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Original article

Learning to Be Gendered: Gender Socialization in Early Adolescence Among Urban Poor in Delhi, India, and Shanghai, China


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 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: The purpose of the study is to understand the gender socialization process in early adolescence.

Methods: The study was located in two disadvantaged urban communities in Delhi, India and Shanghai, China and was part of the multicountry (15) Global Early Adolescent Study. Qualitative methodologies were used with boys and girls aged 11–13 years, including 16 group-based timeline exercises and 65 narrative interviews. In addition, 58 parents of participating adolescents were interviewed. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, translated, and uploaded into Atlas.ti for coding and thematic analysis.

Results: Boys and girls growing up in the same community were directed onto different pathways during their transition from early to late adolescence. Adolescents and parents in both sites identified mothers as the primary actor, socializing adolescents into how to dress and behave and what gender roles to play, although fathers were also mentioned as influential. Opposite-sex interactions were restricted, and violations enforced by physical violence. In Delhi, gender roles and mobility were more strictly enforced for girls than boys. Restrictions on opposite-sex interactions were rigid for both boys and girls in Delhi and Shanghai. Sanctions, including beating, for violating norms about boy-girl relationships were more punitive than those related to dress and demeanor, especially in Delhi. Education and career expectations were notably more equitable in Shanghai.

Conclusions: Parents teach their children to adhere to inequitable gender norms in both Delhi and Shanghai. However, education and career expectations for boys and girls in the two sites differed. Although gender norms varied by site according to the particular cultural and historical context, similar patterns of gender inequity reflect the underlying patriarchal system in both settings. The tendency of parents to pass on the norms they grew up with is evident, yet these results illustrate the social construction of gender through children's interaction with the social ecology, including evolving political and economic systems. Efforts to bend gender norms toward greater equality can build on these results

IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Findings that parents are the principal transmitters of inequitable gender norms even in the midst of changing social norms corresponding to structural changes suggest the need for programs to address parents, as well as children, and to harness evolving social norms for greater gender equality. This study is unique in comparing India and China and contributes to the scanty literature on gender socialization in middle- and low-income countries.

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by empowering children and parents to reflect critically on inequitable gender norms and roles and by mobilizing economic and social support at key turning points in adolescents' lives.

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Gender norms formed during early adolescence influence health and sexuality in later adolescence and beyond. Gender inequalities, such as stereotypical gender attitudes, men's authority over women, and unequal access to resources, are associated with negative health outcomes, gender-based violence, and economic vulnerability [1,2]. Gender socialization, the process of teaching/learning about being a girl or a boy, starts as early as birth and extends throughout adolescence [3]. It includes teaching girls to be prepared for the roles of wife and mother and training boys to shoulder the roles of provider and protector [4–6].

Appropriate behaviors for males and females are learned and internalized through exposure to different socializing agents such as family, media, and social institutions [4,7]. However, children do not passively absorb and embody social messages; they interact with others to produce their own form of gender identity. Gender is an acquired identity that is learned, changes over time, and varies widely within and across cultural contexts. Socially constructed gender identities are forged under the influence of structural factors, such as poverty and globalization, and can best be understood within specific evolving historical contexts [8,9].

Gender socialization is intensified with the onset of puberty which triggers increased reinforcement of social expectations and pressures from family, peers, and society to conform to hegemonic sex-typed identities and roles [3]. During this life stage gender, stereotypes are taught and enforced through punishment and rewards in day-to-day interaction with adolescents [10]. Early adolescence is thus a unique window of opportunity for intervention before gender norms are solidified.

There is a paucity of empirical evidence on early adolescents and the factors that influence their gender attitudes, beliefs, and subsequent behaviors as well as processes of intergenerational transmission. This study is part of the multicountry Global Early Adolescence Study (GEAS), which has sites spread across five continents (15 countries). The GEAS focuses on early adolescents in the context of the re-emergence of an "urban health penalty," whereby adolescents living in poor urban neighborhoods suffer heightened risk of negative sexual health outcomes [11].

We selected Delhi and Shanghai from the GEAS sites for this analysis because of manifested gender disparities and strong son preference which have resulted in a skewed sex ratio at birth for many generations. Both China and India's skewed sex ratio at birth began to increase in the late 1980s and stood at 118 and 110, respectively, in 2011, above the normal of 105 male births per 100 female births [12,13]. Adolescents aged 10–14 years number about 350 million, comprising eight percent of Asia's population. Among this percentage, a little less than three fifths (58%) reside in China and India [14]. However, no studies have compared the gender socialization process among early adolescents in these two settings.

Systematic research on the factors that shape gender attitudes in early adolescence highlights the need for research focusing on low- and middle-income countries like China and India [15]. The specific objectives of this article were to expand our understanding of (1) what gender norms are transmitted to

boys and girls and by whom; (2) how these norms are transmitted and whether this process differs by sex; and (3) what differences and similarities in gender socialization are manifested in two urban settings in Asian countries with diverse cultural, political, and economic contexts.

Methods

Study design

Narrative in-depth interviews with adolescents and their parents as well as group-based timeline exercises with adolescents were conducted. In the timeline exercise, respondents provided a time line of a typical boy or girl in their community and described the changes they experience and the challenges they face from childhood until the moment they perceive as the end of adolescence [16,17]. Study participants were purposively selected. In Delhi, a slum was selected where the study team had previously conducted research with 15- to 19-year-olds. A house-listing exercise was conducted to identify adolescents aged 11–13 years from the selected neighborhood. Subsequently, trained researchers invited the parent/guardian of eligible adolescents to participate in the study, after verifying that they had a child between 11 and 13 years of age residing in the geographic boundaries of the study site. In Shanghai, community workers who were familiar with adolescents in the community helped in identifying participants, according to the selection criteria that trained researchers provided. Once parents provided informed consent for themselves and their children to participate (read to them if they were illiterate), researchers met with the children to obtain their oral assent. In addition, adolescent participants were asked for names and contact information of friends residing in the same area to expand the sample.

Adolescents and their parents were interviewed separately. Each interview lasted for an hour and was conducted in a private setting. Data collection was conducted in April and May 2015 in Delhi and in August 2014 in Shanghai using identical research protocols. All interviews were digitally recorded with participant permission. Study investigators were well versed in Hindi/Chinese and English and transcribed the interviews within 3 days of conducting the interview. To ensure quality, field coordinators made frequent site visits to monitor data collection. Local principal investigators conducted daily debriefing sessions to identify and resolve challenges and randomly compared excerpts of the voice files to the translated transcripts.

The research protocol was approved by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Institutional Review Board and subsequently at the Centre for Media Studies in India and Population Council's ethics review committee and the Shanghai Institute of Planned Parenthood Research.

Study settings

In Delhi, the research was based in one of the largest slums in the East Delhi district, bordering the state of Haryana. The residents of the selected area were permanent settlers inhabited by

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