

Gender Stereotyping in India - Sociological Study

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study Gender **stereotype in India**, a conceptual image that may lead to a simplified view of a person or a thing. India, the country where we worship Goddess Durga and Kali for the protection from evils, the same country with an average of 2,39,000 excess female dies each year under the age of five owing to neglect due to gender discrimination. Ironical! Girls in India are considered to be an economic burden in India. Despite the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, 1994, India is the country with the highest female Foeticides in the world, all thanks to the concepts of “Dowry”. Girls are made to learn that “her husband’s house” is the place where she belongs. Whereas boys are told that they need to feed their ageing parents, they need to build a house and earn money so that a “beautiful” woman can marry him. The gender socialization in India is a thing that one can not ignore. In family gathering, the females ought to serve food to men, while males ought to have “talks” about the economy and the important household decisions of the household.

When a child sees his father beating his mother, they set an example for their child, that men are mean to dominate, while females are bound to surrender. When a child notices these types of family behaviours, he or she inculcates the behaviour and continues the family hereditary in the same way. He or she treats the other gender in the same way their family members were treated. Hence, in order to improve the child in this regard, the discriminatory roles should be interchanged. The stereotype associated with women as a poor driver was broken by a report by Delhi traffic police authority, claiming that women drivers cause less than 2% of fatal road mishaps in accidents. Only 12 fatal accidents in Delhi were caused by women drivers against 724 by men. However, as the generations are getting more educated, the perception is changing. The girls engaged in the service sector are quite prominent. But, we cannot say the same for the business sector. The male is becoming accommodating to women employees and women family members. The women are moving forward to raise their voice and break the age-old shackles of myths. The family decisions are now based on the opinion of both the genders. Also, with the amendment of 2005 in the Hindu Succession Act, 1956 giving equal rights to daughters to inherit her father’s property, the women are given equal status to men, hence empowering them. Although this amendment attracted a lot of criticism, still this was a way forward to gender equality in Indian society.

Key words: India, gender, content analysis, marriage

Introduction

Gender socialization often begins at birth, and gradually escalates during adolescence. This concept begins as soon as a child is born, the colour of the room, or toys that the parents bring for their child, the rituals (especially Indian rituals) etc differs for boys and girls. Usually, by the age of 3 to 7, children are able to interpret the difference between the genders. They are able to understand the difference in the behaviour of family members for boys and for girls. Hence this is a tender age for the children to learn about gender equality. Their character is influenced by how their parents, teachers, relatives etc treat people around them. The different toys that the child is expected to play or the colour in which they are expected to dress depending on their gender plays an important role. Other than that, the encouragement that is given to a child seems to be distant. For example, if both boys and girls are competing in a race, then, if a boy loses, it's considered to be shameful, why? Because he lost from a girl; whereas, if the same boy would have won, it's considered to be normal, since boys are meant to be stronger. These might be some very insignificant illustrations to us, but, these are some small behavioural aspects that a child learns. The stories like Cinderella, or the Sleeping Beauty or Little mermaid, what common in all these fairy tales? The prince charming saves the helpless and needy princess from rags or from the devils. The stories that parents read to their children are like a world of imagination and dreamland for children. And proving that in this "perfect world" it is always the prince who saves the girl from trash is very wrong. This makes them vulnerable to gender stereotyping and makes them think that it is always the job of boys to save the girls.

Gender-neutral parenting is what should be adopted if you expect your child to respect both the genders equally. Giving male children equal kitchen and household-related tasks; giving female children an equal opportunity to participate in outdoor games; giving the same type of video games or books to read to the children are some righteous examples for gender-neutral parenting. Educating them, not just to respect women, but even men equally. Inculcating good habits and thoughts altogether is one of the crucial points for good parenting. While going shopping parents should let children choose the type of dress or toys they want, instead of giving them what you expect they want. They shouldn't be allowed to see TV shows or books that promote gender stereotypes, like the books that exhibit only male police officers or only female teachers. These are some small steps during the tender age that parents must take up to raise a gender-neutral child. Even the relatives who discriminate against children on the basis of gender should be warned. More male preschool teachers should be hired in playschools. The schools should be made in such a way that gives equal and fair opportunities to boys and girls in terms of sports and teaching. The teachers must never segregate the children on the basis of gender in group tasks.

In India, the households give certain types of privileges to their males. According to a survey of 6500 women across the world, it was found that Indian women are the most stressed in the world today. 87% of the Indian women felt stressed all the time. Owing to male patriarchy society, the females aren't given the opportunity to express their feelings. Even if she does, she is considered weak and is generally neglected.

Parents, relatives, friends taunt and bully their girl child for the way she looks as soon as she turns barely 11 or 12. The stress that the girl goes through with all the pressure to look as the society wants her to look is immense. This makes the girl more vulnerable to suicidal thought and feels like an attack on her self esteem. This is not just an issue for the girl child, but the male child also faces the self-esteem issues due to a different genre of pressure. The male child is pressured with the fact that they need to cater to the family business or they need to study hard so that they get a good package of salary.

The restrictions the family members tend to put on different genders are also unlike. The females are asked to come home before the sunset, or the male of the family more often are forced to join family business while ignoring their passion. When a girl smokes or drinks, their family members advise her to quit it, since it can ruin her character, while if a boy smokes or drinks, the parents or relatives give remarks like “that it is just a phase, let him enjoy his teenage life”. Though smoking and drinking damage the health of both boys and girls equally, surprisingly, the habit is considered to be more harmful to the “character” of the girl than her overall health. We as individuals might not be very considerate about these issues in families, and we might have learnt to suppress the feeling of anxiety and anger, but all these feelings accumulate to a certain level, and then burst out in the form of extreme depression.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze gender **stereotypes in India**, typecasting begin from the very young age when children identify the gender. Also effects on men and women in every sphere of life.

Changing laws to promote gender neutrality

No discrimination on basis of sex is a fundamental right of each citizen in India. Gender stereotyping is still deep-rooted in Indian society. Indian legal system is filled with gender-specific laws, giving more rights to women, since, in earlier times, women were not even treated as human beings, but just commodity men. During the freedom fights, leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, B.R Ambedkar, Savitri Phule encouraged women to step out, to the household and raise voice for freedom. We treat our girl and boy child equally! Is it true or is it just a phrase you use to make peace with yourself in your own mind? “You’re so pretty” or “Such a cute dress you’re wearing” these are some compliments that a girl usually gets. Whereas boys receive some different kind of compliments altogether, like, “You’re so strong”; or “He is so good at sports.” During family gatherings, you always hear these conversations like “Hope you get married to a successful and rich man” or “Your daughter has turned 25, when are you planning to get her married?” But, for boys, these aren’t the conversations you hear!. “I hope you have a successful business ahead” or “What are you planning to do after your graduation is complete”, these are the types of things you hear about boys.

Empowerment of women in India was always on a To-Do list of the Indian lawmaker. Hence many Indian laws have put women in a higher position and have given women more rights than men. Some of the examples are The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976; The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961; The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956; The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961; The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971; The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987; The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006.; The Pre-Conception & Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994; The Sexual Harassment of Women at Work Place (Prevention, Protection and) Act, 2013.

An amendment in The Hindu Succession Act in the year 2005, was a major head forward toward gender equality. This amendment conferred the equal rights of Hindu women to inherit the interstate property. Section 497, the Indian Penal Code, 1860 was abolished, which treated women as the property that a man possesses. According to this law, if a man has sexual intercourse with the married woman, without the consent of her husband, he is charged for adultery. Also, it did not give the right to women to sue her husband indulged in adultery. But now, adultery can form a basis of divorce, but it cannot be penalised.

There are several laws for women rights in India, however, if we think about the laws for male victims, the Indian legislation falls behind.

Introduction of POCSO Act (The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012), was crucial legislation, protecting the child, be it male or female, against sexual offences. However, sexual offences on male have not recognised if the male is above the age of 18. In the case of Sakshi v. Union of India, the court suggested the legislature to make the sexual assault provision gender-neutral. In this regard, The 172nd law commission report recommended unbiased rape law. However, with the uproar of the Nirbhaya case in 2013, all the gender neutrality went up in the thin air. Though justice Verma committee suggested that Section 375 should just not confined to Penile-vaginal insertion, but still, due to the huge criticism, the government chose to continue the exclusion of male from the ambit of rape. This exclusion of transgender and male from the ambit of a rape victim, only increases the gender stereotype in society, by depicting that only female could be the victim of such heinous crimes.

Also, under Central Civil Services (Leave) Rule 43A provides for paternity leave for central government employees. But there is no sanctioned law in this regard, hence it is completely open for derogation and private companies.

Common gender stereotypes in our culture

How then do we understand the important issue of sex and gender? Women's and men's gender identities follow from their specific female or male bodies. We need the distinction between "sex" as a biological category – genes, hormones, external and internal genitalia and "gender" as a socio-cultural word – learned characteristics, cultural expectations and behavioural patterns. This helps account for differences in the notion of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' in different cultures over time and space. The different views of how men and women behave in different cultures show that gender difference and identity is given not only by our biology but also from the views of our society. Gender views may change, while being male or female doesn't. Let's examine what acting like a man and being ladylike means in our society and what might be some gender stereotypes in the Indian culture:

'It's a boy!', says the nurse and from then on, subtle stereotyping begins. Conscious and unconscious motives of having the family race continue through him bring joy. Guns and cars are bought for him, preferably blue and never pink! While growing up, if he cries he will be told 'don't cry like a girl!' He perhaps learns to suppress his emotions as he thinks it is 'girlish' to express them. It's likely that he'd be encouraged to act strong, to act brave, to be tough etc. Developing the 'right male interests' like sports, taking care of the outside work, managing money, learning to ride/drive, fixing the bulb etc. will most likely be encouraged in him. He would perhaps be discouraged from cooking and serving. He is likely to have fewer restrictions while going out. While choosing a career, he would be encouraged to be ambitious. He is likely to be discouraged from choosing careers like teaching, counselling etc. as they are seen to be 'softer' career options meant for girls. The question of balancing home & family could may not arise for him as it is assumed that his gender defines his primary role as bread winner.

On the other hand, if the nurse says 'It's a girl!', the equations tend to change from that minute. Her room is perhaps decorated with the supposed feminine colour pink and dolls are bought for her. In many communities in India, she could be considered inferior to a boy child. Conscious and unconscious motives of some day 'giving her away' and 'saving for her dowry/marriage expenses' may bring despair. While growing up, she will be allowed to cry and express herself emotionally. 'Good manners' like talking & laughing gently and not loudly, being delicate, being submissive to elders, not 'fighting like boys', being sacrificial, caring etc. is most likely to be taught to her. Developing the 'right interests' like cooking, dancing, singing, tidying up the house, serving etc. will most likely be encouraged in her. She may not be encouraged to go out as often as her brother and is likely to have many more restrictions. While choosing a career, she is likely to be discouraged from choosing careers such as civil services or defence services as she will not be able to 'balance' family & home later on. It is most often assumed that her gender would define her role & function at home as primarily home maker and mother.

Research on gender stereotypes

Perhaps gender stereotypes are a result of ‘nurture’ more than ‘nature’, as suggested by many research studies on this subject. A recent research study suggests that differences between individual girls or between individual boys are much greater than those between the “average” girl and the “average” boy. Yet we tend to generalize from the “average” girl or boy to individuals.

In our culture, the ideal male is perhaps seen as competent, stable, tough, confident, strong, accomplished, non-conforming, aggressive and is the leader. The ideal female is perhaps seen as warm, emotional, kind, polite, sensitive, friendly, fashionable, gentle, soft and is the follower. In urban contexts, these gender expectations and stereotypes could be more subtle and indirect.

Research also shows that these stereotypes create dangerous consequences that limit a person’s full potential and well being. Men and women, because of these stereotypes, are forced to ignore their personality traits, temperament and unique characteristics that make them who they are. Instead there is always a tendency to conform to the cultural notions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’.

There may be several men who are soft & gentle in their temperament, who love to cook and are often bombarded by our society for not being charismatic and extroverted. On the other hand, there may be several women who are naturally extroverted, brave and tough and they are bombarded by our society for not being gentle & submissive.

Also, the tendency to over generalize ‘that all men are from mars’ and ‘all women are from venus’ is all too common. Exaggerated differences between men & women, most of which are researched to be individual differences, are glorified and generalized as gender differences. The nature-nurture debate still continues as to the definitions of masculinity and femininity.

In his book, ‘Men are from earth and women are from earth’, G Soh challenges stereotypes and proves that there are more similarities than differences between men & women, even anatomically. Men & women have the same desires, wants, dreams and fears.

Going behind the layers of gender

Somehow, in all this chaos, our real self is often lost. Many of us realize this but wonder how to get out of these boxes that seem to be so deeply ingrained in us. We know we have the power to decide what makes sense for us, even if it requires us to look beyond our gender.

Perhaps the best way we can bring about change in our society is by becoming aware of our own biases and stereotypes in the way we see ourselves and others. Psychologists suggest that every human being has both masculine and feminine parts to themselves and the integration of both these parts lead to psychological wellbeing and balance. Listed as one of the eight Millennium Development Goals, the goal of ameliorating

gender inequality and empowering women is well recognized as a critical tool for advancing population health, improving life chances, and bringing economic prosperity to low- and middle-income countries. Nonetheless, the obstacles to achieving this goal are daunting, given that gender inequality is often entrenched at all levels of society and, thus, requires changing both institutional structures and individual behaviours. That is, gendered norms govern what is deemed to be acceptable behaviour for the sexes and become the basis upon which girls and women throughout the world are systematically given fewer resources and opportunities than boys and men. When these restrictions are condoned by political and legal systems, women and girls become powerless to protect themselves from harm and are made vulnerable to disease, mental disorder, and death. Poised to have one of the largest pools of young people in the world, youth will play a pivotal role in building the future of the Indian society. As youth enter adult roles and prepare to parent the next generation, there is a pressing need to understand how gender socialization has shaped their experiences and how these experiences are connected to their mental well-being. As the first to address these issues in the Indian context, the current study makes the following contributions.

First, findings confirm that fewer female youth in India enjoy the same privileges afforded male youth, providing a comprehensive portrait of their family lives. Both male and female youth indicated that gender-discriminatory practices within their households were common, with sons given preference in education, freedom to roam, and household tasks. In all instances, male youth were more likely to identify gender-discriminatory practices within households than female youth. This is a troubling finding as it suggests that female youth lack awareness that they are disadvantaged by their gender.

Female youth also faced greater barriers to independence than male youth as they were less likely to engage in independent decision-making in their day-to-day lives, faced greater restrictions on their mobility, and lacked access to money. To the extent that these are key stepping stones for success in adulthood, observed deficits among female youth are likely to limit upward mobility and contribute to persisting gender inequalities throughout adulthood.

Despite household practices that favoured male youth over female youth, mobility, independent decision-making, and access to money were not universal among male youth. Fewer than half of male youth could express their opinion to elders (aside from parents) or confront others who had wronged them. Most male youth did not have access to money. Thus, there is considerable room for improving independent behaviour among male youth as well.

Finally, a greater proportion of females than males subscribed to gender-egalitarian attitudes. This finding is interesting when contrasted with the finding that a greater proportion of males than females identified gender-discriminatory practices within households. What this suggests is that while males generally recognize that females are not afforded the same privileges as males, they do not see these arrangements as problematic.

Conclusion

The act of **stereotyping** has been deeply rooted in our veins. No matter how much we understand it and try to avoid it, we end up unconsciously categorizing people according to their interests and likings, based on what we have experienced or known in life. Adding to this, people don't even stop putting each other in boxes on the basis of their gender. Gender stereotyping is the most common aspect that parents and teachers unknowingly ingrain into the minds of children. As per the norms of gender stereotyping, females should be interested in a certain few fields which are deemed 'feminine' while males are supposed to be interested only in 'male' things. This notion of assigning a gender interest to a certain play object or career field is extremely harmful as it tells kids at the time of their development yearsthat they can or cannot do a few things based on their sex. Matrimonial ads serve as unobtrusive sites to observe the construction and perpetuation of normative heterosexuality through socio-cultural discourses. This shows that even though women are continuing the climb to gain equal footing in STEM subjects, in the corporate world, and science-based careers, the common perception still has a long way to go.

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