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RESEARCH PAPER
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Changing Gender Role Stereo-Typing among Adolescents: A Sociological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Gender stereo types are perpetuated by systems of patriarchy, male dominated structures like family, religion, education and media leading to the oppression of women. Kerala presents a positive picture as far as women's development is concerned. It is the only state in India, where women outnumber men with a higher sex ratio since 1951. It is undeniable that women in Kerala enjoy liberties and freedom denied to their sisters in other parts of India. But certain gender practices in Kerala as they are reinforced by still prevalent patriarchy have been masked by many impressive development indicators especially with respect to status of women in the state. It is observed that despite recent attempts to alter the assignment of social role to sexes, very young children still continue to develop stereo types around male and female concept. Hence the present study proposes to analyse sociologically the different factors relevant to the formation of these stereo types. Adolescents accept these prescribed roles, which shape their understanding of the "man – women relationship" and thus influence their attitude and behavior towards the opposite sex and towards all sexual and reproductive health issues. Once such stereotyped gender - role attitudes are formed, it is very difficult to change them. This is why an urgent need is felt to provide adolescents with a non-stereotyped environment before they mature and begin to adopt rigid notions of stereotyped gender roles. Appropriate gender role development among adolescence is regarded as essential for ensuring their healthy physical, emotional and social growth and development. They need to appreciate the importance of equal relationships between men and women in all matters, including sexual relations and reproduction in a civilized society.

Key Words : Gender, Gender Socialization, Gender Stereo typing

INTRODUCTION

Gender is the socially constructed component of human sexuality. *Gender* is an inner feeling that you are male, female, both, neither, or somewhere in between. Perhaps the best way to understand gender is to understand it as a process of social presentation. Because gender roles are delineated by behavioural expectations and norms, ones he/she wishes to portray. Adopting the behaviors and norms of a gender leads to the perception that someone belongs in that gender category. Gender roles are, unlike sex, mutable, meaning they can change. Gender is not, however, as simple as just choosing a role to play but is also influenced by parents, peers, culture, and society.

Gender role socialization is a lifelong process whereby people learn the values attitudes, motivations and behaviours considered appropriate to each sex according to their culture. In our society, as in all others, males and females are socialized differently. In addition each culture defines gender role differently. This process is not limited to childhood but continues through adolescence, adulthood and old age.

Gender stereotyping, as defined as preconceived ideas whereby males and females are arbitrarily assigned characteristics and roles determined and limited by their sex. Sex stereotyping can limit the development of the natural talents and abilities of boys and girls, women and

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men, as well as their educational experiences and life opportunities.

Theoretical Perspective- Symbolic Interactionism:

According to symbolic interaction theory, people act toward things (including objects, abstract ideas and other people) based on the meaning those things have for them. That meaning evolves from culture. From this perspective, the socialization process develops as people (initially, young children) take on the roles of others around them. In this sense, the concept of role models, as in social learning theory, is an important one. Critical to the symbolic interactionist perspective, however, is the idea that people reflect on how others see them and through this reflection form their self-concepts. From this point of view, the self is established as one becomes an object to oneself – something on which people reflect. Symbolic interaction also emphasizes the ability of humans to form and understand symbols, it is through symbolic interpretation that consciousness and therefore the self are formed.

Evolving from symbolic interaction is a new way of conceptualizing how fender is formed. This is called the "doing gender" perspective. This perspective sees gender as an accomplished activity – accomplished through the interactions one has with others (West and Zimmerman, 1987, West and Fenstermaker, 1995; Jurik and Siemsen, 2009). Stated another way, this perspective analyses gender not as something essential to men and women nor fixed in biological status or social roles. Instead, it sees people as constantly re-creating gender meanings and gendered social structures whenever they act in gender typical ways. From this point of view, gender is routinely reproduced in everyday interactions. It is not an individual trait; rather; it is created through social interaction.

Objectives:

– To explore the extent of gender stereotyping prevalent among adolescents

– To find out the similarity and difference of male and female adolescents about gender roles.

– To find out the adolescent's perception of parental attitude towards male/female children

– Find out the role of teachers and mass media in creating gender role stereotypes among adolescents.

– To find out the role of religion in perpetuating gender stereotyping among adolescents.

– To examine the gender division of labour in the families of adolescents in Kochi City.

METHODOLOGY

Sample:

Data collected from 100 adolescents who consist of 50 girls and 50 boys. Respondents are randomly selected from plus two first year UG students studying in different schools and colleges in the city.

Tool of the study:

A questionnaire is prepared to assess the gender role stereo typing prevalent among the adolescents. Two standardized questionnaires are used- Bem Sex-role Inventory and adapted version of- "Attitudes towards Women Scale (Spence *et al.*, 1978)

Collected data is analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 20 version.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Family and gender stereo types:

From the analysis of gender division of labour in the families, it is understood that there exists clear cut division of labour with regard to gender. Women are retaining their traditional roles like cooking, cleaning, looking after the children and sick and helping with the studies, while men are taking the lead in repairing, shopping and decision making. But in 15% of the households these common activities are done jointly by both husband and wife (Fig. 1).

78% of the adolescents agree to the statement that parent allow boys to be more independent than girls. Even though, women enjoy much freedom in decision making and employment, girl's mobility is severely restricted especially late evenings and nights. There is a general perception that Kerala is not safe for women and parents are worried may be due to sexual vulnerability of girls. Almost 68% of the respondents feel that parents are spending more money for boys than girls. Boys are also getting the larger share of pocket money from parents. Adolescents are of the opinion that boys are enjoying more position in the family than girls. While taking decisions in the family the opinion of the boys are more valued than girls.

Only 38% of the father's treat both boys and girls in an equal manner. But 62% say that they are not getting equal treatment from their Fathers. This differential

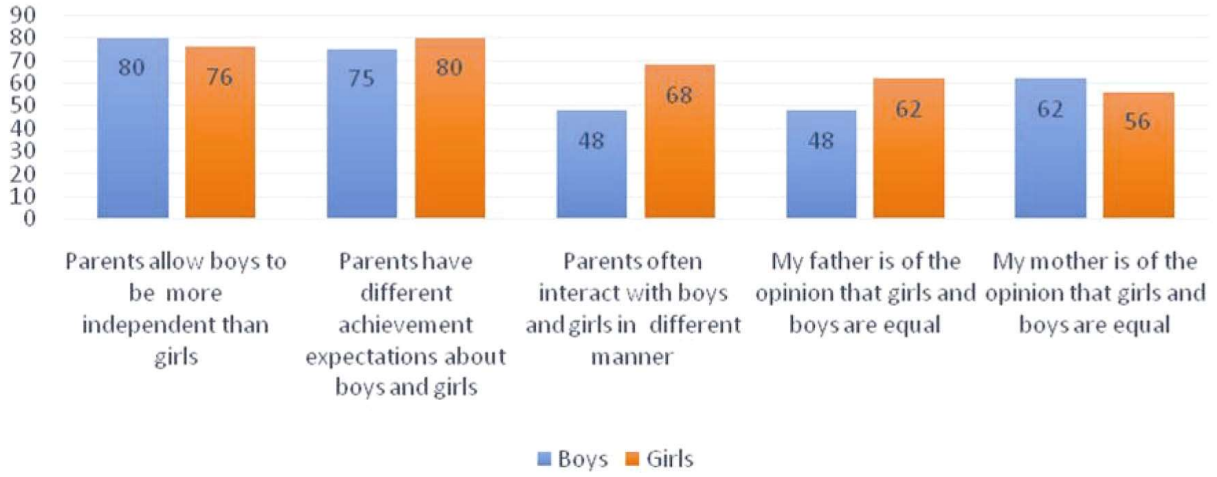

Fig. 1 : Family and Gender stereotypes

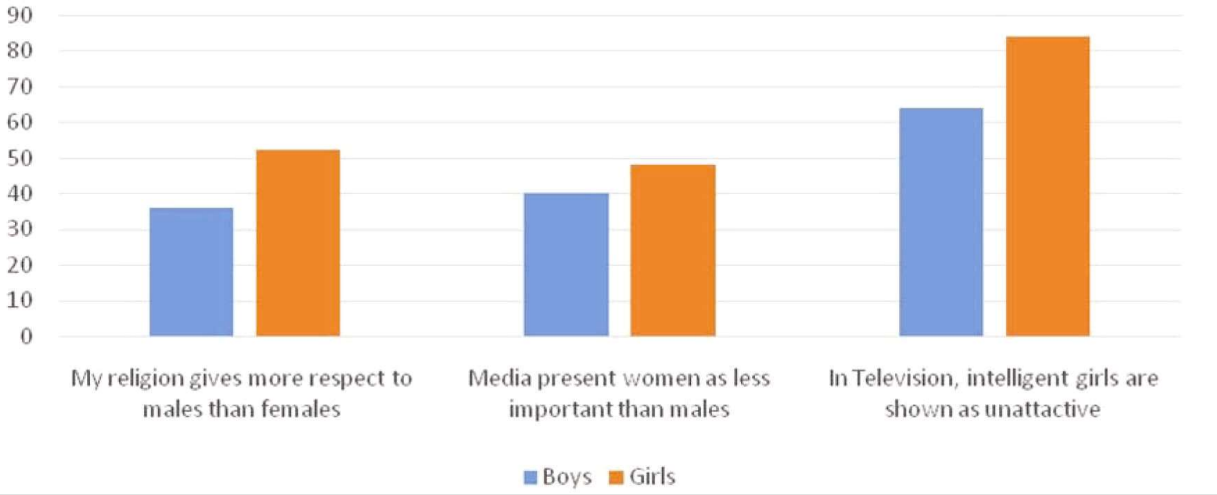

Fig. 2 : Religion, media and stereo types

treatment results in the faulty development of sex roles. 77% of the respondents believe that parents have different achievement expectations about their children. Parents prefer boys to study Mathematics and engineering subjects. And for girls they prefer teaching and other milder jobs. 58% of the respondents agree with the statement that parents often interact with boys and girls in different manner. 42% disagree to this statement. From very young onwards parents try to transmit gender appropriate behavior in their children. Traditionally boys are expected to rough and tough and girls expected to be soft spoken and emotional. Only 60% feel that their mothers are giving equal position to both boys and girls in the family. 68% are of the opinion that boys are getting greater importance at home. Generally, parents are tend to be more protective of girls and tend to worry about them more.

Teachers, religion, media and gender stereo types:

54% agreed that teachers are interacting and spending their class time watching boys than girls as they are more problematic. But 46% disagreed to this statement. 50% of the respondents feel that teachers are favouring boys and the other 50% feels that teachers are favouring girls. Specifically saying boys have the feeling that teachers favour girls and girls has the feeling that teachers favour boys (Fig. 2).

Majority of the respondents are disagreeing to the statement that religion gives more respect to males. But 44% have the attitude that all religions are highly

patriarchal in nature, which impose lot of restrictions upon females. 44 % agree to the statement that religion considers women as inferior to men. 70% of the respondents are of the opinion that women are represented as less important in the media. They are primarily portrayed as concerned only with their appearance and intelligent girls are shown as unattractive. In television and commercials, women are under represented and given only supportive roles with very few exceptions. Advertisements are important agents which reinforce patriarchy in society. Women are featured more in the advertisements of cosmetics, kitchen appliances, detergents, curry powder and baby products. Advertisements influence children than anyone else. It can create gender based impressions in the young minds more effectively.

Attitude towards women:

Only 50% are of the opinion that women should take up leadership roles and engage in social issues, whereas the majority (50%) disagrees to this prospect. They are still of the opinion that women should be concerned with traditional roles of caring and nurturing rather than engaging with the society (Fig. 3).

74% are of the opinion that alcohol and substance abuse among women is worse when compared to the same among men. Alcoholism and drug abuse were considered to be problems relating to men until recently and intoxication among women is an emerging social issue.

Majority are of the opinion that there should be strict merit system in job appointment and promotion without regard for gender. Lot of changes happened in the last few decades that women are now being accepted high positions in both public and private enterprises.

Majority opinion is that women should worry less about their rights and concerned more with becoming good wives and mothers. The traditional roles of caring and bringing up the children are still feminine jobs and must be continued by women. Even the adolescent girls do not find anything wrong in this notion as they are culturally conditioned that way.

Large number of the respondents favour males in Leadership positions. Generally men have greater authority and freedom to choose their career and take autonomous decisions. In the family domain also fathers are last word related to important issues relating to children.

Majority of the respondents find nothing wrong in father looking after the children if mothers are better paid. A less discriminatory attitude is developing among the young generation favouring employment and high salary for women professionals. Men are finding this new trend less stigmatizing and slowly being accepted by the society**.**

In the present study "Attitude towards women scale" consisted of 12 statements for which the respondents could either, strongly agree, mildly agree, mildly disagree or strongly disagree. These scores presumably reflect the degree to which the individual holds traditional or liberal views, and permit comparisons of the attitudes of various groups on this dimension, predictions of other behaviors on the basis of the individual's attitude score, etc. A high score indicates a pro-feminist, egalitarian attitude while a low score indicates a traditional, conservative attitude. In the present study the mean score is 26. This shows that the adolescents are neither profeminist nor conservative. They are exhibiting androgynous character more.

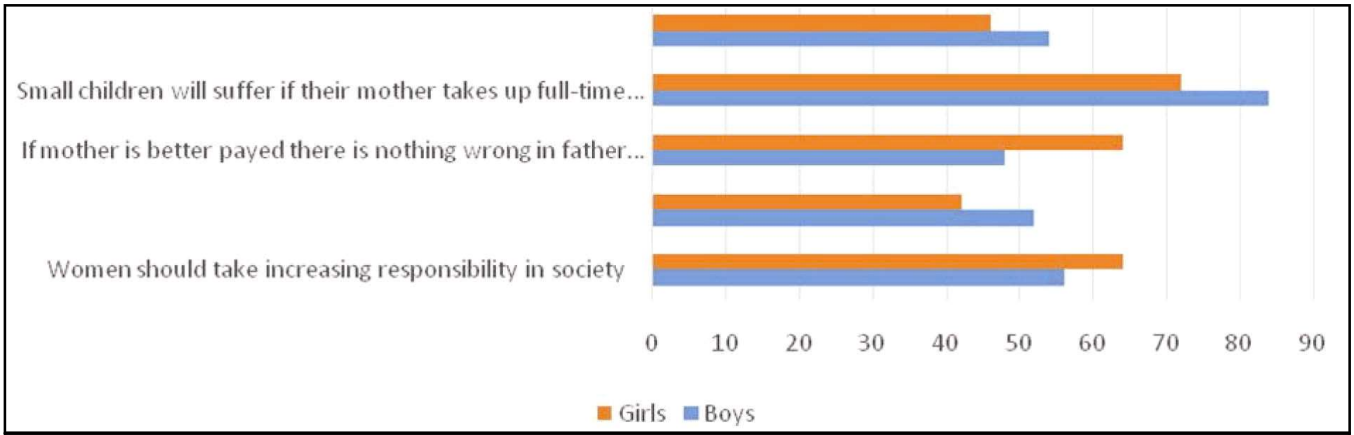

Fig. 3 : Attitude towards women

Majority of the adolescents are of the opinion that small children will be affected more if mothers take full time employment. Modern nuclear families have depended upon outside help as there are no grandparents or other relatives living with them. This directly affects the wellbeing of small children as they may not get the adequate attention of the significant other. This can also result in improper socialization and diminishing influence of parents over children.

70% of the respondents are of the opinion that media presents women as less important. Among them 97% of the UG second year students feels that women play secondary role in advertisements and Television programmes. With increasing age and education, students are becoming aware of the patriarchal model in which our society operates. Even though chi-square values do not show any significant association between education and stereo typing, from the above statistics we can conclude that with increasing age, there is less stereo typing among students.

Both boys and girls fall in the medium category and exhibit androgynous characteristics. From the mean score we can understand that girls have slightly more stereo typing tendency than boys. Girls are more traditional and in favour of continuing conventional roles.

The mean stereo typing score according to religion does not show any particular trend. All the adolescents irrespective of their religion show androgynous characteristics. The mean score shows average stereo typing among the all.

An adapted version of BSRI is used in this study to assess the masculine, feminine and androgynous characteristics of adolescents. Nine masculine, feminine and androgynous characteristics were selected. And the adolescents were required to rate themselves using the inventory. The above table shows a medium level for masculine, feminine and androgynous characteristics among the adolescents. The idealized masculine or feminine characteristics are not visible among adolescents at present.

Based on the study, we can conclude gender role stereo typing in a severe level do not exist in Kerala. Even though parents of the respondents are slightly stereo typed, children show androgynous traits. Most of the time masculine and feminine characteristics are undifferentiated among adolescents. Modern education and nuclear family arrangement are mainly responsible for this new trend.

Towards an equitable society:

Gender equality refers to equal access to social goods services and resources and equal opportunities in all spheres of life for both men and women. When there is a gender inequality, it is woman that are more likely to be disadvantaged and marginalized. Whereas gender equity implies fairness in the way women and men are treated. The different life experiences and needs of men and women should be taken into consideration and compensation is made for women's historical and social disadvantages. The lower status of women in society often constitutes a handicap and provisions should be made to redress this inequality before they can take advantage of the opportunities provided. Gender equity thus provides a level playing felid to empower women. Therefore we can say that equity is essential to achieve equality.

The first step toward gender equality is that men will have to come to understand their role in the process, even in the absence of blatant, personal sexism. All men are tacitly involved in the oppression each time they automatically giggle at sexist jokes, mistake female doctors as nurses, sees women in purely physical terms, expect less from women on job or in school, or expect more of them at home.

The next step will require a fundamental transformation of institutional patterns and cultural values. Such a solution sounds too massive to be possible. But today, we are seeing early steps in that direction: changing conceptions of family roles, women's increasing (though not yet equal) participation in the labour force, their growing (but not yet equal) political power, and greater awareness of sexual exploitation and violence worldwide. How far these changes will take us in the future remains to be seen.

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