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Research Article

Adolescents' Perceptions of Gender Discrimination in India: Do Perceptions Differ for Boys and Girls?

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Abstract

Despite the gains India has made in recent decades, it remains a country with vast gender inequities. Gender sensitization and empowerment programs aimed at young people, precisely at the time when they are forming their gender attitudes, have the potential to diminish gender inequity in the long-term. This study represents data from 36 qualitative in-depth interviews conducted amongst adolescent boys and girls enrolled in grade 7 in northern India, in schools that serve under-resourced communities. The interviews asked questions related to positive youth development, gender roles, violence, and locus of control.

The results of the qualitative analysis provide insights into how adolescents perceive gender discrimination in their families and communities. The majority of expectations for boys revolved around physical labor, while, for girls, gender roles were primarily focused on stopping education early to get married and take care of the household and children. Many of the responses from both boys and girls on privileges/restrictions were related to daughters not being fully educated while sons often were. Furthermore, when comparing between boys and girls (attributes) and understanding superiority, many participants noted there is a clear preference of boys compared to girls. Girls also had a higher proportion of violence codes compared to boys, perhaps because many girls felt they were hit more frequently than boys.

The results of this qualitative analysis provide direction for both future research as well as the development of gender sensitization interventions specifically designed for adolescents.

Keywords:
Adolescent health; gender attitudes and norms; qualitative research; adolescents in India; adolescent girls; youth development; health and well-being

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Introduction

Gender discrimination negatively influences health, education, and safety of girls and women throughout their lifespan. India ranks 125 out of 159 countries on the gender inequality index, and discrimination starts early with staggering rates of female feticides [1]. South Asia is also home to 42% of all child brides worldwide with one-third of child brides being from India [2], and India also records a crime against a woman every two minutes [3]. Increasingly, more efforts are being made to address gender disparities by changing gender norms and attitudes among parents, teachers and community leaders in an effort to improve the health and well-being of girls and women. However, to date, little has been focused on understanding adolescents' perceptions of gender discrimination and attitudes and whether transforming their attitudes may lead to sustainable long lasting change.

Gender norms are defined as culturally shared expectations about the characteristics that men and women should possess and how they should behave [3]. Furthermore, these norms are the strongest factors influencing an adolescent's gender-related attitudes [4,5,6]. Construction of gender attitudes and perceptions of gender norms occurs during adolescence and during early adolescence, an individual's perceptions about gender norms begin to form and are still malleable [3]. Adolescents become increasingly aware of the expectations they must fulfill as a man or a woman and face increasing pressure to conform to the appropriate gender roles of society [3]. Young adolescents are actively engaged with changing gender norms as they support, resist, or alter them, and this process is vulnerable to change.

Over the past few decades, the positive youth development (PYD) perspective has become the main approach to measure adolescent development [7]. PYD focuses on characteristics that enable youth to develop positive characteristics and have healthy and successful outcomes as they age [7]. PYD works to maximize traits that have been linked to positive development and to gender equitable attitudes [7]. The PYD perspective created the framework for the Five C's Model, which states that youth who show Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring are more likely to be on a better life trajectory in regard to mutual respect with self, family, and community [7]. In addition, locus of control has been found to be an important indicator in how a person, particularly an adolescent, behaves and interprets their environment [8]. Locus of control refers to whether a person believes that events or

outcomes in her life are contingent on her own behaviors and attributes or whether they are manipulated by outside uncontrollable forces [8].

Gender sensitization and empowerment programs aimed at young people, precisely at the time when they are forming their gender attitudes, have the potential to diminish gender inequity in the long-term. The present study examines the perceptions of and attitudes towards gender discrimination; PYD; and locus of control among middle school aged adolescents in northern India in an effort to guide future research and the development of gender sensitization and empowerment programs specifically tailored for adolescents.

Materials and Methods

Participants and Procedures

The present data comes from qualitative interviews that were conducted with adolescent boys and girls in grade 7 in northern India (Punjab, Rajasthan and Delhi). Most research on gender norms in adolescence has occurred in high-income countries and little is known about gender attitudes among young adolescents in low- and middle-income countries, and even less is known about gender attitudes in rural areas. Furthermore, within India the northern states suffer from poor health and education indicators compared to the rest of the country. Therefore, to fill the gaps in what is known, this study focused its efforts on communities in northern India, including rural communities.

The study participants were enrolled in schools that serve under-resourced and low socioeconomic communities. One-on-one in-depth qualitative interviews of 36 adolescents were conducted to adequately reach saturation. Adolescents were purposefully selected for the interviews to yield an almost equal distribution by gender and sibling composition. It was hypothesized that variations in sibling composition would yield greater diversity in participant responses particularly with respect to gender attitudes and norms.

The Interview Guide consisted of questions asking participants about their observations of gender discrimination in their community, school, or home. Participants were encouraged to freely express their opinions and provide specific examples of their own experiences or those of others. Questions were also posed to better understand if they had ever talked to their parents, teachers, friends, or family members about gender differences and discrimination, and if they had ever considered how they could make a change in their community. Each interview was conducted by a trained researcher and took place at school in a private setting for approximately 60-90 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Hindi, audio recorded, and transcribed and translated into English for analysis. All procedures for this study, including protection of human subjects, were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the GW Office of Human Research (IRB #071710).

Measures

The following variables and constructs were identified in each transcript (Table 2 provides the abbreviated codes).

Gender Equality

The Definitions for Gender Equality were as Follows:

Gender Roles: Expectations of what an individual is supposed to or required to do based on familial, cultural, and/or social norms.

Privileges: Advantages that members of one gender face over the other gender.

Restrictions: Disadvantages that members of one gender face over the other gender.

Attributes: A direct comparison between boys and girls in which boys are considered to be more superior to girls.

Violence: Experiences of or beliefs regarding physical and/or sexual abuse of girls and women.

Gender Roles, Privileges, and Restrictions variables were created in two ways, with one being for boys only and the other for girls only (i.e. Boy Privilege, Girl Privilege, Boy Restriction, Girl Restriction,

etc.). The Attributes variable was left as one variable because all statements had to be a direct comparison between boys and girls. Similarly, the Violence variable was not separated by gender because all statements were episodes of or beliefs regarding violence that only girls experienced.

The PYD 5 C's

These definitions were adapted from the 5 C's model of positive youth development [7]. For each of the 5 C's, interview responses were labeled as "positive" if the adolescent displayed the specific trait, or "negative" if the adolescent showed a clear lack of the trait (i.e. Positive Competence, Negative Competence, Positive Confidence, Negative Confidence, etc.). Below are the explicit definitions that were used for each of the 5 C's [7].

Competence

Positive view of one's actions in domain specific areas including scholastic, social, emotional, and cognitive competence. Scholastic competence pertains to school grades, attendance, and test scores. Social competence pertains to interpersonal skills like conflict resolution or making friends. Emotional competence pertains to self-regulation, coping, and expression skills. Cognitive competence pertains to using skills, knowledge, or resources to solve problems.

Confidence/Voice

An internal sense of self-worth and self-efficacy; one's global self-regard, as opposed to domain specific beliefs.

Connection

Positive bonds with people and institutions that are reflected in bidirectional exchanges between the individual and peers, mentors, and family, in which both parties contribute to the relationship.

Character

An individual's demonstration of various traits including integrity and morality, desiring to help others, and respecting societal and cultural rules and differences.

Caring

A sense of sympathy and empathy for others

Locus of Control

Locus of control was defined from the I-E scale as follows [8]:

External

When a reinforcement is perceived by the subject as following some action of his own but not entirely contingent upon his action, then, in our culture, it is typically perceived as the result of luck, chance, fate, as under the control of powerful others, or as unpredictable because of the great complexity of the forces surrounding him. When the event is interpreted in this way by an individual, we have labeled this a belief in external control.

Internal

If the person perceived that the event is contingent upon his own behavior or his own relatively permanent characteristics, we have termed this as belief in internal control.

Analysis

Using a preliminary coding scheme, four researchers coded the first four interview transcripts separately and then compared results. After working through the initial transcripts, the coding scheme was revised to the final measures as documented above in order to more accurately reflect the purpose of this study and the specific research questions our team sought to answer. Once the final coding structure was decided upon, only one researcher coded the remaining interviews in an attempt to minimize biases

Table 1. Demographics of Study Population

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Girls	22	61.1
	Boys	14	38.9
School State	Punjab	12	33.3
	Rajasthan	12	33.3
	Delhi	12	33.4
Sibling Gender	Girls with no brothers	5	13.9
	Girls with 1+ brother	17	47.2
	Boys with no sisters	6	16.7
	Boys with 1+ sister	8	22.2

from multiple researchers coding different transcripts. The final database quantified how often each variable was coded, as well as unique quotes or common themes that stood out from the interviews. The transcripts were divided based on whether the student was a boy or a girl, in addition to if they had siblings of the opposite gender.

Results

Sample Characteristics

(Table 1) show the sample characteristics of the 36 adolescent boys and girls in this study. Of the 36 adolescents, 61.1% (N=22) were girls and 38.9% (N=14) were boys. An equal number of adolescents were in each of the three states this study was analyzing, with 12 studying in Punjab, 12 studying in Rajasthan, and 12 studying in Delhi. Within the sample group, 30.6% of participants had no siblings of the opposite gender, whereas 69.4% had at least one sibling of the opposite gender.

(Table 3) shows the frequencies of each of the measured variables from the qualitative baseline interviews of all 36 students. Table 4 shows the number of times each construct was coded in the interviews separated by gender of the participant. Table 5 and Table 6 summarize the number of codes of each construct depending on the participant's gender in addition to the gender of his/her sibling(s).

Gender roles, defined as expectations of what an individual is supposed to or required to do based on familial, cultural, and/or social norms, accounted for 27.2% of the total codes that were recorded from interviews. Of the 27.2% of all gender role codes, 19.7% was specifically for girl gender roles and the remaining 7.5% covered boy gender roles. The majority of expectations for boys revolved around physical labor, such as "(picking) up heavy things," or "[hanging] the charts on the wall." A few participants discussed that boys must complete their education because they must provide for their family as men. One participant responded, "A boy needs to answer each and every question he has been asked because he has to take responsibility of his family as a son, as a husband, as a father for his kids and as a grandfather for his grandsons."

Instances of girl gender roles were primarily focused on stopping education early to get married and take care of the household and children. One participant said, "The life of a girl is to get married, to go (to the husband's) home, then to work in the house. Clean and serve the house, take care of her mother-in-law. Do all the work, take care of the children and complete all the domestic work. Such is her life." Another student responded, "Being a girl in India means that you have to do everything for your family and fulfill their expectations. (For example), if they say you have to get married, then you have to marry in tenth class." There were clear expectations for being a respectable girl, where "a girl is considered to be good if she wears a salwar suit, stays at home, braids her hair, and does household chores. If a girl

Table 2. Key of constructs and their respective abbreviated codes.

Construct	Code
Positive Character	PCH
Negative Character	NCH
Positive Competence	PCP
Negative Competence	NCP
Positive Connection	PCN
Negative Connection	NCN
Positive Confidence/Voice	PCV
Negative Confidence/Voice	NCV
Positive Caring	PCR
Negative Caring	NCR
Gender Equality- Boy Gender Roles	G-BGR
Gender Equality- Girl Gender Roles	G-GGR
Gender Equality- Boy Privilege	G-BP
Gender Equality- Girl Privilege	G-GP
Gender Equality- Boy Restriction	G-BR
Gender-Equality- Girl Restriction	G-GR
Gender Equality- Attributes	G-A
Gender Equality- Violence	G-V
External Locus of Control	E-LOC
Internal Locus of Control	I-LOC

wears shorts, then people say that she is not a good girl, does not stay at home, and her parents have not taught her anything."

Boy privileges, defined as advantages that boys have over girls, accounted for 11.6% of the total codes that were recorded from interviews. Girl restrictions, defined as disadvantages that girls have compared to boys, accounted for 19.6% of the total codes. Of all codes that were documented for male participants, 16.0% were represented by boy privileges, while only 9.9% of all girl codes were represented by boy privileges. Many of the responses that were collected from both male and female participants were related to the issue that daughters were not fully educated while sons often were. One student recalled a story from a previous classmate, "There was girl in my school. She was 15 years. She left the school in 6th class and she is married now. Her brother is still studying. This shouldn't happen." Another student shared that "(parents) get the girls married after they complete the 8th class but they encourage the boys to study ahead." Another theme that came up several times from different participants was female infanticide. One person said that, "Somewhere in India, there are some villages where girls are thought of as nothing…they are killed before they are even born."

Attributes, defined as a direct comparison between boys and girls in which boys are considered to be more superior to girls, accounted for 3.2% of the total codes that were recorded from interviews.

Table 3. Overall frequencies and percentages of specific constructs

Construct	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
PCH	17	2.9
NCH	0	0
PCP	6	1.0
NCP	1	0.1
PCN	117	19.9
NCN	23	3.9
PCV	15	2.6
NCV	3	0.5
PCR	1	0.1
NCR	0	0
G-BGR	44	7.5
G-GGR	116	19.7
G-BP	68	11.6
G-GP	6	1.0
G-BR	4	0.7
G-GR	115	19.6
G-A	19	3.2
G-V	33	5.6
E-LOC	0	0
I-LOC	0	0

Girls reported a higher proportion of these views compared to their male counterparts. In some cases, participants would express a view they did not personally agree with themselves but felt others in the community held. For example, one girl said, “In our house it’s not there, but there are people who think a girl cannot do what a boy can do. Girls are weak and not good in games and we should not let them study more.” In other cases, however, participants shared their own beliefs that displayed a clear preference for boys compared to girls. One student shared his opinion that, “Boys are more intelligent, girls are less. Girls study equally but they just don’t remember everything so they are left behind.”

Violence, defined as experiences of or beliefs regarding physical and/or sexual abuse of girls and women, accounted for 5.6% of the total codes that were recorded from interviews. Girls had a higher proportion of violence codes compared to boys, perhaps because many girls felt they were hit more frequently than boys. One girl stated, “When girls commit any mistake, they are beaten, but boys are not beaten for any mistakes they make.” Several responses were centered on the idea that violence was used to remind girls that they meant nothing. A girl participant said, “(the parents) beat their girl child who wants to study further despite (plans of) getting married.” Another student shared the aggressive tendencies many boys have by sharing, “Some boys are such that after they get married, they beat their wife so badly as if they are nothing to them.” There were also examples of violence occurring because

Table 4. Overall frequencies and percentages of constructs stratified by gender

	Girls		Boys	
Construct	**Frequency (N)**	**Percentage (%)**	**Frequency (N)**	**Percentage (%)**
PCH	8	1.9	9	5.6
NCH	0	0	0	0
PCP	6	1.4	0	0
NCP	1	0.2	0	0
PCN	101	23.7	16	9.9
NCN	18	4.2	5	3.1
PCV	10	2.3	5	3.1
NCV	3	0.7	0	0
PCR	1	0.2	0	0
NCR	0	0	0	0
G-BGR	29	6.8	15	9.3
G-GGR	79	18.6	37	22.8
G-BP	42	9.9	26	16.0
G-GP	2	0.5	4	2.5
G-BR	2	0.5	2	1.2
G-GR	80	18.8	35	21.6
G-A	17	4.0	2	1.2
G-V	27	6.3	6	3.7
E-LOC	0	0	0	0
I-LOC	0	0	0	0

a girl had told a friend about family relationships or expectations that were supposed to be kept private. One girl told a story of her friend who was abused because she shared that her parents wanted her to leave school to get married early. "Vishakha pinched me on the side and told me to (stop talking) otherwise they will beat her again. When I went back to my house, Vishakha told me that 'after you left my mother and father put a hot stove on my hands.' She still has scars on her hands. Her mother was cursing at her and she didn't even give medicine to her for the burns."

Discussion

The results of the qualitative analysis provide insights into adolescents' perceptions, which have been significantly lacking in previous literature. Furthermore, the results provide direction for both future research as well as the development of gender sensitization interventions specifically designed for adolescents.

Regardless of an adolescent's gender, similar concepts and themes were discussed with respect to perceptions of gender roles and gender equality. Most adolescents believed that boy gender roles included

Table 5. Overall frequencies and percentages of constructs for girls depending on the gender of their sibling(s).

	Girls with no brothers		Girls with 1+ brother(s)	
Construct	**Frequency (N)**	**Percentage (%)**	**Frequency (N)**	**Percentage (%)**
PCH	0	0	8	2.2
NCH	0	0	0	0
PCP	1	1.5	5	1.4
NCP	0	0	1	0.3
PCN	16	24.2	85	23.6
NCN	3	4.6	15	4.2
PCV	0	0	10	2.8
NCV	0	0	3	0.8
PCR	0	0	1	0.3
NCR	0	0	0	0
G-BGR	4	6.1	25	6.9
G-GGR	12	18.2	67	18.6
G-BP	9	13.6	33	9.2
G-GP	2	3.0	0	0
G-BR	2	3.0	0	0
G-GR	12	18.2	68	18.9
G-A	3	4.6	14	3.9
G-V	2	3.0	25	6.9
E-LOC	0	0	0	0
I-LOC	0	0	0	0

physical labor and providing for the family as an adult, while girl gender roles included marrying early to take care of children and household work. A common issue that almost every adolescent brought up was the notion that sons of the family were encouraged to continue their education, while girls were told to stop prematurely. Though most adolescents recognized that this was unfair and should not be the case, they often reasoned this difference in education to the expectations of each gender during adulthood. Boys were given the opportunity to study further because they would be expected to have a job that would sufficiently take care of the entire family, and girls did not need an extensive education because it was expected that they would stay at home to raise children. It was interesting to note that adolescent boys were more likely than girls to discuss beliefs around privileges and restrictions for both boys and girls, while girl participants were more likely than boys to discuss beliefs of attribute differences and violence during their interviews.

Adolescents who had at least one sibling of the opposite gender were more likely to share examples of when they were confident in using their voice to enact change in their relationships or their lives compared to adolescents who did not have at least one sibling of the opposite gender. This was particularly

Table 6. Overall frequencies and percentages of constructs for boys depending on the gender of their sibling(s).

	Boys with no sisters		Boys with 1+ sister(s)	
Construct	**Frequency (N)**	**Percentage (%)**	**Frequency (N)**	**Percentage (%)**
PCH	2	2.9	7	6.6
NCH	0	0	0	0
PCP	0	0	0	0
NCP	0	0	0	0
PCN	7	10.0	9	8.5
NCN	2	2.9	3	2.8
PCV	0	0	10	9.4
NCV	0	0	0	0
PCR	0	0	0	0
NCR	0	0	0	0
G-BGR	7	10.0	8	7.5
G-GGR	15	21.4	22	20.8
G-BP	13	18.6	20	18.9
G-GP	2	2.9	2	1.9
G-BR	1	1.4	1	1.0
G-GR	16	22.8	21	19.8
G-A	2	2.9	0	0
G-V	3	4.2	3	2.8
E-LOC	0	0	0	0
I-LOC	0	0	0	0

noteworthy for boys who had at least one sister because most of their stories that discussed confidence/voice were to help ensure their sisters were not abused or denied an education. For adolescent girls who showed confidence, it was primarily in settings where they discussed with family members the importance of completing an education before marriage. Confidence/voice was a unique construct because it demonstrated that not only could adolescents distinguish right from wrong, but they also felt that they could have a voice that others would listen to in order to enact change.

The frequencies of positive connection were similar regardless of whether an adolescent had a sibling of the opposite gender or not. Almost all adolescents, both boys and girls, shared similar reasons for why they felt they shared a positive connection with other individuals in their lives. These reasons included sharing trust to keep a secret, kindness, ability to help in difficult situations, and familial closeness. Though gender of siblings did not have a noticeable impact on positive connection, gender of the participants did. Girls had a higher proportion of positive connection codes (23.7%) compared to boys (9.9%) from all the interviews. Many girls shared they were close to their mothers, teachers, and gave specific examples of why they felt so connected to their dearest friends. These examples

were often rooted in stories where they shared experiences of violence or gender discrimination in their households. Boys, however, for the most part did not have such experiences, which is why they could not reflect on times where they felt the need to share intimate stories with a close friend.

Throughout the interviews, there were reoccurring themes that did not fit into any of the codes and we highlighted them because they showed ideas and beliefs that adolescents shared starting from such a young age about gender discrimination and gender equality. One such theme was how education may impact beliefs about gender equality. A few adolescents mentioned that only adults who are not educated themselves hold the viewpoint that girls do not deserve equal rights as their boy counterparts. Another common theme was the harmful effects of "eve teasing," which refers to the public sexual harassment of girls. Several girls mentioned instances of eve teasing during the interviews, and how it influenced their feelings of safety and trust within their communities and families. One girl who shared moments of extreme desperation and frustration due to eve teasing stated that she did not feel she could share with her family. She described, "I didn't speak to anyone at home about this. I bear it and when (the perpetrators) say something, I used to come back home and cry a lot. I started to think why is this happening to me because I just want to live like a simple girl and that's not happening to me. So I cried a lot. At one time, I thought to mix something in my food and sleep. Then all these problems will get solved. I thought about committing suicide a lot, many times I thought to do such things." It is important for future research and interventions to address these important issues of a lack of education and eve teasing given their influence on healthy adolescent development.

Although these findings compel an urgency to educate and impart gender equitable attitudes during adolescence, this study had several limitations. First, these are cross-sectional qualitative data and therefore lend themselves to hypothesis generation and do not imply causal inferences. Second, the study focused on three communities in Northern India and may not be fully generalizable to the entire country. Despite these limitations, this was a key study that provides important insights for both future research and interventions. For example, gender-sensitization and empowerment programs aimed at young people, precisely at the time when they are forming their gender attitudes, may diminish gender inequity in the long-term. Further, this study provides a foundation for a future study to quantitatively measure gender attitudes among adolescents, as well as the association between gender attitudes and health and educational outcomes.

Conclusion

Gender sensitization and empowerment programs have the potential to encourage thousands of young boys and girls around the world to join the movement for gender equality and build a global community where girls and women are no longer discriminated against. Gender discrimination is especially rampant in Northern India where this study was carried out. The results of this qualitative analysis are an important first-step in understanding adolescent perceptions and how programs can be developed to address perceptions and inspire attitudinal and behavior change. The qualitative interviews were the first time that many of the adolescents had ever been asked to even think about vulnerable and sensitive topics such as gender discrimination in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods. Gender sensitization programs have the power to initiate the conversation and strengthen the voices of community members who wish to live in a world where everyone is given the same resources and opportunities, regardless of their gender, which will ultimately improve the health and wellbeing of girls and women across the lifespan.

Ethics

All procedures for this study, including protection of human subjects, were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the GW Office of Human Research (IRB #071710).

Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

This manuscript has not been published elsewhere and is not under submission elsewhere.

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