



Breaking Chains: Unravelling Gender Stereotypes and Empowering Indian Women

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Introduction

According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), a Gender stereotype “is a generalized view or preconception about attributes, or characteristics that are or ought to be possessed by women and men or the roles that are or should be performed by men and women.”

When one carefully dissects this standard definition, it is quite evident that this kind of stereotyping is not just limited to opinions or beliefs of the major fragment of this society, but in fact serves as a model for an individual to act, behave, express and retaliate in the way that the society has planned or proposed. It is easy to figure out that in a case where there is any mishap or a transition from the exact notions or expectations, an individual is bound to be inflicted upon by a whole different set of prejudices and massive condemnation from the people, particularly the ones that they are surrounded by in all walks of their life. Unfortunately, this ideology has been into effect throughout the history, and is now being transferred into the minds of all the generations, ultimately reflected through their decisions and biased opinions. It is to be noted that although stereotyping plays its role in shaping a person’s perspectives, probably from their adolescence, one might acknowledge that these very rigid perspectives can have a troublesome effect on the mental health of a person. In-case of the naïve women in our society, who already have a load of issues to deal with, these gender norms further add-on to their painful miseries.

This paper explores the prevalent gender stereotypes in an Indian society, delving into the root causes, the prime concerns and a detailed analysis of the various byproducts of this ideology. The detrimental impact of biased judgements and expectations on the mental health and the decision-making abilities of an individual who is exposed to obscure judgements on a daily basis causes a stagnation in the overall personality development. The researcher has tried to traverse into the multiple evident stereotypes and roles that arise from pre-conceived opinions related to the gender of a person, particularly the women in an Indian Civilization. This paper ponders on the psychological and cultural factors that contribute to the establishment of the gender norms; eventually hindering the exemplar outgrowth of a woman’s potential. While there might be several instances of women who have excelled in their professional careers, the reality of the majority of other Indian women that fail to even recognize their capabilities as a result of the refrained structure right from their upbringing, and a possible outcome is examined in this paper.

Critical analysis

How do rigid Gender roles get deeply engrained into the society’s frame of reference?

The process of input of the gender stereotypes into the mind of any individual happens to occur within their families; through the people that are responsible for their upbringing. From a very young age, they are guided in a strict fashion that forcefully makes them adhere to these intact norms and regulations, with a motive that they can be accepted in the society. But one might wonder that who assigned these roles and what were the criteria and directions that led to the subjects such as a person’s behaviour or likes and dislikes, basic aspects like the way they talk, walk, stand and sit also being governed according to the gender they fall under? These examples might sound very vague but it is the reality. When a child is in a growing stage, he/she learns how



to act by observing the actions of those around him/her. But these people that an innocent child looks up to are bounded by the conservative and outdated ideas of how a Man and a Woman should project themselves in front of the world. This kind of stereotype serves as the first-hand experience of learning that they receive from the immediate family members inside their homes. The very relatable instances that everyone would have witnessed in their surrounding even in today's fast-paced world, such as – Girls should play with barbie dolls and boys with power rangers, Pink is the colour for girls and Blue is for boys. How can one justify the bifurcation of things as mere as toys and colours on the basis of the gender of the person using or liking them? That would be the least rational and most practical representation of the insanely absurd stereotypes prevalent in our society. This proves the point that unknowingly though, it is the society and their unworthy rules that make a child follow these strange distinctions. Sadly enough, this does not end here. Gender Stereotyping is the shadow that follows a person at all times, irrespective of the age-group or the educational qualifications. In order to be labelled as beautiful or handsome, a girl must be thin and fair, and a boy should be muscular and tall. When they grow up, a girl must know how to cook and clean. A boy on the other hand must be well-adept with the finances. And this division or chores must not be exchanged under any given circumstances. This is what our society has given to us. When talking about stereotyping, primarily the standards that are imposed onto a woman, it is observed that everyone has assumed that a woman is supposed to be quiet, obedient, and should behave appropriately. Since a young age, it is fed into her mentality that the sole purpose of her life is to be flexible enough to take care of her future husband and her children, not to mention the family of her husband. This would be the testament to her good upbringing and her chastity. Although in some metropolitan cities, families are open-minded, but that's just a limited section of our society. A woman must exhibit feminine energy only, with the way she behaves or the opinions she shares. Apart from that, general viewpoints of the dominant patriarchal society state that a woman should be restricted within the four walls of the home, taking good care of the necessities of her husband and children. Taking care of the expenses or going out for earning or making big decisions in the family is not something that she is expected to try her hands on.

Gender Stereotypes Substantially Impairing The Career Prospects For Women

To begin with, a key reason that restricts the professional growth of a woman is “Marriage”. Interestingly enough, it is not the holy relationship of marriage that holds her back from performing well in her career but it is the expectations or the obsolete opinions of the society. A girl trying to go for higher studies or becoming financially independent before stepping into a marriage is viewed as an ignorant one. Similarly, a married woman who tries to venture back into her professional job or commitments is labelled as an irresponsible wife or an emotionless mother. There are multiple examples of business women or female political leaders who are doing exceptionally well in both, their personal and professional lives. But one can only imagine the kind of stress the society might be throwing at them. And to think of the amount of criticism a woman belonging to a rural area would have to encounter, makes one believe that this society and their bizarre stereotypes for different genders are indeed diabolical. Since it is believed that only men have an ability to manage the finances and investments, women should not attempt to step in that arena. Apart from that, there is an illogical assumption that women and technology don't fit together. So, girls with a passion for a career in the technology related sectors are questioned and demotivated by the judgements of people. A look at the ratio of Boys to Girls in any IIT or NIT, which are considered as the premiere institutions of engineering and technology can make one realise the scenario. If supported firmly and given the love and care that they deserve, it is possible that girls too have excellent aptitudes and can shine in their desired fields.



Assumptions that women can never be as decisive, updated or empirical as men, perceiving them as below-average in the intelligence quotient, doubting their leadership and management skills prepare a sphere that traps women inside and does not allow them to explore and recognise their distinct expertise. Even in the professional environment, stereotypes keep pulling them down. She might as well try to prove her points or showcase her talents that can help her move forward in her career, but the discrimination that a woman has to face at her workplace makes her lose all her patience and dissociates her faith from the system.

Opportunities are snatched away, concerns are not looked upon, her looks to her presentation to her straight-forwardness, absolutely everything is questioned and brutally analysed in the public sphere. A woman who apparently lacks a support back in her home, also has to tolerate similar mistreatment in her professional life; eventually pushes her into an existential distress and alienation. This can also make a woman question her decisions and the struggle that she had to go through in order to be able to pursue her education and step into the career of her choice. Another chief aspect that people need to be well-aware of is the difference in the pay-scales of the women in the working sector. This is not just prevalent in the urban setup but one would find the very same problem in the rural or the uneducated lot of the society where women are paid far less wages compared to the men. The professions and opportunities for women are also limited, owing to the everlasting gender stereotypes. Thus, it wouldn't be an overstatement to say that the patriarchal society has meticulously devised these hurdles so that women are left with no option but to choose to sit at home, fulfilling her household responsibilities, thus meeting the expectations of the society.

Prejudices towards a female's preferences and perspectives:

A woman has to keep herself within a boundary set by the people, depending on her gender. Indian Society is very conservative when it comes to a woman wanting to express her views or planning to desirably work according to her interests. Cultural setup and stringent norms do not allow her to live the life that she manifests. Firstly, she has a very limited access to the developments and modifications ongoing in the external world, and if she does get the chance to stay updated with the advancements, the possible outcomes that she can expect are negligible. Secondly, since a very young age, she is taught to be unassertive, nurturing and less-competitive. This does not let her transcend into the thought process of what else lies in the future for her. She becomes incapable of analyzing her virtues or skills because she puts all of her efforts into looking presentable, learning to take care of the chores well and so on. The society fails to realize that household chores or maintaining good hygiene or cooking are not gender-specific roles. A man should know how to carry out these activities as much as a woman, no matter if he might be a working professional or not. Also, both these genders should show their vulnerability or their emotions as and when they want to. Same holds true for expressing their views too. Girls should not be ordered to tone down their voices when they want to express their opinions. They should be given as much freedom in taking part in discussions and debates as a boy is given. A girl willing to listen keenly to the ongoing conversations in the living room and take part and present her idea should not be asked to leave saying that you belong to the kitchen, or a girl sharing her dreams and aspirations should never be stopped by pointing out that her ultimate destination is marriage and eventually starting a family. These are the very common instances that leave a massive impact on the confidence and future goals of a girl. The terms such as an "Unwed mother", "Dutiful wife", "Pure girl" demonstrate the outlook of the conventional society towards a female's life. Anything different from their idea of "normal" is criticised to the core. When viewed upon practically, it is very possible for a working woman who is a single mother, to take good care of her child and provide good education as much as an earning man who would provide for his child. It is also absolutely normal for a woman to balance her work-life and her family. But the issue lies in the society's mindset. It becomes difficult for them to accept these realities to a point where they start



grouping up against a vulnerable woman, instead of giving her the protection and care that is expected of them. Regrettably, the people or the distant relatives enter later, the first section that spews expletives on a girl or a woman is her own family. A woman is not given the authority of her own life and decisions even if she is capable enough to handle it in the best way possible. Everybody makes sure that a girl is taught well and remembers each of her duties and responsibilities in the most peculiar way but the people who advocate her basic rights or stand by her side for her safety are often scarce. This is to shed light on the trauma that a victim of sexual abuse and domestic violence has to put up with. The society condones these absurd behaviors majority of the time, asking a girl to not utter a word about it in front of people, scaring her that she might be viewed as an impure and immoral girl. The internal struggles and depressed emotions that a girl would be burdened by is casually ignored because of the family honour.

Does an indian woman stand a chance to pave her way out of these incessant ideologies?

A woman, like any other living organism on this planet, has the right to exist freely. And when one mentions about “Living” or “Existing”, it does not merely cover breathing, eating and passing the time years after years. Instead, the very important aspect of existing is to spend the years in a way that you are comfortable, progressing, joyful and content with what you have a hold of. To have the agency of choosing what is beneficial for you and to inculcate habits, behaviours and thoughts that would help you become a better person in and out, reflecting optimism and cheerfulness into the world. But is that possible when you don’t have the freedom to make your own decisions, or project your likes and dislikes? Most probably, not. This is the exact same notion for the women in an Indian Society. All the above stated opinions and possible opportunities and personal developments are a distant dream that would stay distant forever, considering the harmful pre-set stereotypes that were discussed in the former sections of this paper. It is a pre-requisite to recognise and point out what’s wrong in order to suggest how to make things right. It is very necessary to initiate harmless yet significant power rebellions that would put forward the need of shattering the existent gender stereotypes and re-evaluate gender roles. This could be the one in many further steps that need to be taken in order to bring vital changes in the lives of the oppressed and defenseless women. It is indeed a long journey but for the matter of fact, if this process is culminated, the outcomes are going to be quite inspiring and surreal. The major point of change has to be the way in which the upbringing of a child is carried out. The seeds of Gender equality have to be planted right from the nascent age for the upcoming generations that would be in-charge of the introspective flow of the society over a course of time. Every force that propels the conservative views into the brains of the people, particularly the teenagers and the youth, needs to be vanquished. A girl should be taught to steer clear of all the distracting implications that come in her way. It should be the priority to instill the importance of “Empowerment” and “Education” in the minds of the young boys and girls so that when they grow-up; they can propagate equal rights and opportunities in all fields of duration and career growth. Besides, a female should be supported in all her avenues, particularly her decisions about her own life. It is often seen that girls who belong to the financially downtrodden families are wed-off at a very young age, when she does not have the peak maturity to handle the pressures or to even understand the concept of marriage and parenting. This also puts an end to her education, sometimes basic schooling too. In extreme scenarios, these innocent girls in the age group of 18-22 are subjected to marital rape and violence, with nobody to their rescue. Her self-esteem is tarnished and she is subjected to sorrow and grief that perpetuates throughout her life. It is essential to establish support groups, mentors and counsellors for females, most important those hailing from a rural or a sub-altern ethnicity, and show them directions that can help them in every possible way and at-least making them realise that they have a strong community of people to fall back on.



Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper aims at highlighting the pointless prevalence of the existing gender-stereotypes and the rules that are being imposed on individuals at the command of the society's ancient beliefs and opinions that prove to be detrimental in the progress and expansion of people, particularly the Indian Women. The opinions shared above reveal the pre-determined gender roles and the way they play a role in confining a woman in the realms of their expectations and assumptions. The aspects that lead to a destruction of a woman's expression or voice of opinion when deciding for her education, career goals, marital decisions, are broadly discussed. The societal expectations or the rules that have been imposed on women since time immemorial fail to serve any rational reasoning for their existence or origin to be exact. This makes us question the impotent relevance of these stereotypes that can be described as filthy, constricting and useless. The possible consequences that lie in front of the females if changes are brought in the system and the mindset of the society are acknowledged.

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