Religion and Gender Role Perception: An Empirical Study Among Adolescent Girls in Kerala

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Abstract:

Adolescent girls often struggle with certain specific challenges and they are unable to pick up correct habits and behaviours during this stage. A closer analysis of the issues and challenges faced by adolescent girls reveals gender based inequalities as the major reason behind such issues. Young girls are brought up to believe that they are inferior to boys and are trained to accept and adjust with all types of subordination and even violence. The different socialisation agencies teach boys and girls specific personality traits that are desirable for each gender and when girls enter the adolescence stage these gender disparities become more distinct and powerful. Discrimination and stereotypical role assignment existing in mainstream society sustains the secondary status of girls and women. The role of religion in shaping gender role perception is highlighted by the findings of the present study. The sample consisted of 600 adolescent girls from 15 schools of Malappuram district in the state of Kerala. The results reveal significant difference between the gender role perception of adolescents belonging to Christian, Hindu and Muslim religions. The findings highlight the role of religion and the responsibility of religious leaders in sensitising their members towards gender equality.

Keywords: *Adolescent Girls,Gender Role Perception,Socialisation Agencies, Gender Stereotypism,Role of Religion, Religiosity.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a critical time for all individuals as it is a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood. Several studies have documented the rapid physical, cognitive social,moral, spiritual, sexual and emotionalchangesduring this period. Due to the sudden changethe adolescents will be less prepared to adjust with the conflict that this change brings. So they face several problems related to growth and nutrition, identity crisis, peer pressure, social role, sexual attraction,mood swings etc. These problems are common for both adolescent boys and girls.

Besides these, adolescent girls face certain specific challenges such as restrictions on education and mobility, difficulties related to onset of menstruation and breast growth, lack of voice in decision making, low self-esteem,early marriage and pregnancy,eve-teasing, ,trafficking for sexual exploitation, sexual harassment and violence, cybercrime, etc.Adolescent girls often struggle with these challenges and they are unable to pick up the correct habits and behaviours during this stage.As UNFPA [37] observes when young people can make a healthy transition from adolescence into adulthood, options expand for the future.

A closer analysis of the issues and challenges faced by adolescent girls reveals gender based inequalities as the major reason behind such issues. These inequalities in girls' life begin from their birth, sometimes it begins even before their birth. As girls grow, they begin to experience these inequalities in different forms. Young girls may be brought up to believe that they are inferior to boysand are trained to accept and adjust with all types of subordination and even violence.

Kuruvilla[18] observes that "the socialization process at home instils the learned helplessness in girls, which gets strengthened and deepened with time by other agencies of socialization. In matters of literacy and education, the rate of enrolment and retention at schools are different for boys and girls. In aspects related to health and nutrition, girls and women are the last and least fed. When it comes to employment, women are the last to be hired and first to be fired. In the labour market males command the majority of jobs with high prestige, high skills and high income and this is true throughout the industrial world. Even now equal pay for equal work is not the norm in most countries".There is an urgent need to gender sensitize adolescent girls and enable them to understand their abilities and unlearn the learned helplessness which will help them to cope up with the challenges in a better manner, feel happy and proud to be a girl and plan their life for a better future.

Inappropriate Gender Role Perception

Gender roles refer to the behaviours, obligations and responsibilities that society sets for the two sexes in which men and women are expected to engage [2]&[29].The assignment of duties is done as per the clusters of traits and interest patterns commonly labelled as masculinity and femininity. Consequently these ascriptions adapt them better to specific types of occupations and social roles. As a result of these assumptions, gender role division is seen as both natural and functional [8].

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Through various forms of guidance and direction from external influences, children experience gender role socialization [3].As endorsed by Espinosa [10], throughout the lifespan, men and women develop differently and aremoulded to particular expectations of gender. This isinfluenced by a number of agencies such as media, peer group, family, school,religion,advertisements, traditions, beliefsetc.From childhood itself children absorb and develop a concept of socially constructed gender roles.Most parents dress their infants in gender-specific clothing and give them toys according to gender stereotypes[9].When they grow up, the different socialisation agencies teach them specific personality traits that are desirable for boys and girls such as boys are strong, active and intelligent while girls should be kind, gentle,obedient, caring and loving.

When girls enter the adolescence stage these gender disparities become more distinct and powerful. Girls usually bear the burden of domestic responsibilities and their mobility becomes more restricted, most often out of fear about safety. This posesa major barrier for girls to get good education, employment and participation in public activities. Generally, parents give more attention to save money for dowry to be given at the time of marriage of their daughters than investing in their education. For securing girls' future, parents may compel their adolescent daughters to marry before the age of 18 which in turn results in early pregnancy and social isolation. Moreover, these gender stereotypic norms and practiceslead to certain forms of violence against adolescent girls, such as domestic violence, sexual harassment at school and public places etc. [21][40]&[39].

Schooling also reinforces the gendered unequal socialisation. Gender biases are clearly visible in textbooks, classroom and playground, even in the minds of the teachers, administrators and peers [7]&[38].In the Keralacontext there are different streams of schooling- government schools run totally by the state, government aided private schools run mostly by different religious groups and unaided private schools run by either the religious groups or individuals or trusts. The latter two categories are permitted to run the school along religious lines, as long as the minimum standards laid down by the state syllabus and its objectives are met with. Religious private schools give their children a stronger religious foundation in their schooling through the content, classroom practices and general regulations of the school. There are schools in Kerala wherepractices like assigning specific dress codes to girls and lady teachers, separate timings and gates for boys and girls to enter and exit school, compulsory veiling for girlsetc. are practised. Such practices in turn strengthen the gender role perceptions which highlight the differences between the genders and the secrecy and vulnerability of the female body.

Growing up in a media-rich environment, girls see many images that convey information about "appropriate" and "inappropriate" roles for women [33].Mass media in general turns out to be the most powerful agent of socialization while carrying out its functions of transmission and transformation of culture. But in our country, the invisibility and inaudibility of women in society is perpetuated and enhanced by the print media while the visual media act as stronger institutions of patriarchy perpetuating the stereotypic images of women as housewives and mothers. Visual media often shrink the mental horizons of girls and women and channelize their priorities to physical appearance[17].Thus the media also has a significant role in sustaining genderstereotypism.

Religion appears to be an important factor in creating the social knowledge and discourse which constructs the individual's view of gender and the role and place of gender in society. Every religion enforces some or other restrictions on women. Morin and Guelke[23]in their attempt to study the relationship between women, religion and space have found that the space which women occupy is significant within the realm of religion. This includes different elements such as the space in which women and men are allowed to worship which is often separate for certain religions and also strict limitations on the occupation of social positions. The rituals, ceremonies and beliefs of all religions are gender stereotypic. Various studies reveal that religion has a significant role in the lives of adolescents [26] & [34]. According to Odimegwu[25] the teachings of religious institutions are likely to play a role in the formation of individual attitudes, values and decisions. In particular, religion provides certain rules for different gender roles in a community [4] & [23]. Some among them are, regulations regarding clothing [16]&[15], marriage that is predominately controlled by caste and religion [30],the exclusion of women from positions of leadership in the religious community [35]&[19] etc. Besides this during menstrual periods generally girls/women have high restrictions in entering places of worship [11]. Son preference is evident in all religions and men are considered as superior and women as inferior, impure and sinful. Religious dogmas are misinterpreted by the religious leaders and practitioners who are all men so as to keep women secondary. Among Hindus a dead parent's soul can attain heaven only if that person has a son, in his absence a grandson or another male member of the family to light the funeral pyre, and salvation can be achieved through sons who offer ancestral worship [1]

Cultural and religious customs reinforce traditional gender roles, especially those regarding women's responsibilities in the home and family.The influence of religion on women's gender role attitudes is well documented in the social science literature [5], [6], [12], [13], [14], [22], [24], [32], [36]&[41].Women who belong to and participate in orthodox Jewish and conservative Christian denominations, where issues regarding the family and gender roles are particularly important, hold more traditional gender role attitudes than women who belong to more moderate denominations or who have no religious affiliation [12], [27]&[28]. Kuruvilla[20] in her study on a sample of 632 teacher trainees from 20 B.Ed (Teacher Education) colleges of the state of Kerala found significant difference in the gender role perception between Hindu and Muslim students with the former having progressive and the latter having traditional perceptions regarding women's roles. Similarly significant difference exists in the gender role perception between Christian and Muslim students with Christian students having progressive and Muslim students having traditional perceptions about women's roles in the society. No significant difference in gender role perception was seen between Hindu and Christian students. The findings reveal the role of religion in shaping gender role perception of the sample. The sample was adult students of teacher training colleges. Hence the present attempt was made to examine the gender role perceptions of adolescent girls studying at the Plus one level.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study has been designed to attain the following objectives:

1. To assess the gender role perception of adolescent girls belonging to different religious communities.
2. To find out whether there is significant difference in the gender role perception of adolescent girls belonging to different religions.
3. To ascertain the association between religion and gender role perception.

III. METHOD

Sample

The sample consisted of 600 adolescent girls studying at plus one level of 15 higher secondary schools of Malappuram district of the state. The schools were selected randomly. Out of the total sample, 245 respondents belonged to Muslim community, 224 to Hindu and 128 to Christian communities.

Tool

The Inventory on Gender Role Perception[18] has been used for collection of data from the respondents. The inventory consists of 20 statements related to life goals and roles of men and women in various spheres of life such as education, health care, employment, property rights, political leadership, decision making power etc. There are 18 positive statements and 2 negative statements with a score of 2 marks for each and the total score coming to 40. The respondents are required to mark their agreeableness or disagreeableness with each statement. A high score indicates progressive and low score indicates traditional gender role perception.

Procedure of data collection

The principals of the higher secondary schools were contacted in advance and the date and time for data collection was fixed. The researcher herself has administered the tool directly to the students and collected the data.

IV. RESULTS

1. Genderrole perception of adolescent girls belonging to different religious communities

To assess the percentage of adolescent girls with progressive/ traditional gender role perception in the respective religions, the conventional Mean + 1σ and Mean - 1s of the scores for gender role perception have been calculated. The results are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Percentage of Adolescent Girls with High, Average and Low Scores of Gender Role Perception

Category	Percentage of Respondents		
	Muslim	Hindu	Christian
High	14.6%	36.5%	42.9%
Average	55.9%	56.82%	57%
Low	29.38%	6.6%	Nil

As evident from Table 1, 42.9% of Christian girls have high scores indicating progressive gender role perception whereas the percentage for Hindu and Muslim adolescents are 36.5 and 14.6 respectively. Similarly while there are no girls among Christian community with low scores for gender role perception, the percentage for Hindu and Muslim adolescents are 6.6 and 29.38 respectively. In all the three religious groups majority of adolescent girls belong to the category of average scores. It is also to be specifically noted that among the Muslim sample, there are much more respondents with low scores on gender role perception than those with high scores.

2. Comparison of gender role perception of adolescent girls belonging to different religions

To compare the gender role perception of adolescent girls belonging to different religions, the data obtained was analysed using t test. The data and results of test of significance of mean difference for the scores of gender role perception of adolescent girls belonging to the three major religious groups are given in Table 2.

Table 2: Data and Results of t test for Scores of Gender Role Perception of Adolescent Girls

Sample	Sample size	Mean	Standard Deviation	t value
Hindu	227	34.87	4.39	9.57**
Muslim	245	30.37	6.03	
Christian	128	35.94	2.6	12.95**
Muslim	245	30.37	6.03	
Christian	128	35.94	2.6	2.97**
Hindu	227	34.87	4.39	

** indicates a significant mean difference at .01 level

Table 2 shows that there is significant difference in the gender role perception of adolescent girls belonging to the three major religious groups of Hindu, Christian and Muslim. As indicated by the mean scores, Hindu girls have more progressive gender role perception than Muslim girls. Similarly significant difference exists in the gender role perception between Christian and Muslim girls with Christian girls having progressive and Muslim girls having traditional perceptions about women's roles in the society. As compared to Christian girls, Hindu girls possess less progressive outlooks on gender roles. Thus the analysis shows adolescent girls belonging to Christian community to have the most progressive and those belonging to Muslim community to have the least progressive outlooks on gender roles of women.

3. Association between religion and gender role perception

The association between religion and gender role perception was analysed using chi –square test. The data and results of chi- square test are given in Table 3.

Table 3: Association between Religion and Gender Role Perception of Adolescent Girls

Classificatory variable	Sample Size	df	χ2 - Value	Level of Significance
Religion	600	2	595.765	0.01

Table 3 shows that the chi square value 595.765 with 2 degrees of freedom is significant at 0.01 level indicating a statistically significant association between religion and gender role perception of adolescent girls. This in turn reveals that religion plays a highly significant role in developing gender role perception of adolescents.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of the study revealthat religion has a significant role in shaping the gender role perception of adolescent girls.Respondents of the Muslim community were found to have more traditional outlooks regarding gender roles when compared to adolescents belonging to Hindu and Christian religions.The findings are in agreement with that of Read[28]who found Muslim respondents of the sample to be more gender traditional than their non-Muslim peers.Muslimgirls of the region are culturally more restricted when compared to the other two categories. A closer analysis of the scores obtained for Hindu and Christian girls indicates that Hindu girls have comparatively traditional gender role perception than those belonging to the Christian community.The results of the study are in partial agreement with the research findings ofKuruvilla[20], according to whichthe Christian students of the sample have more progressive and Muslim students have traditional perceptions about women's roles in the society. Though Kuruvilla found no difference between Hindu and Christian respondents, a statistically significant difference is obtained in the present study. The results are substantiated by the fact thatin the Kerala context, early marriages are most common among Muslims as wifehood and motherhood are still prioritised in women's lives thanhigher education and employment. Religious teachings also support the protectionist approach whereby girls and women are expected to be taken care of and protected by men in the capacity of father or husband. In the Hindu community of the region notions regarding impurity of women's body during menstruation, son preferencefor the sake of lighting the funeral pyre, restriction of marriage outside of one's caste etc. are still prevalent. Christians constitute a minority community in the region and they support the highereducation, employment and economic independence of girls and women.

The findings also reveal that there are respondents who have higher scores for gender role perception indicative of their progressive outlooks in all the three religions studied. Hence it may be assumed that religiosity as endorsed by Read [28] might be more important in shaping women's gender role attitudes than are their affiliations as Muslims, Hindus or Christians. Further studies are required for making any final conclusion in this regard.

At the same time estimation of the association between religion and gender role perception reveals a strong association between the two. Based on these findings it can be concluded that since religion affects the gender role perception of adolescent girls, religious leaders have a major role to play in sensitising their members towards gender equality.

The findings of the studypoint out that despitethe higher literacy rate and gender development index in Kerala, traditional views and stereotypes regarding gender roles are still prevalent in the society. Research findings of Scaria[31] also highlight this fact that in Kerala remarkable achievements measured by conventional indicators have failed to elevate women from their subordinate status within a household. She found that irrespective of the strata women belong to, they are governed by the patriarchal ideology according to which women's primary duty is tied to the domestic space. Due to the inappropriate gender role perception existing in the society as a whole,girls/women are forced to comply with the traditionalroles of wife and mother and accept the secondary status as natural. It also contributes to the lower work participation rate of women in Kerala when compared to the national average. Even if women go out for work, their career options are narrowed down and jobs like that of teaching and nursing are preferred for them. Girls and women who break the stereotypes are susceptible to much resistance, very often in the form of ridicule and violence. The amounting rate of gender based violence and low percentage of Keralite women in the state assembly and the Indian parliament are also aftermaths of this traditional gender role perception existing among men and women in the society. Hence, there is an urgent need to gender sensitise all socialisation agencies and make adolescent girls realise their social and economic potential which could advance themselves, their families, and their communities.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Indian society is undergoing a rapid metamorphosis especially in matters related to gender roles. More and more girls are getting enrolled for higher education and employment and that too in non traditional courses and jobs. While this happens on one side, there is stiff resistance from several corners to the new gender roles taken up by girls and women. Correct gender role perception is essential for making proper choices regarding one's life goals, courses and careers. The shaping of gender role perception is largely dependent upon the type of socialisation that one receives from the various agencies. In the context of India, especially that of Kerala, religious attachment has increased in recent days and the operation of religious beliefs in private and public spheres is quite evident. Despite the hundred percent literacy, higher educational standards and higher political consciousness of the people, evidence of an increasingly active religious role in political debate on issues such as dress codes, marriage rituals, abortion and homosexuality is apparent in the Kerala context also.

During adolescence, once the stereotyped gender-role mind set is formed, it is very difficult to change them. Appropriate gender-role perception among adolescents is also regarded as essential for healthy transition from childhood to adulthood. Sensitisation of girls and boys to gender issues during

adolescence is essential as only then would they know the importance of working together to achieve a healthy relationship. Besides, this would also make adolescent girls realize their rights and mould them into strong women who can deal with the world in their own terms.Despite the fact that families and schools, together with social peers, media and religion continue to influence the adoption of gender-typed roles, attitudes and activities until the end of adolescence, most of the research in the area of modification of gender roles are focused on interventions in the family, media and peers and very rare studies highlight the role of religion and religious interventions.Though 21st century is acclaimed as the century of the feminine and calls upon the active agency of women in the development agenda, the traditional gender role perceptions as evident from the present study pose a stumbling block to women in taking up this agency. Based on the findings of the present study the following suggestions are made for developing progressive gender role perception among adolescents.

- Promote gender awareness among parents and other family members so as to invite their agency in promoting gender neutral parenting and eliminating social evils like dowry system, sex selective abortion, domestic violence and other discriminations from the family sphere and the society.

- Gender studies must be made compulsory component of teacher education so as to enable teachers and teacher educators function as agents of social change

- Gender awareness must be made compulsory component of in-service teacher education so as to gender sensitise the existing teaching community

- Remove all gender insensitive contents from school/college textbooks and add appropriate gender studies components in textbooks right from primary classes.

- Gender consultants must be recruited in every school /college so as to provide gender sensitive counselling to the adolescents and organise gender awareness programmes for the students and teachers.

- Gender sensitivity training should be imparted to administrators, government officials, religious leaders, media personnel, judiciary and the public.

- Encourage research institutions to undertake research on gender issues.

- Realising the need for progressive gender role perceptions in the modern society, religions must take up a proactive role to break the gender stereotypism and support the new roles of women in the society.

VII. REFERENCES

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