

The Cultural Construct of Troubles with Boys in India

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ABSTRACT Familism in contrast to individualism is a significant reality for Indian families. Family organisation in India rests on age and sex hierarchy with the boys, men and older people being ascribed a higher status. There are usually clear demarcations of the roles and responsibilities between men and women within families. This is a reality that a child even in 21st century India learns and it is even expressed in various rituals, ceremonies, kin terminology and socialization practices. Hence, with this cultural construct boys develop their attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and act accordingly. The amount of restrictions, pressures and regulations are there for girls are enormous, whereas for boys, all freedom, no restrictions and oppositions at all for their behaviour, actions and thoughts in any stages of their lives. Boys are overprotected, over cared and at the same time given total independence in the family. The immediate outcome is visible through boy's immaturity, dependency and learned helplessness owing to varied types of problems for themselves, their families and for the society in general.

Present paper observes that boys are in trouble due to various cultural, social and familial factors such as – gender issues in development, learned helplessness among boys, more empowered girls than boys, impact of electronic media, peer pressures and traditional mind set. Further the paper tries to focus on the mental health status of the young preschool and school going boys and compare it with the girls of same age. It is interesting to find that the boys are more prone and susceptible to different emotional and behavioural problems than the girls. Thus, understanding and empowering the boy is essential and need of the day to maintain the balance in the society.

GENDER ISSUES IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT (INDIAN STORY)

“Gender is perhaps one of the most powerful variables that impacts development from the moment of conception to the last journey from planet earth. The horrendous stories of selective feticide, female infanticide, low female literacy, unfavorable sex ratio, dowry death, the unenviable status of the widow, all speak of the gender bias in a patriarchal society such as in India. Gender colors all aspects of everyday life. The birth of a baby receives a differential welcome depending on sex. The expectation for conformity to social norms, access to education, role and status in marriage and the family are gendered. So are employment opportunities and avenues, participation in

decision-making at all levels from the home to the parliament” Saraswathi (1999).

According to Bhogle (1999), “sex and gender constitute perhaps the single most important ground for differentiation between types of human beings”. Moreover, she emphasizes that, “culture and society play an influential role in the development and construct of gender roles”. Thus, India being an extremely complex entity of distinct religious, regional, linguistic, caste and class identities, it would be meaningful and pertinent to consider these factors while explaining the construct of gender roles for all sections of Indian society. Unlike the western culture that has generally tended to devalue feminine traits and characteristics, the Indian (Hindu) culture presents a different and slightly more complex picture. In the west, the roles assigned to men have almost invariably carried with them more prestige and greater social and economic power than those assigned to women. Also, the masculine characteristics like competence, assertion, and rationality have been valued much more positively than the feminine characteristics like warmth and expressiveness (Broverman et al., 1972). In Hinduism, however, there is basic duality and strong ambivalence above femaleness. Feminine traits of self-sacrifice, nurturance, fidelity and faithfulness have been positively valued (Williams and Best, 1990). Historically, India has produced many heroines, and politically, the Indian constitution has given equal rights and status to men and women. The Indian pantheon contains as many

Goddesses – for wealth (Lakshmi); for knowledge (Saraswati), and even for power (Durga) has interestingly enough been associated with women's status and prestige.

Nevertheless, in modern India the status of women is found to be extremely low and deteriorating still further. Crimes are committed against her because of her sex – as a foetus, as an infant, as a bride who does not bring enough dowry, as a wife, who does not produce a son, and as a widow whose life without her husband is considered worthless. All indicators of status and prestige – mortality rate, life span, education, nutrition, occupation and economic power – underline the great difference that exists between men and women in India today, with women, in all instances, lagging behind. With this background and reality, the individual (specially the girls) grows to become an adult with specific temperaments and psychology so does the boys.

REFLECTION OF GENDERED SOCIALIZATION: PREFERENCE FOR BOYS

“In India, to be a female is often less than to be human” (Sharma and Khosla, 1999). Sex inequality starting before the birth in the Indian context, perhaps exerts a far more potent influence on discriminatory attitudes than in other culture. It begins with the fact that the “preference for sons”, which has its origin in religion and “unwanted daughters”, even before she can emerge into the world.

According to Hindu religion, a man needs a son to perform his funeral rites so that he may attain “mokhsya” (salvation) in the life hereafter. Hindu sage, Manu explains, “Through a son, a man conquers the world through a son's son he obtain immortality, and through a son's grandson he gains the world of the sun”. The strong intergenerational pressure to bear sons is quite evident here. Stroke (1980), attributes gender inequality to the strong accent in Indian literature i.e. a desire for producing a male child.

Gender inequality in the Indian context, perhaps exerts a far more potent influence on discriminatory attitudes than in other cultures. It begins with the fact that a girl is unwanted and therefore eliminated even before she can emerge into the world. Femicide, i.e., abortion of female fetuses after genetic typing and amniocentesis has now been widely practiced.

Following femicide is female infanticide i.e., doing away with the female baby soon after birth, through starvation, poisoning and murder. The male-female figures speak eloquently of this discrimination (933 females per 1000 males, according to 2001 Government of India Census Report). A study conducted by Srivastava (1997) indicated the preferences for the sons to daughters. The study revealed that urban mothers (65%), urban grand mothers (72%), rural mothers (74%), rural grandmothers (96%) overwhelmingly preferred a son to a daughter. Further, large majority of the respondent (93%) who perceived the importance of children in terms of existing the family tree believed that sons were advantageous for that they take over the family responsibilities when parents grow older.

In Indian families sex roles are well differentiated that influence the socialization process from birth onwards. Early in life children begin to experience gender based differentiation in their relationship with others, such as in distribution of family resources and in entitlement to family membership, nutrition, health care and education. There is special preference shown to male children in the patriarchal family system in India, where male child enjoys a special status over the female child. Both boys and girls grow up with the knowledge of this special value attached to the male child and often experience blatant expression of this preference through parental reactions, treatment, behaviour, family rituals and practices, social customs and traditions. The adolescent boys in the process begin to realize his self-worth and develop his individuality, while adolescent girl becomes conscious of her vulnerability and tries to become a non-person. Since early days girls are reared to ensure that they growing to be subservient, accepting and tolerant of their lower status vis-à-vis the boys.

MORE EMPOWERED GIRLS AND MORE DEPENDENT BOYS

Traditionally, socially and culturally girls are considered to be weak, fragile and non-significant in Indian society. However, with social upheaval in last two decades or so, the social fabric of India is producing very contradictory colours in itself. In one hand the girl child is being discriminated from the time

of conception till death. On the other hand realizing the fact that half of India's population is female, governmental initiatives, women's education, westernization, globalisation and impact of mass media has tremendous impact especially on lesser sex called "female child". The effect is so strong that, it has created imbalance within the psychology of both boys and girls of our society. Long years of subjugation, oppression and dominance faced by the female child has taken a challenge of becoming "all powerful" which are very well evident from the achievements of girls of today. In every field of life, be it in academic, research, professional, familial, political, social, as compared to the boys, girls are no less, even in some cases excelling the boys. The amount of power, strength, motivation, dedication, commitments, seriousness the girls of today are possessing are rather praiseworthy. In spite of all disadvantages, girls of today are there to rule the future of our society. The *amount of intrinsic motivation* present in girls are somehow lacking among boys to excel and do well. May be deprivation, rejection and unwanted feeling among girls have created strong motivation to do well and prove one's worth among girls, which are lacking in boys. Boys are all happy, contented, satisfied, as they are "wanted", "respected", "accepted" and above all "needed" by the society for all-purpose to be fulfilled.

Although girls of today's India are capable of doing what their predecessors were unable to do, still the very acceptance of their power and capabilities are not recognized. Boys on the other hand are *more dependent*, lethargic, as they are not given any chance to do of their own. Boys are overprotected even until they are middle aged, having their own family, still not able to take their own decisions many a times. Indian society is patriarchy by nature, where the descent is passed through male, but the real functional power lies with the female. Boys have developed the traditional mindset of having all power with them, but in reality, female is carrying out the work. However, accepting the female power in Indian families are non-existence till today. With the rapid growth of women's education and the focus on women's empowerment, gradually the things are changing, for good or bad, time will decide. Traditionally a male dominant society, Indian women are struggling hard to prove themselves. Whereas, in case of men, they are

still in their position of power, without having to do anything to assert for their status and responsibilities. Thus, a time has come to observe minutely that an environment of imbalance in the attitude of male and female exist in our society, which needs to be equated.

Messages about education, self-reliance, self-confident, self-defense, human rights and equality, given repeatedly to girls and women, have led to women showing courage, confidence and excellence, personally and professionally. What has not been worked on is "male empowerment" where boys are given skills to cope with the changes.

BOYS WITH TRADITIONAL MINDSET

It is quite interesting to note that Indian society being a traditional male dominated society has undergone tremendous changes in every sphere of life, except in few areas like role-relationship within the family dynamics. The main reasons for this being the socialization pattern and parental influence in terms of attitudes, expectations and role models. Boys are in fact not given proper scope and opportunities to carry out the tasks required for their own self-development. Rather expected to carry out the traditional roles and mindset. Young boys are indeed in a very confused state to decide when, how and where to go in case of need. They are torn between traditional roles and modern requirements and expectations. For them it is becoming difficult to have the traditional ways of life and adopt the modern trend, which creates problems for everybody. Caught in a transitional phase and unable to cope with the socio-cultural changes, many adolescent boys have low self-esteem, are confused and unclear about their roles and suffer from poor relationship skills. Aggressive behaviour is only one side effect. Are we raising a generation of young males who cannot cope with themselves?

EFFECT OF MASS MEDIA ON CREATING GENDER DIFFERENCES

With the advent of 21st century the effect of mass media, especially the electronic media played a significant role in creating the gender differences in the social environment in India. It is through the television serials; the perceptions expectation and competitions among

the common people develop, which is found to be far from the reality. There seems to be a great gap between the reel life and real life, thus creating problems for the common mass. In case of young mass, the problems are still difficult, as they are not matured enough, not to succumb to the effect of mass media. Further, the social fabric of India is getting very much disturbed with the unrealistic perceptions developed through various media. With the social pressure on girls in India, some amount of restrictions and discipline are still in existence, for which young girls are in better situation, whereas for boys, it is the freedom without responsibilities and restrictions made them more vulnerable and risky for future adjustments and acceptability. It is the effect of mass media, which is shaping the future of our children, for better or worse best known to nobody.

INDIAN FAMILY SYSTEM AND CHILD MENTAL HEALTH

India is a pluralistic and multiethnic society, consisting of extremely complex family system. Within its diversified boundaries in ethnic origin, religion, languages and cultures the most distinguishing feature of India is its "unity in diversity" that is noticed in the family system. However, during the past few decades, the traditional Indian family has moved towards

nucleation to meet the demands of globalisation and other related factors. A rapid rise in education and specially women's education, legislation covering economic, social and political spheres, marriage and divorce has radically altered the land ownership pattern, power and family interactions, obligations and decision making in our society. Contemporary families in India as contrast to the traditional families are having urge for personal accomplishments and greater autonomy in fulfilling individual desires and wishes with increasing emphasis on individualism and autonomy for the family members. Modern parents are deliberating trying to shape their children's lives in a different ways. There are unstable and contradictory pattern of child rearing, which generates anxiety and conflict in the growing child. Further, the ambiguity of values children and adolescents observe today in adult world, the absence of powerful role models, increasing gap between aspirations and possible achievement, not surprisingly, lead to alienation and identity confusion. The culture of family values and ethos are diminishing with children spending less time with human friends and more with machines like computers, television and cell phones. According to Government of India Census Report of 2001, 14% of children suffer from distress caused due to maladaptive behaviour.

Under this backdrop, an exploratory study has been conducted on 1000 preschool and elementary school children using Achenbach's Child Behaviour Check list (1978) to identify children with mental health problems. The prevalence of emotional and behavioural problems among children is presented in Table 1 and Figure 1, which indicated that the rate of prevalence is 14.8 per cent (119 out of 1000). Boys exhibited more problems than girls in the entire population. Significance differences were specially observed in case of preschool boys and girls. Table 2 and Figure 2 show the pattern and profile of emotional and behavioural problems

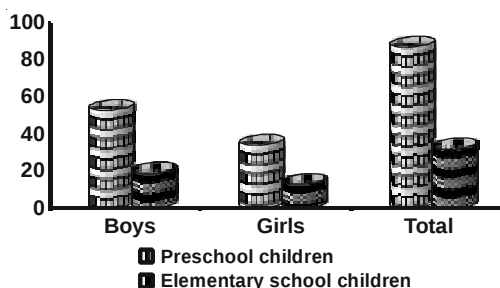


Fig.1. Prevalence of Emotional and Behavioural Problems among Children

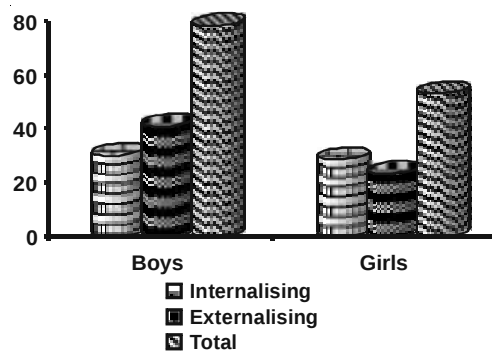
Table 1: Prevalence of emotional and behavioural problems among children

Children	Boys		Girls		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Preschool children	53	20	34	14.4	87	17.4
Elementary school children	19	11.58	13	9.5	32	10.6
Total	72	16.78	47	12.66	119	14.8

Table 2: Gender differences in pattern and profiles of problems among children

Sl. No.	Variables Groups	Pre school children				F	Elementary school children				F
		Boys		Girls			Boys		Girls		
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1.	Internalising	30.09	9.23	28.56	12.04	3.99ns	25.04	9.23	20.02	12.04	6.90***
2.	Externalising	40.9	11.09	23.31	8.64	5.66*	35.41	11.09	21.31	8.64	6.23*
3.	Total problems	78.21	7.23	53.03	5.99	4.98*	98.80	7.23	75.08	5.99	13.23*

Note: * = $P < 0.05$, ** = $P < 0.01$, *** = $P < 0.001$

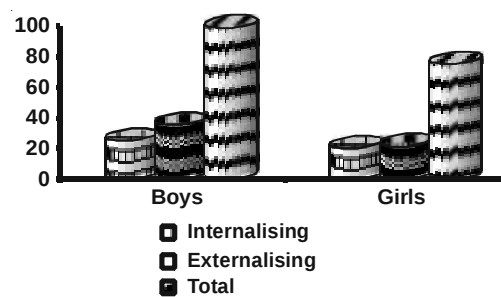
**Fig. 2 (a). Gender differences in pattern and profiles of problems among pre-school children**

among children. Except in internalizing problems among preschool groups, in all other areas, the boys were having more problems than that of their counterpart girls. Boys were seen to be emotionally more reactive and aggressive had more somatic complaints and attention problems.

Further, boys showed significantly higher traits like hyperkinesias and conduct problems than the girls (Table 3). Thus, it could well be said that, boys are in trouble, especially with regard to their mental health problems.

UNDERSTANDING AND EMPOWERING BOYS

Sarawathi Baskar, counseling psychologist, who moved to Chennai after practicing many years in U.S. says, "number of clients referrals in the last two years show more boys, 17 years and above, 'brought' by parents because they lack motivation in studies or have interpersonal problems (Menon, 2005). Expectations from parents, teachers and society create further stress and they lose their motivation and courage, leading to situations where they are either rebellious and aggressive or very timid. Further,

**Fig. 2 (b). Gender differences in pattern and profiles of problems among elementary school children**

young boys are also not taught to address the girls issue positively thus affecting their future relationships at workplace, the family, the community and the society at large.

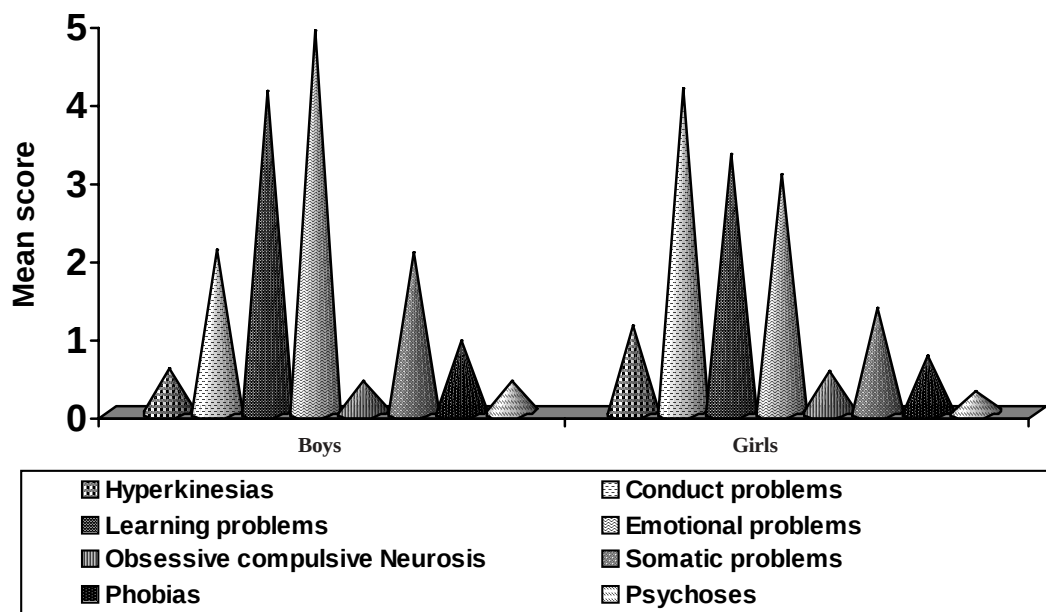
In countries like U.S. several NGOs offer parallel services to men too. Some agencies even offer "fatherhood" programmes to boys, to help create responsible and self-reliant men. Since, the Indian socio-cultural set up is gender biased, boys were and still are given more privileges than girls. With the current social changes, if boys are not empowered, the entire system will crumble. The current generation of teenagers is intelligent and they mature fast. Parental indulgence, peer pressure and desire for freedom without responsibility have also increased. Thus, schools and teachers can engage boys in social service activities, group projects, fine arts, music, sports and intellectually stimulating activities to channelise their energy positively. Aggressive behaviour needs to be addressed, and socially sensitive behaviour rewarded. The parents as a role model crucial in shaping the boys mind, attitude, perception and personality in general. Further, unexpressed parental expectation of financial support from boys is a major factor for developing insecurity among boys. Hence

Table 3: Psychopathological traits

S. No.	Variables	Boys		Girls		F
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1.	Hyperkinesias	0.58	0.95	1.10	0.81	2.31*
2.	Conduct problems	2.08	2.68	4.13	0.173	3.65**
3.	Learning problems	4.10	2.31	3.31	1.52	1.26***
4.	Emotional problems	4.89	2.20	3.06	1.90	1.98***
5.	Obsessive compulsive Neurosis	0.41	0.91	0.52	0.57	-
6.	Somatic problems	2.06	1.27	1.33	1.62	2.11 ns
7.	Phobias	0.92	0.65	0.71	0.80	-
8.	Psychoses	0.41	0.34	0.28	1.50	1.68 ns

Note: * = P<0.05, ** = P<0.01, *** = P< 0.001

Lower the score, higher the problems

**Fig. 3. Psychological Traits**

understanding boys and empowering them is vital for a balanced family and society at large.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, it is *freedom with responsibility*, the ability to discriminate between good and bad, meeting challenges (not problems) with confidence, and developing effective communication skills that will empower both boys and girls in their relationships and to be equally contributing members to both family and society. Indian society is presently passing through transitional phase, and we need to strengthen it by equipping all its members

properly. Along with empowering the girls of our society, boys need to be given importance as well.

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