

Family a major influence on gender attitudes: study

C. Maya

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: A study conducted among school-going adolescent students in the city on their attitudes towards gender and sexuality has revealed strong gender discrimination in the perception of boys and girls regarding work participation, their roles and responsibility in society. The study has shown that the gender conditioning adolescents received at home was a major influence in shaping their perceptions about the roles that men and women were expected to play in society.

Boys believed that men had to be strong, independent and decisive, while girls believed that they had to be the caretakers, sweet and gentle and dependent on men. Both boys and girls were being conditioned into adopting this stereotyped image of men and women and this indirectly affected their personalities, the study has pointed out.

For example, the opinions of both boys and girls did not differ in terms of traditional work roles for men and women. Both boys and girls expressed the opinion that domestic responsibilities, including cooking and care of children, were more suitable to women because of their personality dispositions; while jobs that required hard work, leadership and commitment were better left to men.

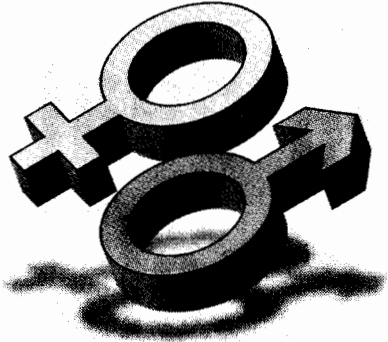
Six schools covered

The researcher, Philip Mathew, undertook this study among 184 students in six schools in the district as part of the Small Grants Programme on Gender and Social Issues in Reproductive Health Research, of the Achutha Menon Centre for Health Science Studies.

The researcher conducted interactive workshops and focus group discussions with students, apart from the questionnaires that were distributed.

Adolescence is one of the most significant periods in the life of an individual, a time when each individual begins to imbibe the value system of the society in which they live. There is the institutionalisation of gender difference in every sphere, with the assigning of different roles to boys and girls right from childhood. Girls said that restrictions were imposed on them at every turn, while boys said that their relationship with their friends were always under scrutiny.

Students said that social norms restricted them from continuing normal friendships between the opposite sex once they reached adolescence and that parents, teachers and tended to blame them in-



- Boys and girls conditioned to accept stereotyped roles.
- Men believed to be 'strong and decisive', and women, 'sweet and servile'.
- Proper life and social skills training needed in schools.
- Family environment is found to be the best influence.

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stead of understanding that their friendship was healthy.

Even the influence of the family in shaping the attitudes and personalities of adolescents is crucial. Girls usually had only their mothers to talk to about their emotional issues, while boys tended to look outside for support. Students reported that mothers were not as open as they would like them to be.

The family, in many homes, is thus turning into a space for boys to assert their powers while for girls it became a space for suppressing their feelings and personality, the study has reported.

Role of family

Family should be the primary agency for creating a better and more just environment for adolescents, as all basic values they imbibe in life comes from their own family structure and the attitude and relationship between parents.

Parents should be given more insight into issues of adolescents and they should be encouraged to give proper information to their children about the physical and mental changes during adolescence.

The home environment should be such that adolescents can discuss their problems frankly.

Adolescents should also be given training in schools on personality development, life skills and social skills, including awareness on sexual and reproductive health. Youth clubs and adolescent counselling should be the part of every school curriculum, the study has recommended.