

Role of Gender perceptions in shaping gender-based discrimination and gender equality among school-going adolescents, Telangana: A cross-sectional community-based study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Adolescence is a unique phase of life, facilitates the transition of a child to an adult, and thus is characterized with distinctive challenges as well as potentialities. Gender socialization during adolescence is shaped by the family, culture, and social construct results to development of attitudes, with more consistent and organized vision toward self and the society. **Aim:** The present study aims to identify the gender attitudes, perceived gender role, and gender discrimination among adolescents. **Materials and Methods:** Cross-sectional descriptive design adopted to study the gender perceptions among adolescents ($N = 200$) between 8th and 12th standards and meeting the inclusive criteria. Data were collected on gender attributes, attitudes, and perceived discrimination based on gender. Gender equality scores measured among students were categorized between high and low. **Results:** Findings reveal the persistence of gendered attitudes, roles, and relationships based on gender; 54% girls and 58% boys reported that boys/men are expected to be tough and less emotional and (37.5% girls; 46% boys) agreed that men were decision makers in the financial and family matters and women were felt as lesser role players. Overall, 46% were with gender-biased perceptions. Girls (18%) and boys (5%) reported sexual abuse; however, for any gender abuse, only 16% preferred to seek help from the family members. **Conclusion:** Findings of the present study highlight the need for gender sensitization in education and schools to transform gender-balanced attitudes and behaviors from young age which greatly affect the inter-personal relationships, affecting behaviors and relationships in families and societies in adulthood.

Keywords: Adolescent students, gender discrimination, gender equality and inter-personal relationships, gender perceptions

Introduction

Adolescence is the unique phase of life, which is the transition of a child to an adult and thus is characterized with distinctive challenges as well as potentialities. Adolescence involves rapid

changes in biological processes and also psycho-socio-emotional and cognitive changes. Gender, a social construct, enables the individual to shape the attitudes through gender socialization influenced by the family, culture, and societal norms and expectations. Gender socialization not only helps in the development of attitudes but also develops an organized, consistent vision toward self and society. Gender involves both biologically determined characteristics and social differences determined by the social construct. Gender perceptions, attributes, roles, and relationships are learned and acquired

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through gender socialization, which primarily take place in the family through deliberate and non-deliberate methods through processes like verbal appellation, canalization, and activity exposure based on gender that shape the gender attitudes and adopting positive behaviors. Appropriate exposure and guidance to adolescents not only help them in building gender-balanced perceptions and behaviors but also inculcate health-promoting behaviors in young age. The attitudes formed at this stage in relation to roles and responsibilities and how people interact and interrelate with one another by gender tend to impact the adulthood. The identity of masculinity and femininity attributed to men and women, respectively, may be based on gendered behaviors. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have identified and placed a due prominence to gender equality. Gender equality and balanced behaviors help in reducing gender-based disparities, gender bias, and abuse and promote an enabling environment for people. Although the journey for gender transformation began decades ago in India, the gender gaps have not narrowed much. Irrespective of social transition and economic development, these gender disparities are unlikely to be eliminated,^[1-4] with exposure to righteous knowledge and environments for children, while gender socialization enables young minds to think at an early age.

Gender, a social construct, impacts the life course in several ways, influencing the autonomy, accessibility, social privileges, and roles assigned to individuals, and in turn affects the health and quality of life of individuals. Health and well-being can be the product of the gender behaviors and reciprocation experienced by the individuals through their life course. In consideration to the need, the present study aims to assess the gender attitudes and perceptions to identify perceived differences and discrimination based on gender and behaviors in connection to gender abuse and balanced behaviors.

Materials and Methods

The study adopted a quantitative research approach with cross-sectional descriptive survey design to study the gender perceptions and attitudes among adolescent students (13–18 years) studying 8th to 12th standards in urban-based private and public-based schools of Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE syllabus). Two schools in the purview of the researcher's field domain were conveniently selected, and institutional approvals were obtained before selecting the sample.

Study setting and sample

Two schools near the communities of the researcher's work area were conveniently selected, and approval from the school principals was obtained for the study.

Sample frame: Students from 8th to 12th standards were approximately 305–325 in private (PVT) and public (NV) Navodaya Vidyalaya schools, respectively. The total number of students falling in the inclusive criteria and willing to participate was listed into a sampling frame and from each school. Simple

random sampling (lottery method) was adopted to select 100 students including boys and girls, meeting inclusive criteria.

Girls and boys/other gender adolescents, studying in 8th to 12th standards, studying Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) from the selected schools, in the age group of 13–18 years and willing to participate in the study were included in the study. Adolescents who were not available during the study period, unwell, or unwilling and could not procure parental consent to participate (students below 18 years old) were excluded from the study.

Data collection procedure

The data collection of the selected variables was performed through a structured interviewer-assisted questionnaire after explaining the study purpose and approximate time taken. Their time table and exam schedule were taken into consideration, and prior approvals and availability were procured for the study to be mutually feasible and convenient. The study variables included questions to identify perceptions on role relationships based on gender, perceived discrimination, and experience of any sort of abuse based on gender. Students were given adequate opportunity to clarify regarding the questions and meaning of the concepts. Gender equality attitudes were scored between 2 (gender-balanced responses) and 0 (gender-biased response). Gender roles and gender relations self-reported by the individual students and perceived discrimination by gender were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire on gender attributes, perceived roles, and discrimination based on gender and gender behaviors in adolescent students. An information booklet was provided at the end of data collection on gender concepts for the benefit of gender sensitivity and understanding for the participants.

Data analysis

Descriptive analyses (frequency, percentages, mean, standard deviations, and correlations) were calculated using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version. 20).

Ethical considerations

Institutional approval and approvals from the principals of the two schools were obtained; institutional ethical approval was obtained before initiating the study, and informed consent by the parents/teachers and assent from the students were secured.

Results

Findings of the study included socio-demographic information, and the outcome variables constituted questions related to gender perceptions, gender attributes, perceived gender discrimination, gender-based abuse, and gender equality scores among adolescent boys and girls. Out of 200 students, 104 (52%) were girls and 96 (48%) boys with an equal number of students ($n = 100$) enrolled from both public and private schools. There were 56% girls and 44% boys in the public school and 48% girls and

52% boys in the private school. The age of the students ranged between 13 and 18 years with a mean age of 14.9 years.

Study findings on gender perceptions [Table 1] show that 56.5% students believed that boys should be tough, 59% agreed that they refrain to play with opposite gender due to social expectations, and 48% disagreed for men being better in decision making than women; however, 42% agreed for the same. A considerably high number (69.5%) of adolescents believed biological differences being male or female is the reason for men being superior. The findings determine that 46% students' responses were gender-biased, 42% were gender-balanced, and 12% were uncertain [Table 2].

Adolescents' perceptions on gender-based discrimination were measured in 10 item questionnaires [Table 3]; findings show that 54% felt that boys/men were entitled with additional liberty and privileges than girls/women, 57.5% said girls/women required monitoring and vigilance, and 51.5% disagreed for reproductive and marital decisions of a girl/woman taken by other members of the family. Of all, 59% agreed women have a role in care taking and cooking in the family. Of all, 12% were with high gender equality perceptions, 28.5% with moderate, and 59.5% with low scores [Table 4].

The study measured the reported experience of gender-based abuse in any form (physical, psychological and emotional, verbal and sexual) at any place in adolescent students. Of the total students, 48% girls and 50% boys experienced verbal abuse, 34.6% girls and 28.8% boys agreed for some sort of physical

abuse like slap, caning, and so on, and 46% girls and 33% boys agreed for psychological/emotional abuse. Of all, 18% girls and 5% boys agreed for sexual abuse and 39.5% denied experiencing any sort of gender-based abuse [Figure 1]. In reference to the mechanism of managing any situations of intimidation or abuse, the majority of the participants (51.5%) said they would avoid the source, 16.5% reported their family member for help, 14% took friends' help, and 18.5% preferred to confront with the perpetrator [Figure 2].

Discussion

With the family being the primary social unit, adolescents adopt the prescribed and observed gender roles from home. India is a country with multi-cultures and values, greatly influencing the children in developing attitudes and behaviors in agreement with the socio-cultural norms and expectations. The patriarchal system influence in the mind sets of children plays a strong role, and the gender gap among social determinants prevails irrespective of the scientific and socio-economic revolutions. To minimize the gender inequality and gender-based violence, sensitizing young boys and girls on gender concepts and balanced behaviors with appropriate gender norms should begin early in adolescence, which contributes to the healthy development of the society. Attitudes and behaviors toward gender roles and gender-specific behavior and responsibilities in relation to the society are formed at this stage.^[5] However, the health care resources are not adequately gender-sensitive in delivering need-based care to address gender disparities. Adolescent friendly health services remain inaccessible, judgmental, and indifferent in quality and unfriendly.^[6]

Table 1: Perceived gender differences among adolescent students

Gender perceptions	Parameter	Public-based school		Private school		Total n (%)
		Girls n (%)	Boys n (%)	Girls n (%)	Boys n (%)	
1. Boys/Men should always be tough and they are looked down if emotional or Cries	Yes	27 (48.21)	30 (68.18)	26 (54.17)	30 (57.70)	113 (56.50)
	No	20 (35.71)	6 (13.64)	16 (33.33)	14 (26.92)	56 (28.00)
	Undecided	9 (16.07)	8 (18.18)	6 (12.50)	8 (15.38)	31 (15.50)
2. Prefers to play with other gender but hesitates because of social norms	Yes	42 (75.00)	18 (40.91)	34 (70.83)	24 (46.15)	118 (59.00)
	No	14 (25.00)	26 (59.09)	14 (29.17)	28 (53.85)	82 (41.00)
3. Women are usually followers, and men handle finances and make better decisions at home or work place	Yes	18 (32.14)	24 (54.55)	18 (37.50)	24 (46.15)	84 (42.00)
	No	32 (57.14)	18 (40.91)	26 (54.17)	20 (38.46)	96 (48.00)
	Undecided	6 (10.71)	2 (4.54)	4 (8.33)	8 (15.38)	20 (10.00)
4. Perceives own gender as a barrier to progress	Yes	32 (57.14)	6 (13.64)	26 (54.17)	8 (15.38)	72 (36.00)
	No	24 (42.86)	38 (86.36)	22 (45.83)	44 (84.62)	128 (64.00)
5. Biological difference being male or female determines men being powerful and/or superior	Yes	34 (60.71)	30 (68.18)	36 (75.00)	39 (75.00)	139 (69.50)
	No	22 (39.29)	14 (31.82)	12 (25.00)	13 (25.00)	61 (30.50)
6. Are men more logical and intellectual than women?	Yes	14 (25.00)	22 (50.00)	18 (37.50)	28 (53.85)	82 (41.00)
	No	42 (75.00)	22 (50.00)	30 (62.50)	24 (46.15)	118 (59.00)

Table 2: Frequency and percentage distribution of adolescents' gender attribute scores

Gender attribute scores	Public-based school		Private school		Total students		Total n (%)
	Girls n (%)	Boys n (%)	Girls n (%)	Boys n (%)	Girls n (%)	Boys n (%)	
Gender-biased	21 (37.50)	29 (65.91)	18 (37.50)	24 (46.15)	39 (37.50)	53 (55.21)	92 (46.0)
Uncertain	6 (10.71)	4 (9.09)	8 (16.67)	6 (11.54)	14 (13.46)	10 (10.42)	24 (12.0)
Gender-balanced	29 (51.79)	11 (25.0)	22 (45.83)	22 (42.31)	51 (49.04)	33 (34.37)	84 (42.0)

Table 3: Perceptions on gender-based discrimination among adolescents

Perceived gender discrimination	Parameter	Public-based school		Private school		Total n (%)
		Girls n (%)	Boys n (%)	Girls n (%)	Boys n (%)	
1. Boys/men have additional privileges in family/ society in making own decisions and move out as they like compared to girls/women	Yes	27 (48.21)	15 (34.09)	26 (54.17)	24 (46.15)	92 (46.00)
	No	29 (51.79)	29 (65.91)	22 (45.83)	28 (53.85)	108 (54.00)
2. Girls/women require close monitoring and vigilance by the men/elders in the family	Yes	17 (30.36)	21 (47.73)	19 (39.58)	28 (53.85)	85 (42.50)
	No	39 (69.64)	23 (52.27)	29 (60.42)	24 (46.15)	115 (57.50)
3. Reproductive and marital decisions for a girl to be taken by the family and other male members in the family	Yes	18 (32.14)	26 (59.09)	14 (29.17)	28 (53.85)	86 (43.00)
	No	32 (57.14)	18 (40.91)	34 (70.83)	19 (36.54)	103 (51.50)
	Undecided	6 (10.71)	-	-	5 (9.62)	11 (5.50)
4. Men need more quality care and nutrition as they work harder than women	Yes	24 (42.86)	18 (40.91)	23 (47.92)	21 (40.38)	86 (43.00)
	No	32 (57.14)	26 (59.09)	25 (52.08)	31 (59.62)	114 (57.00)
5. Men are allowed to have multiple partners, but women have to be loyal and tolerant	Yes	4 (7.14)	16 (36.36)	6 (12.50)	13 (25.00)	39 (19.50)
	No	52 (92.86)	28 (63.64)	42 (87.50)	39 (75.00)	161 (80.50)
6. Most commonly, the decision maker in the family	Wife	8 (14.29)	6 (13.64)	12 (25.00)	10 (19.23)	36 (18.00)
	Husband	45 (80.36)	32 (72.73)	29 (60.42)	32 (61.54)	138 (69.00)
	Both	3 (5.35)	6 (13.64)	7 (14.58)	10 (19.23)	26 (13.00)
7. Moving out in late hours and wearing short dresses are reasons for gender violence	Yes	14 (25.00)	21 (47.73)	12 (25.00)	24 (46.15)	71 (35.50)
	No	42 (75.00)	23 (52.27)	36 (75.00)	28 (53.85)	129 (64.50)
8. Employment is requisite to men, but it is optional to women	Yes	24 (42.86)	20 (45.45)	24 (50.00)	24 (46.15)	92 (46.00)
	No	32 (57.14)	24 (54.55)	24 (50.00)	28 (53.85)	108 (54.00)
9. Cooking and caring roles are primary for women to maintain family compared to education and career	Yes	32 (57.14)	30 (68.18)	28 (58.33)	28 (53.85)	118 (59.00)
	No	24 (42.86)	14 (31.82)	20 (41.67)	24 (46.15)	82 (41.00)
10. Women have to be polite, adjustable, and adoptable in family for the integrity of the family	Yes	23 (41.07)	33 (75.00)	18 (37.5)	38 (73.08)	112 (56.00)
	No	33 (58.93)	11 (25.00)	30 (62.5)	14 (26.92)	88 (44.00)

Table 4: Gender equality scores in adolescent students

Gender equality perception in adolescent students	Public-based school		Private school		Total students		
	Girls n (%)	Boys n (%)	Girls n (%)	Boys n (%)	Girls n (%)	Boys n (%)	Total n (%)
Higher	8 (14.29)	7 (15.91)	4 (8.33)	5 (9.62)	12 (11.54)	12 (12.50)	24 (12.0)
Moderate	13 (23.21)	16 (36.36)	14 (29.17)	14 (26.92)	27 (25.96)	30 (31.25)	57 (28.5)
Low	35 (62.50)	21 (47.73)	30 (62.50)	33 (63.46)	65 (62.50)	54 (56.25)	119 (59.5)

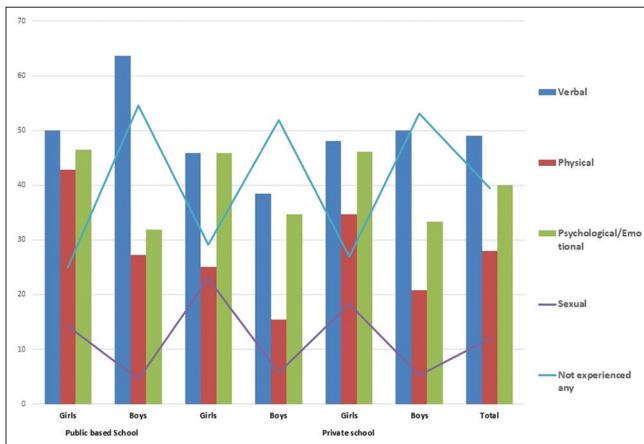


Figure 1: Self-reported experiences of gender abuse among adolescent students

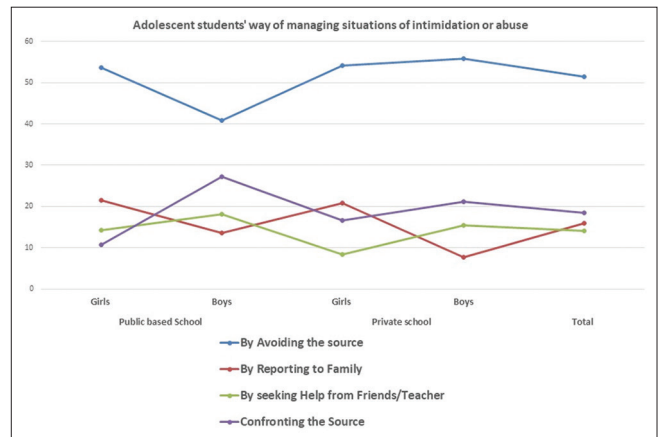


Figure 2: Mechanism of managing situations of intimidation or abuse by adolescents

There is very limited research on studying gender attributes, attitudes, and perceptions in adolescent students. Previous study^[7] on gender perceptions in students focused on specific reproductive and sexual health; the qualitative analysis^[8] explored gender perceptions in boys and girls. The present study explored

the gender attitudes and perceptions among adolescent boys and girls, and the results provide insights into adolescents' perceptions on gender roles and relationships, gender discrimination, and gender-based abuse, which have been very limited in the available literature in India.

There is evidence available on perceptions of social norms about gender or about discrimination and violence; however, the present study is unique of its kind by studying the perceived roles and relationships by gender and discrimination based on gender rooted in the socialization that impact the inter-personal relationships among individuals in their life course. Findings identify the need for gender transformation education in adolescent students on shaping gender attitudes toward gender roles and discrimination and abuse based on gender. Consistent to the existing evidence,^[9,10] the present findings identified that a significant number of adolescent girls were expected to be engaged in domestic chores unlike boys. The present findings related to attitudes toward gender imbalances in household tasks are supported by the previous research studies.^[10,11] Gender stereotype attitudes identified in the study were consistent with other existing evidence.^[12-14] Furthermore, the results highlight the need for replicating similar research in various geographical settings and populations as well as the need for gender sensitization interventions for young in specific.

Conclusion

Appropriate gender socialization, adequate information and education on gender concepts, and gender-balanced behaviors influence developing positive inter-personal relationships and health-promoting behaviors at a young age, and schools play a major role in inculcating gender-balanced behaviors in children. Proper health education with right knowledge and hands-on-training activities in boys and girls and school teachers are essential. Primary health care and health care providers at public health play a stronger role, and Government of India initiated Adolescent Health services at primary health not only for promoting health and health behaviors in adolescents but also to inculcate gender-balanced behaviors through information education and communication and improving acceptability of primary health care services to the young population in rural and urban communities. A child-to-parent approach can be another way for gender-sensitive transformation in the families. Disparities based on gender may not only act as a disadvantage/advantage to a particular gender but also influence the individual abilities to access and utilize the opportunities and privileges of the society and thus impact the physical, mental, and social health and health behaviors and well-being of the individuals, families, and populations. To minimize the gender inequality and to promote an enabling environment to girls, women, and third-gender population to eliminate disparities, discrimination, and violence based on gender, it is essential to engage boys and men who are equitable partners in the family and societal life. Appropriate gender concepts and social environments during the child development will help in the well-being of the individuals and societies. The present study findings emphasize the need for gender-sensitive education at schools to inculcate gender-equitable behaviors.

Strength of the study

The present study, the first of its kind, looked at perceptions and attitudes of adolescent students toward gender equity

and gender discrimination. Gender perceptions developed during adolescence form the basis for human relationships and behaviors influence the well-being in adulthood.

Limitations and recommendations

The present study was limited within Hyderabad city, and only two schools were included with a limited sample size in consideration to the management of students' time and financial limitations to carry out in a larger scale. Bias due to self-reporting of the data and the possibility of copying responses as the assessment were observed in groups.

A similar study in multiple and wider geographical areas with a larger sample size with correlational analysis to identify the determinants of gender perceptions would enable to build evidence further on gender perceptions and behaviors in adolescent students, and interventional gender transformation studies are required further.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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