

Research Article



\*Corresponding Author  
igin.phd@gmail.com

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# Gender Awareness among Adolescent Students in Kerala: An Exploratory Study

K.L. Ligin<sup>1\*</sup> and Nisha Jolly Nelson<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar (Social Work), Department of Sociology, Loyola College of Social Sciences (Research Centre, The University of Kerala), Sreekariyam, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor & Head, Department of Sociology, Loyola College of Social Sciences, The University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

According to Article 15 of the Indian Constitution, the Right to Equality has to be guaranteed to every individual irrespective of class, caste and gender but the question is whether this right is practised. Gender issues have become a common issue in society. Violence against women, sexual harassment of women and children, and transgender issues are increasing day by day. A possible solution to end these issues is to impart gender education to the younger generation. Gender education should start with family and schools as the children spend most of their time with family and in the school environment. Hence, the researcher intends to understand the gender awareness of adolescent children, especially from 8<sup>th</sup> standard students from a co-education school in the Thiruvananthapuram district through qualitative research. In this study, the researcher explored perceptions and attitudes toward gender equity among school-going adolescents. The researcher used FGD, participant observation and case studies as tools for data collection. The study gave insight to the researcher on the perception of gender how the students understand gender issues, and their reflections on gender equality. The study provided valuable insights into the importance of gender-neutral parenting and the significance of early gender education within both family and school environments.

## INTRODUCTION

‘Gender’ refers to the social roles and responsibilities that are perceived to belong to men and women within a particular social group; for example, ‘men as income earners’ and ‘women as caregivers’. Because gender is a socially learned behaviour (that is learned in the family or school), anything associated with it can be changed to achieve any goal. Investigating how these socially defined roles and responsibilities are reflected in our classrooms, schools, communities and the educational system will help researchers better understand how they may disadvantage one gender (girls or boys), such as by influencing whether or not girls and boys have equal opportunities to enter school or how they interact with one another as equals. Are these roles and responsibilities reflected as gender stereotypes in the curriculum that the children are taught, in the textbooks that they use, as well as in the larger educational system of which they are a part, and do they

affect how girls and boys interact with their teachers (male and female)? Girls and boys have equal opportunities to enter school, participate in and benefit from the variety of subjects or other learning experiences that are offered in classrooms and schools, and they are equally equipped with skills and attitudes that will help them to achieve their fullest potential within and outside of the educational system regardless of their sex (Bernard et al., 2005).

## Gender Theorists and Their Ideologies

Gender is a complex notion that encompasses different viewpoints from different gender theorists and ideologies. These viewpoints aid in the comprehension of the construction and perception of gender identity, roles and consciousness in various societies. The concept of ‘gender’ explained by prominent gender theorists like Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, Raewyn Connell and Nancy Chodorow is relevant to this study.

**Judith butler: Gender performativity**

The notion of *gender performativity* was first established by renowned gender theorist Judith Butler in her landmark book *Gender Trouble*. According to Judith Butler, the concept of performativity means that gender is enacted through repeated acts and behaviours that conform to social standards. Butler emphasises that these actions are not merely expressions of an inherent gender identity but are instead performances that constitute gender itself. Butler argues that being born male or female does not determine behaviour. Instead, people learn to behave in particular ways to fit into society. The important arguments are performativity, deconstruction and agency. *Performativity* means conforming to social standards through repeated acts and behaviours is how gender is enacted. Butler highlights *Deconstruction* as gender categories are socially produced rather than biologically established, undermining the binary understanding of gender. By *Agency*, she means that people can rebel against and undermine established gender conventions through their acts (Butler, 1990).

**Simone de beauvoir: Existential feminism**

Feminist thought was largely shaped by Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex*, especially her claim that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'. It is a statement of the belief that social and cultural factors shape a person's gender identity. Beauvoir draws attention to how society creates and enforces gender norms on people. Simone de Beauvoir argued that a woman deserved to be free to pursue her own goals and dreams. She emphasised on *Social Construction, Otherness and Liberation*. Women are marginalised as a result of society's imposition of gender roles. In a patriarchal society, women are frequently defined as men; they are viewed as the 'Other'. She also highlights the necessity for women to break free from conventional roles and become liberated (de Beauvoir, 1949).

**Raewyn connell: Hegemonic masculinity**

The hegemonic masculinity theory developed by Raewyn Connell examines how some masculinities dominate others and uphold gender hierarchies. Connell explores how power dynamics impact gender interactions in his book *Masculinities*. Connell argues that a dominant kind of masculinity in culture, hegemonic masculinity dominates alternative forms of masculinity and femininity.

Connell examines how power systems preserve gender roles and relationships and how gender interacts with other social constructs, including sexuality, race and class (Connell, 1995).

**Nancy Chodorow: Psychoanalytic feminism**

Nancy Chodorow combines feminist viewpoints and psychoanalytic theory in her work, especially in *The Reproduction of Mothering (1978)*, to explain how early experiences and family dynamics shape gender identity. Chodorow argues that a mother's role in raising her children has a big impact on how a youngster develops their gender identity, and family structures serve as a vehicle for the unconscious, which is the source of gender disparities. She also examines how family dynamics and intrapsychic processes influence gendered identity and behaviour (Chodorow, 1978).

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Gender awareness among adolescent students is a crucial aspect of promoting gender equality and addressing disparities in education. The following literature review provides an overview of existing studies and research findings on gender awareness among adolescent students. Using identity theory and identity control theory, gender socialisation is investigated from a social psychology perspective. To gain a better understanding of how families function as socialisation agents and how identities that are nurtured and fostered in youth provide meaning throughout the life course and uphold social order, recent research from the social institutions of family and social psychology is reviewed. Gender is a diffuse status trait that is salient in person, role and social (group) identities as well as across social contexts, as demonstrated by the application of identity theory. The use of identity control theory demonstrates how emotions function inside an internal control system to maintain gendered identities and social structure (Carter, 2014).

According to the worldwide agreement on educational priorities, achieving gender justice in education is a priority. In this sense, two objectives are emphasised by both the Millennium Development Goals and the Dakar 'Education for All' targets. These two objectives are separated into gender equality goals (ensuring educational equality between boys and girls) and gender parity goals (ensuring the equal participation of girls and boys in all

kinds of education based on their proportion in the relevant age groups in the population) (Subrahmanian, 2005).

By examining the concept of 'gender-sensitive' education and its applicability in educational policy, this essay answers Astrid Sinnes and Marianne Lken's paper 'Gendered education in a gendered world: Searching beyond cosmetic solutions to the gender gap in science'. It considers how 'gender-sensitive' education may help advance equality and justice by drawing on academic debates on the concepts of gender and diversity (Forde, 2014).

In 2020, a study was done by Kiram about the Acehese, an indigenous ethnic group from Aceh, Indonesia on the northernmost tip of the island of Sumatra to understand gender-based discrimination, gender education and the value of gender education in Acehese households. This study was carried out utilising a descriptive qualitative methodology, with interviewing and observational data-gathering approaches. The findings indicated that gender-based discrimination against women in Acehese families typically takes the form of unequal distribution of childcare and household chores. Because domestic work is still viewed as being the domain of women in Aceh, most men still have less involvement in child care. Domestic violence against women is another kind of gender discrimination in Aceh. The outcome also showed that there is no gender education in Acehese families since many do not comprehend the term gender equality and gender concerns are still frowned upon in Acehese society. Children pick up gender stereotypes at a young age, therefore gender education in the home is crucial because family is where they first learn about gender equality. Educating gender equality to children is never too early, and since they are never too young to learn about it, they would come out and promote gender equality in their families and society at large when they become adults (Kiram, 2020).

In society, there has been much discussion on gender fairness, which is crucial to Western culture. It is thought that adolescents will shape society's future. The majority of the teenagers' time was spent in class and hanging out with their friends. As a result, it is ideal to grasp how pupils in schools view the concept of gender, and adolescence is the optimum time to learn about gender awareness (Jha et al., 2020).

This comprehensive review of 'Gender Awareness in Education' by Smith and Jones provides an overview of

research on gender awareness among adolescent students. The review highlights the importance of gender-sensitive education policies and programs in promoting gender equality in education. Smith and Jones analyse existing literature on gender awareness interventions in high schools and discuss the impact of these interventions on students' attitudes, beliefs and behaviours related to gender equality (Smith & Jones, 2018).

In the study, 'Gender Awareness and Adolescents' Educational Outcomes', the authors examine the relationship between gender awareness and educational outcomes among adolescent students. Using survey data from a sample of high school students, Brown et al. (2016) investigate the impact of gender awareness on students' academic performance, school engagement and attitudes towards gender equality. The findings suggest that higher levels of gender awareness are associated with positive educational outcomes, including higher academic achievement and greater school engagement (Brown et al., 2016).

In a study conducted on 'Gender Stereotypes and Gender Awareness among Adolescents', the authors explore the relationship between gender stereotypes and gender awareness among adolescent students. Using qualitative research methods, Garcia and Martinez examine how gender stereotypes influence students' perceptions of gender roles and identities. The findings suggest that promoting gender awareness is essential for challenging existing gender stereotypes and promoting gender equality in education (Garcia & Martinez, 2017).

Jones and Smith evaluate the effectiveness of gender awareness interventions in high schools. Drawing on a review of existing intervention programs, the authors assess the impact of these programs on students' knowledge, attitudes and behaviours related to gender equality. The findings suggest that gender awareness interventions can effectively promote gender equality in high schools and contribute to the reduction of gender disparities in education (Jones & Smith, 2019).

The study 'Promoting Gender Awareness through Curriculum Integration', examines the role of curriculum integration in promoting gender awareness among adolescent students. Johnson and Brown assess the effectiveness of gender-sensitive curriculum materials in high schools and explore how these materials can be used to promote gender equality in education. The findings

suggest that curriculum integration is an effective strategy for promoting gender awareness and challenging existing gender norms and stereotypes (Johnson & Brown, 2018).

A recent study on gender education and awareness in schools in Kerala titled 'Gender Bias Visible in Schools; Gender Audit of Textbooks and Gender Training for Teachers Need of the Hour' was conducted by Dr Rakhee Timothy, Fellow, at Centre for Socio-economic & Environmental Studies (CSES). This study highlights the existing gender biases in school infrastructure and curriculum in Kerala. It emphasises the need for gender audits of textbooks and gender sensitivity training for teachers. The report finds that inadequate facilities, particularly for girls and gender-biased teaching materials contribute to perpetuating gender stereotypes in schools (Timothy & CSES, 2023).

Gender awareness among adolescent students is a crucial component of promoting gender equality in education. Existing research highlights the importance of gender-sensitive education policies and programs in addressing gender disparities and promoting gender equality in schools. Future research should focus on developing and evaluating gender awareness interventions that effectively promote gender equality and challenge existing gender norms and stereotypes among adolescent students.

### Significance of the Study

Disparities persist between girls and boys in access, retention, learning achievement and completion of primary education. In most countries, girls are at a disadvantage, but in some cases, and increasingly, boys are more disadvantaged in education. The study is aligned with the goals of the Education for All (EFA) initiative, which aims to ensure that all children, regardless of gender, have access to quality education. By identifying and addressing gender disparities in education, the study contributes to efforts aimed at narrowing the 'gender gap' in education and promoting gender equality at all levels of the education system (Bernard et al., 2005).

The study focuses on understanding the level of gender awareness among adolescent children in high schools. By exploring the attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of adolescent students towards gender equality, the study aims to identify areas where gender disparities may exist and contribute to efforts aimed at promoting gender equity in education. Hence, the study is significant as it addresses

persistent disparities in education, identifies gender awareness among adolescent students, initiates thought-provoking discussions on gender equality and contributes to efforts aimed at closing the gender gap in education. By understanding the gender perspectives of adolescent students and promoting gender equality in high schools, the study contributes to creating a more inclusive and equitable learning environment where all students have equal opportunities to learn and succeed.

## METHODOLOGY

This study used the *Qualitative research method* to understand gender awareness among adolescent students with special reference to 8th-standard students in a co-education private school in a rural area in the Thiruvananthapuram district, Kerala, India.

### Research Question

What is the gender awareness of adolescent students in a co-education school in Kerala, focusing on their perceptions of gender concepts, gender roles within the family and understanding of gender issues and equality in society?

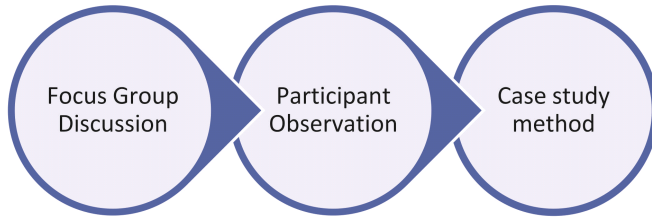
### Data Collection

Both primary and secondary data were used for this study. The primary source of data collection was students from 8<sup>th</sup> standard in a co-education school in the Thiruvananthapuram district, Kerala. **Purposive sampling** was used to gather primary data. Out of the total 49 students in the class, 25 numbers were girls and 24 numbers were boys. The students for the research were identified with the help of the class teacher. The sample size consisted of 12 students (6 girls and 6 boys) from the 8th standard. Students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, varying academic performances and students who are willing to participate in focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were selected for the study. The researcher ensured that an equal or balanced representation of boys and girls to explore gender awareness comprehensively. The secondary data was collected from various books, dissertations, journals and other literature available about this topic.

### Tools of Data Collection

Different tools like Focus group discussion (FGD), case study method and participant observation were used. The researcher conducted the study to understand gender





awareness among adolescent children in high schools and conducted an FGD to initiate a thought-provoking session on gender equality. These discussions provide a platform for students to express their opinions, share their experiences and engage in critical reflections on gender-related issues. By facilitating these discussions, the study aims to raise awareness about gender inequality, challenge existing stereotypes and promote a more inclusive and equitable learning environment in high schools.

### A) Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

The initial stage of the study was conducted using focus group discussion. A two-way FGD was used for this study with a sample size of 12 students. The group of 12 students was divided into two groups: Group A (6 girls) and Group B (6 boys). The topic of 'gender equality' was introduced by the researcher to both groups. The researcher acted as the moderator for the discussion. The researcher guided the discussion and asked questions based on the research question. The FGD aimed to understand the attitudes of the students toward the concept of gender and their perceptions of gender equality. The researcher aimed to explore the students' knowledge about gender, their awareness of gender issues and their opinions on how to address gender inequality. Group A and Group B participated in a two-way FGD. When Group A raised their opinions, Group B observed and listened to their discussion, and vice versa.

The researcher aimed to understand the attitudes of the students toward the concept of gender and how they perceive gender equality. The researcher adopted selected questions from the Gender Equitable Men (GEM) Scale developed by Pulerwitz & Barker (2008) which is a widely used survey tool for assessing attitudes toward gender norms and gender equality. These questions were adopted and adjusted based on the context of the study to understand students' attitudes and perceptions regarding gender norms, roles, gender stereotypes, their awareness of gender-related issues and gender equality.

### Thematic Analysis of FGD

All verbal responses from the FGD were transcribed and codes were generated manually and then grouped into potential themes. Some themes were merged, and some were split into sub-themes and were named to reflect their theme. Direct quotes from the FGD were included to illustrate each theme. The six themes that emerged are Perceptions of Gender Roles, Gender Norms and Stereotypes, Gender Equality in Education, Family and Household Roles, Awareness of Gender Issues, and Understanding of Gender Equality. The details of the discussion along with the FGD guide and thematic analysis are given below:

#### 1) *What are the students' understanding of the concept of gender and gender roles?*

- What do you know about the term 'gender?'
- Do you agree or disagree with the statement: 'Boys and girls should have the same opportunities in school activities'.
- Do you agree or disagree with the statement: 'Boys need to learn how to cook and clean'.

#### Theme 1: Perceptions of Gender Roles

The students of the 8<sup>th</sup> standard are taught about 'Reproductive health' in biology text according to the NCERT syllabus. So, they are aware of the basic concepts of sexuality. The students demonstrated a basic understanding of gender, recognising male, female and transgender identities. Their awareness of transgender individuals was influenced by social media platforms like YouTube.

##### *Sub-theme: School activities*

- **Boys:** Some boys believed certain sports and leadership roles were more suitable for them as they are better in sports than girls.
- **Girls:** Girls expressed the desire to participate equally in all activities but noted instances of bias.
- **Quote:** 'Sometimes, boys are chosen as team leaders in sports and other classroom activities even when girls are equally good'.

##### *Sub-theme: Household chores*

- **Boys:** A majority of the boys expressed the belief that cooking is a task primarily for females, reflecting

traditional gender stereotypes but other boys acknowledged that chores should be shared but noted traditional expectations.

- **Girls:** The girls challenged this stereotype, emphasising that cooking can be done by both genders. Girls reported doing more household chores and felt it was unfair and it is gender inequality.
- **Quote:** 'At home, my brother rarely helps with the dishes. It's mostly my job'.

## 2) How do the students perceive the Gender Norms and Stereotypes in their families and schools?

- Do you agree or disagree with the statement: 'Boys should not cry, even if they feel sad'.
- Do you agree or disagree with the statement: 'Girls should be more focused on their looks than their studies'.
- Do you agree that girls have more restrictions than boys in their families regarding travelling to public places?

## Theme 2: Gender Norms and Stereotypes

### Sub-theme: Emotional expression

- **Boys:** Many boys agreed that societal norms discourage them from expressing emotions openly. Men are always expected to be mentally strong, bold and masculine.
- **Girls:** Girls recognised these norms and empathised with the restrictions on boys. They said that likewise, they are not allowed to raise their voice loudly at home as their family members advised them by saying that girls should not shout like boys.
- **Quote:**
  - 'Boys shouldn't cry is something we hear a lot, but I think it's okay for everyone to express their feelings'.
  - 'Why are girls asked to lower their voices?'

### Sub-theme: Appearance vs. Academics

- **Boys and girls:** Both groups identified a stereotype that girls should focus more on appearance than on academics, which they unanimously disagreed with. They opined that the media played a major role in promoting the so-called 'beauty' and 'cute' appearance of girls.
- **Quote:** 'Girls should be given recognition for their intelligence, ideas and their talents, not just their looks'.

### Sub-theme: Restrictions on freedom to travel

- **Girls:** The girls expressed concerns about the restrictions imposed on them, such as the curfew of returning home by 6 pm. The reason for these restrictions, according to the girls, was parental concern for their safety and fear of societal judgment. There was a strong desire among them, to learn self-defence to ensure their safety in public places.
- **Boys:** All the boys said that they can play or roam around until 9 pm with their parents' permission and they have not faced any restrictions in travelling to public places alone.
- **Quote by a girl:** 'Often, my brother has permission to go outside to play with friends until 9 pm but I have to reach my home before 6 pm even if I go to tuition'.

## 3) How do students understand the treatment by teachers and their opinions about the opportunities in school?

- Do you believe that boys and girls receive equal treatment from teachers in your school?
- Are the students assigned tasks equally by teachers in the classroom activities?
- Do you agree or disagree with the statement: 'Girls and boys should have the same chances to speak and participate in class discussions'.

## Theme 3: Gender Equality in Education

### Sub-theme: Treatment by teachers

- **Boys:** Majority of the boys felt that teachers treated them equally during teaching sessions but some boys thought that some teachers treated them more strictly compared to girls. Boys believed that they were physically stronger than girls and hence they were assigned tasks involving physical labour like moving benches and desks in the classroom.
- **Girls:** Teachers treated them equally while teaching. Even though they raised the concern that gender bias was evident in classroom activities, boys were often assigned tasks involving physical labour. When the boys claimed that they were stronger, girls argued that they were equally capable of performing such tasks.
- **Quote by a girl:** 'Sometimes, it feels like teachers expect us girls to be doing classroom cleaning, and boys to do physical labours which aren't fair'.

**Sub-theme: Participation opportunities**

- **Boys and girls:** Both groups felt that equal participation in class discussions was improving in group discussions, debates, arts, sports and other competitions held at school.
- **Quote by a boy:** 'We are now seeing more girls participating in debates and sports, which is great'.

**4) What are the gendering practices in their family?**

- In your family, do boys and girls share household chores equally?
- Do you agree or disagree with the statement: 'Boys should be responsible for earning money, and girls should take care of the home'.
- In your family, who makes major decisions like your education, buying things at home and decisions regarding financial matters?

**Theme 4: Family, Household Roles and Decision-making:****Sub-theme: Responsibility distribution**

- **Boys and girls:** Both groups highlighted a traditional division of household roles, with girls typically doing more chores. Boys are asked to go to shops to buy provisionary and groceries. Sometimes, boys are allowed to play outdoor games like cricket and football but girls have to play indoor games. Both boys and girls were allowed to learn extracurricular activities like music class, dance class, drawing and other musical instruments.
- **Quote:** 'I have to help my mom in the kitchen while my brother plays games.'

**Sub-theme: Parental expectations**

- **Boys:** Boys noted that they were expected to focus on future careers. Boys were expected to focus on either medicine, engineering jobs, preparing for government tests, or any other professional courses.
- **Girls:** Girls mentioned expectations around balancing academics and future household roles. Girls were expected to aspire to engineering, medicine, management, teaching, preparing for government tests or any professional courses as well as learn household chores to prepare for their marriage in the future.
- **Quote by a girl:** 'My parents tell me to study hard but also to learn cooking because they say it's important for my future as I will be married to another family'.

**Sub-theme: Gender roles in decision-making**

The discussion revealed a perception among both boys and girls that decision-making in families is gender biased. Girls felt that their mothers were often considered to be homemaking roles and they acted as caregivers, which affected their decision-making power. Boys, on the other hand, felt that fathers, being the breadwinners, were the primary decision-makers in their families.

**5) Are the students aware of the gender issues prevailing in society and how are they aware of such issues?**

- Are you aware of any gender-related issues in your school and society?
- Have you ever participated in discussions or activities about gender equality?
- Do you think that media influences gender inequality in society?

**Theme 5: Awareness of Gender Issues****Sub-theme: Recognition of gender inequality in society**

Both boys and girls acknowledged the existence of gender inequality in society, citing examples such as domestic violence and dowry deaths reported in newspapers. They emphasised the importance of gender awareness and gender equity in addressing these issues.

**Sub-theme: School discussions**

- **Boys and girls:** They expressed a desire for more discussions and activities around gender equality in school.
- **Quote:** 'We need more sessions where we can talk about gender issues openly'.

**Sub-theme: Influence of media**

Both boys and girls agreed that media has a negative impact in depicting gender and gender issues in society like gender stereotypes, body shaming, male domination and a culture of female subjugation and subordination. Media, including TV serials and online games, was identified as perpetuating gender stereotypes and promoting violence and discrimination in society.

**6) What is the student's understanding of 'gender equality'?**

- What does gender equality mean to you?
- Do you think it is important for boys and girls to be treated equally? Why or why not?

## Theme 6: Understanding of Gender Equality

### *Sub-theme: Conceptual understanding*

- **Boys and girls:** Both groups understood gender equality as equal treatment and opportunities for all genders.
- **Quote:** 'Gender equality means all the genders get the same chances and each gender has to respect the other'.

The FGD revealed that while there is a growing awareness and positive attitude towards gender equality among 8th-standard students in Kerala, traditional gender roles and stereotypes still influence their perceptions and experiences. Encouragingly, both boys and girls showed a clear understanding of gender equality and a desire for more balanced opportunities and treatment in both school and home environments. The FGD highlighted the pervasive influence of gender stereotypes and the importance of addressing them in various spheres of life, including the family, school, workplace and media. It underscored the need for gender-sensitive education and interventions to promote gender equality and eliminate gender-based discrimination and violence.

*Benefits of Two-way FGD:* Two-way FGD allowed both groups to actively participate in the discussion. It provided an opportunity for students to listen to and learn from each other's perspectives. This format encouraged dialogue and exchange of ideas between the two groups, potentially understanding the topic.

### **B) Participant Observation**

The researcher employed *participant observation* during the focus group discussion (FGD) to gain an understanding of the behavioural characteristics of the students. The researcher observed the students participating in the FGD. This observation included noting their attitudes, body language and responses during the discussion. By actively observing the participants, the researcher could gather additional insights beyond what was explicitly communicated verbally.

The researcher took on the role of the moderator during the FGD. As the moderator, the researcher guided the discussion, ensuring that it stayed focused on the predetermined topics or questions. While moderating, the researcher also observed the participants' behaviours, communications, non-verbal cues and their interactions actively which are detailed below:

1. **Engagement and participation levels:** The researcher noticed the students who were actively engaging in the discussion based on their verbal and non-verbal communication (e.g. speaking up, asking questions, nodding in agreement). The researcher carefully observed those students who expressed hesitation or reluctance to participate based on any signs like avoiding eye contact or speaking softly.
2. **Body language and non-verbal cues:** The researcher watched the body language of the students that indicated interest (e.g. leaning forward, nodding) or disinterest (e.g. playing, looking around the room). The researcher noticed non-verbal cues that suggested agreement or disagreement with statements (e.g. smiling, shaking heads, blinking eyes).
3. **Turn-taking and interaction dynamics:** Tracked how students took turns speaking and whether any interruptions occurred. Observed if certain individuals dominated the conversation or if quiet participants were encouraged to speak.
4. **Emotional responses:** Noticed emotional reactions such as laughter, surprise, or frustration in response to certain topics or comments. Observed instances where emotions seemed to influence the tone or direction of the discussion.
5. **Group dynamics and peer influence:** Monitored how group dynamics influenced individual opinions or statements (e.g. agreement with peers, challenging someone else's viewpoint). The researcher also noticed the attempts by students to conform to group norms.
6. **Leadership and facilitation:** Identified the students who naturally took on leadership roles within the group (e.g. guiding the discussion and summarising key points). Observing how students responded to the researcher's prompts or questions.
7. **Response to sensitive topics:** The researcher gave attention to how students reacted to discussions on sensitive topics related to gender norms, equality and stereotypes. Noticed if there were shifts in comfort levels or openness during these discussions.

By observing the students' body language, facial expressions, other non-verbal cues and their interaction during the FGD, the researcher gained an understanding of how the students perceived and discussed gender-related topics, their level of engagement and the dynamics within the group. These observations provided valuable context



to complement the verbal data collected during the discussion. Participant observation allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the students' behaviour and attitudes.

### Integration with FGD

Participant observation was integrated into the FGD process. While the researcher moderated the discussion, the researcher actively observed the participants' behaviours and interactions and they were categorised based on their engagement levels, body language, non-verbal cues, turn-taking and communication dynamics, emotional responses, reaction to the facilitator's prompts and their response to sensitive topics which are detailed below:

1. **Engagement levels:** Some participants leaned forward attentively during discussions, while others sat back with arms crossed, indicating varying levels of engagement. Engaged participants nodded, made eye contact with the researcher and responded affirmatively or asked follow-up questions.
2. **Body language and non-verbal cues:** One participant tapped his fingers or feet nervously, revealing discomfort or eagerness to speak. Another participant folded his arms defensively, potentially signalling disagreement or scepticism.
3. **Turn-taking and communication dynamics:** Most of the male participants eagerly raised their hands or interrupted politely, displaying assertiveness in contributing to the conversation. Some girls hesitated before speaking, possibly indicating shyness or contemplation of their responses.
4. **Emotional responses:** Participants occasionally smiled or chuckled in agreement with light-hearted comments, demonstrating companionship. Conversely, furrowed eyebrows or tense shoulders could indicate disagreement or discomfort with sensitive topics.
5. **Reaction to facilitator prompts:** Participants nodded in understanding or glanced at the facilitator for confirmation, signalling responsiveness to guidance. Some participants deferred to others for their perspectives or elaborated on their peers' comments, fostering collaborative dialogue.
6. **Response to sensitive topics:** A participant sighed audibly or looked away during a tense exchange, revealing emotional resonance with challenging

themes. Another participant sought clarification on terminology related to gender roles, demonstrating intellectual curiosity.

These observations not only enriched the qualitative data collected from verbal exchanges but also provided insights into participants' emotions, group dynamics and individual contributions. By integrating participant observation seamlessly into the FGD process, the researcher gained a holistic understanding of how adolescent students in a Kerala school perceive and discuss gender-related issues.

### C) Case Study Method

During the FGDs, the researcher identified 3 students - One girl and two boys with unique personalities for conducting case studies. The data was gathered through interviews and observation for the case studies. The researcher conducted a thorough analysis of the cases through thematic analysis.

#### Case 1

During the Focus group discussion, the researcher observed a boy who looked agitated to the question about gender discrimination in the family and society. The boy believes that there is gender discrimination within his family as well as in society.

#### *Background of the student*

The boy named Sooraj (13 years old) has a father, mother and a sister in his family. His father is a private firm employee, his mother is a homemaker and his sister is studying in Plus Two. He mentioned that his mother is responsible for all the household chores, while his father does not participate in domestic tasks like cooking. The boy perceives household chores as women's work, which contributes to his understanding of gender discrimination within the family. The boy provided examples of gender discrimination within his family, such as his mother being solely responsible for household chores. He mentioned that his sister sometimes gets scolded for coming home late from tuition, while he does not face the same restrictions. The boy's father imposes restrictions on his sister's activities, stating that it is unsafe for girls to be outside after 6 pm. However, the boy himself does not face the same restrictions and is allowed to go outside even after 9 pm because he is a 'boy'.

**Analysis****Theme 1: Gender discrimination in the family**

- The boy expressed agitation when asked about gender discrimination in the family and society.
- He believes there is gender discrimination in his family, as evidenced by the unequal distribution of household chores.
- The boy's perception is that household chores are considered women's work, and his mother is responsible for all the household tasks.
- His father's lack of involvement in household chores contributes to the perception of gender discrimination within the family.

**Theme 2: Gender discrimination in society**

- The boy also perceives gender discrimination in society, as indicated by his father's restriction on his sister's activities.
- His sister gets scolded for coming home late from tuition, while he faces no such restrictions.
- His father imposes a curfew on his sister, stating that it is unsafe for girls to be outside after 6 pm, but the boy faces no such restrictions because he is a boy.
- This differential treatment based on gender highlights the presence of gender discrimination in society.

**Theme 3: Differential treatment based on gender**

- The boy's account reveals differential treatment based on gender within his family and society.
- He is allowed more freedom and fewer restrictions compared to his sister because he is a boy.
- This differential treatment reinforces gender stereotypes and contributes to gender inequality within the family and society.

**Theme 4: Perpetuation of gender stereotypes**

- The boy's father's beliefs and actions perpetuate gender stereotypes within the family and society.
- By assigning household chores to his wife and imposing restrictions on his daughter's activities, the father reinforces traditional gender roles and stereotypes.
- This perpetuation of gender stereotypes contributes to the normalisation of gender discrimination within the family and society.

**Theme 5: Impact on perception**

- The boy's perception of gender discrimination in the family and society is influenced by his observations and experiences.
- His awareness of the unequal distribution of household chores and the differential treatment of his sister based on gender contributes to his understanding of gender discrimination.

**Conclusion**

- The case of the boy illustrates the presence of gender discrimination within his family and society.
- His observations and experiences highlight the perpetuation of traditional gender roles and stereotypes, as well as the differential treatment of individuals based on their gender.
- The case underscores the need to address gender discrimination and promote gender equality within families and society.

In summary, the boy's experience sheds light on the reality of gender discrimination within his family and society, emphasising the importance of promoting gender equality and challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

**Case 2**

The researcher observed a silent girl during the discussion and the researcher tried to ask questions to make her engaged in the discussion but she was hesitant. Neha appeared silent and hesitant during the discussion about gender discrimination in the family. Despite the researcher's efforts to engage her in the discussion, Neha remained reluctant to speak up. The researcher built a rapport with that girl and conducted an in-depth interview.

**Background of Neha**

Neha comes from a family where her parents are divorced, and she is looked after by her single mother. Her family is financially dependent on her mother's income as a tailor, which is meagre. Neha's education is sponsored by her dominating uncle, who also takes care of their family. Neha faces many restrictions and is often silent, indicating a challenging family situation. She does not have many friends and is an average student, but she has a favourite teacher at school whom she trusts and confides in.

### ***Rapport building***

- The researcher built a rapport with Neha to make her feel comfortable and open up.
- Recognising Neha's hesitation and silence, the researcher encouraged her to express her feelings to her favourite teacher whenever she felt sad.
- The researcher also informed the teacher about Neha's situation, ensuring that she receives additional support and care at school.

### ***Analysis***

#### ***Theme 1: Gender discrimination and family dynamics***

- Neha's silence during the discussion about gender discrimination in the family indicates a reluctance to share her experiences.
- Neha's family situation is complex, her parents divorced, and she is raised by a single parent, her mother, with support from her uncle.
- Neha's family relies on her mother's income as a tailor, and her education is sponsored by her dominating uncle.
- Neha's silence may reflect her reluctance to discuss sensitive family matters, such as financial struggles and the dominance of her uncle.

#### ***Theme 2: Financial dependence and power dynamics***

- Neha's family relies on her mother's meagre income as a tailor, indicating financial struggles and dependency.
- Neha's education is sponsored by her dominating uncle, suggesting a power imbalance within the family.
- Neha's dependence on her uncle for financial support may contribute to her reluctance to speak up about gender discrimination or other family issues.

#### ***Theme 3: Social isolation and emotional support***

- Neha's silent and hesitant behaviour may indicate feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- She mentions that she does not have many friends and is often silent.
- Neha's relationship with her favourite teacher provides her with emotional support and a trusted confidante at school.
- The researcher encourages Neha to open up to her favourite teacher whenever she feels sad, emphasising the importance of emotional support and communication.

### ***Theme 4: Impact of family environment on education and well-being***

- Neha's family situation, characterised by divorce, financial struggles and dominance from her uncle, may impact her education and well-being.
- Despite facing challenges at home, Neha is an average student and has a favourite teacher who provides her with support and encouragement.
- The support from her teacher and the researcher's intervention to inform the teacher about Neha's situation highlights the importance of a supportive school environment.

### ***Conclusion***

- Neha's case highlights the complex interplay between family dynamics, financial struggles and emotional well-being.
- Her reluctance to speak up about gender discrimination may be influenced by her family situation and dependence on her uncle for financial support.
- Neha's relationship with her teacher provides her with much-needed emotional support and highlights the importance of supportive relationships in the school environment.

In summary, Neha's case underscores the need for support and intervention to address the challenges faced by students from complex family backgrounds. It also emphasises the importance of a supportive school environment in promoting the well-being and academic success of students like Neha.

### ***Case 3***

One of the boys, named John, was selected for an individual interview. He seemed very positive to the questions of gender equality. So, the researcher conducted an in-depth interview with the student.

#### ***Background of the student***

John is a single child whose parents are well-educated and working. From childhood onwards, he was taught to cook, help his parents with household chores and to also to assist them while shopping for provisions and groceries. He was taught to respect his friends, elders and other family members irrespective of gender. During the FGD, when the question 'if there is gender equality' in your family was raised by the researcher, John expressed that there is gender

equality in his family. He explained that his parents shared household chores, made decisions together and did not argue over family matters. The researcher was curious to know about him and further interviewed him. During the interview, John mentioned that his parents taught him to respect everyone and consider others' opinions. He emphasised the importance of equality and mutual respect in his family.

### **Analysis**

#### **Theme 1: Gender equality in family**

- John perceives gender equality within his family.
- His parents share household chores and make decisions together, indicating an equal distribution of responsibilities and decision-making power.
- There is no gender-based division of labour in John's family, and both parents contribute equally to household tasks.

#### **Theme 2: Upbringing and values**

- John's upbringing has played a significant role in shaping his perspective on gender equality.
- From childhood, he was taught to cook, help with household chores and assist his parents while shopping.
- His parents instilled in him the values of respect and consideration for others' opinions, irrespective of gender.
- John emphasises the importance of equality and mutual respect in his family, highlighting the positive impact of his upbringing on his understanding of gender equality.

#### **Theme 3: Shared decision-making**

- John's parents made decisions together, indicating a collaborative and egalitarian approach to family decision-making.
- There is no dominance of one gender over the other in decision-making processes, reflecting balanced power dynamics within the family.

#### **Theme 4: Mutual respect and consideration**

- John's parents taught him to respect everyone and consider others' opinions, regardless of gender.
- Mutual respect and consideration are central values in John's family, contributing to a harmonious and egalitarian family environment.

### **Conclusion**

- John's experience provides a positive example of gender equality within the family.
- His upbringing, characterised by shared responsibilities, mutual respect and shared decision-making, has shaped his understanding and appreciation of gender equality.
- John's family serves as a model for promoting gender equality and mutual respect, highlighting the importance of upbringing and family values in shaping attitudes towards gender equality.

In summary, John's experience illustrates the positive impact of a gender-equitable upbringing on promoting attitudes of equality and mutual respect within the family. His story underscores the importance of instilling values of equality and respect from an early age to promote a more inclusive and egalitarian society.

### **FINDINGS**

From the case studies, the researcher observed the students' perception of gender, gender issues and gender equality concepts. The data from the three case studies derived different themes through the thematic analysis.

#### **Case 1: Gender Discrimination in Family and Society**

The case highlights the presence of gender discrimination within the family and society, as perceived by the boy. His experiences and observations illustrate the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and the differential treatment of individuals based on their gender. The case underscores the importance of addressing gender discrimination and promoting gender equality within families and society. This thematic analysis provides insights into the boy's perception of gender discrimination within his family and society, highlighting the need for interventions to address gender inequality and promote gender equality.

#### **Case 2: Gender Discrimination and Family Dynamics**

Neha's case highlights the complex interplay between family dynamics, financial struggles and emotional well-being. The support from her favourite teacher and the researcher's intervention aim to address the challenges Neha faces and promote her well-being and academic success. In summary, Neha's case underscores the need for support and intervention to address the challenges faced by students from complex family backgrounds. It also



emphasises the importance of a supportive school environment in promoting the well-being and academic success of students like Neha.

### Case 3: Gender Equality in Family and Society

Case 3 provided valuable insights into John's perspective on gender equality. His belief in gender equality is rooted in his family's dynamics and the values instilled in him by his parents. John's experience highlights the importance of parental influence in shaping children's attitudes and beliefs about gender roles and equality. The interview with John offered a clear understanding of how family dynamics and parental values can influence a child's perception of gender equality. The importance of gender-neutral parenting is very much relevant in our society for the better upbringing of children because today's children are tomorrow's citizens. It is important to inculcate gender education in children even from their early childhood. It should start with family and schools.

To conclude, the study gave insight into the importance of gender-neutral parenting and the significance of early gender education in both family and school settings:

#### 1) Importance of Gender-Neutral Parenting

- **Prevention of gender bias:** Gender-neutral parenting helps prevent the perpetuation of gender bias and discrimination. It fosters an environment where all individuals are treated with equal respect and value.
- **Empowerment:** Gender-neutral parenting empowers children to explore their interests and abilities without constraints based on their gender. It encourages them to pursue any activity or career path they choose, regardless of traditional gender norms.
- **Respect and understanding:** Gender-neutral parenting teaches children to respect and understand diverse gender identities and expressions. It promotes empathy, compassion & acceptance of others, regardless of gender.
- **Equality and fairness:** Gender-neutral parenting promotes equality and fairness by challenging traditional gender stereotypes and roles. It ensures that children are not limited by societal expectations based on their gender.

#### 2) Significance of Early Gender Education in Family and Schools

- **Breaking stereotypes:** Early gender education helps children recognise and challenge gender stereotypes. It

allows them to develop a more nuanced understanding of gender and its impact on society.

- **Promoting inclusivity:** Gender education in family and school settings promotes inclusivity and diversity. It teaches children to appreciate and respect people of all genders, backgrounds and identities.
- **Preventing gender-based violence:** Gender education helps prevent gender-based violence by promoting healthy relationships, concern and respect for others. It equips children with the knowledge and skills they need to navigate social interactions respectfully and responsibly.
- **Foundation for future behaviour:** Early childhood is a critical period for learning and development. Gender education from an early age lays the foundation for children's attitudes and behaviours toward gender throughout their lives. Gender education must be included in the school curriculum. The teachers shall be given refreshment training on gender education.

## DISCUSSION

### Interpretation of Findings

The study provides valuable insights into the importance of gender-neutral parenting and the significance of early gender education in both family and school settings. Gender-neutral parenting will reduce inequality by promoting gender equality and enhancing the psychological well-being of the children. Gender-neutral parenting, where children are not confined to traditional gender roles, helps reduce gender stereotypes. Children raised in gender-neutral environments are more likely to see men and women as equals. This can lead to more egalitarian attitudes and behaviours in adulthood. Gender-neutral parenting can positively impact children's psychological well-being by reducing the pressure to conform to restrictive gender norms.

The significance of early **Gender education** both in family and schools is relevant in the Kerala context. Introducing gender education at an early age in schools can play a crucial role in shaping children's understanding of gender equality. Incorporating gender studies into the curriculum helps normalise discussions about gender diversity and equality. Early gender education empowers students to become advocates for equality and inclusivity. It equips them with the knowledge and skills to recognise

and challenge gender-based discrimination and biases in society. By implementing gender-neutral parenting strategies and integrating comprehensive gender education in school curricula, families and educational institutions can collectively contribute to a more equitable and inclusive society.

### Theoretical Implications

*Judith butler's concept of gender performativity*, which theorises that gender is constructed through repeated actions rather than being an innate quality, helped the researcher to explain how adolescents in Kerala understand and perform their gender roles. Butler's idea of deconstruction is essential to challenge the traditional binary notions of gender prevalent in Kerala's society. Analysing how students perform gender in their daily lives revealed the extent to which societal norms influence their behaviours and attitudes towards gender. For example, classroom interactions, participation in sports and social activities were observed and analysed through Butler's lens. The theory on *Existential feminism by simone de beauvoir* is relevant to understanding how Kerala's cultural and educational systems shape adolescents' perceptions of gender. She argued that women are marginalised as a result of society's imposition of gender roles. During the FGD, the girls responded that they were subjugated and marginalised in their families due to the gender stereotypes prevailing in society.

*Connell's* exploration of *Hegemonic masculinity* and the power relations among them is crucial for understanding the hierarchical nature of gender relations in Kerala. This theory helped the researcher in identifying the dominant forms of masculinity and how they affected both boys and girls. The researcher investigated how boys in Kerala asserted dominance or how girls navigated these power structures. This revealed the pressures and conflicts adolescents face regarding conforming to or resisting traditional gender roles. *Chodorow's* work on the *Psychoanalytic feminism*, and socialisation process, particularly the role of family in shaping gender identities, is significant for understanding how adolescents in Kerala perceive and enact gender roles. The researcher analysed the family structures and parenting styles in Kerala through interactions with adolescents. It reveals how gender roles are transmitted and how these roles influence adolescents' attitudes toward gender equality and awareness.

### Practical Implications

The two-way **Focus group discussion** conducted by the researcher provided valuable insights into the attitudes of the students toward gender and gender equality. By actively engaging both Group A and Group B in the discussion, the researcher was able to gather diverse perspectives and opinions on the topic. In summary, the two-way FGD was an effective method for exploring the students' attitudes toward gender and gender equality, with the researcher acting as a moderator to guide the discussion and ask relevant questions.

The **participant observation** during the FGD provided the researcher with a more comprehensive understanding of the students' behavioural characteristics, including their attitudes, body language and responses during the discussion. This approach enriched the qualitative data collected during the FGD and allowed for an analysis of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

The **case studies** enabled the researcher to understand the perceptions of adolescents about gender-related concepts. The researcher gained the insight that Gender-neutral parenting and early gender education are essential for the better upbringing of children and the creation of a more inclusive and equitable society. By challenging traditional gender stereotypes and promoting equality and respect, parents and educators can help create a world where all individuals are valued and empowered, regardless of their gender. In summary, gender-neutral parenting and early gender education are crucial for promoting equality, respect and understanding in society, starting from childhood and laying the foundation for a more inclusive and equitable future.

### Limitations of the Study

The research was conducted in a rural area school in Thiruvananthapuram district, Kerala with a particular focus on an eighth-grade student group using qualitative methods. It is possible that this narrow demographic range does not accurately represent Kerala's teenage population. The study shall be conducted using quantitative techniques, such as questionnaires or surveys, using a large sample size could provide a more rounded viewpoint and supplement qualitative data. The study was conducted in a rural area in the Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala. So, the responses may vary from urban areas of metro cities and other districts of Kerala.

### Research Gaps for Further Research

- Future research could compare gender awareness among adolescents in co-educational versus single-gender schools within Kerala. This could provide insights into the effectiveness of different educational environments on gender awareness.
- Conducting longitudinal studies to observe the development of gender awareness over time would be valuable. This approach could track the long-term impact of educational interventions and societal changes on gender perceptions.
- Studies could explore how exposure to various media content affects gender attitudes and behaviours among students.
- Experimental studies assessing the impact of curriculum changes on students' gender perceptions would provide evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and educators.

By addressing these limitations and research gaps, future studies can build a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of gender awareness among adolescents in Kerala.

### CONCLUSION

The findings of the study underscore the importance of providing education and job opportunities to females to attain financial stability. Economic independence empowers females, providing them with opportunities for participation, accessibility and involvement in decision-making within their families and society.

To ensure the success of all students, regardless of gender, it is imperative to provide them with the necessary resources and support. Schools play a crucial role in creating an inclusive and equitable learning environment where all students can thrive. Incorporating gender education into the curriculum is essential. By providing students with knowledge about *gender and civic responsibilities*, they can evolve into efficient and responsible citizens. It is vital to recognise that gender should not be a barrier to achieving one's goals. Gender equality can only be achieved through the practice of gender mainstreaming in all sectors. Each gender must respect the other as an individual, as enshrined in Article 15 of the Indian Constitution, which guarantees the 'Right to Equality'.

In conclusion, promoting gender equality is not only a moral imperative but also a legal and constitutional mandate.

Gender equality is not just a matter of fairness; it is a fundamental human right enshrined in various international conventions and national constitutions. For instance, Article 15 of the Indian Constitution guarantees the 'Right to Equality', prohibiting discrimination based on gender. Similarly, various international treaties, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), emphasise the importance of gender equality and the empowerment of women.

However, achieving gender equality requires concerted efforts from all sectors of society. It involves addressing deep-rooted social norms, attitudes and practices that perpetuate gender inequality. This includes reforming discriminatory laws and policies, promoting women's participation in decision-making processes, and challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The researcher concluded that gender issues can only be solved if there is gender equality and equity in the family, school environment, workplace and public places. Refresher training on gender awareness for teachers is required. Gender education must be incorporated into the school curriculum.

Furthermore, promoting gender equality in education is particularly important as education is a key driver of social change and economic development. By ensuring equal access to quality education for all, regardless of gender, societies can empower girls and women, break the cycle of poverty and promote sustainable development. In conclusion, achieving gender equality is not just a matter of social justice; it is essential for building inclusive and equitable societies. It requires the collective efforts of governments, civil society organisations, the private sector and individuals to ensure that gender equality is achieved and maintained at all levels of society. Only then can we create an egalitarian world where everyone, regardless of gender, has equal rights, opportunities and access to resources.

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