

Masculinity, Gender Role Conflict, and Sexism: Testing Western Findings in an Indian Context

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to understand the relationship between gender role conflict (GRC) and certain harmful behavior and attitudes in Indian adolescents. This study attempted to test whether the findings and patterns observed in Western studies hold true in an Indian context. The study explored how gender role conflicts relates to behaviours and attitudes such as benevolent sexism, support for gender equality, and enjoyment of sexist or anti-gay humour. Twenty-nine male teenagers from urban Bangalore completed the Gender Role Conflict Scale–Short Form (GRCS–SF) along with a few custom developed attitudinal items. The analyses of the Pearson correlation revealed a significant positive relationship between gender role conflict and benevolent sexism ($r = .40$, $p = .03$). On the other hand, a moderate negative correlation was observed between GRC and enjoyment of sexist humour ($r = -.37$, $p = .05$), a finding which deviates from what was found in western studies. Additionally, there were no other significant relationships between GRCS scores and the other variables measured in this study. This suggests more research is required in gender role conflict and masculinity in the Indian context.

Keywords: Masculinity; Mental Health; Threatened Masculinity; Gender Role Conflict; Toxic Masculinity; Fragile Masculinity.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A cultural issue that has gained traction in recent times is the issue of “toxic masculinity,” a term often associated with homophobic, sexist and aggressive behaviour as well as the rejection of feminine behaviour [1]. Gender role conflict can manifest or contribute towards these toxic behaviours, as shown by several studies [2]. Gender role conflict is defined as “a psychological state in which socialized gender roles have negative consequences for the person or others” (Author, 1981, as cited in [2]). O’Neil’s conceptual model of gender role conflict suggests that men are constrained by a rigid and sexist process of sex-role socialization, which limits their ability to develop as fully functioning human beings. Rigid gender socialisation encourages men to adopt narrow gender roles and specific masculine ideals, while developing a fear of femininity. These attitudes are captured in three kinds of negative experiences—restriction, devaluation or violation.

Several studies in the past have shown that gender role conflict significantly relates to homophobic and anti-gay attitudes [2], negative attitudes towards non-heterosexuals [2], and negative or violent attitudes towards women [2]. Evidence also indicates that men with less egalitarian views of gender roles experience greater gender role conflict [2]. Additionally, past studies have found that patterns of gender role conflict correlate with men’s traditional attitudes

towards women [2], and sex role stereotyping [2]. This indicates a possible link between gender role conflict and benevolent sexism as well.

Previous studies have shown that masculinity threats can elicit a wide range of responses in men. For example, when their masculinity is threatened, men are more likely to reject feminine preferences [3], display aggression toward gay men [4], justify social inequality [5], show reduced support for gender equality [6], endorse benevolent sexism [7], express more homophobic attitudes [8], exhibit greater enjoyment of sexist and anti-gay humour [9], and support more aggressive policies such as the death penalty or military action [10]. Although these involve responses to masculinity threats rather than gender conflict, they highlight reactions men may exhibit when their conformity to masculine norms is challenged.

Understanding gender role conflict is essential for studying men’s mental health, since GRC has been associated with negative emotional outcomes such as anger, fear, stress, anxiety, depression, and self-hatred [11]. It also decreases help-seeking behaviour as men with high GRC tend to avoid counselling [2].

Across time and cultures, manhood is hard to earn but easy to lose. In other words, manhood is precarious. While “maleness” is present at birth, manhood is socially conferred

[12], [13]. In many males, the pressure to earn and prove their manhood triggers anxiety that motivates compensatory behaviours. While the idea that manhood must be earned is widespread, cultural definitions of what it means to “be a man” vary considerably [14], [15]. Additionally, it is important to consider ethnic expectations while studying gender roles [16].

Very little research has been conducted on mental health issues in adolescent boys regarding gender roles in the Indian population [17]. This study aims to address this gap by verifying whether Indian teenagers with high gender role conflict show the same patterns observed in Western studies—specifically, whether high GRC correlates with increased enjoyment of anti-gay and sexist humour, reduced support for gender equality, heightened benevolent sexism, and increased support for aggressive policies.

Table 1 Correlation Between GRCS Scores and Attitudinal Variables

Variable	R Value	P Value
Support for forceful measures over diplomatic approaches	0.12	0.52
Enjoyment of Anti-gay humour	-0.33	0.07
Enjoyment of Sexist Humour	-0.37*	0.05
Benevolent Sexism	0.40*	0.03
Support for Homosexuality	0.25	0.19
Support for Gender Equality	0.12	0.52
Justification of Social Inequality	-0.17	0.35

Note. n=29. r=Pearson Correlational Coefficient. p=Probability Value. *p<0.5

II. METHOD

➤ Participants

The sample consists of 29 male teenagers aged 13–18 years old, from urban Bangalore, belonging to middle-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds.

➤ Measures

• Gender Role Conflict Scale – Short Form (GRCS–SF)

The GRCS–SF is a 16-item scale measuring gender role conflict. Responses range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate higher GRC.

• Attitudinal Items

Custom Likert-type items measured attitudes toward gender equality, homophobia, benevolent sexism, and humour.

➤ Procedure

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling and filled the survey on Google Forms. They consented anonymously and completed the GRCS–SF followed by attitudinal items. Average completion time: 5–7 minutes.

III. RESULTS

A Pearson correlation analysis examined the relationship between GRC and attitudinal variables. GRC was positively correlated with benevolent sexism ($r = 0.40$, $p = 0.03$). A moderate negative correlation emerged between GRC and enjoyment of sexist humour ($r = -.37$, $p = 0.05$). Other correlations were non-significant.

IV. DISCUSSION

➤ Limitations

The sample size was small, limiting generalizability. Self-report data may introduce social desirability biases.

➤ Implications for Future Research

Understanding gender role conflict in Indian youth can help design better school programs, mental health frameworks, counselling services, and policy interventions. Larger and more diverse samples are needed.

V. CONCLUSION

This study explored the relationship between fragile masculinity, measured through gender role conflict, and various attitudinal variables among Indian teenage boys. Higher GRC was associated with stronger endorsement of benevolent sexism, consistent with previous findings linking GRC to traditional gender norms [2]. However, GRC was negatively related to enjoyment of sexist humour—a culturally specific deviation from Western research.

No significant relationships were found between GRC and support for forceful measures, enjoyment of anti-gay humour, support for homosexuality, support for gender equality, or justification of social inequality. As a preliminary study, these findings contribute to the limited research on GRC in Indian adolescents.

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