompasses the diversity of masculine practices, including “positive masculinity,” and (2) *hegemonic masculinity*, the Gramscian concept of “hegemony,” which carries the burden of an honoured way of being a man. It exerts power over subordinate and marginalized masculinities, imposing social penalties on men who deviate from expectations.

The recent trend of positive masculinity has attempted to alter older notions and define new forms of masculinity with benign aspects that win the consent of subaltern groups. Positive masculinity redefines itself by promoting a psychology of men who behave more constructively, fostering positive life changes that benefit themselves and those around them. Thus, more can be expected of men than suggested by pessimistic discourses that present masculinity as a “risk factor.”

The Role of Masculinity Theories in Adult Learning, Research and Practice

To understand the role of masculinity, it is necessary to consider Burke's (2007) research on masculinity and learning in higher education. Burke highlighted the issue of masculinity and access to higher education through wider participation. Since masculinities are shaped through earlier school experiences, Burke examined the shifting roles of masculinities as men accessed higher education, particularly through self-disciplining and self-regulating. The ESRC-funded study involved 38 men who

aspired to become undergraduate students through alternative entry courses in London. They were interviewed about how personal histories and memories shaped their masculine self as students. The findings showed that bullying was central to belonging, especially among working-class students, as it served as a defense mechanism to mask their class and play masculine roles within a larger consciousness. One participant regretted past actions, seeing higher education as a remedial tool to amend mistakes. When asked about academic performance, he admitted he was intelligent but also “lazy.” This reflects masculinity operating as a defense—using laziness as a pretext to hide academic incompetence.

Another participant described being bullied for his physical appearance (“very big” and wearing glasses), which he saw as a reason to be targeted in a society that valorised machismo. He later embraced neoliberal discourses of personal responsibility, seeing success as a matter of determination, hard work, and discipline. This connects with positive masculinity, which focuses on improving oneself in ways that benefit others. Another participant described changing himself by adopting feminized behaviours such as calming down, being quiet, and fading into the background to fit into higher education contexts. These examples highlight how men regulate their gendered identities within the context of the privilege masculinity continues to hold over femininity. For example, one student described moving from being a popular class clown to a sporty, intelligent guy, distancing himself from marginalized identities without perceiving a “masculinity crisis.” Thus, the notion of a masculinity crisis is challenged, as men’s participation in higher education must be understood within shifting, interconnected identity formations. The “crisis of masculinity” narrative risks homogenizing boys and men, ignoring the discursive production of the ideal student subject.

Methodology

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, integrating qualitative and autobiographical approaches to produce robust, multi-layered findings.

Sampling Strategy

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke style) with an explicit intersectional coding framework—coding for gender, class, caste/ethnicity, rural/urban, age, and sexuality—was used to derive the findings of the study. For the qualitative component, secondary literature was analyzed and interpreted to arrive at clear findings.

LGBTQ - Similarities and Differences

Moving towards the developments in LGBTQ debates, these refer to the discussions centered on their rights, representation, and acceptance in society. These debates often touch upon various topics, including marriage equality, transgender rights, effective learning, healthcare access, and the holistic development of LGBTQ people. However, there has been an intragroup power relationship between LGBT and Queer. The primary goal of lesbian and gay studies has been “*to express and advance the interests of lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men, and to contribute culturally and intellectually to the contemporary lesbian/gay movement*”, which can be traced from the 1960s. Queer theory, in contrast, builds on the critique of heteronormativity and emphasizes multiple ways of being gay, lesbian, or otherwise identifying. In terms of commonalities, both LGBT studies and Queer theory are modes of inquiry whose focal points are gender and sexuality. Both are linked to significant social movements of the mid- to late-20th century, particularly the second wave of feminism and the gay liberation movement. Both have made extensive use of qualitative approaches to explore how meanings are subjectively constructed. Both seek to link research with politics and liberate sexual and gender minorities from oppressive forms of heteronormativity and prejudice.

In terms of differences, LGBT studies are rooted in modernist ideas emerging in the 1960s, whereas Queer theory is a postmodern framework that gained prominence in the 1990s. Queer theory argues that gender and sexual identity are fluid, flexible, and socially constructed, rejecting fixed binaries. It also critiques structures and institutions that normalize and privilege heterosexuality. Historically, gender discourse has been confined to a male/female binary, ignoring intersectional categories such as transgender, intersex, and non-heterosexual identities. The acronym LGBTQ(I) - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex - needs to be understood within the framework of Affective Sexual ALE (Adult Learning and Education). Sexuality education aims to construct an explanatory model of human sexuality that is critical, open, and continuously evolving. Building sexual knowledge is part of personal, affective, and social development, helping individuals understand themselves, others, and their cultural context.

Barragán (1996) explained three models of sexuality education: the *moral model*, rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions, which views non-reproductive sexuality as sinful; the *preventive or health model*, which medicalizes sexuality (see Foucault, 1980); and the *integrative model* (López, 2005), which takes a broad, holistic view of sexuality as vital to human life. A study of 25 educational interventions on discrimination among older LGBTQ(I) adults revealed that 17 participants aligned with the integrative model, 8 with the preventive model, and none with the moral

model. Despite progress, gender stereotypes persisted, with LGBTQ individuals often excluded from affective sexual education due to society's abnormalizing outlook toward them.

Intersectionality as a Critical Social Theory and its Importance to Adult Learning

Intersectionality emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s from critical race studies, a movement in the legal academy that critiqued law's claims of neutrality and objectivity (Nash, 1988). Intersectionality plays a central role in exposing identity politics, which often obscure intragroup differences, such as those within feminist movements. According to Nash, scrutinizing intersectionality is essential for both feminist and anti-racist theorists to avoid the pitfalls of narrow theorizing.

In adult education, intersectionality highlights gender as a core lens for interpreting reality (Bem, 1993). Feminist scholars in Europe challenged male dominance in academia by using biographical methods and emphasizing women's lives in adult education contexts such as community education, higher education, and the labour market. The intersectional approach has also exposed differences within feminism itself, for example, between white women and women of colour. The role of intersectionality in adult education is to advance social justice for marginalized groups by identifying structures of oppression and disadvantage. Feminist intersectional analysis, as reflected in *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults* (2021), emphasizes centering women and other marginalized groups in policy and practice to ensure inclusion.

Different countries have adopted varied analytical tools: Europe often uses additive or multiple discrimination frameworks, while Canada employs Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) to assess the gendered impact of policies and programs. The Finnish *Journal of Adult Education* incorporates inter-categorical approaches, blending intersectional theories and pedagogy. Such frameworks highlight inequalities and guide practices to minimize exclusion.

Findings

Since this topic is personal, I remain objective in reflecting on how an intersectional, gender-sensitive approach can inform my professional future. Currently, as a PhD researcher in Adult Education, I see myself as a future academician and practitioner, working as an educator, researcher, and policy contributor. Gender participation in higher education, particularly adult learning, remains minimal. As an academic, my first role will be to integrate gender-sensitive approaches into my writing and research. In India, the sexually marginalized - particularly LGBTQ(I)

communities - remain excluded from higher education due to stigma. As an adult educator, I envision sensitizing society through various platforms, including social media, to challenge stereotypes and promote affective sexual awareness. As a learner, I remain engaged with literature on adult education and gender to understand changing dynamics. As a practitioner, I believe gender learning begins at home.

Practicing empathy, creating equal spaces, and challenging patriarchal norms within families can extend to broader social change. India, where 70% of the population lives in rural areas and patriarchal norms remain entrenched, needs strong feminist movements to disrupt gendered roles. Adult learning can play a vital role in increasing women's participation in higher education and mainstream society. In my future, I aim to contribute to policies on Adult and Lifelong Learning with gender, sex, and intersectionality as central priorities. I see adult education as a movement that can promote civic education, active citizenship, and social justice. In India, women's participation in politics remains minimal despite quotas at local levels, where many women representatives remain under male control. There is a need to sensitize women about their political rights as part of civic education. For LGBTQ(I) communities, homosexuality was decriminalized in India only in 2018, yet social acceptance remains low. Affirmative action and political representation can be crucial steps toward inclusivity.

Conclusion

This paper examined debates around gender through theoretical concepts of sex, gender, femininity, masculinity, and LGBTQ(I), in relation to Adult Learning and Education. It highlighted how gender-sensitive approaches can break stereotypes and reshape learning systems. Feminist movements and masculinity studies demonstrate how adult learning fosters reflection, self-discipline, and personal growth. Affective Sexual ALE offers a deeper understanding of LGBTQ(I) identities within learning contexts. The intersectional approach proved effective in exposing identity politics and emphasizing inclusivity. The auto-ethnographic dimension of this paper further demonstrated how gender-sensitive practices influence both personal and professional perspectives. Ultimately, the study suggests that practicing gender sensitivity - from family life to professional and political spheres - can create broader social change and inclusion in adult education.

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