

Real man and real woman: Understanding the gender dynamics in Orissa, India

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Abstract

The present study attempts to understand youth's perception of 'real man' and 'real woman'. The findings are based on the qualitative data i.e. focus group discussions and in-depth interviews of rural married youth aged 15-29 years from Orissa, India collected during 2006-07. Necessary ethical guidelines like informed consent of the youth have been taken into consideration during data collection. Atlas ti package has been used for the analysis. It has been found that the patriarchal sexual culture manifest in the development of male sexuality an assertive and in the cultivation of sexual passivity in females. The unequal perceived gender role of the youth towards sexual and reproductive behavior of both sexes and its strong association with the socio-cultural norms of the society urges focused efforts to intensify information education and communication programs in promoting gender equality for the development of society in general and young people in particular.

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Introduction

Gender is the socio-cultural definition of man and woman; the way societies distinguish them and assign them social roles. Gender disparities and double standards have widely been acknowledged as one of the most pervasive factor affecting behavior of youth. Past research indicates that boys experience comparatively greater social pressure than girls to endorse gendered societal prescriptions such as the strongly endorsed health related beliefs that men are independent, self reliant, strong and tough (Martin 1995) and often are socialized to engage in sexual activity so as to express their masculinity (Jejeebhoy et al 2004; Abraham 2002; Forste & Hass 2002; Das 1988; Dube 1988). Again, the dominant norms of masculinity i.e. the most traditional beliefs about manhood adopted by young men, predicted the highest level of risk taking and of involvement in behaviors such as high-risk sexual activity (Courtenay 2000). There exist relationships between childhood socialization and youth sexual behavior as well.

Families are the first context in which adolescent boys are socialized into gender roles including sexuality, masculinity, and ethnicity (Harter 1999) and familial factors strongly influence adolescent sexual activity (Davis & Friel 2001; Gage 1998). Gender differences are significant in the differential opportunities that boys and girls have in terms of access to information and in the exploration of their sexuality. These gender roles internalized by boys and girls are reflected in their social interactions, attitudes and views regarding marriage and sex, and in the nature and extent of their sexual experiences (Abraham 2004). Moreover, there is a gender difference in the coping strategies as well (Frydenberg & Lewis 1991; Patterson & McCubbin 1987). The present study attempts to explore youth's perception about their gender role in the society. More specifically, it aims to understand youth's perception of 'real man' and 'real woman'.

Data and Methods

The present study uses data from a cross-sectional study, comprising of pre-survey qualitative phase, survey and post-survey qualitative phase, which was conducted among young married people in 20 villages of the state of Orissa, India. Data collection was conducted during July 2006 – April 2007. In the pre-survey qualitative phase, focus group discussions (FGDs)

separately for young men and women in some selected villages were carried out. The selection of those villages was done at random in the *tehsil* (administrative unit of the district) selected for the main survey. Youth for the FGDs have been selected keeping in mind the age, education, occupation, caste and marital duration. A multi-stage sampling design had been adopted for selecting the youth for the main survey. Finally, in the post-survey qualitative phase, for the in-depth interviews (IDIs) a few youth were selected purposively from respondents of the main survey.

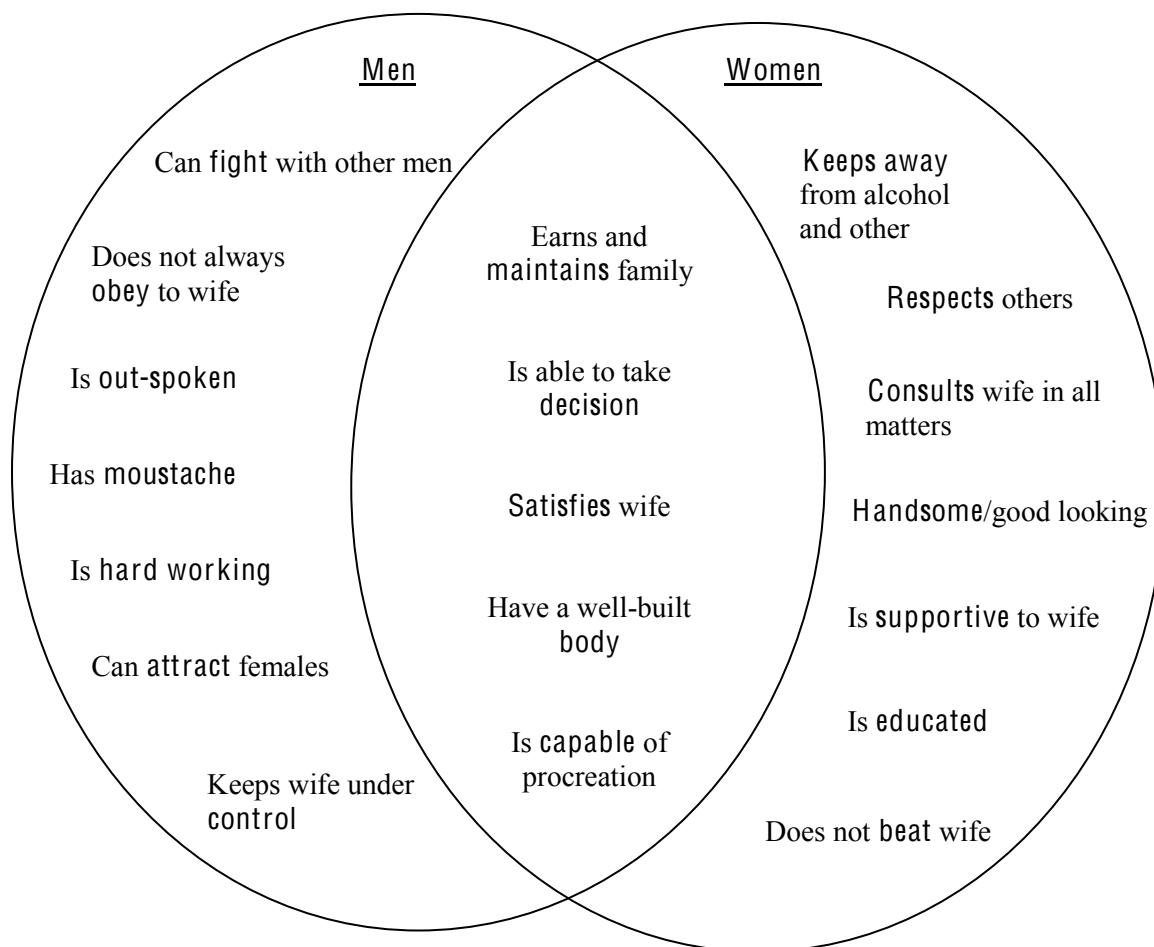
The findings of the present study are mainly based on the qualitative data collected during the pre and post-survey qualitative phase of the larger study. More specifically, the conclusions are based on eight FGDs (four each among young men and women) and 42 IDIs (20 and 22 interviews respectively among young men and women) of rural married youth. The young men and women included in the study are aged 15-29 years and 15-24 years respectively. The results from the free listing exercise with a total of 50 youth (26 young women and 24 young men) have also been presented. It is worth mentioning that required ethical guidelines like informed consent of youth have been taken into consideration during data collection. ATLAS. ti package has been used for the content analysis of the qualitative data gathered through FGDs and IDIs. The interviews were first typed in Microsoft word as documents and then the documents were assigned as a hermeneutic unit. A detailed code list covering all the issues of the interviews had been prepared and the hermeneutic unit was assigned codes as applicable. Association among major theme areas, codes, and sub-codes has been studied using the ATLAS. ti query tool.

Findings

Men and women are biologically different and are often differentiated on that ground. In addition to this however, there are some other social factors that play equally important role in further validating their gender identities. Societies usually have a host of predetermined list of qualities that one is expected to inherit in order to be a 'real man or woman'. Figure 1 reveals the findings from the free listing exercise of 'real man' as perceived by young men and women. It has been observed that both young men and women are in agreement with the attributes like ability of a man to earn and maintain family, to take decisions, to physically satisfy spouse/partner and to procreate besides having a well-built body as the essential

characteristics of a 'real man'. "If one is unable to earn and procreate, his existence as a man is fruitless" (illiterate young woman, FGD participant).

Figure 1: Free list of 'real man' perceived by youth



Note: N= 50 married youth consisting of 24 men and 26 women

Many of the young men also view that a 'real man' should be physically strong enough to fight other men (if needed), should be out-spoken and hard-working. "Unless one defeats others in the ring (jagaghare), what kind of man is he?" (24 year old FGD participant).

A few other young men view man's ability to attract woman, controlling wife and not always obeying to wife is a must to be a 'real man'. "If one always obeys her, he will be called his wife's pet" (24-year-old cultivator, FGD participant).

However, many of the young women seem to have very different view about a 'real man'. As most of them perceive a man, who keeps away from alcohol and other women as a 'real man'.

Besides this, a few other young women perceive a man's good behavior towards his wife, respect for others, and educational status as the must of a 'real man'.

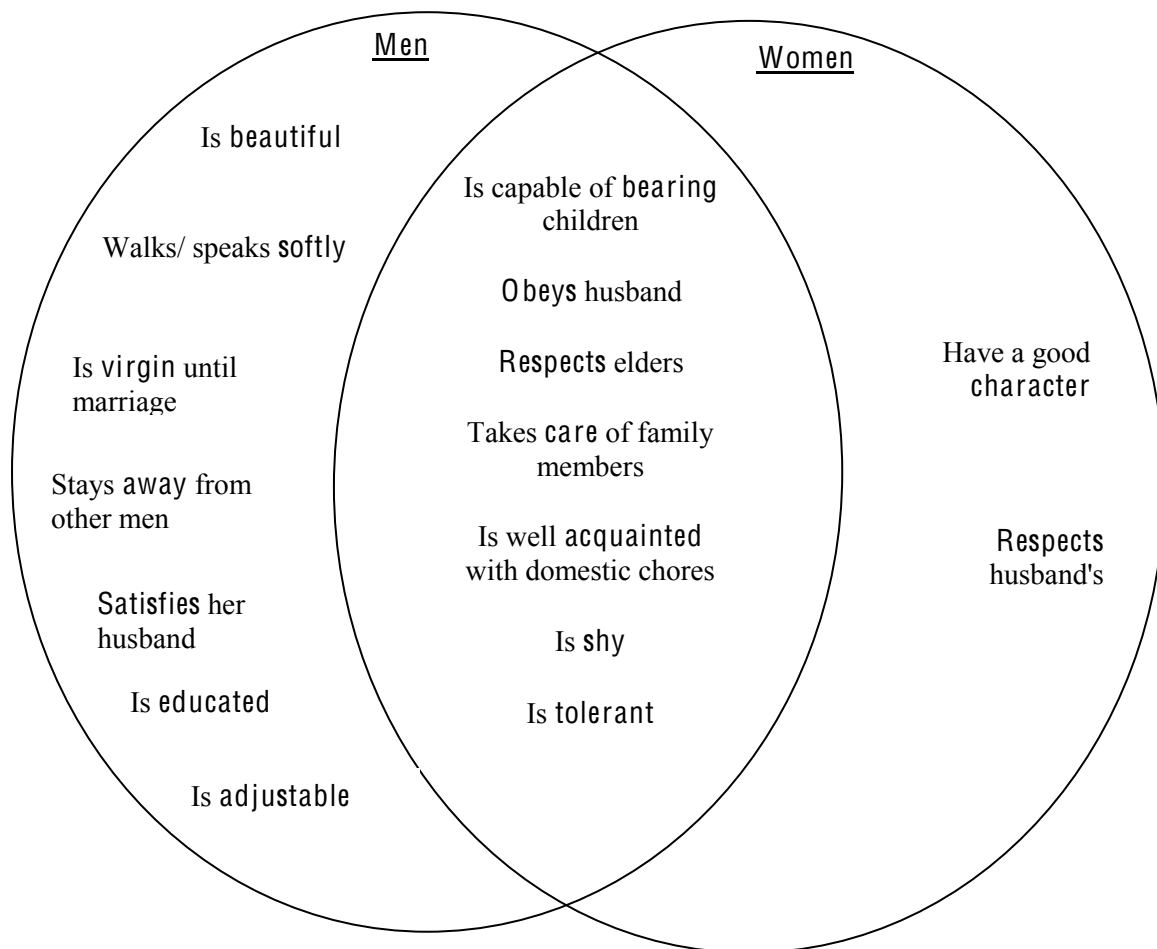
On the contrary, there are some other characteristics a woman is expected to possess to be a 'real woman' and there exist sex differences in the perception too. Figure 2 reveals that for many young men, a 'real woman' should be beautiful; educated; adjustable; walks and speaks softly; virgin till marriage; besides being faithful to husband. Many of the young women also view good character and respect for husband's decision as essential characteristics of a 'real woman'. "Involvement in sex before marriage is sin for a girl; this will bring misfortune for the marital family" (23-year-old daily wage laborer, FGD participant).

There seems to be consensus between young men and women about a woman's ability to bear child, acquaintance with domestic chores and caring nature towards family members as a must to be a 'real woman'. "Until you give birth to a child, you cannot be a real woman" (24-year-old non-literate woman, FGD participant).

Moreover, respect for elders, bashfulness, tolerant attitude besides obeying to husband has emerged to be essential for a 'real woman'. "The woman who respects elders, takes care of home as well as children and obeys husband is a real woman" (22 year old male betel-stall owner, FGD participant).

It is apparent from the analysis that there prevails an inequity in the perception of youth towards the gender role of both the sexes. So far as the gender role towards sexual behavior is concerned, while they have a somewhat liberal view towards the sexual promiscuity of young men, it is strictly prohibited in case of young women. "Boys are like brass pot, it would shine back as it was like before after cleaning. Girls are like clay pot, blackness remains forever once used" (Young male cultivator, IDI participant).

Figure 2: Free list of 'real woman' perceived by youth



N= 50 married youth consisting of 24 men and 26 women

Again, it is the woman who is expected to be tolerant, adjustable and caring for the family. The way they are brought up and taught how to behave (which is nothing but socialization process) cannot be ignored as the factors leading to such thinking. “You are born as girls, do not to mix with boys, do not roam outside, learn domestic chores, after all you have to do all those things after marriage” (24 year old female teacher, IDI participant).

Women having masculine qualities and men having feminine qualities are rarely admired. The series of rules and regulations and sometimes physical punishment often compels youth to adhere to the expected gender role according to their biological sexes.

Conclusions

The study brings out that in addition to the biological difference between the sexes, there are other socio-cultural factors that play vital role in further validating the gender identities. Both young men and women are in agreement with the attributes like ability of a man to earn and maintain family, to take decision, to physically satisfy spouse/partner, and to procreate, besides having a well-built body as the essential characteristics of a 'real man'. Similarly, a 'real woman' is perceived as one, who is capable of bearing children, taking care of family members, well acquainted with domestic chores, is tolerant, and above all possess a good character.

The study further elucidates that since, young boys and girls are treated differently and are provided different learning environments, they tend to develop differential needs, desires, skills, temperaments and roles. They eventually grow into different types of people- men and women- often adhering to the culturally appropriate ways of thinking. They hardly question why they are different or why they ended up the way they are. Further, there prevails inequality in the perception as far as the sexuality of both sexes is concerned. This, however, does not pose any direct restriction on young men to indulge in sexual activities before marriage and/or outside the marital union. In contrast, there is a lot of stigma attached to sexuality of young women; as the words like virginity, fidelity and family prestige in the community are typically associated with them. Nevertheless, youth in general are expected to adhere to the roles ascribed to them, based on their biological construct and any deviation from it is not encouraged, more so for young women.

The unequal perceived gender role of youth towards sexual and reproductive behavior of both sexes and its strong association with the socio-cultural norms of the society urges focused efforts to intensify information, education and communication programs in promoting gender equality for the development of society in general and young people in particular. Gender sensitive programs at the community level such as puppet shows and street plays enhancing awareness on the importance of the rights of young women, is suggested for a more egalitarian society.

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