Rethinking the Concept of Masculinity and Femininity: Focusing on Iran’s Female Students

Amir Biglar Beigi Ghajarieh and Karen Kow Yip Cheng
University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur

Abstract
Iran, with the world’s youngest population, needs to pay utmost attention to the content of textbooks used to instruct at the primary and secondary school levels because, in many parts of Iran (except for some affluent parts of the capital), the textbooks are the only reference books for the teachers and students. If these textbooks reflect gender-bias in their language and illustrations, especially at lower levels of education, future generations who are the hope for sustainable development in Iran as a developing country can be affected by the pictures of gender stereotypes and the bias generated through these textbooks. In this article, it is argued that due to the religious and social context of Iran, there is still great emphasis on the social theory of differences between men and women. This social role theory in Iran, together with mores and cultural values, leave no room for other versions of femininity and masculinity to emerge in the social sphere of Iranian society.

Keywords
masculine hegemony, gender issues, GLBS studies

Introduction
In the case of Iranian students, as recorded on the Iran Chamber Society web-site in 2001, girls and boys have equal shares of the student population (49 and 51 per cent respectively). Similar figures were reported in the years following 2001 (e.g., Education Ministry of Iran, 2009; UNHCHR, 2005). This thought-provoking figure concerning the female student population drove the researcher to trace the existence of gender bias and stereotypes in Iranian textbooks. In other words, in view of the number of female students present in the education system in Iran, a number which is a relatively high proportion for a developing country, such as Iran, possible gender bias in textbooks in Iranian schools, particularly at the lower grades, as pointed out by Ise (n.d.) and Jost and Key (2005), may therefore influence a large number of female students. To put it differently, if a textbook which is one of the most significant teaching
resources for teachers contains gender bias issues, young students are not only subliminally influenced as learners, but also as human beings (Ise, n.d.). Therefore, based on this assertion, if we do not consider boys in our analysis in the same way as was done by Babaii and Ansary (2003), we overlook the possible effect these textbooks may have on the other half of the student population in Iran, which does not seem just based on human rights principles and UNESCO considerations regarding justice and equality for everyone, regardless of the biological gender of each individual (Blumberg, 2008).

**Men Should/Should Not be Included in Gender Studies**

One possible counter-argument to this line of reasoning, however, is that the picture presented by textbooks for boys is very affirmative and full of positive notions regarding men; therefore, focusing on men may appear less urgent (Jefferson, 2002). With regards to this criticism, the researchers would argue that what is likely to appear as a positive picture of men promoted in textbooks, media, or any other possible communication is akin to that which is labelled as 'masculine hegemony' in the literature (Condit, 1994; Hobbs, 2006). According to Hanke (1990, 232), “Hegemonic masculinity … refers to the social ascendancy of a particular version or model of masculinity that, operating on the terrain of ‘common sense’ and conventional morality, defines ‘what it means to be a man.’” By considering this definition, this picture — which is assumed to be positive — is regarded as patriarchal, and many men feel as unsatisfied with this picture as women do (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Jefferson 2002). Additionally, if we do not incorporate men and their issues in gender studies, this can have deteriorating effects on women. In the case of HIV/AIDS, for instance, men and women are both victimised by masculine hegemony and patriarchal beliefs that dominate traditional families. As the International Center for Research on Women reported in 2007, gender inequality and the notion of men as the head of the family supported by social hegemonies not only puts women at a high risk of HIV infection, but also increases men’s vulnerability. Traditional norms of masculinity encourage men to engage in sexual relationships before marriage to gain enough sexual experience (UNAIDS, 1999). Hence, considering the HIV epidemic in the world and the role which many men can play in curbing the rate of women contracting HIV/AIDS, we begin realise to what extent the sinister effect of masculine hegemony pertinent to relations in a family based on traditional gender roles can be damaging for both women and men. From another angle, as Sunderland (2004) asserts, masculinity and femininity projected into the minds of young learners’ educational settings can suggest two extremes of the gender
continuum. Thus, males or females can be close to one of these extremes but, due to the idiosyncrasy of human beings, none of them is located exactly at either extreme. We have many feminine and masculine traits, which means different degrees of masculinity and femininity are projected by social and patriarchal hegemonies. What can be concluded from this debate, as also proposed in Biglar Beigi (2008), is that even men are not content with this masculine hegemony, which might be more sensible in the case of homosexual men and women who cannot fit into the traditional bipolar gender dichotomy. This social hegemony is likely to cause some harassment for males, as well as for females, with a different sexual orientation in a society. Therefore, we cannot exclude men from our mainstream studies concerning gender issues in textbooks. Ignoring men in this kind of research may be equal to ignoring the harassment, hassles and other issues of all men and women who cannot fit into the traditional gender roles dictated by social conventions and patriarchy. The general debate of many studies done on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) communities is illustrative of the fact that no matter whether you are a GLBT person or not, masculine hegemony stemming from biased cultural mores and social orthodoxies reflected in language and mass media can do us harm and cause detriment to whomever does not conform (Gonçalves, 2005; McLelland and Dasgupta, 2005; Yeung et al., 2006).

How Gender and Sexuality are Related

The argument may appear convincing but some may still argue that GLBS issues are related to sexual orientation. It should be noted that sexual orientation per se, as Greenfield (2005) proposes, supports ‘heteronormative hegemony’ (p. 2). In other words, gays, lesbians and bisexuals are considered to be deviations from masculine hegemony, which regards heterosexuality as the norm. Clearly, we can conclude from Greenfield’s argument that stereotypes can have a possibly negative effect even on the sexual orientation of individuals. The masculine hegemonic worldview, to put it in simple terms, denotes the supremacy of heterosexuality and the suppression of GLBS or whatever seems contrary to this worldview. Greenfield advocated the use of the term ‘relational orientation’ (p. 309) which has a less-negative connotation than the term ‘sexual orientation.’ Meanwhile, Fausto-Sterling (2000) argues that even the most fundamental knowledge about sex is shaped by culture.

If we focus on both men and women in our gender investigation, more men will be directed to gender issues, thus increasing the public’s awareness of gender biases. After all, awareness raising — which is considered the best solution to decrease the effects of gender stereotypes — can be achieved when
sizable samples of men and women participate in gender issues (Reskin, 2005). Meanwhile, if we decline the gender-biased picture perpetuated by strongly-held beliefs of the society, this is considered the first step to transcend the binary gender system and paying attention to the rights of GLBT communities in an effective way (Matzner, 2005). In other words, for those who feel imprisoned by their original sex, challenging the gender stereotypes and calling bipolar gender roles and attributes under question can be seen a step forward in understanding these groups in society. GLBTs and other people are all circumscribed and constrained by stereotypical gender messages and the only divergence between them is that not only are GLBTs inharmonious with gender stereotypes, just as in the case of other citizens, but are also struggling for their sexual orientation under the shadow of these gender stereotypes. As Maurer and Plante (2009) argue, there is a range of forms that human beings come in this world as and it is not accurate to put all human beings to two possibilities of men and women, as many feminists believe. Therefore, including men in gender studies can be seen a turning point in accepting the possibility that human beings all suffer from socialised gender inequality, regardless of where they are fit into the men–women spectrum. Meanwhile, the dichotomy of sex and gender proposed by feminist theories, i.e., the belief that gender is culturally constructed and sex is biologically determined (Speer, 2005), while being very enlightening in providing a counter to biological determinism — that is ‘the tendency on the part of many researchers to explain women’s operation in terms of their biology’ (p. 61) — and understanding of social hegemonies and their effects on women, leads to the bipolar dichotomy of men and women (Callahan, 2009). This is due to the fact that in the sex/gender distinction, the discussion concerning biological elements in men and women’s dichotomy was left untapped (Speer, 2005). Therefore, with regards to the intersex phenomenon, this concept is a challenge to the dichotomy of gender/sex that is proposed by feminist theories (Callahan, 2009; Maurer and Plante, 2009) and although feminism and the idea of equality between men and women are very constructive, we should be cognisant of the fact that women and men (i.e., femininity and masculinity) are only two extremes on a continuum (Sunderland, 2004) and, as Callahan (2009) believes, we are all intersex. For that reason, if we want to have an egalitarian society, we should combat all forms of biases against any gender being, regardless of their biological sex or whether they fall under the category of men or women. Eventually, by this way of thinking we are also able to include the GLBT community in our considerations about gender issues due to the fact that they are other forms of masculinity and femininity that have emerged in present of heteronormative social beliefs (Greenfield, 2005), particularly when we contemplate
Fausto-Sterling’s (2000) convincing argument concerning the significance of cultural norms and social mores in shaping sexual orientation.

What about Women in Gender Studies

Despite the above arguments, the present investigation does not suggest that gender studies should not be focused on women due to the fact that men wrestle with gender biases. Conversely, we should bear in mind that gender stereotypes concerning women can result in unwanted consequences for men as well; therefore, there should be a balance when highlighting gender stereotypes and biases in both men and women. Esen (2007, para. 21) emphasizes this as follows:

Frequent repetition of the framework combining the teaching profession with femininity does not only reinforce the stereotypes offering appropriate professions for women, it also marginalizes male teachers. For this reason, it should be born in mind that any determination (text or illustration) which limits or frames the women may create unwanted consequences for the men.

Finally, but importantly, it should be emphasized that even the gender-biased picture supported by masculine hegemony is not bad per se. Some characteristics, such as confidence and emotionality, are considered good traits. What causes these characteristics to be problematic is when masculine hegemony places emphasis on this assumption that a certain number of behavioural and emotional values are typical of men or women (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Lopez et al., 2009). Put differently, the problem only arises when some men misuse the qualities attributed to them by societal conventions, beliefs, and by patriarchal culture and try to dominate women and other men who do not fit into these stereotyped gender roles and attributes. This is nowhere more evident than in rape cases and domestic violence, as well as in cases of harassment against men and women when masculine hegemony makes one group of men capable of violence (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). At the same time, Collier (1998) puts forward the notion that masculinity hegemony is linked with disapproving personality traits that give a picture of men as destructive, antagonistic, and unemotional — characteristics from which many criminal behaviours stem. However, this kind of mentality may overlook violence in women, which may cause discrimination against men. With respect to this fact, there are also many reports of violent acts among lesbians where there is always a perpetrator and a victim ‘regardless of any features such as size, height, or age’ (Womensweb, 2009, para. 11).
Conclusion

In conclusion, in Iran, the study of gender needs to consider men and even GLBTs — as a divergence to the masculinity/femininity dichotomy and cultural/social norms (Fausto-Sterling, 2000) — may be a challenge due to the social and religious beliefs of Muslim people in this country. Until then, any gender studies done in Iranian culture without a view to ensuring the inclusion of other forms of masculinity and femininity may not reveal true results of what is happening in Iranian culture.

Meanwhile, in other countries, researchers need to raise the consciousness level of educators, teachers and students concerning the areas touched upon in this article due to the fact that a myriad of issues in gender studies are enacted at the global level, including HIV/AIDS, GLBT communities, and other minority groups in society. After all, highlighting invisible social minorities who are afraid of the incomprehension and of social exclusion can be seen a step towards accepting them.

References


