



Exploring everyday gendered practices and experiences among young boys and girls: A sociological study

Vindheswari Kashyap¹, Kabelo Francinah Leqhae¹, Shrishti Purabiya¹, Swasti Sikha Naik¹, Dr. Esha Chatterjee²

¹ Department of Arts and Humanities, Kalinga University, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, School of Arts and Humanities, Kalinga University, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India

Abstract

This paper examines everyday gendered practices and experiences among young boys and girls, aiming to understand how gender norms are internalized, negotiated, and sometimes resisted within social contexts. Drawing on qualitative methods, face-to-face in-depth interviews with 30 participants aged 18-25 were conducted. Findings reveal changing dynamics across family, socio-emotional aspects, activities and hobbies, and educational institutions. While traditional gender roles persist within families, yet there is evidence of renegotiation and resistance, among young boys and girls. Peer groups play a significant role in shaping emotional expression, with varied responses to gendered expectations. Despite perceived fairness in schools, underlying biases contribute to gender disparities in academic disciplines. Overall, the paper underscores the complex interplay of societal norms and individual agency in shaping gendered practices among youth, offering insights for fostering gender equality.

Keywords: Gender norms, gender equality, youth experiences, societal expectations, gender equality

Introduction

Gender is a multifaceted concept that goes beyond biological distinctions and includes how an individual view themselves and perceived by others in relation to societal expectations associated with masculinity or femininity. It examines how society influences our understanding regarding the disparities between masculinity- what society believes is an appropriate behaviour of a man, and femininity- what society views as the appropriate behaviour for a female (Connell, 2005) ^[1]. By examining various facets of human behavior, the field of gender studies aims to unravel the intricate dynamics that underpin the construction and performance of 'gender identities' (Butler, 1990) ^[2]. One of the pivotal aspects to this exploration are to understand the everyday practices and experiences that both reflect and perpetuate gendered norms within society.

In this paper, an attempt is undertaken to sociologically explore everyday gendered practices and experiences among young boys and girls. The objective is to understand how gender norms are internalized, negotiated, and sometimes resisted by individuals within their social contexts. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for uncovering the mechanisms through which gender inequality is perpetuated and for envisioning pathways towards gender equality. In this regard, the relevance of this study is to deepen our comprehension of the multifaceted nature of gender. The voices and experiences of young boys and girls, not only give insights into their lived realities but also uncover the broader societal forces that shape their perceptions and behaviors.

Objective

This paper aims to understand the behavioral dynamics and gendered practices demonstrated by young boys and girls, seeking to gain insights into their gender perspectives. By examining various aspects of their lives—including family dynamics, social and emotional factors, hobbies and

activities, media portrayals, and educational experiences—the study throws light on the influence of these factors on gendered behaviors and identities. Thus, it aims to scrutinize the presence and effects of gender norms within the spheres of children's lives.

Review of Literature

The origin of gender studies can be traced back to the feminist movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which attempted to challenge the prevailing assumptions about gender roles and advocate for women's rights and equality. During the mid-20th century, with the emergence of second-wave feminism, the scope of gender studies began to take shape as an academic discipline. It went beyond the legal rights to critically examine the social, cultural, and political dimensions of gender. Influential texts like Betty Friedan's *"The Feminine Mystique"* (1963) and Simone de Beauvoir's *"The Second Sex"* (1949) challenged the prevailing assumptions about women's roles and experiences, thus igniting a wave of feminist scholarship and activism. Gradually, scholars from varied disciplines began to explore gender from interdisciplinary perspectives. Such an interdisciplinary approach laid the groundwork for the development of gender studies as a distinct field of study.

In the field of gender studies, investigating everyday gendered practices and experiences among young boys and girls holds significant importance. Such research gives valuable insights into the processes of gender socialization and identity formation during childhood and adolescence. From an early age, children internalize societal norms and expectations regarding gender roles, behaviors, and interests through various socialization agents like family, peers, schools, and media. Gender roles, stereotypes, and discrimination have long been pervasive issues rooted in cultural norms, historical contexts, and systemic biases (Johnson, 2016) ^[3]. It has been that throughout history,

cultural, religious, and ideological factors have influenced the construction of gender roles and stereotypes. For instance, ancient Greek and Roman societies idealized masculinity as synonymous with dominance, strength, and rationality, while femininity was associated with passivity, nurturing and emotional sensitivity (Sen 2019) ^[4].

Methodology

This qualitative study explores gendered experiences and practices among young boys and girls, using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. 30 participants, of which 15 boys and 15 girls, have been chosen aged 18-25. Face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted, allowing participants to share perspectives on their experiences. Thematic analysis has been used to identify recurring themes, providing insight into how gender is experienced in daily life. The profile has been varied ranging from high school students to young professionals, thus enriching the study's findings. By using qualitative methods, this research aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how gender is negotiated by young individuals in their everyday experiences.

Findings and Discussions

The findings of this paper have been presented in distinct thematic categories, each shedding light on the multifaceted dynamics of gendered practices among young boys and girls.

Family

In exploring the perceptions of family and household expectations based on gender, respondents shared views, often shaped by their gender identity and socialization experiences. Most of the male and female respondents spoke of presence of distinctive gender roles within their families. They spoke of specific gender norms being followed in their domestic spheres. Few spoke of egalitarianism, i.e. the absence of rigid gendered expectations at home, others acknowledged the prevalence of traditional gender norms in their domestic spheres. For example, men and women opined that they have seen women predominantly engaged in household work, taking care of family, cooking, care-giving while for men, the primary responsibility is financial provision for the family. The situation was little different for some respondents too. Some men as well as women said that they saw their fathers helping out their mothers in whatever way it was possible. In such cases, the respondents did not acknowledge gendered identities in families. Interestingly, the boys whom we interviewed noted their support for egalitarian distribution of household responsibilities. Most of them seem to renegotiate the traditional gender expectations.

Instances of gendering in family was also found in terms of prescriptions for dress and going out. Most women noted that there are restrictions regarding girls staying outside home, after a certain time. This time varied between 6-8pm, but never extended beyond that. Reasons cited for this mainly include their fear of safety outside home. Restrictions were also noted for certain 'kind of dresses' to be worn. Such restrictions were not noted in case of men. However, they acknowledged the restrictions that girls face. Also, it is to be noted that women many times challenged the restrictions by parents and make their voices heard. In many cases, they are made to understand the consequences.

Sometimes, they abide by what their parents and sometimes they do not.

Gendering in family was also noted in terms of play activities. Both men and women were asked to recount their childhood experiences or talk about play for girls and boys. All of them unanimously spoke of girls playing with dolls, doll-house, kitchen set and so on while boys are seen and in fact encouraged to play with machines and cars. They even recounted their experience of seeing such instances in family. Such accounts illuminate the influence of traditional gender norms on familial dynamics, highlighting the ways in which societal expectations regarding femininity and masculinity permeate familial contexts and shape individuals' roles and responsibilities (Connel, 2005) ^[1]. While some individuals may challenge and renegotiate traditional gender roles within their families, the persistence of gendered expectations illuminates the complex interplay between individual agency, familial dynamics, and societal structures. These findings highlight the perpetuation of traditional gender roles within familial contexts and reflect broader societal norms regarding masculinity and femininity (Smith, 2018) ^[5].

Socio-Emotional Aspects

This theme tried to understand the sociological dynamics of emotional expression and gender norms within peer groups. Through examining respondents' favorite colors, perceptions of themselves as emotional individuals, and reactions to friends' emotional displays, an understanding can be made of societal expectations influencing interpersonal interactions and support mechanisms.

The respondents' choice of favourite colours, including sky blue, purple, black, green and white, reflects a diverse range of preferences, irrespective of boys and girls. There is no gender specific connotation attached here. All of them perceived themselves as emotional or sensitive individuals. This acknowledgment of emotional sensitivity suggests an awareness of their personal feelings and an openness to expressing them. This challenges traditional gender norms that prescribe emotions and sentiments for women and rationality and impersonality for men.

When asked about their responses to male friends expressing emotions like crying, the respondents exhibited a range of attitudes and behaviors. While some viewed emotional expression as 'natural' for both genders and responded with empathy and understanding, few of them expressed discomfort or avoidance. This highlights the influence of socialization and peer pressure on individuals' willingness to engage with emotions perceived as 'feminine' or 'vulnerable'. The respondents' reactions to female friends' emotional displays revealed a similar types of responses. While many expressed willingness to give emotional support and comfort regardless of gender, some suggested that girls will be able to 'give better support' to female friends due to gendered expectations of nurturing and caretaking. This highlights the intersectionality of gender and emotional labor, whereby women may be expected to perform emotional support roles more extensively than men. The findings talk about the sociological significance of gendered emotional expression within peer groups. Societal norms and expectations regarding masculinity and femininity influence the comfort levels of an individual with regard to expressing and responding to emotions, shaping interpersonal dynamics and support networks. the findings

also show the role of emotional support networks in reinforcing or challenging gender norms. While some respondents perpetuated traditional gender roles by providing differential support based on gender, others subverted such norms by prioritizing empathy and understanding, irrespective of gender. This highlights the potential for peer groups to serve as sites of resistance to gendered inequalities through promoting inclusivity and gender neutral display of emotions. This exploration of emotional expression and gender norms within peer groups provides significant insights into the sociological dynamics of gender and emotion. Feminist sociological thinkers offer critical perspectives on these issues, illuminating the ways in which societal expectations shape the experiences of individuals' and interactions. Butler's theory of gender performativity is relevant in understanding how societal norms influence emotional expression within peer groups. In this context, the respondents' acknowledgment of emotional sensitivity challenges traditional gender norms which prescribe certain emotions for women and others for men. This challenges the binary construction of gender and highlights the fluidity and diversity of emotional experiences.

Activities and Hobbies

This theme looks into the sociological dimensions of gendered perceptions and encouragement regarding activities and hobbies among respondents. By exploring opinions on gender-specific activities and experiences of encouragement or discouragement based on gender, it sheds light as to whether societal norms and expectations shape individuals' leisure pursuits and opportunities for self-expression.

Respondents showed different opinions regarding whether certain activities and hobbies are considered more suitable for boys or girls. Some of them talked about the existence of gender-specific activities, citing examples of sports like football and physically demanding tasks like lifting heavy weights as inherently masculine, while associating hobbies like painting with femininity. Conversely, many of them rejected the notion of gendered activities, advocating for inclusivity and equality in leisure pursuits irrespective of gender. In this context, respondents' opinions on gender-specific activities reflect the influence of cultural norms and expectations regarding masculinity and femininity. However, their rejection of gendered activities and advocacy for inclusivity suggest a potential challenge to these norms, and demonstrating the fluidity and diversity of gender identities (Butler, 1990) ^[2].

Educational Institutions

In schools, gender stereotyping persists through curriculum content, teaching practices, and peer interactions. R.W. Connell, in "Gender and Power," highlighted how schools, as secondary agents of socialization, contribute to the reproduction of gender inequalities. Textbooks and classroom materials often reflect gender roles and interests, inadvertently reinforcing gender biases, Aulette & Wittner, "Gendered Worlds". Also, peer interactions within schools can also exert significant pressure on students to conform to gender norms, as discussed by Simone de Beauvoir in "The Second Sex," perpetuating the policing of gender expression and behavior (Spade & Valentine, 2018) ^[6].

There were interesting opinions about equality in schools. In general, both men and women spoke of fairness and equal treatment prevailing in schools among respondents. However, upon closer examination, a more nuanced picture emerges, revealing disparities. While some completely denied any incidents of gender-based teasing or discrimination, others offered candid accounts of specific examples. In the realm of higher education, particularly in high schools and universities, a pattern emerges wherein there is a higher prevalence of women in arts and humanities disciplines and fewer women pursuing science-related fields. Further exploration uncovers underlying biases that contribute to these disparities. It becomes apparent that while girls are not actively discouraged from pursuing science fields, there is a subtle societal pressure for boys to opt for science over arts and humanities. This pressure reflects deeply ingrained gender stereotypes that equate masculinity with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, while relegating arts and humanities to the domain of femininity. Consequently, men may initially encounter resistance or skepticism when expressing interest in arts and humanities, further perpetuating the gender gap in these disciplines.

Conclusion

This paper has showed a complex interplay of adherence to and resistance against traditional gender norms. While some aspects of gendered practices persist, like the division of household labor and societal expectations regarding emotional expression, there are also instances of renegotiation and challenge to these norms, especially among younger generations. This highlights the fluid and evolving nature of gender identities and behaviors.

Overall, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of gender and the ways in which it intersects with various aspects of individuals' lives. Moving forward, addressing gender inequalities requires collective efforts from individuals, communities, and institutions to challenge and transform existing norms and create more equitable and inclusive environments for all.

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