

Social Conditioning and Gender Expectations: Understanding the Indian Mindset Towards Women's Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Attitudes toward women's empowerment in India are not formed in adulthood; they are built up over a lifetime of social conditioning. From infancy, Indian children learn through reward, punishment, observation and instruction what is expected of girls and boys. These lessons are delivered by families, schools, peers, media and religious practice, and they are reinforced at each stage of life, from childhood through adolescence, marriage, motherhood and old age. This article examines that process from a psychological perspective. It draws on behaviourist accounts of conditioning, social learning theory, cognitive-developmental and gender schema approaches, social role theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model. It reviews Indian evidence on differential treatment of sons and daughters, on gendered messages in schooling and media, and on the life-course expectations placed on women. It then considers the consequences of conditioning for women's self-concept and aspirations, and for men's attitudes and behaviour. The article argues that because gender expectations are learned, they can also be relearned. It identifies pathways to change at each level of the social ecology, including parenting, school curricula, peer programmes, media representation and community norms. The article concludes that empowering women requires deliberate re-conditioning of both girls and boys, beginning early and sustained across institutions.

Keywords: social conditioning, gender socialisation, gender expectations, social learning, ecological systems, women's empowerment, India

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1. INTRODUCTION

When an Indian girl is told to sit properly, help her mother in the kitchen or come home before dark, and her brother is not, she is learning more than a household rule. She is learning what kind of person she is expected to become. Repeated thousands of times across childhood and adolescence, such small lessons shape a deep sense of what is natural, proper and possible for women and men. By adulthood, many of these expectations no longer feel learned at all. They feel like common sense.

This process is what psychologists call social conditioning: the shaping of beliefs, feelings and behaviour through repeated experience within a social environment. In the domain of gender, social conditioning produces expectations about how women and men should think, feel, act and relate to one another. These expectations underlie much of what is described as the Indian mindset toward women's empowerment, including the widespread belief that women's primary responsibilities lie in the home and that their freedom must be balanced against family honour.

India has made considerable progress in women's education, health and political participation. Yet attitudes often change more slowly than opportunities. A woman may be legally entitled to inherit property, work in any profession or choose her own husband, and still feel that

exercising these rights would be selfish or improper. Understanding why requires attention to the long process through which gender expectations are conditioned.

This article examines that process. Section 2 outlines psychological theories of social conditioning. Section 3 reviews the main agents of gender conditioning in India. Section 4 traces gender expectations across the life course. Section 5 considers the consequences for women's empowerment. Section 6 discusses how conditioning can be changed, and Section 7 concludes.

2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL CONDITIONING

2.1 Conditioning through reinforcement

Behaviourist psychology showed that behaviour followed by reward tends to be repeated, while behaviour followed by punishment tends to decline (Skinner, 1953). Gender conditioning operates partly through this mechanism. Girls are praised for being quiet, helpful, modest and obedient, and criticised or punished for being loud, assertive or adventurous. Boys receive the opposite pattern of reinforcement for many of the same behaviours. Because reinforcement is often subtle, a smile, a frown or a remark about what others will say, its effects

accumulate without either parents or children being fully aware of them.

2.2 Social learning

Bandura (1977) extended behaviourist ideas by showing that people learn by observing others and noting the consequences of their actions. Children watch how their parents divide work, who speaks at family gatherings, who eats first and who makes decisions. They imitate same-gender models more readily, especially when those models appear powerful or are rewarded. Social learning explains why gender expectations are transmitted even when no one explicitly teaches them: children simply observe the world around them and draw conclusions about their own future roles.

2.3 Cognitive-developmental and schema approaches

Cognitive-developmental theory emphasises that children are active in their own gender socialisation. Kohlberg (1966) proposed that once children understand that gender is stable, they seek out and value behaviours consistent with their own gender. Martin and Ruble (2004) described children as gender detectives who search their environment for cues about what boys and girls do. In settings where gender differences are sharp and pervasive, as in many Indian households, children find abundant cues and construct strong, rigid gender categories.

2.4 Social roles and prescriptive expectations

Social role theory argues that gender expectations derive from the roles men and women typically occupy (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Where women are concentrated in domestic and caregiving roles, people infer that women possess the traits those roles require, such as nurturance and patience. These inferences become prescriptions. Prentice and Carranza (2002) distinguished descriptive stereotypes, beliefs about what women and men are like, from prescriptive stereotypes, beliefs about what they should be like. Prescriptive expectations are particularly powerful because violating them provokes disapproval.

2.5 Ecological systems

Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed that development occurs within nested systems: the microsystem of family, school and peers; the mesosystem of connections among them; the exosystem of institutions that affect the child indirectly; and the macrosystem of cultural values and ideologies. Gender conditioning in India operates at every level. A girl's family restricts her movement, her school seats girls separately, her parents' workplaces offer few roles for women, and broader cultural narratives idealise female sacrifice. Because messages at each level reinforce one another, they are difficult to resist. Deaux and Major (1987) similarly emphasised that gender-related behaviour depends on the expectations present in each social context, not only on stable individual traits.

3. AGENTS OF GENDER CONDITIONING IN INDIA

3.1 The family

The family is the first and most influential agent of gender conditioning. Indian research documents differential treatment of sons and daughters from birth. Jayachandran and Kuziemko (2011) found that Indian mothers breastfed daughters for shorter periods than sons, a pattern linked to the desire to conceive again in pursuit of a son. Barcellos et al. (2014) found that boys in India received more childcare time and more health inputs, such as vaccinations and vitamin supplements, than girls. Such differences communicate a clear message about relative worth, even to very young children.

Families also prepare daughters for their future roles. Dube (1988) described how Hindu girls in patrilineal communities are trained from an early age in household skills, restraint and the expectation of leaving for another household at marriage. Seymour (1999), drawing on long-term fieldwork in Bhubaneswar, showed that childrearing practices in Indian families emphasise interdependence, obedience and gender-differentiated responsibilities, while also changing with education and urbanisation.

3.2 School

Schools can challenge or reinforce gender conditioning. Indian textbooks have historically portrayed men as farmers, doctors, soldiers and leaders, and women mainly as mothers, teachers and nurses. The National Council of Educational Research and Training's focus group on gender issues in education noted that curricula and classroom practices often reproduce stereotypes and recommended systematic revision (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2006). Teachers may also hold different expectations for boys and girls, for example in mathematics and science, and assign girls tasks such as cleaning while boys move furniture or run errands. Such everyday practices confirm the lessons children learn at home.

3.3 Peers and community

Peers enforce gender expectations through teasing, exclusion and approval. Boys who play with girls or show emotion may be ridiculed as effeminate, and girls who are assertive may be called shameless. In villages and close-knit urban neighbourhoods, the wider community also monitors behaviour. Fear of gossip, and of what neighbours and relatives will say, is a constant influence on family decisions about daughters' education, clothing, friendships and movement.

3.4 Media

Television serials, films and advertisements are powerful sources of social learning. Many popular serials idealise the self-sacrificing daughter-in-law and depict women who pursue careers or personal desires as villains or as causes of family conflict. Advertising frequently associates women with cooking, cleaning and beauty

products, and men with cars, finance and technology. At the same time, media can introduce new models of womanhood. Jensen and Oster (2009) found that the arrival of cable television in rural India was associated with improvements in women's status, which shows that media conditioning can work in both directions.

3.5 Religion and ritual

Religious stories and rituals embed gender expectations in sacred practice. Fasts undertaken by wives for their husbands' long lives, rituals in which sisters pray for brothers' protection, and mythological figures such as Sita who exemplify patience and loyalty all convey ideals of female devotion. Because these practices are associated with religious merit, festivity and family bonding, the gender messages they carry are absorbed with strong positive emotion, which makes them resistant to critical questioning.

4. GENDER EXPECTATIONS ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE

Social conditioning is not confined to childhood. Expectations change and intensify at key transitions in women's lives.

Childhood. Young girls in many families enjoy relative freedom, but they are already assigned household chores and taught to defer to brothers and elders. Their education may be valued, though often less than that of sons, especially where resources are scarce.

Adolescence. Puberty marks a sharp change. Restrictions on mobility, clothing and interaction with boys increase, justified by concern for safety and reputation. Many girls experience adolescence as a narrowing of their world just as boys' worlds widen. This is often the period when girls withdraw from school or lower their aspirations.

Marriage. Marriage is presented as the central goal of a woman's life. Girls are conditioned to anticipate adjusting to a new family, accepting the authority of in-laws and placing their husbands' and children's needs before their own. Desai and Andrist (2010) found that age at marriage in India is shaped by gender scripts that vary across families, with earlier marriage where women's seclusion and limited decision-making are more common.

Motherhood. Motherhood, particularly of sons, raises a woman's status. Women are expected to devote themselves to childcare and household management, and those who return to paid work may be criticised for neglecting their families.

Later life. Older women often gain authority as mothers-in-law, but widowhood can bring sharp losses of status, especially in communities that restrict widows' dress, diet and social participation. Women's late-life security frequently depends on sons, which reinforces the cycle of son preference.

At each stage, women who have internalised earlier expectations tend to pass them on to the next generation.

Mothers and grandmothers are often the most active enforcers of gender norms, not because they are uniquely conservative, but because conformity has been the basis of their own security and respect.

5. CONSEQUENCES FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

5.1 Internalised limits

The most important consequence of gender conditioning is that women come to see constraints as natural. A woman who has learned since childhood that her role is to serve the family may feel guilty pursuing her own career, even when her family supports it. Kishor and Gupta (2009) reported that, in the third National Family Health Survey, a majority of Indian women agreed that wife-beating was justified in at least one circumstance. Such findings illustrate how deeply conditioning can shape women's own judgements about what is acceptable.

5.2 Aspirations and self-efficacy

Conditioning shapes what girls believe they can achieve. When girls see few women in science, leadership or business, and are steered toward domestic skills, their aspirations and self-efficacy in these domains remain low. Steele (1997) showed that awareness of negative stereotypes about one's group can impair performance and lead people to disengage from domains where those stereotypes apply. Over time, lower aspirations lead to lower investment, which produces outcomes that appear to confirm the original stereotypes.

5.3 Conditioning of men

Gender conditioning affects men as profoundly as women. Boys learn that masculinity means strength, control, provision and emotional restraint. Many grow up believing that household work is beneath them and that a wife's independence reflects badly on her husband. The International Men and Gender Equality Survey found that many Indian men held inequitable views about household authority. It also found that men whose fathers had participated in domestic work were more likely to do so themselves (Barker et al., 2011). Men's conditioning is therefore a central obstacle to women's empowerment and an essential target for change.

5.4 Resistance to change

Because conditioned expectations feel natural and are tied to emotional experiences of family and religion, challenges to them can feel like attacks on one's identity and values. This helps explain why empowerment initiatives sometimes provoke defensive reactions, and why change is often slower than policymakers expect.

6. RE-CONDITIONING: PATHWAYS TO CHANGE

The central lesson of conditioning theory is that what is learned can be relearned. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model suggests that change is most effective when it occurs at several levels at once.

1. **Parenting.** Parenting programmes can encourage equal treatment of sons and daughters in food, health care, schooling and household chores. Fathers who share domestic work model new forms of masculinity for both sons and daughters.
2. **Schools.** Gender-sensitive curricula, revised textbooks and teacher training can disrupt stereotyped messages. School-based programmes such as the Gender Equity Movement in Schools in Mumbai showed that structured discussion of gender roles can shift adolescents' attitudes toward greater equality (Achyut et al., 2011).
3. **Peer groups.** Adolescent girls' clubs, sports programmes and life-skills training give girls safe spaces to build confidence, while boys' groups can explore alternatives to dominant masculinity.
4. **Media.** Television, film and advertising can present women in diverse roles and men as caring partners and fathers. Entertainment-education programmes use storytelling to model new behaviours and stimulate discussion.
5. **Community and religion.** Engaging community and religious leaders can help reinterpret traditions in ways that support women's dignity and choices, drawing on egalitarian strands within Indian religious and reform traditions.
6. **Policy and institutions.** Laws, reservations and workplace policies change the social roles that men and women occupy. As social role theory predicts, when women are increasingly seen in positions of authority and paid work, expectations about women's nature and abilities shift accordingly.

Re-conditioning requires consistency. A girl who is encouraged at school but restricted at home, or a boy who learns about equality in class but is mocked by peers for helping his mother, receives mixed messages. Durable change depends on aligning messages across the settings in which children grow up.

7. CONCLUSION

The Indian mindset toward women's empowerment is the product of a long process of social conditioning. Through reinforcement, observation and active construction of gender categories, children learn from their families, schools, peers, media and religious practice what is expected of girls and boys. These expectations intensify at key life transitions and are passed from one generation to the next, often by women who have internalised them most deeply. Their consequences include women's internalised limits, lower aspirations and self-efficacy in many domains, and men's attachment to roles that resist sharing power.

Because gender expectations are learned, they can be changed. Evidence from India shows that media exposure, school programmes, women's visibility in public roles and fathers' participation in domestic work can all shift attitudes. The task for policy and practice is to re-condition both girls and boys deliberately, beginning early and reinforcing new messages across every level of the social ecology. Women's empowerment will be most secure when the next generation grows up experiencing equality as ordinary, natural and expected.

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