



# Typecast Early

## How Teenagers See Gender Roles

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**G**ender relations and identities are not universal, but vary from culture to culture and sometime from community to community. In this article, an attempt has been made to show how some adolescent boys and girls living in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu perceive gender roles and gender relations.

This article is based on the information gathered during the Life-skills Education Programme conducted for middle-school students by the Rural Women's Education Centre (RUWSEC), an NGO working in the Chengalpattu district of Tamil Nadu. The participants included 586 adolescents (307 boys and 279 girls) and the course was conducted during the years 1996-97 and 1997-98. The students were mostly studying in class VIII and were drawn from ten middle schools in the Thirupporur and Tirukkazhunkundam Panchayat unions of Chengalpattu district.

In all there were six sessions, including an introductory session. Each session covered a number of topics, and was of two to three hours duration. The first session was devoted to creating self-awareness through various exercises and the students were taught how to be assertive as and when required. The second session on learning about our bodies had group discussions

and this was followed by a question answer session based on the book *Our Body and its Functioning* published by RUWSEC. The next session on the status of women in present day society included opinion polls and a discussion based on it. In the fourth session on the relationship with the opposite sex, norms according to elders, and codes of behaviour that the students would find useful were discussed. In the final session there were separate topics for girls and boys. The topics for the girls were marriage and expectation from life partners, responsible sexuality, sexual abuse and rape, high risk situations and self help strategies. The topics for boys included dealing with bullying peer pressure and substance abuse.

### Proverbial Wisdom

Before starting the discussion on the status of women, the teachers asked the boys and girls to narrate some of the proverbs on women that are commonly used by the villagers. In all the classes, the students repeated almost the same proverbs, which were very derogatory to women. Though these proverbs may not indicate the views of these adolescents, it shows that they are so commonly mentioned in their households that they are quite familiar with them.

The proverbs were originally narrated in Tamil and are translated in a way that emphasizes their underlying

meaning rather than their literal meaning:

- Never trust a woman.
- Why waste education on a woman whose duty is in the kitchen?
- Woman can make or mar a home.
- Women are susceptible to afterthoughts.
- Grow a drumstick tree by breaking off the stems and tame a girl by beating her.
- If a woman giggles, everything is lost.
- The beauty of a woman lies in her eating less.
- One can reach the depth of the sea but one cannot comprehend the mind of a woman.
- You can sometimes trust a river, or even quicksand, but can never trust a woman in a *sari*.
- An ideal wife starts her day before the rest of the family and ends it after everyone has retired for the day.
- A chaste woman is one who confines herself within the four walls of the house.
- One can trust an irate snake, but can never trust a smiling woman.
- The male cock heralds the dawn, not the female hen.
- The snake has poison only in its fangs, a woman has it all over her body.
- A woman's world should be at home and a man's world is outside the domestic realm.

- Women must accept the suzerainty of men.
- A husband is a living God.

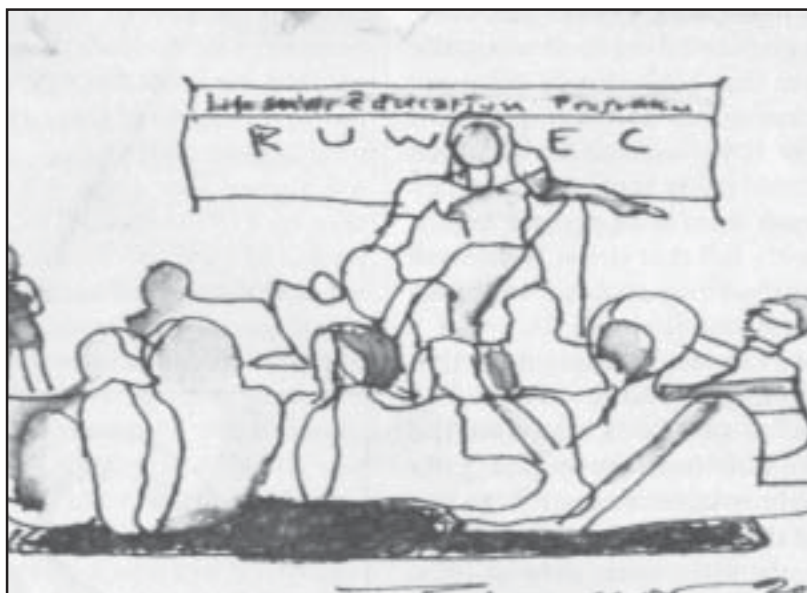
It is rather obvious that most of these proverbs were coined basically to keep women under the control of men. It is not that the boys and girls did not come up with some proverbs that were in praise of women, but there were very few.

In another session, an opinion poll was conducted among the students regarding the status of women in the society. The teachers distributed a proforma containing some statements and asked them to tick right or wrong against each statement. The statements described the role of men and women, gender relationships and certain norms regarding the responsibilities of men and women. The students were given ten minutes to give their opinion and this was followed by a discussion on each of the statements.

The parents of these adolescents are either illiterate or semi-literate. They work mostly as agricultural wage labourers. The statements and the opinions expressed by the adolescents are grouped below under broad headings.

### **Feminine Behaviour**

Every society imposes certain restrictions on girls and women and tries to 'teach or preach' the right kind of behaviour. When the adolescent boys and girls were asked to give their opinion, nearly half the boys and 40 per cent of the girls agreed with the statement that girls should not laugh loudly. The boys who were not in favour of girls laughing loudly felt that the reputation of the family would be diminished if she laughed loudly. Some of the boys said that their mothers never approved of their sisters laughing loudly and compared such laughter with that of prostitutes. Some of the boys as well as a few girls were of the view that girls should be modest



and if they laughed loudly, they could be misunderstood. However, most of the girls questioned such views and said they were not bothered about what others thought of them as long as they were clear in their own minds about whether they were really acting immodestly or not.

Similarly, men are not supposed to weep in public—it is not considered masculine to do so. Although not even one third of the girls agreed with the view, most of the boys were of the opinion that men should not weep in public. The boys and girls who agreed with the statement thought that if men wept, people would tease them and would compare them with women. However, a few girls wanted to know why men should not weep and felt that they were not going to lose their dignity if they wept. According to them, if, for example, men lose a close relative, they are bound to weep. In fact some of the girls were of the view that nowadays men weep more than women.

### **Education of Boys and Girls**

The proportion of girls enrolled both at primary and upper-primary levels continues to be lower than for boys. The dropout rate, both at the

primary and middle school levels, is much higher for girls. The children were asked to give their opinion on whether boys should get more education than girls. As expected, most of the girls (as high as 88 per cent) did not agree with the statement. However, as many as 40 per cent of the boys were of the view that boys should get more education. The arguments given by the boys are presented below:

- If girls get more educated, they would become very arrogant
- If girls were better educated, it would be very difficult to find educated grooms.
- Who would do the household chores or work in the farms, if the girls also want to study?
- There would be demand for more dowry.
- If a well qualified girl marries a less qualified boy, she would not respect her husband. She would be too independent and would create problems in the family.

Some of the boys who believed that only boys should get more education did not even want to give any reason. They just stated very emphatically that girls should not study more.

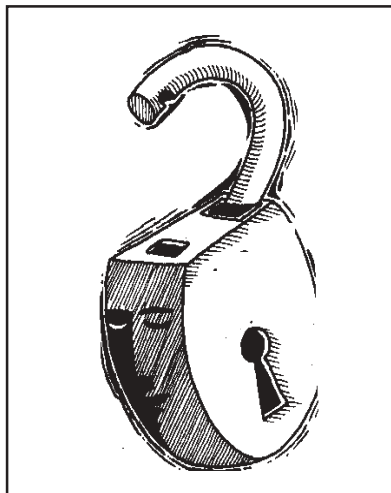
It is interesting to note that some of the girls who agreed with the statement that boys should get more education gave a very different argument. They were of the view that boys should study more because they had to earn more to support the family. These girls felt that if the boys were well qualified they could go out of the village and look for jobs.

However, as mentioned earlier, most of the girls and more than fifty percent of the boys were of the opinion that both boys and girls should get an equal education. In fact some of the boys had mentioned that since only girls were getting jobs, say as teachers, *anganwadi* workers and helpers, ANMs and even as clerks or sales girls in nearby towns, they should be encouraged to study more. Some boys mentioned that if women were educated, they could help their children in their studies. The girls felt that nowadays, since girls were better in studies, they should get more education. Also, the girls were of the opinion that if men were educated and their wives were not educated, the wives would be ill-treated by their husbands.

### Men, the Main Earners?

Since time immemorial, it has been considered a man's responsibility to earn for the family and a woman's responsibility to take care of the domestic chores. Though this situation is changing considerably, still in most of these households men are the primary earners. The students were asked to express their opinion on whether it is necessary for a man to earn more than his wife to maintain peace and harmony in the family. A majority of the students agreed with the statement. As many as 64 per cent of the boys and nearly 60 per cent of the girls shared the view that men should earn more in order to have peace in the family. The boys were of the opinion that a man should earn

enough money to run the family because if he depended on his wife's income, he would not be respected. However, some of the girls who did not agree with the statement mentioned that even women could take care of the family. According to them, in case of death or serious illness of the husband, the women often have to support the family. Some of the girls mentioned that in



most of the houses, the household expenses were met mainly out of the earnings of the women of the house, since men generally did not give their full earnings for the household expenses. Even some of the boys opined that if men earned more, they spent most of it on alcohol, while women used their earnings for meeting the family's needs.

### Restrictions on Women

Although, nowadays women are seeking employment outside their homes, there are restrictions on the type of job they can undertake. For instance, when the adolescents were asked whether women could take up a job that involved working night shifts, as many as 58 per cent of the girls and 51 per cent of the boys did not seem to approve of it. Though this question may not be directly relevant to them (since not many such jobs were available in the rural

areas), this question was discussed mainly to understand their norms / perceptions about women entering such job markets. The girls were mostly concerned about the reputation and security of such women who had to work night shifts, say in health centres / factories. They were of the view that men could misbehave and they would be misunderstood as women of immoral character. Some of the girls, who were not against women doing night shifts, said that women could work in the nights, provided they had enough security. They also felt that women should not interact with men if they did night duties.

The boys were against women doing night shifts since they were worried that if women worked night shifts, how could they get up in the morning and do household chores? In the opinion of some of the boys no decent man would send his wife to work in the nights. A few boys who felt strongly against women doing night shifts were of the view that such women would become immoral and were bound to develop illicit relationship with other men. Surprisingly, some of the boys were rather afraid that if women went for night shifts, their husbands could develop extra marital relationships, when their wives were away. These feelings expressed by the adolescent boys show that they are deeply influenced by television serials and films where such themes are fairly common.

One of the statements related to the freedom to move about: "Men can return home at any time, but women should be back at home before dark". As many as two thirds of the boys and 55 per cent of the girls were in agreement that women should reach home before dark. The boys said that if women did not return home early, they could get into trouble since they could be subjected

to sexual harassment. According to some of these boys, if men went out to work, they could return anytime, but if women did not return in time, it caused anxiety. Some of the boys wanted the women of the house to come home early, so that they could prepare dinner. The girls complained that if women returned late, men would get suspicious. However some of the girls felt that if women had to travel a long distance for their work, they could get late and wanted to know why anyone should suspect them.

### Intra-household Finances

Even if women go to work and earn money, many girls and boys felt they should not have the right to spend the money in ways they wish. While 50 per cent of the boys agreed with this view, in the case of the girls this percentage was lower at 28 percent. Some of the boys were very firm in their opinion that women should not spend money without the consent of their husbands. They went to the extent of mentioning that if women kept buying *saris*, how could the household expenditure be met? However, a number of boys mentioned that in their houses, their fathers gave their earnings to their mothers and their mothers managed the finances. One of the boys was of the view that men spent their earnings on alcohol, while women spent it on food. Some of the girls argued very vehemently that if women go to work and earn, they should be able to spend the way they wish.

### Sharing Household Chores

According to the norms set by their society, cleaning the house, cooking and child care are primarily the responsibility of women. Surprisingly, more than ninety per cent of the girls and as many as 87 per cent of the boys agreed with the statement that both men and women

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should share the kitchen work. The girls who agreed with the statement mentioned that since both were equal, both should cook. Even if men refused, the women should make them do a share of the kitchen work. They were also of the view that if the housewife fell sick, it was the duty of the husband to cook and take care of the children.



A small percentage of girls who disagreed with the statement were of the view that men should not cook; according to them cooking was a woman's job. Similarly, in the opinion of some boys, if men cooked, people would think badly of them, since 'cooking is, after all, a woman's job'.

Nearly two-thirds of the boys and one third of the girls agreed with the statement that men cannot look after children as well. The boys and girls gave the following

arguments to support their view that men could not take care of children as well:

- Only mothers are kind to children;
- Fathers would not have the patience and if the child keeps crying, a father would beat the child;
- If babies pass stool or urine, men do not know how to clean up;
- Men can look after children only after the children grow up a bit—say, after they start walking;
- Men are supposed to earn money and roam around and it is the duty of the women to look after the children.

Interestingly, a majority of the boys and girls (more than 50 per cent of the boys and nearly 60 percent of the girls) seemed to agree with the view that women should get up early. Both boys and girls gave same arguments in support of their views. In their opinion, since women had to fetch water, cook and send the children to school, they had to get up early. However, some of the girls felt that if both husband and wife got up early and shared the household work, the burden on women would get reduced.

### To Sum Up

The opinion poll conducted among the adolescents indicate that most of these boys and girls have several typecast ideas about who should perform everyday chores like cooking, cleaning, fetching water, etc. The majority of these boys and girls seem to have stereotyped norms about what is feminine and what is masculine. However, it is heartening to note that a significant number of these adolescents have questioned their traditional roles, and a majority are in favour of equal sharing of household chores. □

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