
THE INFLUENCE OF DIFFERENT AGENTS OF SOCIALISATION ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF GENDER IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Gender identity is a significant psychosocial dimension of human personality that reflects an individual's internal sense of self, social identity, and gender expression. Although biological sex is determined at birth, gender identity develops primarily through the process of socialisation. Socialisation is a lifelong process through which individuals learn and internalize the values, norms, beliefs, behaviors, and social roles of their society. Various agents of socialisation, including family, school, religion, peer groups, media, and society, play a vital role in shaping gender identity. These agents not only influence an individual's understanding of gender roles but also affect attitudes, self-concept, interpersonal relationships, and social participation.

In the contemporary world, globalization, digital communication, and social media have transformed the process of gender identity formation, making it more dynamic and multidimensional. While modern education, constitutional values, and human rights awareness promote gender equality and inclusion, many cultural, social, and religious stereotypes continue to reinforce gender-based discrimination. This paper critically examines the concept of socialisation, the meaning of gender identity, and the influence of major agents of socialisation on gender identity development. It also discusses the Indian context and offers practical recommendations for promoting gender equality through inclusive socialisation practices.

KEYWORDS: Gender Identity, Socialisation, Family, School, Religion, Media, Society, Gender Equality, Social Institutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Every individual possesses a unique identity that develops through continuous interaction with society. One of the most significant dimensions of this identity is gender identity. Gender identity is not confined to an individual's biological sex; rather, it is shaped by social, cultural, psychological, and personal experiences. It reflects how individuals perceive themselves and how they express their identity within society.

A distinction must be made between sex and gender, as these terms are often used interchangeably despite having different meanings. Biological sex refers to the anatomical and physiological characteristics that classify individuals as male or female at birth. Gender, on the other hand, refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, expectations, and responsibilities that societies assign to individuals. For example, the belief that women should perform household duties while men should be the primary breadwinners is a social construction rather than a biological necessity.

Individuals are not born with predetermined social roles. Instead, they gradually learn the norms, expectations, values, and behaviors accepted by society through interaction with family members, teachers, peers, religious institutions, media, and the wider community. This lifelong learning process is known as socialisation. Through socialisation, individuals acquire not only social values and cultural practices but also develop their gender identity, moral values, attitudes, and social responsibilities.

The development of gender identity begins during early childhood. Children observe the behaviors of parents, siblings, teachers, relatives, and peers and gradually internalize these behaviors as socially appropriate. When children grow up in an environment characterized by equality, mutual respect, and cooperation, they are more likely to develop an inclusive and positive understanding of gender. Conversely, exposure to gender discrimination, stereotypes, and unequal opportunities may negatively influence their perception of gender roles.

The twenty-first century has witnessed significant social transformations due to globalization, digital technologies, and the rapid expansion of social media. These developments have broadened the understanding of gender beyond the traditional male–female binary. Concepts such as *gender diversity*, *gender equality*, and *social inclusion* have become central to educational policies, human rights frameworks, and sustainable development initiatives. International organizations such as the United Nations and UNESCO emphasize gender equality as an essential component of inclusive and sustainable development. Similarly, India's *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020* advocates equitable and inclusive education by promoting equal opportunities irrespective of gender.

Educational institutions have increasingly recognized that schools are not merely centres of academic learning but also important environments where values, attitudes, and gender perceptions are formed. Likewise, family, religion, media, peer groups, and the broader social environment continuously influence individuals' understanding of gender roles and identities. Therefore, examining the contribution of these agents of socialisation is essential for understanding how gender identity develops and how societies can promote gender equality. Contemporary Indian society is undergoing rapid social transformation. Women's participation in education, employment, politics, and leadership has increased considerably. At the same time, awareness regarding gender diversity and equal rights has expanded. However, challenges such as gender discrimination, child marriage, dowry, workplace inequality, gender-based violence, and deeply rooted social stereotypes continue to exist in many communities. These realities highlight the need for a more inclusive and gender-sensitive process of socialisation.

Against this background, the present study examines the influence of major agents of socialisation—family, school, religion, peer groups, media, and society—on the development of gender identity. It further explores the Indian context and proposes recommendations for promoting gender equality through inclusive educational and social practices.

2. Concept of Socialisation

Socialisation is a continuous social and psychological process through which individuals learn and internalize the values, norms, beliefs, customs, traditions, and behavioral patterns of their society. It begins at birth and continues throughout life, enabling individuals to become responsible, ethical, and socially competent members of society.

Through socialisation, children acquire language, cultural values, discipline, cooperation, empathy, moral responsibility, and acceptable patterns of social behavior. More importantly, they learn society's expectations regarding gender roles and gradually develop their own gender identity. Thus, socialisation serves as the foundation for both personality development and gender identity formation.

According to **H. M. Johnson (1960)**, socialisation is *"the learning process that enables individuals to perform their social roles effectively."* Similarly, **Green** described socialisation as the process through which children internalize the culture, beliefs, and behavioral patterns of society. These definitions indicate that socialisation is not merely the acquisition of behavior but also the development of social identity and responsible citizenship.

The major objectives of socialisation include:

- Familiarizing individuals with social values and cultural norms.
- Developing responsible citizenship and social responsibility.
- Promoting personality and character development.
- Helping individuals understand gender roles and social expectations.
- Developing cooperation, tolerance, empathy, and social adjustment.
- Preserving and transmitting cultural heritage from one generation to another.

Socialisation takes place through both formal and informal agencies. Family, school, religion, peer groups, media, and society are among the most influential agents that shape an individual's attitudes, behaviors, values, and gender identity. Their combined influence determines how individuals perceive themselves and interact with others throughout their lives.

3. Concept of Gender Identity

Gender identity refers to an individual's deeply held internal sense of self regarding gender. It represents how a person perceives and identifies themselves, regardless of the biological sex assigned at birth. Unlike biological sex, which is determined by physical and physiological characteristics, gender identity is shaped through a combination of psychological, social, cultural, and environmental influences. It develops gradually through continuous interaction with family, educational institutions, peer groups, religious organizations, media, and society. The *World Health Organization (WHO)* defines gender as the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women, men, and people of diverse gender identities. This definition highlights that gender is primarily a social and cultural construct rather than a biological one.

Gender identity plays a crucial role in an individual's personality development, self-esteem, emotional well-being, and social participation. When society respects individual identity and provides equal opportunities, individuals are more likely to develop confidence, emotional security, and positive self-concepts. Conversely, discrimination, stereotypes, exclusion, and rigid gender expectations may negatively influence psychological development and social adjustment.

In contemporary society, the understanding of gender identity has expanded significantly. Modern educational policies, constitutional values, and international human rights frameworks emphasize dignity, equality, and inclusion irrespective of gender. Consequently,

educational institutions and other social agencies are expected to create environments that promote respect for diversity while eliminating gender-based discrimination.

4. Major Theories of Gender Identity Development

Several psychologists and sociologists have explained the development of gender identity through different theoretical perspectives. These theories provide valuable insights into how children learn gender roles and gradually construct their gender identity through cognitive, social, and cultural experiences.

4.1 Social Learning Theory (Albert Bandura)

Albert Bandura's **Social Learning Theory (1977)** argues that children learn behaviours primarily through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. According to Bandura, children do not simply learn from direct experience; they also observe the behaviour of parents, teachers, siblings, peers, and media personalities and imitate those behaviours that receive social approval.

From the perspective of gender identity, children observe how men and women behave within the family and society. For instance, if boys consistently observe men making important decisions while women perform domestic responsibilities, they may internalize these behaviours as socially acceptable gender roles. Likewise, positive reinforcement strengthens such behaviours, whereas punishment discourages behaviours considered socially inappropriate.

This theory highlights the importance of parents, teachers, and media in promoting gender equality. When children witness equal participation of men and women in family life, education, leadership, and employment, they are more likely to develop egalitarian gender attitudes.

4.2 Cognitive Development Theory (Lawrence Kohlberg)

Lawrence Kohlberg proposed that children's understanding of gender develops alongside their cognitive maturity. According to this theory, children actively construct their understanding of gender rather than simply imitating others.

Kohlberg identified three major stages in gender development:

a) Gender Identity

At approximately two to three years of age, children begin to recognize themselves as either boys or girls. At this stage, they identify gender labels but have only a limited understanding of their permanence.

b) Gender Stability

Between four and five years of age, children understand that gender remains stable over time. They realize that boys grow into men and girls grow into women.

c) Gender Constancy

By the age of six or seven, children recognize that gender remains constant despite changes in clothing, hairstyle, or external appearance. They understand that superficial changes do not alter one's gender identity.

Kohlberg's theory suggests that cognitive growth enables children to understand and internalize gender roles more effectively as they mature.

4.3 Gender Schema Theory (Sandra Bem)

Sandra Bem (1981) introduced the **Gender Schema Theory**, which explains how children develop mental frameworks, known as **gender schemas**, that help them organize information related to gender.

According to Bem, society continuously provides messages regarding what behaviours, occupations, emotions, and activities are considered appropriate for males and females. Children absorb these messages and gradually develop cognitive structures that guide their attitudes and behaviours.

For example, if children repeatedly hear that engineering is a male profession while nursing is primarily a female profession, they may unconsciously develop stereotypical beliefs regarding occupational roles. Conversely, exposure to gender-inclusive educational practices encourages children to develop broader and more flexible perceptions of gender.

Gender Schema Theory emphasizes that reducing stereotypes within families, schools, and media is essential for promoting gender equality.

4.4 Gender Performativity Theory (Judith Butler)

Judith Butler (1990) challenged traditional biological explanations of gender by introducing the concept of **Gender Performativity**.

According to Butler, gender is not a fixed biological characteristic but is continuously constructed through repeated social behaviours, cultural expectations, and everyday performances. Individuals perform gender through their speech, appearance, dress, gestures, occupations, and interactions with others.

This perspective argues that many behaviours traditionally considered "masculine" or "feminine" are socially produced rather than biologically determined. Consequently, gender roles can change when societies redefine cultural expectations.

Butler's theory has significantly influenced contemporary gender studies by encouraging greater recognition of gender diversity, inclusion, and respect for individual identity.

5. Major Agents of Socialisation and Their Influence on Gender Identity

5.1 Role of Family

The family is universally regarded as the primary and most influential agent of socialisation. During early childhood, children spend most of their time within the family environment, where they first learn language, cultural values, moral principles, discipline, and patterns of social interaction. Consequently, the foundations of gender identity are also established within the family.

Parents consciously and unconsciously communicate gender expectations through daily interactions. The selection of toys, clothing, colours, household responsibilities, career aspirations, and behavioural expectations often reflects prevailing gender norms. For example, assigning dolls exclusively to girls and construction toys exclusively to boys may reinforce traditional gender stereotypes from an early age.

However, families that promote equal treatment, shared responsibilities, and equal educational opportunities help children develop a more balanced understanding of gender. When both parents participate equally in household duties, decision-making, and child-rearing, children learn that competence and responsibility are not determined by gender.

Parental attitudes also influence children's confidence and career aspirations. Encouraging daughters to pursue science, technology, engineering, and leadership roles while motivating sons to participate in caregiving and household responsibilities helps dismantle rigid gender stereotypes. Therefore, family socialisation serves as the foundation for developing an inclusive, respectful, and equitable gender identity.

5.2 Role of School

After the family, the school becomes the most influential formal agency of socialisation. Schools provide not only academic knowledge but also opportunities for social interaction, personality development, leadership, cooperation, and value formation. The school environment significantly shapes students' perceptions of gender equality and social justice.

Teachers play a particularly important role because their expectations, classroom interactions, language, and teaching practices influence students' understanding of gender. A gender-sensitive teacher who encourages equal participation in classroom discussions, leadership positions, sports, science, and cultural activities promotes confidence and equal opportunity among all learners.

Similarly, textbooks and curriculum materials should avoid reinforcing stereotypes by portraying both men and women in diverse professional and social roles. Inclusive educational content enables students to challenge traditional assumptions regarding gender.

Extracurricular activities also contribute significantly to gender identity development. Mixed-gender teamwork, debates, sports competitions, community service, and leadership programmes encourage cooperation, mutual respect, and appreciation of diversity.

India's **National Education Policy (2020)** strongly advocates equitable and inclusive education, emphasizing gender inclusion through curriculum reform, teacher training, and institutional support. Schools, therefore, have a responsibility to create safe, discrimination-free, and inclusive learning environments where every learner, regardless of gender identity, is treated with dignity and respect.

5.3 Role of Religion

Religion is one of the oldest and most influential agents of socialisation. It shapes individuals' moral values, ethical behaviour, attitudes, and perceptions of gender through religious teachings, customs, traditions, and community practices. Religious institutions play an important role in transmitting cultural values from one generation to another and, therefore, significantly influence gender identity development.

Most religions advocate universal values such as compassion, justice, equality, dignity, cooperation, and respect for human life. When interpreted from a progressive and inclusive perspective, these values encourage gender equality and promote equal opportunities for all individuals regardless of gender. Religious education that emphasizes human dignity and social justice contributes positively to the development of healthy gender identities.

However, in many societies, traditional interpretations of religious texts have sometimes reinforced patriarchal structures and rigid gender roles. Such interpretations may restrict women's participation in education, employment, leadership, and decision-making or create social barriers for individuals belonging to diverse gender identities. These limitations arise not necessarily from religion itself but often from cultural practices and historical interpretations.

Therefore, religious institutions should promote interpretations that align with constitutional values, human rights, and gender equality. Religious leaders, educators, and community organizations can contribute significantly to eliminating gender stereotypes by emphasizing equality, mutual respect, and social inclusion.

5.4 Role of Peer Groups

Peer groups become increasingly influential during late childhood and adolescence. At this stage, young people spend considerable time interacting with classmates and friends, making peer relationships an important source of social learning.

Peers influence attitudes, communication styles, interests, aspirations, and behavioural patterns. Through daily interaction, adolescents receive approval, criticism, encouragement, or rejection, all of which contribute to the formation of self-identity, including gender identity.

Supportive peer groups encourage acceptance, cooperation, empathy, and respect for diversity. They create environments in which individuals feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of discrimination. Such environments strengthen self-confidence and contribute positively to emotional and psychological development.

Conversely, peer pressure may reinforce gender stereotypes through teasing, bullying, exclusion, or expectations that boys and girls should behave according to traditional gender norms. Students who fail to conform to these expectations may experience social isolation, anxiety, or reduced self-esteem.

Educational institutions can reduce these negative effects by encouraging collaborative learning, inclusive classroom practices, leadership opportunities, and anti-bullying programmes that promote mutual respect and gender sensitivity.

5.5 Role of Media and Social Media

In the twenty-first century, media has emerged as one of the most powerful agents of socialisation. Television, newspapers, films, radio, digital platforms, online games, YouTube, and social media significantly influence public opinion, lifestyle choices, and perceptions of gender.

Media shapes gender identity by presenting images of masculinity, femininity, family roles, occupations, and social expectations. Positive media representation can challenge stereotypes by portraying women as leaders, scientists, entrepreneurs, and decision-makers while encouraging men to participate in caregiving and domestic responsibilities.

The rise of social media has further expanded opportunities for individuals to express their identities, connect with diverse communities, and participate in discussions about gender equality and inclusion. Online campaigns advocating women's rights, gender justice, and equal opportunities have increased public awareness across the world.

Nevertheless, media may also reinforce harmful stereotypes. Advertisements, films, and digital content sometimes objectify women, glorify rigid masculine ideals, or portray stereotypical gender roles. Social media may also expose young people to cyberbullying, online harassment, body-shaming, and misinformation, all of which can negatively affect psychological well-being and gender identity development.

Therefore, promoting **media literacy** has become essential. Schools should encourage students to critically evaluate media messages, identify stereotypes, and distinguish between socially constructed representations and reality.

5.6 Role of Society and Culture

Society and culture provide the broader framework within which gender identity develops. Cultural beliefs, customs, traditions, language, and social expectations shape how gender roles are defined and practiced.

Every society develops its own understanding of masculinity and femininity. Consequently, gender roles vary across countries, communities, and historical periods. Social change, economic development, globalization, and technological advancement continuously reshape these roles.

Indian society has witnessed remarkable changes during recent decades. Women's participation in higher education, employment, politics, entrepreneurship, sports, and public administration has increased substantially. Social reform movements, constitutional guarantees, and educational expansion have strengthened awareness regarding gender equality.

Despite these positive developments, challenges such as child marriage, dowry, gender-based violence, wage inequality, workplace discrimination, and unequal access to opportunities continue to affect many communities. These issues demonstrate that cultural transformation remains an ongoing process requiring collective efforts from families, schools, governments, and civil society.

6. Gender Identity in the Indian Context

India is constitutionally committed to equality, dignity, and social justice. The Constitution guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex through Articles 14, 15, and 16. Article 21 further protects the dignity and personal liberty of every individual.

The **National Education Policy (2020)** emphasizes equitable and inclusive education by promoting gender-sensitive learning environments and equal educational opportunities. Government initiatives such as *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*, *Samagra Shiksha*, and *legal measures including the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013*, and the *Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019*, represent important steps toward gender justice and inclusion.

Although considerable progress has been achieved, disparities remain between rural and urban communities due to differences in literacy, economic development, social awareness, and cultural practices. Consequently, strengthening gender-sensitive socialisation through education, family support, media awareness, and community participation remains an important national priority.

7. Contemporary Challenges

Despite significant progress toward gender equality, several challenges continue to influence gender identity development:

- Persistent gender stereotypes in families and communities.
- Discriminatory social practices and unequal opportunities.
- Gender bias in educational and professional settings.
- Stereotypical portrayals in mass media.
- Cyberbullying and online harassment.
- Limited awareness regarding gender diversity.
- Cultural resistance to changing gender roles.
- Social exclusion of transgender and gender-diverse individuals.
- Lack of gender-sensitive counselling services in educational institutions.
- Inadequate implementation of gender equality policies.

Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts from governments, educational institutions, families, civil society organizations, and media agencies.

8. Recommendations

To promote healthy gender identity development through effective socialisation, the following measures are recommended:

- Families should ensure equal treatment and opportunities for all children regardless of gender.
- Schools should integrate gender-sensitive curricula and inclusive teaching practices.
- Teachers should receive regular professional training on gender equality and inclusive education.
- Educational institutions should establish counselling services addressing gender-related concerns.
- Religious and community leaders should promote equality, dignity, and mutual respect.
- Media organizations should portray balanced and diverse representations of gender.
- Students should be educated in digital and media literacy to critically evaluate online content.
- Governments should strengthen awareness campaigns promoting gender equality and constitutional values.
- Schools should implement anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies.
- Community participation should be encouraged to eliminate harmful gender stereotypes.

9. CONCLUSION

Gender identity develops through a continuous interaction between individuals and the various agents of Socialisation that shape their beliefs, values, behaviours, and social experiences. Family, school, religion, peer groups, media, and society collectively influence how individuals understand themselves and others within the context of gender.

Positive socialisation based on equality, dignity, respect, and inclusion promotes healthy personality development and encourages individuals to contribute meaningfully to society. Conversely, discrimination, stereotypes, and unequal opportunities hinder personal growth and reinforce social inequalities.

In contemporary India, significant progress has been achieved through constitutional provisions, educational reforms, legal protection, and increasing public awareness regarding gender equality. However, many social and cultural barriers continue to exist. Therefore, creating an inclusive process of socialisation requires collective commitment from families, educational institutions, policymakers, religious organizations, media, and civil society.

Ultimately, promoting gender-sensitive socialisation is essential not only for the development of individual identity but also for building a democratic, equitable, and inclusive society where every individual is respected regardless of gender.

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