



Transitions in Gender Roles in Contemporary India: A Cross-Generational Analysis

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Abstract

This study explores how gender roles in India have evolved across generations, focusing on the perceptions of young adults and middle-aged adults living in Delhi and the NCR. Using a qualitative design and a semi-structured interview format, data were collected from 80 participants (40 aged 18–30 and 40 aged 40+). Responses were thematically analyzed, revealing seven major themes: typical roles, desirable characteristics, moral ethics, career expectations, societal norms, safety, and additional personality traits. Findings indicate both continuity and change in gender role expectations. While traditional role beliefs such as nurturing females and financially responsible males remain prominent, younger participants demonstrated more egalitarian views regarding personality traits, career aspirations, and gender equality. The study highlights a gradual transition toward flexibility in gender roles, though longstanding societal norms continue to influence expectations. These results underscore the need for further research on how cultural, generational, and social factors shape evolving gender identities in contemporary India.

Keywords: *Gender Roles, Gender Roles Transition, Femininity, Content Analysis, Societal Norms*

Introduction

Gender significantly contributes to our identity and is often characterized by the psychological distinctions between men and women. A gender role refers to a collection of societal norms that determine the behaviors deemed acceptable, appropriate, or desirable based on an individual's actual or perceived sex or sexuality. The term was first introduced by John Money in 1955 to describe how intersex individuals navigated their gender identity in situations lacking clear biological categorization.

The late 1960s and 1970s represented a pivotal moment in gender research, with developmental scientists focusing on how and why gendered behaviors develop and evolve over time (Ruble and Martin, 1998). This led to a concentration on the origins of gendered behavior and thought.

Self-socialization theories suggest that children actively seek to understand what gender means and how it relates to their identities, which drives their behavior and leads them to socialized themselves (Martin et al., 2002).

Social construction theories argue that gender behavior primarily arises from social conventions, while others maintain that it is influenced by universal biological factors to varying extents, with societal norms having a predominant impact on gender behaviors rather than the other way around.

Historically, gender was viewed as something achieved and relatively stable once developed in early childhood. The contemporary constructionist view, suggested by Fenstermaker and West, sees gender as an activity shaped by social expectations and beliefs about sex, influenced by situational variables. Typically, society recognizes only male and female as gender categories, associating each with specific traits such as dress, speech, and behavior. Women are often perceived as submissive, while men are viewed as dominant. This gender typicality arises from our intersecting characteristics and needs, often limiting individuals' choices in defining their identities. The need to classify others emerges as a priority in social interactions, leading to categorizations based on appearance and behavior.

The concept of femininity or womanhood is actively constructed through interactions in particular social contexts. Given that society generally acknowledges only two genders, transgender individuals seeking gender reassignment must demonstrate their ability to "pass" as either male or female, indicating that even the choice to change one's gender is shaped by social constructs.

Method

AIM

The aim of this research is to explore how gender roles have transformed over time and how these transitions are reflected in contemporary Indian society.

PARTICIPANTS

This study employs an open-ended questionnaire for content analysis, involving a sample of 80 participants: 40 individuals (20 males and 20 females) over the age of 40 and 40 individuals (20 males and 20 females) aged 18 to 30. All participants reside in different areas of Delhi and the Delhi NCR.

MATERIAL USED

A semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect data. This format allowed for consistency across interviews while providing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations. The open-ended nature of the questions facilitated deeper exploration and

often revealed not only participants' responses but the underlying meanings, beliefs, and motivations shaping those responses. Semi-structured interviews also helped create a comfortable environment for discussing sensitive issues related to gender.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

A qualitative research design was employed to interpret subjective meanings and understand how individuals construct and make sense of gender roles within their sociocultural context. The study focused on descriptive data derived from participants' spoken and written expressions. No statistical analyses were conducted, as the emphasis was on capturing unique personal narratives and patterns across groups. The data collected through interviews were subsequently examined using thematic methods.

PROCEDURE

Participants were approached individually and briefed about the purpose of the study. Rapport was established prior to the interviews to ensure comfort and openness. Each participant responded to a semi-structured interview schedule containing 12 open-ended questions (see Appendix A). All interviews were recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data were read repeatedly to ensure familiarity, after which initial codes were generated. These codes were clustered into broader categories, leading to the development of themes. Tables were prepared to organize these themes and visually represent similarities and differences across age groups and gender categories.

DATA ANALYSIS

Content analysis was used as the primary method of data analysis. This approach allowed the data to be systematically coded, categorized, and interpreted while staying grounded in participants' narratives. Thematic analysis was applied within the broader content analysis framework to identify patterns, recurring meanings, and areas of convergence or divergence. This method provided a structured yet flexible approach that enabled both precision and depth, allowing the researcher to capture the complexity of gender role perceptions and the nuances reflected in participants' lived experiences.

TRANSPARENCY AND OPENNESS

This research follows the principles of the Transparency and Openness Promotion (TOP) Guidelines. The study was not preregistered, and no formal registration record is available. The study protocol, including the sampling framework and procedural outline, is described in detail within the manuscript. The analysis plan, outlining the use of qualitative content analysis and thematic interpretation, was developed prior to data coding and was consistently applied throughout the study. The material used in the research, semi-structured interview schedule, are provided in Appendix A to facilitate transparency and enable replication. The data, consisting of anonymized interview transcripts, cannot be publicly shared due to the sensitive and potentially identifiable nature of participants' responses; however, access may be granted for academic purposes upon reasonable request and in accordance with ethical guidelines. As the study relied on manual qualitative analysis, no analytic code was generated. Reporting throughout the manuscript follows the APA guidelines for qualitative research, ensuring clarity, accuracy, and completeness in the description of methodology and findings.

RESULT

The data analysis involved coding all responses and grouping similar codes into major themes, resulting in seven key themes: typical roles, desirable characteristics, moral ethics, career, societal norms, safety, and additional traits.

Table 1: Summary of Responses for the Theme 'Typical Roles' of Females and Males

Age Group	Females	Males
20-30 years	Multi-tasking, cooking, taking care of family, responsibility of home, engaged in household, helping healthy atmosphere, child bearing, handling new situation, feminine jobs, housewife, mother, daughter, sister, household chores, family values are important, relationship manager, spiritual advisor.	Tasks of physical strength, earn for family, working day and night, protect family members, pressure of remuneration, supports family financially, knowing everything, heavy job, head of the family, dominate women, businessman, masculine, activities related to going out of house, emotionally strong, respect women and understand everyone.
40 and above	Bread bearer, home manager, play roles according to social norms, balance every aspect, children and husband are her main priorities, household work, moral values, talkative, housewife, cooking, take care of children and husband.	Safety assurance, anchor of house relied on upon, responsible, helping in work outside the periphery of home, physical strength, balanced, protect wife and family, societal and financial protection, provide basic necessities.

Table 1 illustrates the typical roles perceived for females and males by young and middle adults. Young adults believe that females should engage in household tasks, exhibit nurturing qualities, and prioritize family, while males should work outside the home, earn money, honor women, and meet basic needs. Middle adults, on the other hand, see females primarily as home managers, caregivers who adhere to societal norms, while males are expected to provide financial and societal support and demonstrate physical strength.

Table 2: Summary of Responses for the Theme 'Desirable Characteristics' for Females and Males

Age Group	Females	Males
20-30 years	Politeness, patience, ultimate strength, household work, balance, control their emotions, not attention seekers, have hobbies and fashion, very intelligent, brilliant communicators, independent, should not do gossip, mature and understanding, adjustable, confident, hardworking, shy, submissive, good values, resilient, empathetic, believe in themselves, talented, appearances, soft-spoken, emotionally strong, household work, secure her marriage, respect everyone, not to be feminist.	Masculine, dominant, powerful, supportive, nonjudgmental, respect every gender, protective for woman, support and uplift females of house, have goals and ambitions, kind towards everyone, having compassion, strong, flexible, open-minded, sense of humor, moral integrity, revealing their authenticity, possess power, hardworking, self-confident, speedy at work, ready to do various tasks, smart.
40 and above	Mentally strong, stand for herself, never feel inferior, respect other women, no gossip, confident, honest, emotional, strong, independent, patience, secure, defined purpose, good management skills, flexible, understanding, strong willpower, determination, should earn some money, loving, understanding, caring, educated, religious, social, polite, respect her husband, high character, good looking.	Trustworthy, responsible, dedication, well spoken, kind towards everyone, compassion, comfortable in multiple roles, approachable, decision-making skills, economically stable, provide more than basic necessities, respect for humanity, treat women with equality, caring and understanding, protective, honest.

Table 2 outlines the attributes considered desirable for males and females in society. Young adults suggest that females should be polite, patient, effective communicators, mature, adaptable, hardworking, confident, and even shy and submissive, whereas males should be masculine, dominant, powerful, supportive, flexible, open-minded, possess a sense of humor, and maintain moral integrity. Middle adults believe that females should exhibit mental strength, mutual respect among women, confidence, honesty,

and emotional support, while males should be trustworthy, responsible, dedicated, articulate, kind, adaptable, possess decision-making skills, and achieve financial stability beyond basic needs.

Table 3: Summary of Responses for the Theme 'Moral Ethics' for Females and Males

Age Group	Females	Males
20-30 years	Trustworthy, reliable, respect others, not cheat, not smoke, drink, not questioning males, not oppress the weak, help people, work efficiently, not to be submissive, not hesitate, not to disrespect males, public display of skin.	Ignoring the wrong, not judging women on the basis of their attire, not engage in unnecessary issues, not cheat, should not dominate women, believe in equality of gender, not dominate juniors.
40 and above	Not to break trust, not feel dominated, not hurt herself, respect, not deteriorate her image in her own eyes and of society as well, clothing should be appropriate, should not have any relationship with anyone else than her husband, no unethical practices, no bad habits or hurt others, follow moral values, high in morality, not lying, cheating, smoking, drinking and running away from responsibilities.	No drugs, abusive language and ill behavior, should not urinate in public, high character, not cheat, commit crime and should never go against his moral values, should be humble, not short tempered, not be characterless, not have extramarital affair or disrespect females.

Table 3 discusses the moral values expected of males and females. Young adults argue that females should be trustworthy, refrain from cheating and substance use, avoid challenging men, help others, work effectively, and assert themselves. Males, they say, should not overlook wrongdoing, judge women by their appearance, engage in irrelevant disputes, cheat, or dominate women. Middle adults suggest that females should not betray trust, feel oppressed, harm themselves, damage their self-image, dress inappropriately, or engage with anyone outside of marriage, while males should avoid drugs, abusive language, poor behavior, maintain high character, and refrain from cheating or committing crimes.

Table 4: Summary of Responses for the Theme 'Career' for Females and Males

Age Group	Females	Males
20-30 years	Not skipping career, not sacrificing her dreams under family pressures, not be fooled by her bosses for success and then get in trouble, not putting security in danger, not use immoral ways to grow their career, follow your heart and excel, never compromise, show their strength, ability to do work, show skills, personality change, liberty, confident, work, successful, ambitious, hardworking, never quit, never run from conflicts, independent to choose career, not to be suppressed by male, not too stereotypical thinking in choosing jobs, believe in herself, work hard, achieve whatever she wants, confident, motivated, goal oriented.	Should not choose his career according to anyone else, dominate juniors, being in one's ability, supportive, goal oriented, not being oppressive, not disrespect others, not do anything bad to females, not use immoral ways to grow their career, not be overconfident, determination, should think about cash, innovating things so that they can be known in the company, responsible, focused, ethical values, never run from their conflict.
40 and above	Suppress own ambition, never compromise on her career, balance work and home properly, not earn more than a man, not be considered wrong by society, depends upon one's interest, should not affect your family interest, follow the passion, don't get dominated, being happy, don't stress, inspired, passionate, leave the unwanted job, make own	Not Suppress others, no dishonesty, shouldn't spoil his career, honest, not ignore work, bribe-taking or giving, necessary work problems, home and personal problems, to work to excel in career, not take advantage of his position, not use unfair means, not overwork and ignore family, high income assertive, right

	story, don't copy others, be polite to co-employees, should do what she feels like, not to be leader, educated, independent, have self respect, something which gives pleasure, no shortcut for success, hardworking, high character, shift jobs, study, increase caliber, work sincerely, honesty, teachers, doctors, nursing, call centers, passion, faithfulness.	things which makes the family financially strong.
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Table 4 presents the career-related preferences and guidelines for females and males. Young adults believe that females should pursue their careers without compromise, resist family pressures, avoid being exploited for personal advancement, maintain job security, remain ethical, follow their passions, and excel without concessions. They suggest that males should not be oppressive, disrespectful, engage in unethical career practices, or carry excessive confidence while being determined. Middle adults contend that females should balance work and home life effectively, avoid earning more than males, and consider societal perceptions, while males should not suppress others, be dishonest, jeopardize their careers, act unethically, or ignore work responsibilities.

Table 5: Summary of Responses for the Theme 'Societal Norms' for Females and Males

Age Group	Females	Males
20-30 years	Not prioritize oneself above society and nation, being unaware of societies judgement, enjoying company of people around her, not saying yes to everything, not bringing down other woman, not do manly work, should not be friendly with males, decide upon her will to change, not consider baseless rules of society, respecting everyone.	Amendment in thought process, not judge others on clothes, being respectful, protest against molestation, not using short acts, not gullible and disrespecting others.
40 and above	Not feel less than men, not take every blame on self, not disrespect others, should have some respect for societal norms and behave accordingly, not disrespect her in-laws, think about her family, knowing her responsibility, not let anyone take away her rights, overwork, ignore self-life, shouldn't bring down moral values, wearing protective clothes, not doing unethical things.	Not disrespect your wife, not judge other women by words from others, stand by the right, work according to the society, not abandon his family, not support patriarchal society, ignore social life, no abusive language, public display of family matters, should not have unfriendly behavior, not indulging in unethical politics.

Table 5 describes the societal norms expected for both genders. Young adults advise females to assert themselves rather than always agreeing, not undermine other women, avoid traditionally male-dominated jobs, and refrain from overly friendly interactions with men. Males are encouraged to change their mindset, refrain from judging others based on appearance, and show respect. Middle adults emphasize that females should not feel inferior to men, deflect blame onto themselves, respect others, and uphold societal norms, while males should respect their wives, avoid judging women based on hearsay, uphold righteousness, and conform to societal expectations.

Table 6: Summary of Responses for the Theme 'Safety' for Females and Males

Age Group	Females	Males
20-30 years	Not safe at all	Safer than women
40 and above	Not safe	Unsafe

Table 6 evaluates the safety of males and females in society. Both young and middle adults agree that females are currently unsafe, while young adults view males as safer than females, contrasting with middle adults who see males as unsafe as well.

Table 7: Summary of Responses for the Theme 'Characteristics' for Females and Males

Age Group	Females	Males
20-30 years	Learn from experiences, beautiful soul, intelligent, confident, passion, playful, love, ambition, selflessness, idealistic, broad-minded, optimistic values, intellectual, well mannered, adjustable, caring, perfect figure, fair complexion, well spoken, looking presentable, independent, not dual faced, not afraid of what they are, inner beauty, supportive, satisfied with her body, good personality, body language, good at heart, good nature.	Moral characteristics should be there, humble, chivalrous, who treat the one inferior to him as equal, kind-hearted, respecting women, not orthodox mind, generous, good looking, well spoken, height, structure, muscular, good dressing style.
40 and above	Confident women, elegance, kindness, composure, courage, deliberate, intelligent, humble, honest, loving, beautiful heart, and mind, long healthy hair, minimum ageing signs, not be overweight, dress in ethnic wear, beauty with brains, beautiful at heart, beautiful face, inspiration for all, good character, soft-spoken, respectful, spiritual, elegant, confident.	Caring, loving, maintain health and work, honest, athletic body, good health, hygienic, helpful, intellectual, physically fit, good source of income, selfless man, treating women with respect, understand that happiness is in helping others, willing to keep his family safe and happy, dressed well, gentleman, mannerly, good physique, balance family and work life, responsible.

Finally, Table 7 outlines additional characteristics deemed important for both genders. According to young adults, females should embody qualities like a beautiful soul, confidence, passion, inner beauty, supportiveness, and body positivity, while males should have moral integrity, humility, and chivalry. Middle adults note that females should possess elegance, kindness, composure, courage, stylish ethnic attire, and intelligence, whereas males should treat family as a societal unit, maintain good health and hygiene, remain helpful, and be physically fit.

Discussion

The aim of this research is to explore how gender roles have transformed over time and how these transitions are reflected in contemporary Indian society. The data set was collected from 80 individuals living in Delhi and Delhi NCR. The results were focusing on seven themes found out in content analysis.

The first theme is typical social roles of females and males. This theme is to represent the societal norm of gender roles perceived by various individuals. In this theme, it was found that both young adults and middle adults had similar role perceptions about gender roles. According to both the groups, females should be caring and nurturing whereas males should be able to earn money or be financially strong.

The second theme is desirable characteristics of females and males, representing the various qualities people find desirable for male and female to possess. There was a difference in the perception of young adults and middle adults. According to young adults, females should have to be full of emotions, confident and hardworking while males should be open-minded, flexible and supportive. According to middle-aged adults, females should respect other females, be honest, and mentally strong and males

should be dedicated towards their work, have decision-making skills and kind towards everyone. This difference shows that young adults believe in the sense of equality between females and males in terms of understanding each other.

The third theme is morality and ethics, including the various, do's and don'ts in the sense of morality for females and males. It was found that both young adults and middle adults had similar views. Females should not disrespect, dominate others and hesitate, but they should show helping behaviours towards others. Males, on the other hand, should not use drugs, abusive language, dominate women or commit crimes.

The fourth theme is career. It shows the various types of career options participants perceive to be appropriate for females and males to have in their lives. Mixed views were reported amongst young adults and middle adults. For example, on the basis of similarities, both the groups (young and middle adults) reported that female should not skip their career and male should not disrespect or suppress others. In case of differences, according to young adults, females should not compromise but according to middle adults, females should not earn more than males. This shows difference in the perspectives of young adults and middle adults for career of females.

The fifth theme is societal norms. It represents the rules and regulations that are expected to be followed in the society by females and males. It is found that both young and middle adults have a similar point of view in this. As according to them, females should not blame themselves, engage in manly work, or disrespect societal norms, whereas, males should not judge others on the basis of clothes, should be respectful, stand by the right and work according to societal norms.

The sixth theme depicts the level of safety of males and females with respect to today's scenario. In this theme, young and middle adults show similar perception that females are not safe. But in case of safety of males, young adults think males are safer than females while according to middle adults, males are unsafe.

The seventh theme represents the various other characteristics which a female and a male should have. According to young adults, females should have inner beauty and she should be satisfied with her body and males should be chivalrous and humble. According to middle adults, females should be courageous and be beauty with brains and males should be physically fit and treat family properly.

The findings of this study demonstrate that gender roles in India are simultaneously changing and remaining anchored in traditional expectations. Across generations, participants continued to associate females with caregiving and emotional responsibilities and males with financial provision and physical strength. However, clear shifts emerged in perceptions of desirable traits and career-related expectations, particularly among young adults who emphasized equality, independence, and emotional expressiveness across genders. Middle-aged adults maintained more conventional views, especially regarding career hierarchy and societal norms. Interestingly, both groups shared concerns about women's safety, indicating that shifting gender roles coexist with persistent structural inequalities. Overall, the study highlights a transitional phase in Indian society where foundational norms endure but are increasingly challenged by younger generations seeking more flexible and egalitarian gender identities.

Conclusion

This study underscores a significant generational transition in how gender roles are perceived in contemporary Indian society. While traditional norms continue to shape expectations regarding

caregiving, morality, and social conduct, younger adults express more progressive and egalitarian attitudes toward traits, careers, and gender equality. The coexistence of these divergent views suggests that India is in a phase of cultural negotiation, where established roles are being reevaluated in light of evolving social values, increased gender awareness, and changing lifestyle patterns. Safety concerns for women remain a shared priority across generations, highlighting the continued relevance of gender-based vulnerabilities. Future research should explore how socioeconomic factors, education, and urbanization influence this transition, and how these shifting gender perceptions translate into real-world changes in behavior, relationships, and societal structures.

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APPENDIX A**Interview schedule:**

Q1. What are the typical roles of a female?

Q2. What are the typical roles of a male?

Q3. What desirable characteristics should be in a female?

Q4. What desirable characteristics should be in a male?

Q5. What type of things a female should not do in the following context:

a. In consideration of morality:

b. In consideration of career:

c. In consideration of society:

Q6. What type of things a male should not do in the following context:

a. In consideration of morality:

b. In consideration of career:

c. In consideration of society:

Q7. How safe is a female in today's society?

Q8. How safe is a male in today's society?

Q9. What type of things should a female do in her career?

Q10. What type of things should a male do in his career?

Q11. Describe the characteristics of a beautiful female?

Q12. Describe the characteristics of a handsome male?

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