

Gender Roles and Careers: Perceptions of Youth

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ABSTRACT

The world is rapidly changing with respect to role expectations and gender norms. More women, than ever before, are seeking higher education and careers in fields traditionally dominated by men. Among 25- to 34-year-olds, women are more likely to have a tertiary degree than men in all 38 countries that are members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Wolfers, 2021). This study explored the perceptions of youth (ages 14-19) with respect to gendered roles and career aspirations. Approximately 100 students from an international high school, reached through social media and snowball sampling, responded to an online survey. Responses demonstrated a move on egalitarian approach to expectations of men and women regarding family and work

Introduction

Statistics about education and youth

More youth than ever are in school today and pursuing a higher education. The literacy rate of the world is 86.4% and for developed nations, it's 99.2% (World Bank, 2021; World Population Review, 2022). The World Bank (2021) reports that socio-economic status has a greater impact on the literacy skills of 15-year-olds than gender or country of origin. Youth from middle and upper income homes are most likely to pursue secondary and college education (World Bank, 2021). According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in 2019, women made up 55% of new entrants to tertiary education on average (2021). If current patterns continue, it is expected that 46% of young women will graduate with a tertiary degree for the first time before they turn 30, increasing the gap with men by 15% (OECD, 2021). As more young women complete secondary education, they are increasingly enrolling in college to pursue higher education. This has been the trend in most economically advanced countries. For instance, in the US, young women are more likely to be enrolled in college today than young men, and among those ages 25 and older, women are more likely than men to have a four-year college degree (Pew Research Center, 2021). They report that the gap in college completion is even wider among younger adults ages 25 to 34 (Pew Research Center, 2021). This increasing parity among male and female youth may reflect a change in role expectations and an increase in opportunities for women.

Evolution of Perceptions

As culture evolves and higher education becomes more accessible to the youth around the world, researchers have found that perceptions of youth with respect to gender roles are changing. Halimi, Consuegra, Struyven & Engels (2016) examined gender role attitudes towards education and social outcomes. They conducted a systematic review of literature on this subject and found that Americans had become more egalitarian over time. Moreover, they noted that several studies report youngsters having more egalitarian views compared with their

parents. (Burt & Scott, 2002; Carlson & Knoester, 2011; Ex & Janssens, 1998; Thornton, Alwin, & Camburn, 1983). Kulik (2000b, 2002a, 2002b) “Several U.S. studies and one Dutch and one Israeli study argue that respondents are generally positioned on the egalitarian-side of the axe (Crouter, Whiteman, McHale, & Osgood, 2007; Ex & Janssens, 1998; Kulik, 2002b; Nelson & Keith, 1990; Richmond-Abbott, 1984; Rollins & White, 1982). This is in contrast with some studies performed in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Japan, and Korea that indicate that respondents are traditional minded (Kucinkas, 2010; Mensch, Ibrahim, Lee, & El-Gibaly, 2003; Sagara & Kang, 1998).” Another finding which is recurrent in both western and non-western countries is that male respondents are generally more traditional minded than their female counterparts. (Burt & Scott, 2002; Carlson & Knoester, 2011; Crouter et al., 2007; Davis & Wills, 2010; Fan & Marini, 2000; Kucinkas, 2010; Kulik, 2000a; Marks, Bun, & McHale, 2009; Mensch et al., 2003; Nelson & Keith, 1990; Richmond-Abbott, 1984; Sagara & Kang, 1998; Stephan & Corder, 1985; Streitmatter, Santa-Cruz, & Ellis-Schwabe, 1984).

There is also greater exploration on how attitudes are evolving in the developing world. Patel, Santhya and Haberland (2021) explored changing attitudes among youth in a rapidly developing country in India. They found that for both the younger and older cohorts, girls held more egalitarian views than boys, and this pattern was evident throughout time for both cohorts. Their study demonstrated that gender role attitudes were influenced by factors at the individual, family, peer, and societal levels, as well as by community engagement (Patel, Santhya & Haberland, 2021). They defined community engagement as youth’s exposure to social networks (like self-help or interest groups) or affinity group membership (like group sports). The researchers found that greater exposure to the opposite gender and understanding the similarities in aspirations made both genders become more egalitarian in their beliefs.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, researchers found that women held more traditional views of gender roles than their male counterparts. Abaz & Hazdic (2020) posited that stereotypes about expectations of men and women in the labor market influenced attitudes about employment. A study conducted in Georgia (Japaridze, et al., 2013) found that despite the political, social, and economic changes in Georgia, traditional views and stereotypes regarding gender preferences and roles were still prevalent among Georgian youth. Young people viewed and interpreted issues such as gender distribution in education and employment and family gender roles in strictly traditional frames.

Early Childhood Influences

Kambouri-Danos & Evans (2019) conducted an exploration on how gender-related attitudes and behaviors develop in early childhood. They found that a child’s social environment plays a major role in shaping these attitudes. Stemming from social-constructivist theories from Bruner and Vygotsky, gender can be understood as a concept which is learnt within the early years through the social interaction form of engaging with and observing adults as well as how certain behavior from the child is received and rewarded (Massey, 2013). Other research grounded in socialization such as MacNaughton (2000), have posited that gender is a social construction and its developmental process begins at birth and then expands and develops with the child (Chapman, 2016). Whyte (1998) believed that gender role knowledge is actively developed within young children through monitoring of their social environment and the earliest influences in their lives (parents, families, peers, community) have a profound impact on the development of their perceptions about gender attitudes.

Impact of Parental Role Models

Davis and Wills (2010) posited that a father’s attitude and beliefs had the most significant impact on their children’s perceptions of gender roles. They found that the more egalitarian a father’s views, the more likely their children would hold similar views. In contrast, when fathers held a more traditional gender ideology, mothers’ ideology had a strong, positive effect on adolescents’ gender ideology” (p. 507). Kambouri-Danos &

Evans (2019) found that gender attitudes are “taught” by parents and those nearest to the children in early childhood and this has an outsized influence on their attitudes as adults.

Socio-economic Status and Attitudes

Most studies found a positive correlation between the offspring’s egalitarian views and both mothers’ and fathers’ educational backgrounds. Parents with higher educational levels have more egalitarian offspring (Halimi et al., 2016).

Researchers found that when both parents worked, they had a critical impact on attitudes and perceptions among their children (Hansen, 1991; Valentova, 2012). Youth from households where both parents worked were more likely to hold egalitarian views about gender roles (Valentova, 2012). Rollins and White (1982) found that the mother’s employment effects differed according to the reason why mothers work. They distinguished between dual-work families (mother employed for economic reasons) and dual-career families (mother choosing for a professional career). Children in dual-career families report more egalitarian gender role attitudes than traditional and dual-work families (Rollins & White, 1982).

There is also an increasing change in attitudes towards women’s roles as homemakers. Researchers and women’s rights groups have argued for the recognition of homemakers’ contributions to the household as legitimate work (Perkins, 2007; Thiry, 2015). When calculating the national GDP, the contributions of a homemaker should be monetized and be factored in to the calculation (Narayan & Basu, 2011)

Purpose of Study

This study aims to explore the perceptions of youth (ages 14-19), enrolled in high school, about gendered roles, expectations and aspirations. Specifically, this study illustrates how young men and women view themselves and their counterparts with respect to housework, education and career goals. It also explores adolescents’ perceptions on the role of women in the economy.

Methodology

Study design

This cross-sectional, exploratory study evaluated the perceptions of youth about personal educational and career goals, in addition to their expectations of the other genders. An electronic, anonymous survey was utilized in order to engage the potential respondents. The study was conducted in a High School in a major metropolis in the Middle-East. The students in this international school are the children of expatriates from around the world who live and work in this city.

Recruitment

One of the co-authors is a student in the American School of Dubai. A short invitational message was developed by the authors to invite potential respondents who met the eligibility criteria. Eligibility criteria included being a current student in the international school where the study was being conducted. This message, along with a link to the online survey, was posted on various social media networks utilized by one of the co-authors. The invitations were posted on Instagram and Whatsapp. Utilizing snowball sampling methods, individuals who received or viewed the invites were asked to share it with others in their networks (youth who were enrolled in the international school).

Study Instrument

The co-authors developed the study instrument. The instrument had eight questions. Three of the questions collected on the age, educational level and self-identified gender of the respondents. Three additional questions inquired about the country of origin of the parents and their employment status. One of the questions broadly evaluated the perceptions of the respondents about gendered roles and expectations. This question had eight items posed as statements. Respondents were provided a Likert scale with five categories ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The final question explored the respondents’ plans for education and career goals. This question had five items posed as statements. Respondents had to answer “Yes” or “No” to each statement.

Data Collection

The survey was posted on a Qualtrics website and a link to the electronic survey was sent to potential respondents on social media. The link to the survey was accompanied by a brief message from the co-authors. If the recipients of the invitation clicked on the link, they would be directed to the online survey. Participation was completely voluntary and respondents did not receive any compensation for their participation. Respondents could refuse to answer any question on the survey or leave the survey at any time. No names were collected by the survey.

Data Analysis

The data from the electronic survey was transferred to the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), version 28. The data were examined for missing information or errors. The data were evaluated using univariate and bivariate analyses. Simple frequency distributions were utilized for univariate analyses, and cross-tabulations were utilized for the bivariate analyses.

Results

Sample

A total of 110 individuals participated in the study. However, eleven of the respondents completed significantly less than 50% of the survey. Their data was eliminated from the analysis. A usable sample of 99 respondents was utilized for the study analysis.

Just over half of the sample identified as male (52.5%), while 42.4% identified as female and a very small proportion (5.1%) identified as non-binary/third gender. Four out of ten (40.4%) of the respondents were in the 12th grade, and nearly three out of ten (29.3%) were in the 11th grade. The proportion of those in the 9th grade (16.2%) and 10th grade (14.1%) were smaller in comparison. With respect to ages, just over half the respondents (52.5%) were between the ages of 16 and 17. A smaller proportion (16.2%) were between the ages of 14 and 15. Surprisingly, 23 respondents left this question blank, but shared their grade-level (Table 1).

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		

Female	42	42.4
Male	52	52.5
Non-binary/third gender	5	5.1
Educational Level		
9 th Grade	16	16.2
10 th Grade	14	14.1
11 th Grade	29	29.3
12 th Grade	40	40.4
Age		
19	2	2.0
18	6	6.1
17	23	23.2
16	29	29.3
15	7	7.1
14	9	9.1
Missing	23	23.2

Parental Characteristics

The parents of the respondents came from a wide array of countries. There were 32 countries of origin reported in this study. The majority of respondents reported the same country of origin for both parents (Table 2). The countries most frequently cited as countries of origin were the USA, India, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the Philippines. Nine of the respondents reported parents from two different countries of origin (Table 2).

Approximately three out of five respondents (62.6%) reported that both their parents worked outside the home. In this case “work” was defined as “paid employment”. Among the respondents who reported that only one parent worked outside the home in paid employment, the majority were fathers (81.1%).

Table 2. Parental Characteristics

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Birth Country of Parents		
<i>Both parents are from-</i>		
USA	22	22.2
India	13	13.1
Sweden	5	5.1
United Kingdom	4	4.0
Philippines	4	4.0
Canada	2	2.0
Lebanon	2	2.0
Australia	2	2.0
Finland	2	2.0
Vietnam	2	2.0

Mexico	2	2.0
Norway	2	2.0
Pakistan	2	2.0
China	2	2.0
Bangladesh	2	2.0
Egypt	1	1.0
South Korea	1	1.0
Armenia	1	1.0
Kosovo	1	1.0
Puerto Rico	1	1.0
Iran	1	1.0
Switzerland	1	1.0
Austria	1	1.0
Laos	1	1.0
South Africa	1	1.0
Sri Lanka	1	1.0
Jamaica	1	1.0
Brazil	1	1.0

Parents from two different countries -

South Korea/USA	1	1.0
Netherlands/USA	1	1.0
Canada/USA	1	1.0
Nicaragua/Guatemala	1	1.0
Egypt/Germany	1	1.0
Sweden/Colombia	1	1.0
Brazil/Lebanon	1	1.0

Do both your parents work outside the home (paid employment)?

Yes	62	62.6
No	37	37.4
Missing		

If only one parent works outside the home (paid employment), who is it?

Mom	7	18.9
Dad	30	81.1

Perceptions about gendered roles and expectations

A significant majority of male, female and non-binary/third gender students agreed with the following statements (Table 3):

- Women who stay-at-home should be financially compensated for their work at home (n=98).
- Women and men should share equally in their household responsibilities (n=99).
- Women's work at home should be given a monetary value (n=98).
- Monetary value of women's work at home should be calculated in the national GDP of a country (n=98).

A relative majority of male, female and non-binary/third gender students agreed with the following statements, even though an almost equal proportion selected “*neither agree nor disagree*” (Table 3):

- Women should pursue paid employment outside the home after getting married (n=99).
- Women should pursue paid employment outside the home after having children (n=99).

A significant majority of male, female and non-binary/third gender students disagreed with the following statements (Table 3):

- It is a woman's primary responsibility to take care of her family and home (n=99).
- It is a man’s primary responsibility to be the breadwinner and work outside the home (n=98).

Table 3. Perceptions about Gendered Roles and Expectations

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Women who stay-at-home should be financially compensated for their work at home (n=98).	14 (14.3)	36 (36.7)	24 (24.5)	15 (15.3)	9 (9.2)
It is a woman's primary responsibility to take care of her family and home (n=99).	4 (4.1)	3 (3.0)	13 (13.1)	26 (26.3)	53 (53.5)
It is a man’s primary responsibility to be the breadwinner and work outside the home (n=98).	4 (4.1)	6 (6.2)	12 (12.2)	26 (26.5)	50 (51.0)
Women and men should share equally in their household responsibilities (n=99).	56 (56.6)	32 (32.3)	7 (7.1)	3 (3.0)	1 (1.0)
Women should pursue paid employment outside the home after getting married (n=99).	24 (24.2)	31 (30.3)	41 (41.4)	1 (1.0)	2 (2.0)
Women should pursue paid employment outside the home after having children (n=99).	24 (24.2)	24 (24.2)	44 (44.4)	4 (4.1)	3 (3.0)
Women’s work at home should be given a monetary value (n=98).	20 (20.4)	27 (27.5)	23 (23.5)	20 (20.4)	8 (8.2)
Monetary value of women’s work at home should be calculated in the national GDP of a country (n=98).	13 (13.1)	27 (27.3)	32 (32.3)	13 (13.1)	13 (13.1)

Personal aspirations regarding education and paid employment

An overwhelming majority of respondents (nine out of ten in most cases) answered in affirmative to the following statements (Table 4):

- You intend to go to college after High School
- You intend to pursue a career after college

- You intend to continue to work outside the home after you are married
- You intend to continue to work outside the home after you become a parent
- You would expect your partner/spouse to work outside the home
- You would share household responsibilities with your partner/spouse

Table 4. Personal Aspirations Regarding Education and Paid Employment

	Yes	No
	n (%)	n (%)
You intend to go to college after High School	95 (96.0)	4 (4.0)
You intend to pursue a career after college	96 (97.0)	3 (3.0)
You intend to continue to work outside the home after you are married	93 (95.1)	5 (4.9)
You intend to continue to work outside the home after you become a parent	90 (91.8)	8 (8.2)
You would expect your partner/spouse to work outside the home	84 (85.7)	14 (14.3)
You would share household responsibilities with your partner/spouse	95 (97.0)	3 (3.0)

Impact of Gender and Parental Employment Status

We evaluated the impact of gender identity and parental employment status on gendered roles and expectations, as well as personal aspirations. We found that there were no significant differences between male and female youth with regard to their assumptions about gendered norms or their educational/career goals.

Discussion

This study yields important information on the values, perceptions and aspirations of youth today. There were three major themes that emerged from the survey:

- (i) Male and female youth have a more balanced, egalitarian view of the roles and expectations of each other with respect to personal lives (marriage, raising a family, etc.) and professional aspirations.
- (ii) The majority of all youth, regardless of gender, hope to pursue higher education after High School.
- (iii) The majority of all youth, regardless of gender, hope to engage in paid employment outside the home.

(iv) The majority of male, female and non-binary/third gender students agreed that women's care work should be financially compensated for and be calculated in the national GDP.

Limitations

This survey employed a snowball sampling method and potential respondents were reached via social media. This may have impacted the final respondent pool, as youth who are not as active on social media may not have participated in this study. The responses may have been influenced by a social desirability bias (a desire to answer the questions in a way that may be perceived as preferred by society). All the respondents were from an international school in a major, modern metropolitan city. This lived experience may have influenced their perceptions and beliefs.

Implications

This study has highlighted changing attitudes among youth in a specific region in the world. We must recognize that the youth sampled come from economically privileged households. But it is encouraging to note that both male and female youth are more attuned to changing gender role expectations. Both male and female youth in this study supported egalitarian notions of higher education, career aspirations and shared household responsibilities. Schools need to adapt to the changing values and expectations. Teachers, guidance counselors and parents need to be educated to help support the youth and to provide the resources needed by this cohort. Role models and informal mentors can also play a powerful role in facilitating the aspirations of the youth.

Conclusion

This study leaves us hopeful about positive changes towards gender equality and valuing the contributions of women in the workforce and at home. As today's youth become adults, they may serve as role models for the younger generation and their own children, thereby accelerating positive change towards gender equity.

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