

THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER STEREOTYPES ON WOMEN'S ROLES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN SOUTH ASIA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY ACROSS TRADITIONAL AND MODERN CONTEXTS

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of gender stereotypes on women's roles and opportunities in South Asia through a comparative analysis of traditional and modern contexts. Utilizing a qualitative research design, it employs a comprehensive literature review as its primary method, drawing from academic journals, books, and reports from international organizations published over the last two decades. The analysis focused on key themes related to societal expectations, educational opportunities, workplace dynamics, and family roles, employing thematic coding to organize findings and facilitate a nuanced understanding of gender stereotypes' implications across diverse societal settings. The research objectives were to illuminate both the similarities and differences in how these stereotypes shape women's experiences in traditional and modern environments. Ethical considerations guided the study, ensuring respectful representation of women's experiences and appropriate citation of sources. Ultimately, this research findings contributed to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding gender stereotypes in South Asia, highlighting the critical need for ongoing dialogue and action to promote gender equity.

Keywords: gender, opportunities, South Asia, Stereotypes, women's roles

Introduction

Asian countries are consist of agriculture-based economies, coupled with tribal feudal systems and patriarchal structures, assign women a secondary role. Polygamy is permitted in both Hinduism and Buddhism, further diminishing women's status. Historical practices, such as foot binding in China and the Hindu custom of sati, where a widow is expected to burn alongside her deceased husband, exemplify the violence women face in South Asia. Although Islam also permits polygamy, it theoretically provides women with equal rights in many areas. However, in practice, it often adopts cultural

norms from Hinduism and Buddhism, such as societal disapproval of women's right to remarry, even though Islam allows it. As South Asian countries transition into a post-industrial society after missing the industrial revolution, disparities in development levels emerge across different regions. Widespread unemployment has pushed women out of more lucrative job markets, forcing many to return to unpaid labor in agriculture and family businesses. South Asia, often referred to as the Indian subcontinent, encompasses the modern nation-states of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. This region is

characterized by a wide array of cultural and linguistic diversity and is home to over a billion people. The dynamics within South Asia significantly impact global issues such as social welfare, population growth, cultural and economic development, and environmental challenges. Women's experiences are ranging from their symbolic representation to their educational, religious, and professional conditions which are crucial for shaping the future of this region. Even though it has been 21st century its haven't change gender stereotypes, there are scholarly arguments for the prevalence of traditional gender stereotypes

Despite progress over the years, gender stereotypes persist, perpetuated through media and various forms of socialization such as educational, recreational, and familial that reinforce prejudice and discrimination (Naznin & Nayak, 2021). Although many gender-related barriers have diminished, these stereotypes continue to hinder women's advancement in both public and private spheres. For educators aiming to address the deeply ingrained stereotypes faced by South Asian women, identifying an effective starting point is a significant challenge. The oppressive nature of certain cultural and religious practices affecting women in South Asia is well-documented. This region is often described as a patriarchal stronghold. As noted by Anne and Water (1983), educators face substantial obstacles in successfully challenging these entrenched stereotypes.

The career advancement opportunities for women continue to be adversely impacted by gender stereotypes, which influence managerial behaviors and occupational perceptions in a workplace shaped by patriarchal norms. Despite the implementation of various policies aimed at promoting gender equality in recent decades, gender discrimination rooted in these stereotypes persists (Naznin & Nayak, 2021). Stereotyping

arises in multiple contexts to fulfill the specific demands of those environments. The challenges posed by gender stereotypes can be particularly detrimental; for many women, their involvement in family businesses is determined by birth rather than choice. Although these women may be familiar with business practices, they are often not seen as viable successors due to their gender.

Furthermore, traditional views hinder women's career growth by restricting their ability to seek employment outside the home or engage with individuals beyond their family circle. Anne and Water (1983) highlight the importance of documenting educational opportunities for girls, women's rights within marriage, and activism against issues such as dowry, rape, and domestic violence. According to the IBR (2020), as cited in Naznin & Nayak (2021), only 29% of senior management positions globally are held by women. A critical review of the existing literature reveals that, despite numerous studies on sex-role stereotyping, its underlying causes remain insufficiently explored. Until these causes are identified, the issue is likely to persist (Desvaux, Devillard-Hoellinger, & Baumgarten, 2007).

In addition to indigenous religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, invaders introduced Islam and Christianity to the region. These religions are deeply influential, affecting both lifestyle and women's status. In June 1980, the Women Lawyers Association of the Philippines held a meeting in Manila where representatives from 13 South Asian countries presented their findings. They all indicated that while there were no discriminatory laws against women, prevailing cultural norms and traditions were the primary sources of such attitudes. The customs and traditions in Asia are so inflexible that they prevent women from pursuing justice, even when they have a legal right to do so. Reports from South Asian countries reveal a pattern of

injustice, oppression, and powerlessness experienced by women as they seek to obtain the rights granted to them by local laws, largely due to entrenched traditional attitudes (Niaz, 2003).

There are handful of studies on gender and gender stereotypes in Asian countries. Few empirical studies are map out the prevailing stereotypes in South Asian countries. Therefore, very few studies have indicated the significant of studying women stereotypes in South Asian countries. Still there is requirement of profound understanding of gender stereotypes on women's roles and opportunities in South Asia. The purpose of this qualitative study fill the existing gap which identified in the existing literature. This secondary study highlighted the significance of understanding prevailing women roles under the stereotypes of South Asian societies and opportunities that exists to women in South Asia. This study divided into three sections in order to get better understanding of the topic. Firstly, I focused on gender stereotypes in South Asia and secondly I focused on women roles in South Asia and thirdly, opportunities for South Asian women.

Literature Review

The section of literature review flow according to a three sections. First theme that, I identified was gender stereotypes in South Asia and secondly I directed my focused on women roles in South Asia and final section drew, opportunities for South Asian women.

Gender Stereotypes in South Asia

The impact of gender-role stereotypes on women's lifelong learning, income, and career advancement opportunities is analyzed. It is suggested that "learning gender" plays a vital role in the process of lifelong learning (Silberstang, 2011). Gender stereotypes persist and are perpetuated through various channels, including media and social, educational, and recreational

forms of socialization, which reinforce gender bias and discrimination (Naznin & Nayak, 2021). They posit that the current management culture often fails to critically incorporate the social theories from gender studies, which could inform the creation of gender-neutral, affirmative action-oriented managerial approaches. While there has been a progressive shift in management literature, gender stereotypes remain a significant barrier to women's career advancement. The outcomes from gender stereotype change research can be categorized mainly under the themes of “family and children,” “marriage” and “equality and women’s employment” (Priyashantha, 2021).

Silberstang (2011) posits that throughout their lives, women internalize gender roles and stereotypes that significantly affect their lifelong learning activities. These implicit stereotypes shape how girls and women perceive themselves and their potential, influencing their choice of subjects in school, career paths, and efforts toward career advancement. Thus, "learning gender" becomes a crucial aspect of lifelong learning, laying the groundwork for educational success and career growth. These gender-role stereotypes are reflected in various inequities related to education and the workplace, including unequal access to education in many regions, substantial pay gaps between men and women in both developed and developing countries, and the notably low representation of women in senior management roles globally.

Since the 1970s, changing gender stereotypes has been a key focus for researchers, and the discussion remains relevant in the twenty-first century. Some scholars contend that these stereotypes persist unchanged due to strong theoretical underpinnings and their deep-rooted nature in social interpretation. (Priyashantha, Alwis, & Welmilla, 2023).

Women Roles in South Asia

Talbani & Hasanali, (2000) explores the social and cultural experiences of adolescent females from various South Asian immigrant groups in Canada. Like other immigrant communities, South Asian families experience acculturation stress. While South Asians tend to blend secular European cultural aspects with their own traditions, family and community structures often remain patriarchal. The findings indicate that gender roles are upheld through practices such as gender segregation, restrictions on girls' social activities, and arranged marriages. Interview participants expressed that their parents and communities enforce stricter socialization rules for girls compared to other communities in Canada. Additionally, the research revealed that adolescent girls perceive significant social repercussions for protesting or dissenting, leading them to accept the existing conditions while hoping for gradual social change. Some of these adolescents also experience stress, which can result in behavioral issues.

Historically, caregiving for frail older adults in South Asian families has primarily been the responsibility of women. However, the findings from this study indicate that women's attitudes toward caregiving are evolving within British society (Hossain, Stores, Hakak, & Dewey, 2020). While women in Southeast Asia are often seen as more empowered compared to other regions, they still face significant obstacles to gender equality in Thailand (Richardson & Roberts, 2020). They posit that although women in Thailand hold a largely positive view of themselves and their skills, they still internalize the gender stereotypes associated with the agricultural industry. These beliefs seem to hinder their sense of empowerment within the agricultural workforce.

In South Asian countries, the blending of Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu, Islamic, and Christian traditions has significantly influenced women's identities and their societal roles. Rigid cultural norms and patriarchal attitudes undermine the value of women, contributing to widespread violence against them. In a family structure where men hold dominant authority, and family matters are treated as private, violence often occurs behind closed doors. In addition to traditional forms of abuse like domestic violence and sexual assault, women face specific dowry-related crimes, including bride burning, kidnapping for prostitution, and "honor killings." Legal frameworks often perpetuate discrimination against women and discourage them from reporting such violent incidents (Niaz, 2003). He further posits that women's economic, social, and cultural rights remain overlooked. In Pakistan and other South Asian countries, women are confronted with various forms of violence, such as sexual assault by family members, strangers, and state agents; domestic violence, including spousal homicide; being burned or disfigured with acid; physical abuse and threats; ritual honor killings; as well as custodial abuse and torture.

Opportunities for South Asian Women

Health coverage, microfinance loans, and credit opportunities, and examining how they can provide support, facilitate access, and address limitations in helping women improve their well-being and escape poverty (Varma, Falk, & Dierking, 2023). The opening statement of the 2004 ILO report on global trends in women's employment highlights a significant trend: an increasing number of women are joining the labor force, allowing many to harness their potential and achieve economic independence. While women still participate in the labor force at lower rates than men in many parts of the world, the gender gap in participation has gradually narrowed. Several factors have

contributed to this change, including declining fertility rates, improved female education and aspirations, and the emergence of labor-intensive export manufacturing and service opportunities. However, the growth in female participation rates has slowed and even declined in some regions. Notably, the MENA and South Asia regions continue to exhibit persistently low female labor force participation rates. While male participation rates in these areas are comparable to those in other parts of the world, female participation remains stubbornly low (Kabeer, Deshpande, & Assaad, 2019).

It is now widely recognized that the needs of women workers in the informal sector are not adequately addressed by traditional labor organizations and trade unions. Although women's contributions to the economies of developing countries are vital, they often do not find employment in the regulated, unionized sectors and are predominantly employed in what is referred to as the 'unorganized,' 'unprotected,' 'unregistered,' or 'informal' sector. The author examines the major challenges and opportunities that women face in organizing and mobilizing for change within the informal economy in South Asia. Additionally, she critically analyzes the various interventions implemented by the state and civil society organizations to empower these women. The author concludes by identifying the combination of strategies and interventions that are most effective in different social, political, and economic contexts.

A study conducted in Pakistan by Sarfraz, Andlib, Kamran, Khan, & Bazkiaei, (2021) posit that education is crucial for empowering women and improving their employment prospects, as educated women are more likely to participate in decent labor market activities, whether as paid employees or employers. They have explored some important policy implications, such as: (i) education is essential for unlocking better job

opportunities, so it is vital for women and their households to invest in education and vocational training; (ii) Pakistan urgently needs to shift its policies to ensure that women have access to at least a higher secondary (HS) level of education. According to Pio, & Syed, (2013) there are three policy implications for opportunities for women. First, there are widespread structural and institutional obstacles, including patriarchal beliefs that are bolstered by gender-biased interpretations of religious texts. Second, women often face restricted opportunities for education and skill-building. Third, the scarcity of non-agricultural job options and financial resources leads to economic reliance on men and a division of labor based on gender. Finally, the promotion and support of women's agency can foster their empowerment and joy.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the influence of gender stereotypes on women's roles and opportunities in South Asia, contrasting traditional and modern contexts. By employing a comparative approach, the research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how deeply entrenched cultural norms affect women's experiences and opportunities across different societal settings. The qualitative nature of this study allows for an in-depth exploration of the complexities surrounding gender stereotypes and their implications for women.

Given the focus on secondary data, this study utilizes a comprehensive literature review as its primary method of data collection. The data sources will include academic journal articles, books, reports from international organizations, and other relevant documents published over the last two decades. The literature will be sourced from databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, Research gate and institutional repositories to ensure a diverse and credible range of materials. Specific attention will be paid to studies that

examine the roles of women in both traditional and modern contexts within South Asia, as well as research highlighting the impact of gender stereotypes on their career opportunities and societal roles.

The analysis will follow a thematic approach, allowing for the identification and interpretation of key themes and patterns related to gender stereotypes and their effects on women's roles. Initially, the data will be organized according to context of traditional versus modern. Thematic coding will be applied to categorize findings related to societal expectations, educational opportunities, workplace dynamics, and family roles. This process will facilitate a comparative analysis that highlights both similarities and differences in how gender stereotypes manifest across various contexts.

Although this study primarily relies on secondary data, ethical considerations remain paramount. The research will ensure that all sources are appropriately cited and that the integrity of the original research is maintained. Furthermore, the study will be sensitive to the cultural contexts from which the data is drawn, recognizing the importance of respectful representation of women's experiences in South Asia.

Limitations

The reliance on secondary data may present certain limitations, such as the potential for bias in the original studies and the lack of control over data quality. Additionally, the study may not capture the most recent developments in gender roles and stereotypes due to the focus on existing literature. Despite these limitations, the rich insights gained from a qualitative analysis of secondary sources will contribute significantly to understanding the complex landscape of gender stereotypes in South Asia. By employing this methodology, the study aims to illuminate the multifaceted influences of gender stereotypes on

women's roles and opportunities in South Asia, providing a foundation for future research and policy recommendations.

Results and Findings

Overview of Gender Stereotypes in Traditional and Modern Contexts

The comparative analysis of gender stereotypes in South Asia reveals significant disparities between traditional and modern contexts regarding women's roles and opportunities. In traditional settings, entrenched patriarchal norms dictate the behavior and expectations placed on women, often relegating them to domestic roles. These norms are deeply rooted in cultural and religious beliefs, with interpretations of sacred texts reinforcing the notion that women should prioritize family and household duties over personal aspirations or career ambitions. In contrast, modern contexts, influenced by globalization, education, and shifting economic structures, are beginning to challenge these stereotypes, though not without significant resistance.

Societal Expectations

In traditional settings, societal expectations create rigid frameworks within which women must operate. Women are often expected to adhere to roles that emphasize submissiveness, obedience, and familial loyalty. The ideal woman is typically portrayed as a caregiver, responsible for raising children and maintaining the household. These expectations limit women's autonomy and discourage aspirations outside domestic spheres. In many communities, adherence to these roles is socially enforced, with deviations often met with stigma or ostracism.

Conversely, modern contexts present a more nuanced picture. While stereotypes still persist, there is a growing recognition of women's rights and capabilities. Women are increasingly encouraged to pursue education and careers, and

societal narratives are shifting to celebrate women who break traditional molds. However, despite these advancements, residual stereotypes continue to influence perceptions of women in professional settings. Many women still face scrutiny regarding their commitment to family when they take on roles that require significant time and effort outside the home.

Educational Opportunities

Access to education is another critical area where gender stereotypes play a significant role. In traditional contexts, educational opportunities for women are often limited. Societal norms may prioritize boys' education, reflecting a belief that investing in male education yields higher returns for the family. As a result, girls may be encouraged to drop out of school early to assist with household chores or to marry young, thus perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependency.

In modern contexts, there has been notable progress in female education, driven by government initiatives and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) promoting gender equality. However, disparities remain. Women may still encounter barriers such as cultural resistance, lack of safe transportation, or financial constraints that hinder their ability to pursue education. Additionally, even when educational opportunities are available, the quality and relevance of education may not meet the needs of women, often focusing on traditional roles rather than equipping them for diverse career paths.

Workplace Dynamics

The influence of gender stereotypes is markedly evident in workplace dynamics across both contexts. In traditional settings, women's participation in the workforce is typically limited to low-paying, low-status jobs, often within agriculture or informal sectors. The prevailing belief that women are primarily caregivers

creates an environment where their professional aspirations are undervalued. As a result, workplace policies may not account for the unique challenges women face, such as balancing work and family responsibilities.

In contrast, modern workplaces, especially in urban areas, are beginning to evolve. Women are increasingly entering diverse fields, including business, technology, and politics. However, systemic barriers persist. Women often face discrimination, unequal pay, and a lack of mentorship opportunities compared to their male counterparts. Moreover, workplace cultures can be hostile, with implicit biases that undermine women's contributions and limit their career advancement.

Despite these challenges, modern contexts are witnessing the emergence of women's networks and support systems that aim to foster professional development and provide mentorship. Such initiatives are crucial for challenging existing stereotypes and creating a more equitable workplace environment. However, they must contend with the lingering influence of traditional beliefs that still permeate many sectors.

Family Roles

Family dynamics further illustrate the impact of gender stereotypes on women's roles. In traditional contexts, women's identities are often closely tied to their roles as wives and mothers. The expectation to prioritize family responsibilities can create tensions when women seek to pursue careers or education. Additionally, decision-making power within the family is frequently skewed towards men, leaving women with limited influence over significant life choices.

Modern contexts are beginning to redefine family roles, as dual-income households become

more common. This shift can lead to a more equitable distribution of domestic responsibilities; however, traditional gender roles still exert a strong influence. Women often find themselves shouldering the majority of household and childcare responsibilities, even when both partners work full-time. This “second shift” can create stress and limit women’s opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Moreover, the evolving notion of family in modern contexts, including single-parent households and same-sex partnerships, challenges traditional gender roles. As diverse family structures gain visibility, there is potential for broader acceptance of varied gender roles, allowing for more equitable partnerships. However, resistance remains, with traditional ideals often clashing with contemporary realities.

Comparative Analysis and Conclusions

The thematic analysis reveals both similarities and differences in how gender stereotypes manifest across traditional and modern contexts in South Asia. While traditional settings are characterized by rigid, prescriptive roles for women, modern contexts exhibit a gradual shift towards greater acceptance of women’s agency and potential. However, deeply rooted stereotypes continue to exert influence, presenting challenges that hinder women’s full participation in society.

Ultimately, addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes education, advocacy, and policy reforms aimed at dismantling patriarchal structures. Encouragingly, as awareness of gender inequality grows, both men and women are increasingly engaged in dialogues around gender roles, contributing to a slow but promising transformation in societal attitudes. Continued efforts to challenge stereotypes and promote

gender equity are essential for empowering women and enabling them to thrive in both traditional and modern contexts.

Conclusion

The examination of gender stereotypes in South Asia reveals a complex landscape where traditional norms and modern influences intersect. While significant strides have been made in challenging rigid societal expectations, deeply entrenched stereotypes continue to shape women’s experiences and opportunities. Traditional settings impose restrictive roles on women, emphasizing obedience and domesticity, which limit their aspirations and autonomy. This environment not only enforces conformity but also penalizes deviations, perpetuating cycles of inequality that stifle women’s potential.

Conversely, modern contexts exhibit a growing recognition of women's rights and capabilities. Increased access to education and emerging professional opportunities reflect a shift in societal narratives, celebrating women who defy conventional roles. However, despite these advancements, the persistence of stereotypes and systemic barriers creates an uneven playing field. Women in modern settings often confront discrimination, unequal pay, and the dual burden of work and family responsibilities, as traditional gender roles continue to influence expectations within the household.

The evolution of family dynamics further complicates the discourse on gender stereotypes. While the rise of dual-income households signals progress towards more equitable partnerships, women frequently find themselves managing a disproportionate share of domestic responsibilities, reinforcing traditional notions of caregiving. This ongoing struggle emphasizes the need for cultural shifts that promote shared responsibilities and challenge the underlying beliefs that dictate gender roles.

To address these multifaceted challenges, a comprehensive approach is essential. Advocacy for policy reforms, investment in quality education, and the promotion of gender-sensitive workplace practices are critical steps toward dismantling patriarchal structures. Moreover, fostering open dialogues around gender roles among both men and women can facilitate greater awareness and understanding, ultimately contributing to a cultural transformation.

In conclusion, while the trajectory towards gender equity in South Asia shows promise, it remains fraught with obstacles rooted in historical and cultural contexts. Continued efforts to challenge and redefine gender stereotypes are vital for empowering women and ensuring their full participation in society. As awareness grows and collective action intensifies, there is hope for a future where gender equality is not just an aspiration, but a lived reality for all.

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