

# Perception of gender stereotypes among adolescent boys in Chandigarh, India

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## Abstract

**Background:** In India there exists gender inequality, where men and boys occupy higher social status in comparison to women and girls. Only a handful of studies have been carried out in India, which give an insight into perception of gender norms and gender stereotypes among adolescent boys. Such studies are important as they help in designing and implementing gender sensitisation intervention strategies for adolescent girls and boys.

**Aim:** An attempt has been made in this qualitative study set in urban India i.e. Chandigarh, to try and understand perceptions related to gender stereotypes among adolescent boys living in a lower income neighbourhood.

**Methods:** Qualitative survey research design was used for the purpose of data collection. Selection of candidates was done with the help of purposeful sampling technique. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher among thirty one adolescent males living in a rehabilitation colony for slum dwellers. Interview transcripts were coded using predetermined and emergent codes to identify perceptions related to gender stereotypes.

**Results:** Major themes that were identified in the interviews included: (1) teaching is one of the best professions for women; (2) boys don't cry; (3) boys are better at mathematics and science than girls; (4) cricket is a game only meant for boys; and (5) only men are legal heirs to their parents' property.

**Conclusion:** Results from the study reflected that majority of the adolescent boys held egalitarian attitudes related to gender stereotypes discussed in the study.

**Keywords:** gender stereotypes, adolescent, boys, males, equitable, egalitarian, Chandigarh.

## INTRODUCTION

India has been ranked 140th among 156 nations by the Global Gender Gap Index 2021 (2021), after taking into consideration gender parity in the areas of political participation, education, health and economic status. It was ranked lowest among the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China & South Africa) Nation for gender parity previously (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2018). Due to the existence of regressive gender stereotypes, women and girls occupy a lower

social status in Indian society (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2015).

In society gender stereotypes portray women to be homemakers, care givers and nurturers; while men are stereotyped as aggressive, dominating and income generators for the family (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Kahalon et al., 2018). According to Thomas (2002) Stereotypical masculine attitudes associated with being, 'physically and emotionally strong, being competitive, dominating and controlling others' are reinforced among young men and

boys (Jaya et al., 2014). On the other hand girls are taught to be submissive, obedient and live as per decisions made by their family (Jaya et al., 2014).

Regressive social norms reinforce harmful perceptions about masculinity among young men and adolescent boys (Bhatla et al., 2014). Gender attitudes based on in -egalitarian gender stereotypes have long term adverse effects on the lives of women and men, girls and boys (Vyas et al., 2020).

There exists a comprehensive body of research relating to gender attitudes among young men and adolescent boys living in developed nations; unfortunately similar research is still in its nascent stages in newly industrialized countries such as India (Landry et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2017). According to the United Nations Population Division (2015), it is estimated that young men and adolescent boys (between the ages of 15 to 34 years) will constitute 32.72 per cent of India's total population by the year 2030 (as cited in Social Statistics Division, Central Statistics Office, 2017). Thus it becomes essential to carry out research in this area for the purpose of generation of meaningful knowledge; which can be used for designing and implementing essential gender sensitisation based intervention strategies.

#### Study aims

An attempt has been made in this study to explore and understand perception related to gender stereotypes among adolescent boys, taking into consideration:

- 1) social norms ;
- 2) professional stereotypes ;
- 3) academics ; and
- 4) sports.

## Methods

### Settings

As such Chandigarh is a union territory located in the northern part of India (Mohapatra, 2012). It is capital to the agrarian states of Haryana and Punjab.

In the year 2018 NITI Aayog (National Institute for Transforming India, 2018) ranked Chandigarh as one of the most gender equitable union territories of India.

Data was collected by the researcher in the month of December 2017. Data was collected in a rehabilitation colony settlement for slum dwellers in the northern part of Chandigarh (Chandigarh Administration, 2018; Mohapatra, 2012).

Being a lower income neighbourhood residents are employed in the informal and unorganised sector (Chandigarh Administration, 2018). A number of women living in the area, work as household help at minimum wages in the nearby affluent colonies. There are others who run street food stalls; sell fruits and vegetables; and work in confectionary or grocery shops.

The colony is considered unsafe for women and girls, as a number of cases of perpetration of GBV have been reported in recent years (Kahlon, 2014).

### Study design

The research was carried out as a part of the procedure for designing gender sensitisation intervention strategies specifically for adolescent girls and boys. For the purpose of data collection, qualitative survey research design was employed in the study.

### Sampling and participants

Purposeful sampling technique was used for the selection of candidates. Following were the inclusion criteria: adolescents, identifying as male and residing in the rehabilitation colony already mentioned above. Researcher interviewed a total number of 31 male adolescents, so that adequate saturation was reached.

All participants were informed about the purpose of this study. Each of the adolescent male participants were made to understand their rights a voluntary participant; and the right to withdraw at any time during the interviews. Oral consent was taken from parents or guardians of adolescent male participants who were below the age limit of 18 years.

Table 1. *Demographics of the participants.**Demographics of the participants.*

| Participant Number | Age | Has female sibling/siblings | Mother as earning member |
|--------------------|-----|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Participant 1      | 13  | No                          | Yes                      |
| Participant 2      | 13  | Yes                         | No                       |
| Participant 3      | 13  | No                          | Yes                      |
| Participant 4      | 14  | Yes                         | Yes                      |
| Participant 5      | 14  | Yes                         | No                       |
| Participant 6      | 14  | Yes                         | Yes                      |
| Participant 7      | 14  | Yes                         | Yes                      |
| Participant 8      | 14  | No                          | Yes                      |
| Participant 9      | 14  | No                          | No                       |
| Participant 10     | 15  | Yes                         | No                       |
| Participant 11     | 15  | Yes                         | Yes                      |
| Participant 12     | 15  | No                          | No                       |
| Participant 13     | 15  | Yes                         | No                       |
| Participant 14     | 16  | Yes                         | Yes                      |
| Participant 15     | 16  | Yes                         | Yes                      |
| Participant 16     | 16  | Yes                         | No                       |
| Participant 17     | 16  | Yes                         | Yes                      |
| Participant 18     | 16  | Yes                         | Yes                      |
| Participant 19     | 16  | Yes                         | Yes                      |
| Participant 20     | 16  | Yes                         | No                       |
| Participant 21     | 17  | Yes                         | No                       |
| Participant 22     | 17  | Yes                         | Yes                      |
| Participant 23     | 17  | Yes                         | No                       |
| Participant 24     | 17  | Yes                         | No                       |
| Participant 25     | 18  | No                          | No                       |
| Participant 26     | 18  | No                          | Yes                      |
| Participant 27     | 18  | Yes                         | No                       |
| Participant 28     | 18  | No                          | Yes                      |
| Participant 29     | 18  | Yes                         | No                       |
| Participant 30     | 18  | No                          | Yes                      |
| Participant 31     | 18  | Yes                         | No                       |

**Data collection**

Semi-structured interviews were carried out amongst the participants. Interview guide included open-ended questions which focused on relevant gender stereotypes that adolescents are exposed to at their age. Experts were consulted for the purpose of designing interview guide.

Adolescent male participants were interviewed at their residents or nearby locations. Interviews took approximately 30 to 60 minutes with each participant. All transcripts were noted down in

Hindi and later translated into English by the researcher.

**Data analysis**

Direct content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was used to qualitatively analyse the data. Relevant theories, research findings and literature were used to develop the very first coding scheme. As the qualitatively data was further analysed emerging codes were added to the initial coding scheme. The emergent codes were then further placed into relevant themes and sub-themes.

The researcher then requested an independent researcher in the field of qualitative data analysis, to review the thematic data analysis. Suggestions given by the independent researcher were incorporated into the existing scheme of themes and sub-themes.

## Findings / Results

Researcher was able to draw out five major themes from the interviews with the adolescent boys: (1) teaching is one of the best professions for women; (2) boys don't cry; (3) boys are better at mathematics and science than girls; (4) cricket is a game only meant for boys; and (5) only men are legal heirs to their parents' property. Themes, sub-themes and related facets that emerged during data analyses have been discussed as follows:

Teaching is one of the best professions for women

During the course of interviews the gender stereotype 'teaching in a school is the best profession for women' was discussed with the adolescent boys. From among the participants interviewed, a number of them agreed that it is indeed one of the most suitable professions for women.

Sexually harassed

They were of the opinion that schools provide a safe working environment:

In schools women teachers work with children and adolescent students. Young girls and boys are respectful towards their teachers. It is impossible that any case of sexual harassment will take place against a teacher in a school (Participant-10).

Timings

Some of them also mentioned about the working hours being more suitable for women:

Working in a school doesn't involve long working hours; nor does it one has to stay out of the house at night. Thus teaching in a school is the best job for women and girls as it helps to maintain a balance between professional and family life. (Participant- 12)

Career of their choice

Out of those who did not agree (Total number-14), they had to say that there is no difference between women and men, girls and boys, thus women and girls have the freedom to decide for themselves, their career paths and choices:

At times women and girls are more brave and fearless than men. In India, many women decide to join the army and police force to serve the country. (Participant-30)

Some were of the view that women and girls should not be forced into taking up professions, which are not of their choice:

Women and girls should always be able to choose for themselves, the profession/ career they want to pursue. They should be able to do any job, as long as it involves good and decent work. (Participant -13)

Salary

Others considered salary as criteria for making professional choices:

Salary is a very important criteria while choosing a job, rather than taking up a job that others think is best for you. (Participant 3)

Other professions are as good

There were participants who were of the view that with time other professions were also as good as teaching:

A number of women and girls join the police and army now days. Many others work in the corporate sector in big cities. In metropolitan cities young women and girls do jobs that involve night shifts. Things are changing around us for the betterment of women and girls. (Participant-19).

Boys don't cry

While giving their opinion regarding the masculine stereotypy 'boys don't cry', a number of boys stated that they were pressurised to hide their feelings and emotions, due to societal expectations from them:

If you cry in front of others, it shows that you are weak. (Participant-27)

### Avoid embarrassment and bullying

The boys explained that they had learnt to internalise their emotions so as to avoid getting embarrassed and bullied:

If a boy cries in public others taunt him by saying, 'You are a boy, you should not be crying. Only girls cry, because they easily get scared and intimidated, while boys don't.' (Participant-3)

When boys cry in public, others make fun of them. But when girls cry, no one laughs at them or makes fun of them. (Participant-6)

If a boy cries in front of his friends his image gets spoilt. (Participant-11)

Boys lose their respect if they cry in front of others. (Participant-13)

It's not good to share your feelings with other boys; they will take you as a joke. (Participant – 14)

Boys get embarrassed more easily than girls. (Participant-15)

Other people ridicule you, if you cry in public. (Participant-16)

When a boy cries and expresses his emotions in front of other boys, they make fun of him and start disrespecting him. (Participant-31)

### Parenting

There were some who described how boys were groomed at home by their parents, that crying in front of others was a sign of weakness:

Girls are taught at home from the very beginning 'you are weak', so they do not hesitate to cry in the company of others. But boys are taught the very opposite by their parents that 'boys do not cry', it is 'shameful' for boys to do so. (Participant-18)

### Boys are stronger than girls

During the interviews some of them described girls being emotionally weaker than boys; thus it was acceptable for girls to cry in public, but not boys:

Boys are able to control their emotions. But girls are not that emotionally strong. (Participant -5)

When boys cry in public, friends make fun of them. But no one makes fun of girls, when they

cry in public, because they are supposed to be vulnerable. (Participant-24)

Boys are stronger than girls. They are better at handling situations than girls. (Participant-30)

### Trustworthy friends

Few of the boys were of the opinion, that boys should reveal their vulnerable side, only in the company of trustworthy friends:

Boys should cry and express their emotions only in the company of their close friends. (Participant-17)

You should not cry in public, people will make fun of you. Boys should cry and share their feelings only in the company of trustworthy friend. (Participant-24)

### Boys can also be vulnerable

While a number of boys were of the view that boys should not reveal their vulnerable side, there were some who had the very opposite view:

There is nothing wrong in showing your feelings to your parents and friends. It is wrong to think that only boys are rough and tough; so they should not cry and share their feelings. (Participant-1)

It is not necessary that boys are stronger than girls. It can be vice-versa also. (Participant-8)

I do cry when I am upset. I do not control my tears and emotions. If girls can cry so can boys. (Participant-29)

### Control over emotions

There were some who expressed their vulnerability in other ways:

Sometimes it becomes very difficult to control your emotions. You cannot help, but cry. (Participant-9)

In certain situations you cannot control your emotions. (Participant-20)

### Seeking support

Another adolescent boy described it as a way of reaching out and seeking comfort from others:

When we share our feelings and emotions with others, they can help us in so many ways. (Participant-4)

### Deal with stress

In the view of one of the older participants, it was a way of dealing with various pressures during adolescent life:

One should not be embarrassed or shy of crying in front of others. Expressing one's emotions and grievances helps to relieve stress. (Participant-28)

Boys are better at mathematics and science than girls

Interviews with the participants revealed that, majority of the adolescent boys disagreed with the statement 'boys are better in mathematics and science than girls':

It is a misconception that boys are better in mathematics and science than girls. Nowadays, there are so many women who work in banks. Most of the teachers who teach mathematics and science are women. (Participant-30)

Girls are better at mathematics and science

In quite a few cases boys believed that girls are better at mathematics and science than boy:

Girls are better at mathematics and science, because girls in my class get better marks in their exams than boys. (Participant-8)

In my class, it's the opposite, girls are better at mathematics and science than boys. (Participant-26)

Academic performance is gender neutral

While there were others who believed that both girls and boys could be good at mathematics and science. Gender did not have an effect on academic performance; rather it was effected by other factors such as intelligence and hard-work:

Both girls and boys are good at mathematics and science in my class. (Participant-14)

Aptitude

Adolescent boys spoke about aptitude when academic performance in mathematics and science was discussed with them:

Ability to perform well in mathematics and science depends on one's aptitude rather than gender. (Participant-13)

Diligence

There were others who cited hard-work and diligence as factors for performing well in mathematics and science:

Almost all the students studying in my class, whether girls or boys; do well in mathematics and science, because they work very hard when it comes to their studies. (Participant-7)

Amongst the students I study with, boys perform better in mathematics and science than girls. This is because boys in my class are more hard-working than the girls. (Participant-18)

Girls are better at mathematics and science, because they are more hard-working than boys. (Participant-20)

Cricket is a game only meant for boys

Adolescent boys expressed egalitarian views when cricket was discussed with them. Only a handful of the boys considered it a masculine gendered game.

India has a women's and a men's cricket team

Boys with egalitarian views spoke about the success of Indian women's cricket team, during the Women's Cricket World Cup (2017), where the team came second to England. They were proud of not only the men's cricket team but also the women's cricket team:

Men's cricket team lost the world cup in 2015. But the Indian women's cricket team has made a mark for itself in the recent world cup that took place in England during June-July, 2017. (Participant-18)

It's a game both for girls and for boys

A number of boys believed that cricket was neither exclusively a girls' game nor a boys' game. They believed that cricket as a sport belonged to everyone; and everyone should play it, irrespective of gender:

Girls have as much the right to play cricket, just like boys. It's a gender neutral game. (Participant-11)

Nowadays both girls and boys play cricket. It's incorrect to stop girls from playing cricket just because they are girls. (Participant-28)

Girls cricket team in school

Some of them spoke about the girls' cricket team in their school:

In my school, the girls' cricket team always win in the inter-school matches they participate in. But the boys' cricket team does not perform that well. (Participant-6)

My school has a very good girls' cricket team. They are very good at the game. (Participant -9)

Encourage girls to play the game

The adolescent boys also believed that it was important to encourage girls to take up cricket as a game:

Girls should play cricket, it will help to gain confidence in themselves. (Participant-13)

If girls want to play cricket, they should be encouraged to take-up the game. (Participant-17)

Cricket is a masculine game

Only a handful of the adolescent boys considered it be boys'/men's' game:

Cricket is mostly played by boys, so it is a boys' game. (Participant-14)

Though cricket is not meant for girls, but they can still play the game, only if their parents allow them to do so. (Participant-25)

Only men are legal heirs to their parents' property

Excluding one participant, participants believed that girls and boys have equal rights to inheritance in their family's assets.

Both are a part of the same family

The adolescent males laid emphasis on family bonding and relations between women and men, girls and boys. A number of them considered it to be essential to make women and girls feel, as much a part of the family as others:

Sisters and brothers are part of the same family, both are special. It's not that only brothers are special. They both should get equal share in their family inheritance. (Participant-1)

Inheritance should be equally divided among sisters and brothers, otherwise sisters might feel left-out and neglected. (Participant-25)

If women and girls of the family, are not given what is rightfully theirs; it may lead to misunderstanding and animosity among siblings. (Participant-28)

Whatever belongs to me also belongs to my sister, which includes tangible assets of the family. This helps to maintain warmth and good relations among siblings. (Participant- 29)

Secure their future

Adolescent boys explained how equitable division of family resources between girls and boys, sisters and brothers, would help not only to make the son's future but also the daughter's future secure:

Sisters also need support from their family. Who has seen the future? Inheritance not only acts as a safety net for brothers but also for sisters. (Participant – 7)

Receiving part of the family assets is a way of making women and girls financially independent and sound. (Participant-9)

My parents do not discriminate between me and my sister. If a woman or a girl has a bad marriage, property and inheritance will definitely help her to cope up with unforeseen circumstances. (Participant-17)

Daughters are more attached to parents

Some spoke about daughters being more caring and affectionate towards parents than sons; thus they were in favour of sisters having equal right to inheritance in the family assets:

If a brother abandon's his family, or disowns his family; at least his sister or sisters will have assets to fall back on and take care of their parents. (Participant- 6)

If a brother runs away from home or leaves for a foreign country; at least his sister will have access to assets of the family; which will financially help her to take care of her parents. (Participant – 18)

## Discussion

This qualitative study set in urban India, explored perception of gender stereotypes among urban male adolescents living in Chandigarh. Five major stereotypes were explored during analyses of qualitative data: (1) teaching is one of the best professions for women; (2) boys don't cry; (3) boys are better at mathematics and science than girls ;( 4) cricket is a game only meant for boys; and (5) only men

are legal heirs to their parents' property. Based on these five major themes ideas and opinions of the adolescent boys have been discussed further.

There is a widely held belief in Indian society, that working in a school is one of the best and safest profession, for women as it helps them to 'maintain a healthy balance between their professional and personal life' (Vajiravel, 2015). Nearly half of the adolescent boys supported the stereotype. They were of the view that working in schools provides a safe work place environment and does not involve long working hours. Out of those who did not agree, they had to say that there is no difference between women and men, girls and boys; thus women and girls have the freedom to decide for themselves, their career paths and choices. Some were of the view that women and girls should not be forced into taking up professions, which are not of their choice. Others considered salary and safety as criteria for making professional choices.

Hegemonic masculinity is reinforced by parents and peers amongst adolescent boys (Blum et al., 2017). Adolescent boys spoke about being pressured to internalise and hide their emotions, rather than crying in front of others. The participants revealed that they were told by their parents, as boys they should not cry in public; boys who cried were weak and sissy in their demeanour. They also explained that if they cried in front of their peers, they were either bullied or made fun of by others. In India masculinity is synonymous to machismo; toughness and aggression are engrained as masculine traits among adolescent males; while being emotional and vulnerable are labelled as not man enough qualities (DASRA, 2015). At the same time a number of boys considered 'crying' and being able to share their emotions as a form of catharsis and stress buster. Going against conventional beliefs, they recognised the importance of mental health and well-being at this age.

The adolescent boys believed in aptitude, working hard and diligence as requirements for performing well in mathematics and science. They did not believe that gender made boys more intelligent or better performers at mathematics and science than girls. In a similar study carried out in Gujrat, boys considered themselves academically more competent in mathematics and science (Kurtz-Costes et al.,

2011). The research suggested that academic stereotyping that existed in the region to the above perception, might have stemmed from the belief that it was more important for boys to pursue higher education than girls. In India boys are encouraged to take up STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) field subjects; as these subjects are thought to be requiring physical labour and eventually lead to lucrative employment opportunities (Sekhar & Parameswari, 2019).

When it came to discussing cricket with the boys, most of them considered it to be a gender neutral game. Studies suggest construction of gender attitudes among adolescents are influenced by a number of forces including media and institutional setups (Patel et al., 2021; Kågesten et al., 2016). Participants were proud of the Indian Women's cricket team which had recently won the Women's Cricket World Cup in 2017. The team received extensive media coverage and viewership in their home country during the tournament (Das, 2019). Government school located in the neighbourhood has a cricket ground and training facilities both for girls and boys (Department of Education, Chandigarh Administration, 2017). As mentioned by the participants themselves, Under-19 (U-19) girls' cricket team, belonging to the neighbourhood school, had also recently won the Inter School Cricket Tournament U-19 Girls. Such achievements may have helped in normalising cricket as a sports activity for all adolescents irrespective of gender.

The adolescent male participants believed that both sons and daughters have equal rights over their family inheritance. They were of the opinion that it was essential to make daughters feel as much a part of the family as sons. The participants considered girls to be more attached and affectionate towards their parents. At the same time a number of them explained the fact that family inheritance provided a safety net not only for brothers but also for sisters. Under Hindu Law, both sisters and brothers have equal rights over their mother's or father's property (NRI Legal Services, 2021).

NITI Aayog (2018) has rated Chandigarh as one of the most gender equitable union territories of India. Adolescent boys expressed egalitarian gender attitudes related to most of the stereotypes. Though they supported the view 'being a school teacher is the best job for women



and girls'. A number of participants also believed in internalising their feelings and emotions rather than crying; for the fear of being shamed or bullied.

### Limitations and future directions

The present study was carried out in a slum settlement located in the city; adolescent boys from other neighbourhoods were not included. This qualitative research used purposive sampling technique. It was conducted with the help of a semi-structured questionnaire designed by the investigators. Due to these reasons it must be mentioned, that it might be difficult to generalize results of this qualitative research. Lastly, this study is based only on the two gender binaries i.e. male and female.

It is suggested that for future research diverse sample should be taken into account by also including adolescent boys from other neighbourhoods. To further strengthen results of the study, observation technique and group discussions can also be included. Mixed methods research is another way of reaching findings that can be generalized. Issues related to gender roles that go beyond the two gender binaries i.e. male and female can also be explored.

By carrying out research on similar lines, gender sensitization intervention strategies targeting adolescent girls and boys can also be adapted or designed.

### Conclusion

This study was undertaken with the purpose of exploring and understanding perceptions of gender stereotypes among adolescent males living in Chandigarh, India. Qualitative research findings were categorized and sub-categorized in to themes relating to social norms, professional stereotypes, academics and sports. Barring a few concerns, majority of the adolescent male participants expressed equitable gender attitudes. In situations where they did express in-egalitarian views such as professional stereotyping, they did so out of concern and not as an expression of female subordination to men. . Though it needs to be mentioned here that a number of the boys believed that it was most un-masculine for men and boys to cry and express

their emotions in front of others. These qualitative explorations help to identify stereotypical beliefs and attitudes that pose as potential threats not only for women and girls, but also to the boys themselves. At the same time these results also give us reasons to be happy, as in a number of instances the boys have supported gender equitable norms and attitudes; and thus rejecting conventional gender stereotypes.

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### Conflict of Interest:

The author declares that there exists no conflict of interest.

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