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Educational Reinforcements of and Challenges to Gender Norms in Urban Sri Lanka

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BACKGROUND

In 2013, over half of surveyed Sri Lankan men and women expressed gender-inequitable attitudes equating masculinity with violence and femininity with obedience to men. Gender-inequitable attitudes have been shown to be linked to gender-based violence (GBV) in multiple contexts.

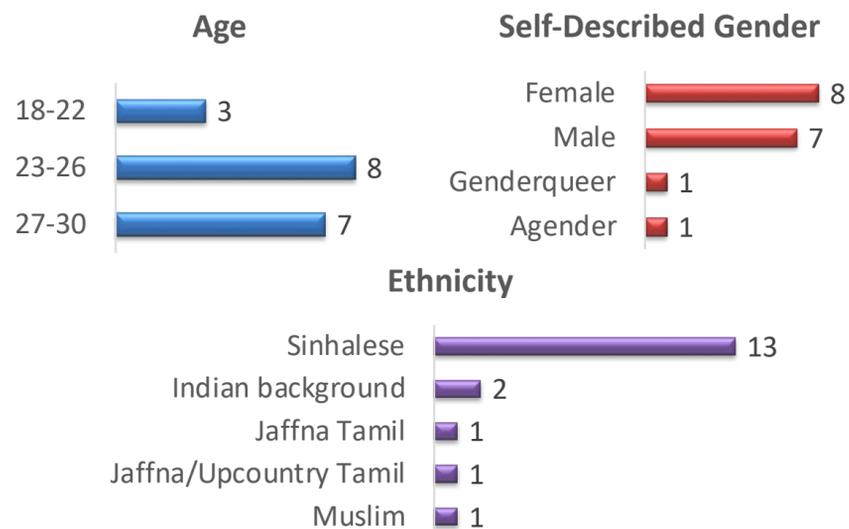
The goal of this study was to identify points of intervention at which programmes and policies could cultivate gender-equitable attitudes among youth in Sri Lanka, with a goal of reducing GBV in adulthood.

METHODS

Over 9 months, the lead author interviewed 18 young adults (ages 18-30) in urban Sri Lanka to understand how their experiences influenced their gender identity, as well as their perceptions of gender norms.

Interview transcripts were analysed using a directed content analysis approach to explore which factors have most influenced the processes of gender norm learning, acceptance, or rejection throughout Sri Lankan young adults' lives.

RESULTS: SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS



RESULTS: ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES

Most Sri Lankan parents prefer their girls to be educated in convents. They believe that girls will be disciplined in convents. (Female, 30)

It's good to be in [a mixed gender] environment. This distance [between genders] is not created...[But] my [all-male] school's reputation is something that I still cherish. (Male, 26)

In girls' schools, you have life skills. We learned cooking and sewing. But in boys' schools, boys learn electronics. When electronics become a part of the science curriculum, they're so much better, and we're not. And that used to make me really mad, like "how come you know so much about this and I don't?" (Female, 29)

[Men] have to take part in sports. And nowadays, after you leave school you are expected to go to a gym and work out. (Male, 22)

Being a good girl is being educated until you get married, and after you get married, it shouldn't interfere with being married. (Female, 24)

"Boys don't do arts in Sri Lanka...boys don't read." (Female, 30)

When I was in school, people had sex before they went to college...[There were] no conversations about consent, rape culture. You didn't even know that things weren't okay. I had boys grope me in the hallways, and I didn't know to complain about it. There were no conversations on these matters. (Female, 26)

Sexual education is pretty much zero. You're told it is evil. Sex is taught in a biological way. You learn the internal anatomy, and you don't learn that sex is a normal part of everyday life. Especially when you are in high school and people are experiencing sexual feelings and you are told it is bad. (Female, 28)

A lot of [teachers] try to opt out of those parts, because they feel uncomfortable... We didn't get sex education and gender education at the time that we wanted. After grade 10, 11, you talk about it in a very large scale, biological aspect. Not in the social aspect. (Male, 22)

RESULTS: THEMES OF INTEREST

Single-gender schooling reinforces gender-inequitable norms.

- Girls are groomed for domestic chores, while boys are taught skills for employment and to excel in science
- Single-gender schools carry prestige and strong alumni networks that for some outweigh the negative gender stereotypes

Femininity and masculinity are performed very differently in schools.

- Boys are encouraged to play sports and display their physical strength
- Girls are encouraged to read and study but be prepared to put their academic goals on hold after marriage

Schools are lacking strong sexual education and gender curricula.

- Even in schools with curricula, teachers opt out because of discomfort discussing sex
- Students are not prepared to negotiate consensual relationships or to identify gender-based violence

ADVOCACY IMPACT

Educational settings in urban Sri Lanka contribute to and reinforce inequitable gender norms among adolescents and young adults. Some points of intervention for gender equity advocates are:

- Increasing interaction between single-gender school students of different genders,
- Challenging gender stereotypes perpetuated by students and alumni
- Developing and implementing strong sexual education curricula

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