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Impact of Social Construction of Childhood: On Career Aspiration and Academic Performance

MONALISHA ROUT[1], PABITRA MOHAN NAYAK[2] AND SUBHASMITA TARAI*[3]
[1&3]Ph.D Research Scholar and [2]Associate Professor
Department of Sociology, Fakir Mohan University, Balasore (Odisha) India

*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

The social construction of childhood is not a universal, fixed stage of life defined by biological development only, but it is a concept which shaped by cultural, societal and historical influences. Although social construction of childhood process helps the child how to be adopted in the society in accordance with their gender. This process also impacted on certain areas of child development like career aspiration, decision making process, academic performance from a young age children are often exposed to gendered expectations about their academic abilities because of societal construction of childhood. Society perceive boys are better at subject like Math and science, while girls are often expected to excel in language, literature and social studies. The major aim of the present study to analyse how social construction of childhood affect career aspiration as well as academic performance of a child through an empirical analysis. For this study survey was conducted in Nuapadhi village of Balasore district and covered 60 respondents including 30 male and 30 female student respondents. This study is based on exploratory research design and data collected from both primary and secondary sources of data.

Keywords: Socialization, Social construction of childhood, Gender expectations, Gender role, Career aspiration, Academic performance

INTRODUCTION

Childhood is a pivotal and formative stage of human development, generally defined as the period from birth to adolescence. It is a time of rapid physical, emotional, and cognitive growth, where individuals begin to learn about the world around them, form social connections, and develop their identities. Childhood is typically characterized by innocence, exploration, and play, as children engage in various activities that foster creativity, problem-solving skills, and social understanding. It is during this period that foundational experiences shape future attitudes, behaviours, and capabilities. Cultural, social, and economic factors can influence the way childhood is experienced, with different societies placing varying emphasis on education, family structure, and childhood rights. Globally, childhood is recognized as a critical phase for nurturing future generations, with an increasing focus on ensuring the well-being, health, and safety of children through laws, policies, and community initiatives. As we know childhood is socially constructed, socially constructed refers to the process in which societal values, norms, customs play a very important role in the childhood construction process. Our society have set up some gender expected behaviour and attitude and gender expected role. To perform this gender expected roles and attitude from the early childhood a child socialized in accordance with their gender. The process of childhood construction is also influenced by gender. The way boys and girls are raised differs, and this is where gender soc[1]ialization plays a significant role, often contributing to societal inequalities. As children grow, the expectations tied to their gender become more pronounced. Boys are typically expected to be tough, competitive, and aggressive, while girls are expected to be nurturing, emotional, and cooperative. These gendered messages are reinforced through media, toys, and peer interactions. For example, boys might be encouraged to play with cars,

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while girls are given dolls or kitchen sets. Such practices reinforce gender roles and societal expectations of masculinity and femininity. According to sociologist Ann Oakley, "gender roles are shaped by cultural and social influences rather than biological factors". The family and school are the two primary institutions that guide gender role development. From birth, children are exposed to various factors that shape their attitudes and behaviours regarding gender roles. These attitudes are typically instilled at home and reinforced through interactions with peers and the school environment. Career Aspirations refer to an individual's long-term professional goals and ambitions, such as wanting to become a doctor, engineer, educator, or entrepreneur. Career aspirations often stem from personal interests, passions, and the desire to contribute to a particular field or society. Academic performance refers to how well a person does in their educational journey, typically measured by grades, test scores, and overall achievements in school or university. The social construction of childhood also impacts academic performance in various ways. Children from different social backgrounds may be expected to exhibit certain behaviour's, such as high achievement or obedience to authority. In some cases, children from wealthier backgrounds may have greater access to educational resources, extracurricular activities, and academic support, which positively influences their academic performance. On the other hand, children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may face limitations such as fewer resources, less parental involvement, or a lack of academic support, which can affect their performance. These social constructions can create achievement gaps based on class, with children from more privileged backgrounds having an advantage in academic success. From a young age, children are socialized into specific gender roles that influence their career aspirations. Society often imposes traditional gender norms that suggest what careers are "appropriate" for men and women. For example, boys are typically encouraged to pursue careers in fields like engineering, technology, and business, while girls are more often steered toward nurturing professions such as teaching, nursing, or social work. These early socializations impact the academic interests that children develop and the careers they ultimately consider.

Statement of problem:

We have already step towards twenty first century but still the dimensions of gender matters in some sphere such as employment, decision making, education etc. which ultimately affect the career aspiration and academic performance in a very negative way. Gender-based career aspirations and academic performance can lead to several significant problems, both for individuals and society as a whole. Social construction of gender promotes gender-based activities, attitude and role further which limit the career choice and self-perception. It also creates gender gap in certain field. Gendered expectations reinforce traditional roles, limiting women's access to high-paying or leadership positions and discouraging men from pursuing nurturing careers. This perpetuates economic inequality and unequal career opportunities between genders.

Review of related literature:

Anderson (2004) describes gender as the socially constructed characteristics, roles, and interactions associated with being male or female. These attributes and relationships—shaped through socialization processes are not fixed but instead vary across different contexts and over time. Gender influences societal expectations, permissions, and values assigned to individuals based on their identity as women or men in specific situations. In many societies, this results in unequal treatment between women and men, particularly in the distribution of tasks, participation in activities, access to resources, and decision-making opportunities. The socio-cultural dimensions of gender are deeply intricate, reflecting the dynamic and multifaceted nature of these constructs.

Various institutions, such as the family, legal systems, and markets, play a significant role in shaping and reinforcing gender relations. According to Greiff and Neubert (2014), these relations are hierarchical power dynamics that consistently disadvantage women. While girls generally outperform boys in high school graduation rates and grades (Finn, 2008), their academic strengths reveal notable patterns. Girls exhibit higher verbal aptitude through high school; however, beginning in fourth grade, they tend to fall behind boys in math and science aptitude tests. This persistent gender gap in math and science performance raises global concerns among educators, as it may impact young women's career opportunities in these fields.

Gender disparities in educational attainment and academic performance have long been a critical issue. Numerous studies highlight that female university students

often under perform compared to their male counterparts (Becker, 2005; Finn, 2008; Erickson, 2009). Aiken (2007) asserts that men tend to achieve higher academic success than women. Similarly, Glenn (2009) emphasizes the existence of a substantial gender gap in school achievement, noting significant discrepancies in some American schools. However, their research also revealed that girls generally exhibited a high potential for success, with minimal differences in gender gaps across schools. In contrast, Fryer and Levitt (2009) observed that gender disparities in academic outcomes were relatively consistent across demographic groups, suggesting that variations in the gender gap depended on the specific school context. Kelly (2007) points out that boys surpass girls in science-related subjects, particularly in mathematics and practical assessments, where the differences are most pronounced. Gender bias, defined as actions or decisions influenced by assumptions about an individual's gender, is also a contributing factor. Gordon (1995) found that teachers of both genders acknowledged distinct potentials for boys and girls, shaped by their gendered characteristics, abilities, and dispositions.

Teachers often perceive boys as being more academically driven, possessing quick cognitive abilities, and excelling at managing complex and demanding school tasks. However, research by Finn (2008) in Britain revealed that academic performance between boys and girls followed a consistent pattern, indicating equal levels of achievement across all stages. In classroom settings, boys tend to dominate interactions, discussions, and question-and-answer sessions, while girls are more likely to align with gender expectations by remaining quiet or displaying cooperative behaviours. Ezewu (2003) discovered that boys outperformed girls in art-related subjects in a study aimed at identifying gender differences in academic performance. This supports the notion that subject selection may play a role in the performance gap. However, social trend surveys reveal that males are significantly underrepresented in certain artistic fields, such as language and history.

Extensive research has explored gender issues related to career choices, particularly in construction and architecture, highlighting the low retention rates of skilled women in these fields (De Graft-Johnson *et al.*, 2005). Several factors contribute to this focus. One significant reason is the widespread societal perception, both locally and globally, that construction is an unsuitable career for women. In Nigerian culture and religion, this belief is deeply rooted, reinforcing the notion that women should primarily focus on home and family responsibilities (Adogbo *et al.*, 2015).

Theoretical Orientation:

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), developed by Robert W. Lent, Steven D. Brown, and Gail Hackett, provides a framework for understanding how individuals make career decisions, develop interests, and achieve goals. The theory emphasizes the interaction of personal factors, environmental influences, and behaviour in shaping career development. Central to SCCT are three key constructs: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in their ability to perform specific tasks, influencing their interests, choices, and persistence. Outcome expectations involve beliefs about the likely results of certain actions, such as financial rewards or personal satisfaction, which motivate career pursuits. Personal goals represent the objectives individuals set, whether short-term, like completing a course, or long-term, like attaining a specific career role.

SCCT also highlights the role of interests, which develop from enjoyable activities and are shaped by self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations. Environmental factors, including social supports like mentors and family, as well as barriers such as discrimination or resource limitations, significantly influence career development. Past learning experiences, whether direct or vicarious, affect self-efficacy and shape expectations about outcomes. Broader contextual factors, such as economic conditions, educational access, and cultural norms, further impact career decisions and opportunities. The theory underscores the dynamic interplay between individual factors, environmental contexts, and behavioural actions, making it a valuable tool in career counselling, workplace development, and education. By addressing barriers, enhancing self-efficacy, and encouraging exploration, SCCT helps individuals navigate the complexities of career development, aligning their interests and goals with available opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

Objective:

- To investigate the role of gender in the academic performance.
- To evaluate the influence of gender in choosing

career aspiration.

- To investigate the socio-economic background of the respondents.

On the basis of broader objectives, the study tries to find out the relationship between gender and career aspiration and academic performance. The current study is based on exploratory research design because social construction of childhood creates inequality in various field specifically in the field of education regarding career choice and academic performance. For this exploratory research design is suitable to discover significant factor about the problem. The universe of the present study is Nuapadhi village which comes under Nilgiri block of Balasore district. For the purpose of the present study simple random sampling has been selected from the age group of 15-23. The sample size is 50 including 25 boys and 25 girls. Observation, interview schedule, case study is used as the techniques of data collection to collect data from the field. Secondary source of data also employed to know about existing literature.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of socio-economic profile of the respondent is very necessary in social science research. Socio-economic background presents the picture of social and economic status of respondents and which will help us to connect how economic and social factors plays a crucial role in every aspect of human life. Specifically in the context of career aspiration and academic performance to know about socio-economic profile is very important.

The Table 1 provides an analysis of socio-economic conditions based on gender, age, family type, and economic class. In the age distribution, the 14-16 age group shows equal representation of males and females, with both contributing 40% to the total. In the 17-19 age group, males slightly outnumber females, contributing 40% compared to females' 32%, resulting in a combined total of 36%. In the 20-22 age group, females are more prevalent, accounting for 28% compared to males' 20%, making up a total of 24%. Regarding family type, nuclear families are more common, with males representing 60% and females slightly higher at 64%, for a combined total of 62%. In joint families, males account for 40% and females 36%, resulting in an overall representation of 68%. This indicates that while nuclear families dominate overall, joint families also have significant representation, with a slight male predominance. Economic conditions reveal variations across classes. The lower middle class sees higher representation from males (32%) compared to females (20%), contributing to a total of 26%. In contrast, the middle class has a stronger female representation at 40% compared to males' 28%, resulting in a total of 34%. The upper middle class has the highest overall representation, with equal contributions of 40% from both males and females.

In summary, the data highlights trends in socio-economic distribution. Males dominate younger age groups and lower middle-class representation, while females are more prevalent in older age groups, middle-class families, and nuclear households. The upper middle class shows balanced gender representation, reflecting equality in this economic tier.

The Table 2 presents data on the educational preferences of boys and girls, highlighting significant gender-based trends across various fields of study. Nursing is exclusively chosen by girls, with 10 respondents (10% of all girls) opting for this field, making up 20% of the total in this category. Boys show no representation in nursing, suggesting a strong preference for this career among girls, likely influenced by traditional gender roles. Teaching also attracts more girls, with 9 respondents (18%) compared to 3 boys (6%), resulting

Table 1 : Socio-economic background of the respondents (N=50)

Socio-economic condition		Male	Female	Total
Age	14-16	10(40%)_	10(40%)	40%
	17-19	10(40%)	8(32%)	36%
	20-22	5(20%)	7(28%)	24%
Family	Nuclear	15(60%)	16(64%)	62%
	Joint	10(40%)	9(36%)	68%
Economic condition	Lower middle	8(32%)	5(20%)	26%
	Middle	7(28%)	10(40%)	34%
	Upper middle	10(40%)	10(40%)	40%

Source: Primary Data

Table 2 : Findings About Career Aspiration

Education	No of respondents based on their Gender		Total
	Boys	Girls	
Nursing	0(0%)	10(10%)	10(20%)
Teaching	3(6%)	9(18%)	12(24%)
ITI/Diploma	11(22%)	2(4%)	13(26%)
Medical	5(10%)	3(6%)	8(16%)
Physical Science	4(8%)	3(6%)	7(14%)
Total	23(26%)	27(54%)	50(100%)

in a total of 24% for this field. This indicates that teaching is a significantly more popular choice among girls. Conversely, ITI/Diploma courses have the highest overall representation at 26%, dominated by boys with 11 respondents (22%), while only 2 girls (4%) pursue this path. This reflects a clear preference for technical and vocational courses among boys. The medical field garners moderate interest, with 5 boys (10%) and 3 girls (6%), contributing to a total of 16%. Boys show slightly greater interest in pursuing medical studies compared to girls. Physical science, with the lowest overall representation at 14%, has 4 boys (8%) and 3 girls (6%), indicating a relatively balanced gender distribution but still favoring boys slightly. Overall, the total respondents include 23 boys (46%) and 27 girls (54%), with girls having a marginally higher participation in the survey. Girls predominantly choose fields like nursing and teaching, while boys show strong preferences for ITI/Diploma courses and slightly higher representation in medical and physical sciences. These trends reflect societal expectations and traditional gender roles that influence educational choices. Efforts to diversify participation across all fields may help address these disparities and promote a more equitable representation in career aspirations.

The social construction of childhood plays a critical role in shaping the gendered patterns in educational preferences observed in the data. Childhood is a socially defined stage where societal norms and expectations influence how children perceive themselves and the opportunities available to them. These constructs often reinforce rigid gender roles, which contribute to the disparities in career choices between boys and girls.

From a young age, children are socialized into traditional gender roles. Girls are often encouraged to embrace nurturing, caregiving, and interpersonal qualities, while boys are guided toward roles associated with technical skills, leadership, and problem-solving. This is evident in the data, where nursing, chosen exclusively by girls, aligns with the societal expectation of women as caregivers. Similarly, the higher number of girls opting for teaching reflects the stereotype of women in roles that involve nurturing and education. Conversely, boys dominate ITI/Diploma courses, reflecting the societal perception that technical and vocational skills are more suited for men. Boys' higher representation in medical and physical sciences further underscores the belief that men are naturally inclined toward technical and scientific professions. Parents, educators, and societal institutions significantly shape children's aspirations during their formative years. Girls may receive more encouragement to pursue careers deemed "appropriate" for their gender, such as teaching or nursing, while boys are steered toward technical and science-based careers. This guidance reinforces traditional gender norms and limits children's exposure to diverse career options, narrowing their aspirations to predefined roles. The lack of diverse role models further exacerbates these patterns. Children are more likely to aspire to careers where they see individuals of their gender succeeding. The dominance of women in fields like teaching and nursing, and men in technical roles, perpetuates these choices, as children internalize the norms they observe. This restricts their potential to explore professions outside of traditional gender expectations. Cultural narratives also play a role in influencing career preferences. Nursing and teaching are often portrayed as stable, socially acceptable, and family-friendly careers for women, while technical fields and physical sciences are seen as high-status, financially rewarding paths for men. These narratives shape how boys and girls evaluate their future career paths, aligning their aspirations with societal approval rather than personal interests. To address these impacts, society must challenge the social construction of childhood by fostering gender-neutral upbringing and education. Encouraging children to explore

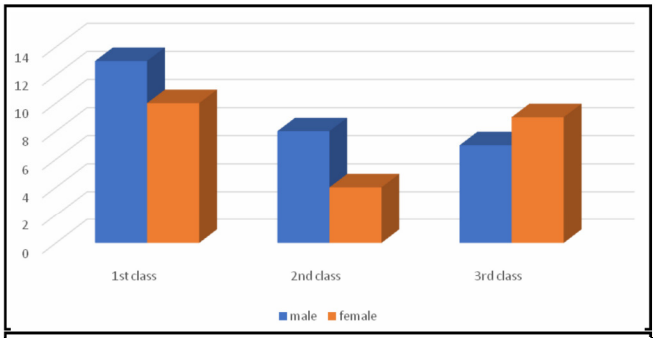

Fig. 1 : Findings on Academic performance

diverse career paths, providing exposure to non-traditional role models, and actively breaking down stereotypes can broaden their aspirations. Normalizing boys in caregiving roles and girls in technical fields is essential to achieving a more equitable representation across professions.

In the 1st class category, males slightly outperform females, with 13 males achieving this level compared to 10 females. Although the difference is small, it suggests that both genders perform relatively well at the highest academic level, with males holding a slight edge. In the 2nd class category, the gender gap becomes more pronounced. Here, 8 males achieve second-class academic performance compared to only 4 females. This indicates that males are twice as likely as females to fall into this category, showcasing a noticeable disparity in mid-level academic performance. Interestingly, in the 3rd class category, the trend reverses. Females outperform males, with 9 females achieving third-class results compared to 7 males. This suggests that females are more represented in the lower academic performance tier compared to males. Overall, the total number of males (28) slightly exceeds the total number of females (23) across all categories. The distribution of academic performance highlights that males dominate in the first and second-class categories, while females show stronger representation in the third class. This pattern reveals gender-based differences in academic achievements across the spectrum. The notion that males excel more in academics than females is influenced by cultural, social, and systemic factors rather than inherent gender differences. Cultural expectations often prioritize male success, especially in STEM fields, while girls may face societal constraints that limit their opportunities. Access to resources also plays a role, with girls in some regions facing barriers like poverty and restricted education. Classroom dynamics and curriculum biases can further disadvantage females by favouring male participation or emphasizing male achievements. Despite minor biological differences in cognitive strengths, these do not inherently Favor one gender over the other. Systemic challenges, such as discrimination and expectations around family roles, often disproportionately burden women, limiting their academic progression.

Conclusion:

The social construction of childhood significantly impacts career aspirations and academic performance by shaping children's perceptions of their abilities, roles, and opportunities. Societal expectations, cultural norms, and gender stereotypes influence how children view themselves and their future possibilities, often steering them toward traditional roles or fields. These constructs can limit aspirations and create disparities in academic performance by reinforcing unequal access to resources and support. To mitigate these effects, it is essential to challenge stereotypes, promote diverse role models, and provide equitable opportunities for all children. By fostering inclusive environments and encouraging children to explore their full potential, society can break down limiting constructs and empower individuals to succeed based on their abilities and interests rather than predefined roles.

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