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Research Article

Are Male University Students' Perception on Female Gender role Differs with Higher Education and Discipline of Study?

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Abstract

Higher education and wider exposure to outside world through information technology is expected to change the mindset of university students on perception of gender roles. Perception of male students regarding female gender role of mother, wife and girlfriend was studied by using a self-administered questionnaire on randomly selected 560 students from a state university Sri Lanka. Nearly 67%% of the respondents agreed that it should be men who should hold managerial/administrative posts and there was no difference among different faculties with this regard. Eighty eight percent students did not approve wife or girl friend wearing trousers and nearly 80% sleeveless blouses. Nearly half the sample (48.3%) condoned verbal abuse of wives. However, more than 78% students did not condone physical abuse of their mother (by the father), girlfriend or wife. It is imperative to change the mindset of university students who will be future leaders for the society to progress in gender equity and equality.

Keywords: University Education; Male Perception; Female Gender Roles; Sri Lanka

Introduction

In Sri Lanka, without gender discrimination, girls and boys have equal access to free education and the literacy rate of the country is 92% [1]. Of the total university admission in 2013, 60% were women. However, in Sri Lanka, according to the census and statistics report 2013, only 33.4% females contribute to national economy [2]. Higher education is free from the kindergarten through university. However, only around 10 percent of students who sit for the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) examination get the opportunity to enter a state university to pursue higher studies. Theses students, after their university education, have a higher chance of holding administrative positions making policies and decisions at all levels of both state and private sectors. Students who study Management and Commerce, Medicine, Humanities and Applied Sciences are exposed to different subject areas and social outlooks. The emphasis in gender equity and equality during their formative years in the university differ according to subjects they study. In young university students' mind, the exposure to university education and exposure to the outside world through modern technology and social media should make an impact on perception on gender equity and equality helping them to change attitudes inculcated in them from childhood. A recent study focusing on masculinity and gender based violence, conducted by Care International among 1568 male participants of 18 to 49 years representing all social classes in four districts of Sri Lanka [3] showed that 57.4% men had felt that women's most important role was to take care of her home and that 34.9% of men with tertiary education had admitted having been physically or sexually violent to their intimate partner. The attitude of the students whether in Asia or United States did not differ much. A study that was carried out in the United States in 2002 to examined college students' plans and attitudes concerning work and family and gender differences showed that 27 % of men agreed that men should be the primary financial providers and about one third of them agreed that women should be the primary caretakers of children. Only 27% of men strongly agreed that it is important for a woman as for a man to support herself financially [4].

However, very few studies have been conducted in Sri Lanka to explore the male university students' perception on the female gender role. Therefore, this study was planned to describe the perception of male undergraduate students on female gender role as girlfriend, wife and mother.

Methodology

A cross sectional descriptive study was carried out on 560 students selected randomly from four faculties of the university: Humanities, Management and Commerce, Applied Sciences, and Medicine. Students were in their 3rd year of study and with their consent pretested questionnaire was distributed among them just before a lecture and filled forms were collected in the evening in a box kept in a place convenient to students. They were asked to fill the questionnaire without consulting anyone and to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. The questionnaire included mainly questions and statements to assess male students' perception regarding gender roles and expectations and acceptance of social norms with regard to mother, girlfriend and wife to be.

Results

Of the total sample of 560 undergraduates, the number who

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Table 1: Perceptions of student.

Perception		Mother %					Girl friend %					Wife %				
		Med	Hum	Man	Sci	Total	Med	Hum	Man	Sci	Total	Med	Hum	Man	Sci	Total
Verbal abuse	Yes	40.7	56.5	34.8	40.8	41.8	38.5	59.8	38.7	44.1	43.8	45.9	55.4	43.2	51.3	48.3
	No	59.3	43.5	65.2	59.2	58.2	61.5	40.2	61.3	55.9	56.2	54.1	44.6	56.8	48.7	51.7
		χ^2= 11.4, df= 3, p < 0.05					χ^2= 12.1, df= 3, p < 0.01					χ^2= 4.3, df= 3, p > 0.05				
Physical abuse	Yes	20	17.4	19.4	19.1	19.1	16.3	21.7	25.2	18.4	20.4	17.8	20.7	23.9	23	21.5
	No	80	82.6	80.6	80.9	80.9	83.7	78.3	74.8	81.6	79.6	82.2	79.3	76.1	77	78.5
		χ^2= 0.3, df= 3, p > 0.05					χ^2= 4.0, df= 3, p > 0.05					χ^2= 1.9, df= 3, p > 0.05				
Should be a virgin	Yes											77.0	70.7	89.7	71.1	77.9
	No	N/A					N/A					23.0	29.3	10.3	28.9	22.1
												χ^2= 19.5, df= 3, p < 0.01				
Shouldn't wear Jeans	Yes						88.9	92.4	83.9	86.8	87.5	88.9	87.0	84.5	89.5	87.5
	No	N/A					11.1	7.6	16.1	13.2	12.5	11.1	13.0	15.5	10.5	12.5
							χ^2= 4.2, df= 3, p > 0.05					χ^2= 2.1, df= 3, p > 0.05				
Shouldn't wear tight skirts	Yes						77.8	69.6	71.0	67.1	71.3	78.5	69.6	71.0	69.7	72.3
	No	N/A					22.2	30.4	29.0	32.9	28.7	21.5	30.4	29.0	30.3	27.7
							χ^2= 4.2, df= 3, p > 0.05					χ^2= 3.6, df= 3, p > 0.05				
Shouldn't wear sleeveless blouses	Yes						84.4	83.7	78.7	75.0	80.0	85.9	82.6	77.4	74.3	79.6
	No	N/A					15.6	16.3	21.3	25.0	20.0	14.1	17.4	22.6	25.7	20.4
							χ^2= 5.0, df= 3, p > 0.05					χ^2 = 6.9, df= 3, p > 0.05				

returned the questionnaires that were complete was 534. Majority students were Sinhalese (95%) followed by Muslims (3%) and Tamils (2%). A great majority of Sinhala students (98.6%) were Buddhists while rest (2.4%) was Christians. All Muslims and all Tamils were Islam devotees and Hindus respectively. Of the 534 respondents 24% were from the Faculty of Medical Sciences, 30% from the faculty of Humanities, 30% from the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce and 16% from the Faculty of Applied Sciences. The age of the study sample ranged from 19 to 25 years with a mean of 22.1 years. Majority were unmarried (97%) and 64% indicated that they had previous love affair and 46% of the respondents were currently in a relationship.

A majority of respondents were from the districts close to Colombo. Almost half of the respondents have been educated in boys' only schools. When considering the educational level of parents of respondents, 74.7% of their mothers and 71.2% of fathers were educated above General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) examination i.e. they have had more than 10 years of education. Nearly half of the mothers were housewives and only 26.4% were professionals. While all fathers were working only 25.7% of them were professionals.

Although majority of students were coming from families with educated parents, 75.3% of respondents held the view that the chief householder in a family should be a male. Ninety two percent wanted their girl friends or wives to care for their parents and 82.4% of respondents agreed that a wife should be competent in cooking. The perception of students regarding whose responsibility is household chores differed according to the person about whom they responded— mother or wife. In the sample 56.7% agreed with statement that childcare is primarily the wife's responsibility, but only 40% agreed with the statement that child care is primarily mothers' responsibility and 71.1% held the view that cooking and household activities is wife's primary responsibility but of mothers it reduced to 54%. Nearly 75% indicated that their mothers should not be employed while only 57% indicated that their wives should not be employed.

Of the respondents, 66.5% agreed that it should be men who should hold managerial and administrative posts and among faculties there was no statistically significant difference in students' views. However, faculty of Applied Sciences had the highest percentage (72.4%) that felt men should hold administrative posts compared to 60.7% Medical, 66.5% Humanities and 62.6% Management and Commerce. The male students also had strong views regarding the dress code for girlfriend or wife. Nearly 88% students did not like their either wives or girl friends to wear trousers, and nearly 80% of the total sample did not want either girl friends or wives to wear sleeveless blouses. Seventy one percent of the total sample did not want girlfriend or their wives to wear tight skirts. There was no statistical significant difference among students of different faculties in these opinions (table1). Nearly 90% and 92% respectively agreed that females should not consume alcohol or smoke cigarettes. Almost 78% of the students were firmly of the view that their bride to be should be a virgin. The differences in the percentages of students who had this view regarding virginity of the bride to be, among faculties was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) where high percentage (90%) was for the faculty of Management and Commerce.

Nearly half of the respondents (48.3%) condoned verbal abuse of wife but when verbal abuse of girl friend and mother (by the father) were inquired lower percentages (43.8% and 41.8% respectively) condoned them and these differences were statistically significant(Cochran Q test, $p<0.01$). There were no statistically significant differences in

percentages that condone verbal abuse of wife among fields of study. However, faculty of Humanities recorded the highest percentage. In contrast, with regard to condoning verbal abuse of girl friend and mother (by the father) the differences in percentages of respondents among faculties were statistically significant with faculty of Humanities recording the highest percentage in both instances (Table 1). However, students did not condone physical abuse of their mother (81%), girlfriend (80%) or wife (78%) and there was no significant difference among faculties among faculties (Table 1).

Discussion

The findings of the study shows students, although following higher education in the university system in diverse academic disciplines for 3 years in the course of which exposed to technocratic world and social media have not shaken off their perceptions towards women role in society that has being instilled from childhood. Male students adapting themselves to the new cyber world and modern socialization patterns, have accepted without any reservations, dating, alcohol, smoking, music and modern attire which they were not exposed as children. Although students came from literate parental background, (nearly 70% of the respondents had parents with education of more than 10 years of schooling) they still believe in patriarchal hierarchy and virginity which is representation of good character of a girl. Although symbol of virginity has disappeared in the modern world, theses graduates, in the 21st century exposed to modem value system, still believe in the virginity of the girl they marry. This implies an indirect controlling of behaviour of women and to making it more unfair by women, there are no tests to assess virginity of men other than their word.

The male students' perception regarding household chores differed when one shifts from mother to wife. Nearly 71% of the students held the view that cooking and household activities are wife's primary responsibility but when it comes to the mother, it reduced to 54 %. The CARE international study on masculinity and gender based violence conducted among 1568 male participants of 18 to 49 years representing all social classes in four districts of Sri Lanka [3] showed that 57.4% men felt that women's most important role is to take care of her home. Although in the present study a higher percentage (75%) felt that their mothers should not be employed, only 57% indicted that their wives should not be employed. This shows students are more protective towards their mothers and feel they should not exert themselves in household chores or earning for the family. These strong view young men have regarding their mothers and wives, without any difference across different subject areas they study, could change with marriage and Connel [5] in his textbook endorses this by indicating men make compromises within marriage and community life and he also discuss that there is no such thing as a single concept of masculinity, but, rather, that many different masculinities exist, each associated with different positions of power.

The CARE international study [3] found that 87% agreeing that women are as competent as men and should be paid equally for their labour. However, in the present study among university undergraduates 66.5% agreed that it should be men who should hold managerial/administrative posts. University male students, who face competition in job market once they graduate, may feel women as a potential threat and feel they are not good administrators although they do not have experience of women holding such posts. It is surprising that students in all fields of study felt in the same way, with more science students disliking women mangers/administrators. It cannot be a perception they have lived with as CARE international study [3] representing all social classes (4.8% professionals), 70% of men agreed with the statement that more women should be in public decision making roles.

Although women should have the freedom to dress as they like, in Sri Lanka, culture and attitudes and beliefs play a key role in the dress code for women. This was also seen in the present study where more than 78% participants indicated that they do not want their wives or girl friends wear trousers or sleeveless blouses. There are no published studies in Sri Lanka regarding men's preferences on dress code for women. Saree that is culturally accepted as the correct and decent dress code for women nevertheless can be worn provocatively and sexually arousing compared to trousers and sleeveless blouses. The young participants exposed to different disciplines of study and to electronic media to hold same perception indicates culturally inbuilt dress norms and accepted dress code that their wives should adopt. Walle in 2004 indicated in his book, adjustments, transactions and negotiations characterize the interplay of what people actually do and the perceptions and values they may hold [5]. Therefore, although young would be doctors, mangers, scientists and scholars have these attitudes at present, one can hopefully wait expecting them to change once they enter the society and take over their assigned roles allowing women more freedom of dress. However, they had strong approval of verbal abuse—one in every two participants—of the wife. These findings are supported by another study [6] conducted among university students in 2011 where 57.3% of the respondents admitted verbally abusing their female partner within a romantic relationship. Most studies conducted in Sri Lanka show one in every 3 women has been physically, verbally or emotionally abused [7]. Although students were protective towards their mothers in relation to household activities, yet a considerable proportion (41%) approved their fathers verbally abusing their mothers. However, to be fair by them it should be noted nearly 80 % did not condone physical abuse of either their mothers by their fathers or their wives by them. If behaviour of males as said by de Neve in 2004 is flexible, empowerment of men with knowledge and skills to respect gender equity and equality might help these young men to be gender sensitive leaders in their professional lives and responsible non-violent husbands [8]. A conclusion arrived at in a study conducted under the auspices of the Gender Equality in Commonwealth Higher Education in 2006 indicates, ignoring the social dimensions of gender inequality and the role education can play in challenging it, will only result in the attainment of qualifications but not empowerment [9,10]. The paper also indicates gender is considered as non-issue in the higher education policy at national as well as organizational levels in Sri Lanka. Nearly 10 years after this study, although several curriculum changes have occurred only in very few course curriculums have attempted to include gender mainstreaming.

Conclusion

Higher education and wider exposure to the outside world through information technology and social media have not changed the mindset of university students on perception of gender role for

women. Students, after completion of the degree will be holding decision making positions in the society in their professional life as well as in their personal life. The results indicate the need to include gender mainstreaming, taking into consideration social dimension, into university curricula. Change of attitudes of young men towards gender equity and equality is imperative for the society to move forward progressively providing equal opportunities for women to work and to reduce verbal and physical abuse of women.

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