

GENDER SOCIALIZATION OF CHILDREN: DECONSTRUCTING GENDER STEREOTYPES

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Abstract: Gender equality is one of the most important Sustainable Development Goals 2030. To accomplish this macro level goal, it is necessary to understand the root cause of gender biased attitudes and stereotypes at micro and mezzo levels. Thus, the paper aims to outline the interaction among various socializing agents in a child's environment that constructs such stereotypes and to explore ways in which those can be deconstructed to promote healthier gender socialization and gender equality.

Keywords: Gender Education, Gender Equality, Gender Socialization, Gender Stereotypes.

Introduction: Greek philosopher Aristotle has rightly suggested that "man is by nature a social animal". As a child is born, his or her development does not take place in isolation. The development of an individual across the lifespan is influenced and guided by various agents in his/her environment. One of the fundamental aspects of an individual's development is that of socialization. Socialization is defined as the process by which people acquire values, beliefs, attitudes, norms skills and behavioral patterns that are contingent on the socio-cultural environment of the person. Thus, socialization encompasses transmission of culture from generation to generation through the interaction of various multilevel socializing agents that includes family, peer groups, educational institutions, mass media, political and legal systems. Gender socialization is the process by which children develop an understanding of the roles, characteristics and skills that are expected of a boy or a girl. With the help of these socializing agents, children acquire a sense of self and gendered identity which brings along with it stereotypical notions and attitudes as well. This also proves that if socializing agents have the power to construct such stereotypes, they are powerful enough to deconstruct them as well.

Gender equality is one of the important Sustainable Development Goals 2030 that aims at women empowerment by ensuring justified allocation of resources and opportunities to women. In order to ensure gender equality at a macro level, it is essential to outline the root cause of gender discrimination and stereotypes at micro and mezzo levels and to examine ways in which those can be reduced. Socialization is evolutionary in nature and it evolves from generation to generation. Thus, it is possible to devise strategies that can help in gender equitable socialization. The following sections will elaborate upon the impact that the multi-layered socializing agents can have on children's understanding of gender and various practices that can be employed to catalyze healthier gender socialization among children in order to promote gender equality and creation of a gender-sensitive generation.

Multiple Layers of Gender Socialization:

Family and Peer Influences: The primary socializing agent through whom the child's first and foremost understanding of what it means to be a boy or a girl comes from is his/ her family. Parents, guardians, siblings and relatives play a crucial role in the development of a child's identity. A gendered sense of self develops when children understand that there are different social roles and qualities expected from them on the basis of their gender. Children see their parents performing 'gender-specific' tasks and duties. Parents act as primary role models for children and thus, they tend to learn from them the gendered roles and responsibilities through observation and modeling. Parents have different expectations from sons and daughters and the distinctions made between a boy and a girl can take subtle or explicit forms. Starting from infancy, girls are often dressed in pink while boys in blue; girls are given dolls and kitchen sets to play whereas, airplanes and cars are given to boys as toys. Girls are conventionally taught to be 'soft-spoken' and well mannered which is not given much emphasis in case of boys. Similarly, boys are discouraged from expressing their emotions since a very young age as they

are told that 'boys don't cry' whereas it is considered okay for girls to cry and show their emotional side. This takes away from boys the opportunity for catharsis and leads to repression of emotions that might come up to the surface levels in more aggressive or depressive forms. Girls are encouraged to indulge in singing, dancing, cooking and pursue arts whereas boys are discouraged to participate in such 'feminine' pursuits. Likewise, boys are motivated to indulge in activities like swimming, karate and other sports and pursue subjects like science, mathematics and commerce. Families also expect boys to earn income to run their families in future and thus, convince them to become doctors, engineers and businessmen or take up professions that require physical strength like police, air force, navy, etc. Girls, on the other hand, are expected to take care of the household chores and thus, are encouraged to either not have a career at all or to take up 'soft' professions like that of a teacher, nurse, etc. [1]. Moreover, parents often desire that their children must fit into the ideal standards of physical appearance and wish their sons to be taller and stronger and girls to be fair and lovely, slim and fit.

It is noteworthy, that even siblings can influence the gender identity development of a child. A meta-analysis [2] revealed that the older sibling's gender had an impact on the gender attitudes of the younger child. Examples can be drawn from Indian families as well where many times boys expect sisters to do household chores for them and girls expect brothers to help them with technical stuff. Also, an age-old festival of *Rakshabandhan* traditionally emphasizes the strength of a brother to protect his sister.

Similarly, peer groups of children also influence their perception of gender. The way children play in groups is gender dependent as well. While a group of girls might play with delicate dolls and kitchen sets, boys would play outdoor games like cricket, football and basketball. In order to fit well with the fellow peers, children tend to follow the norms so that they don't stand odd one out. Thus, they embrace the idea of being an 'appropriate' girl or an 'ideal' boy for peer acceptance. If one of the mates does not follow the normative codes, he/she is labeled as a 'bad boy' or a 'bad girl' by the teachers and parents of other children. Parents ask their children to stay away from such friends that lead to the social rejection of such a 'bad' boy or a girl. Thus, children tend to maintain the norms to attain peer acceptance and this further reinforces and strengthens the gender typing of attitudes, behaviors and thoughts.

Such patterns of stereotypical gender identity development lead to internalization of these notions in children that they carry along as they grow into adolescents and adults and then transmit the same to future generations. Therefore, suggested below are several practices and perspectives that could be adopted by families to deconstruct these implicit as well as explicit ways of gender stereotyping.

- To employ gender-neutral practices, the first step should be for parents to share and exchange their responsibilities and duties equally, irrespective of their gender.
- It needs to be understood that boys can also like pink and girls can like blue too; Boys might like to play with kitchen sets and girls might love playing with cars and bikes.
- It should be considered normal when a boy cries and tries to express himself just like girls do. This would give them an opportunity to vent out and introspect themselves. Acceptance of emotional expression also helps in developing healthier attachment patterns and relationships.
- Instead of telling children that 'boys don't cry', families should teach their children that 'no one should cry because of you, respect all boys and respect all girls'.
- Instead of instructing girls to be 'soft-spoken' all the time, they should be taught to raise their voices against injustice and maltreatment.
- It should not be a child's gender but her/his interest and aptitude that should direct the hobbies, subjects and careers that the child wishes to pursue.
- Festivals like *Rakshabandhan* should be celebrated to cherish the beautiful bond of siblings irrespective of gender where a brother and a sister, or two sisters, or two brothers can tie the holy thread to each other's wrists promising lifelong support, love and care for each other.

School and Education: School is another micro level socializing agent that plays a crucial role in a child's life as it has the power to shape and mould the perspectives of a child. Teacher's attitudes, peer interactions and curriculum content might exhibit overt or covert sexism in schools that can

significantly contribute to gender-typing in children. Gender stereotypes appear in prescribed textbooks. Moreover, teachers have different expectations from male and female students. They often assign different activities to boys and girls assuming their capabilities on the basis of their gender. They frequently encourage boys to take up sports, science, mathematics and commerce, whereas girls are persuaded to take up singing, dancing, music, arts and social sciences. Also, gender socialization is different in co-educational schools as compared to single-sex schools [1]. In co-educational schools, gender biases are more evident as compared to single-sex schools because boys and girls interact with each other in coed institutions and are able to delineate the gender differential in attitudes of teachers, peers and school curriculum.

Talking about education, literacy rate for girls is 65.46% as compared to 82.14% in case of boys [3]. The gender gap in education is very much evident. Girls, especially in remote areas, are not encouraged to go to schools to attain education because they are conventionally expected to get married, give birth to babies and take care of household chores. Thus, education of girls is considered as an unnecessary liability. Keeping in view the critical scenario, gender equality has been declared as one of the key Sustainable Development Goals 2030 that aims at providing equal access to education, employment and healthcare facilities to women and men.

Education is a powerful tool that can promote gender equality and bring a prominent change in the status of women [4]. Interventions at such levels should focus on making parents aware of the importance of education and employment for both women and men so that they have equal opportunities to choose their career and plan their future.

Schools should impart gender education among students that would possibly help them in recognizing and evaluating the negative impact of gender stereotypes. This could help in making children more gender-sensitive where they respect people's choices of activities, careers and behaviors irrespective of their gender. Gender education is not only imparted through lectures and discussions, but also by adopting gender-neutral practices that might reduce the internalization of stereotypes in children. This can be achieved by introducing teacher training programs with the help of which they can introspect their ways of teaching so as to avoid intentional or unintentional sexism among children. Such programs could recommend teachers to try to give similar duties and opportunities to both boys and girls. Both should be encouraged to take up leadership roles. An effort should be made in making textbooks and study materials more gender-neutral that does not portray men and women in specific roles or professions.

Mass Media: Mass Media has absorbed a massive space in people's lives and it proves to be a powerful tool to influence the masses. Stereotyped representations of gender in media have a huge impact on the audience. Children are the most vulnerable audience segment because it is difficult for them to differentiate between the virtual world and the real world.

It is a common sight that women are shown in advertisements of products that are related to cleaning, cooking, beauty and hygiene whereas men are mostly pictured in the commercials for cars, bikes, property, industrial and financial services. Audio-visual media involving cinema and television incessantly represents men and women in stereotypical roles [5]. Female characters are conventionally depicted as emotional, dependent, weak and sacrificing. Either they are shown as the caretakers and nurturers of their families who are housewives and have no career of their own or they are portrayed in professions stereotypical to women like that of a teacher, air hostess, receptionist, dress designer, nurse, etc. Men, on the other hand, are shown to be businessmen, industrialists, doctors, lawyers, police officers etc. Men are shown in more authoritarian and dominant positions as compared to women. Moreover, even if a woman is shown in a powerful and managerial profession, then she turns out to be the villain most of the times. A study [6] done on 318 Indian TV commercials revealed that only 7% female characters were depicted as employed as compared to 23.9% male characters and 16.1% of men were portrayed as powerful figures whereas, only 10% of women were represented as having some

authority. Such misrepresentation of men and women in TV and movies reinforces the existing gender stereotypes and notions.

One can easily look for such stereotypical portrayals in cartoon series as well. For example, famous cartoon series like Doraemon, Ninja Hattori, etc., none of them portray girls with any capacity to fight for themselves. Females are majorly shown as delicate beings that are weak and wait for a male hero to protect them. One of the studies [7] analyzed 10 famous cartoon series and showed that only 10% animated cartoons, like power puff girls, are female-centric and 90%, on the other hand, are male-centric. Using content analysis, the study suggested that male characters are often portrayed as physically strong, courageous, intelligent and dominant whereas female characters are shown as attractive, physically weak, emotional, dependent, and caring. A gender biased portrayal of characters even appears in text media including magazines, children's textbooks and storybooks. Fairytale princesses like Cinderella, Rapunzel and Snow White are shown as delicate and fair toned who wait for their strong and courageous prince to make their lives better.

Such representation in media largely impacts children's understanding of gender and shapes their attitudes, thoughts and behaviors. Children thus, internalize these gender stereotypes and continuous exposure to media tends to strengthen such gender schemas. Children learn that there are certain roles and traits expected from a boy or a girl and not being able to fit into those standards would make them a "bad boy" or a "bad girl". Moreover, such depictions also generate beauty standards at a tender age because typically a positive character always has a fair and lovely complexion while the one with a darker complexion is depicted as a villain. For example, one of the famous cartoon series '*Chhota Bheem*' depicts the female character '*Chutki*' as fair toned and rosy-cheeked girl whereas the negative character is named as '*Kalia*' (meaning black) [9].

Media has the power to shape cultural processes across the globe. With that might, it also has the power to create a gender-sensitive audience. Media could portray characters in non-stereotypical roles to make it more acceptable and easier for people to break free from gendered notions and prejudices. Media can prove to speak against gender discrimination and marginalization of women [9].

Many TV shows and movies have made an attempt to move away from stereotypical notions and have received great admiration from the audience as well. For example, Bollywood movies like, '*Mary Kom*', '*Chak de India*', '*Dangal*', etc have shown women in non-conventional roles from being a boxer, a wrestler to a hockey player. Another movie '*Ki & Ka*' has uniquely portrayed a couple in which the husband is the house-maker who does not wish to work outside the home and the wife is highly career oriented and is the breadwinner. Although it is a rare sight to see such role reversals in reality, however, it broadens the perspectives of the audiences that even men are free to become 'house-husband' by choice and women are free as well to choose their career options as per their interest. Thus such programs and movies that project men and women in non-conventional roles and professions can facilitate the viewers to think divergently and deconstruct the rigid gender stereotypes.

Moreover, media should avoid portraying unrealistic beauty standards. Most of the magazines and movies exhibit celebrities and models with pancakes of makeup and picture editing that creates unrealistic standards of beauty especially, in the mind of children and adolescents. They try to meet those standards and a failure to do so lowers their self-esteem which in extreme cases may lead to eating disorders, depression and anxiety as well. Not only the audience but the actors and actresses as well persistently try to meet the unnatural beauty standards and splurge in cosmetic surgeries. This practice has even encouraged teenagers these days to engage in such surgeries [8].

Another important practice for eliminating gender stereotypes can include the regulation of the quality and quantity of the exposure of media to children. Parents should try to watch TV and movies with children so that they can develop a healthy pattern of discussion of the distinction between reality and fantasy. This way, it becomes easier for children to avoid internalizing gender stereotypes and to develop a critical thought to what they see. They become active viewers and not just passive consumers of media.

Conclusion: Gender socialization occurs through various ecological systems in which a child is embedded. Thus, intervention at those multiple layers of socializing agents can help in deconstruction of gender stereotypes and facilitate the making of a gender sensitive generation that can see men and women as equal.

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