Gender Socialization during Adolescence in Low- and Middle-income Countries: Conceptualization, influences and outcomes

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What is Gender Socialization?

In this paper, gender socialization is defined as a *"process whereby individuals develop, refine and learn to 'do' gender through internalizing gender norms and roles as they interact with key agents of socialization, such as their family, social networks and other social institutions."*

John et al. (2017), p. 6

WHY A FOCUS ON GENDER SOCIALIZATION DURING ADOLESCENCE?

This brief summarizes the key insights and conclusions from **a discussion paper on gender socialization during adolescence,** with a focus on low- and middle-income settings. By reviewing theories from psychology, sociology and biology, significant societal changes and effective programme interventions, the paper sets out to provide a more holistic picture of the influences and outcomes of gender socialization for adolescent programming and policy.

Understanding gender socialization is important because its negative outcomes are a significant driver of gender inequality and harmful consequences for girls, boys, men and women across the world. Globally, more than 200 million girls and women have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and approximately one in seven girls aged 15-19 is married or in union (UNICEF, 2016b). The global leading cause of death for adolescent boys (aged 10-19) in 2015 was road traffic accidents (resulting in 88,590 deaths) followed by interpersonal violence (resulting in 42,277 deaths) (WHO, 2016). Gender norms and socialization around what constitutes gender-appropriate behaviour play a major role in shaping these outcomes.

The paper focuses on adolescence because it is a period of physical, social and emotional development and as such, a critical period for intervention. It is a time in the life course when addressing gender inequity is particularly important, as it is here that gender attitudes and roles intensify and certain negative behaviours – including violence, risky sexual behaviors and substance abuse – begin to emerge. Their consequence is sometimes immediate and sometimes has significant impacts later in life.

Adolescence is also increasingly seen as a 'second window of opportunity' to build on early investments, promote positive behaviours, and offer a second chance for those who have not fared well in early childhood (Patton et al., 2016; UNICEF, 2017). Biological changes, the expansion of social networks and the importance placed on belonging and feeling accepted that occur, make adolescents especially responsive to normative influences in their environment – and make adolescence a pivotal period for interventions related to the achievement of gender equality.

Finally, while many of the issues and concepts covered in the paper apply globally, its focus is on adolescents living in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC), which are home to over 91 per cent of the adolescent population. South Asia alone is home to 340 million adolescents and East Asia and the Pacific to 277 million (UNICEF, 2016a). Despite these large numbers and projections that they will increase globally through to 2050 (UNICEF, 2016a), evidence on how to design policies and programmes that reap more gender-equitable outcomes for this population is limited.

To address this gap, the paper had **three overarching objectives**:

1. To review how key disciplines conceptualize the gender socialization process and apply these conceptualizations to the adolescent period.
2. To situate the gender socialization process during adolescence in a broader context of multi-level influences and outcomes, using a conceptual framework.
3. To develop practical suggestions for designing effective programmes and policies to achieve more equitable gender outcomes for adolescents living in LMICs.

This brief outlines a conceptual framework of gender socialization influences and outcomes developed in the discussion paper and the results of a rapid literature review of programme interventions aiming to influence gender socialization during adolescence. It concludes with three overarching recommendations.
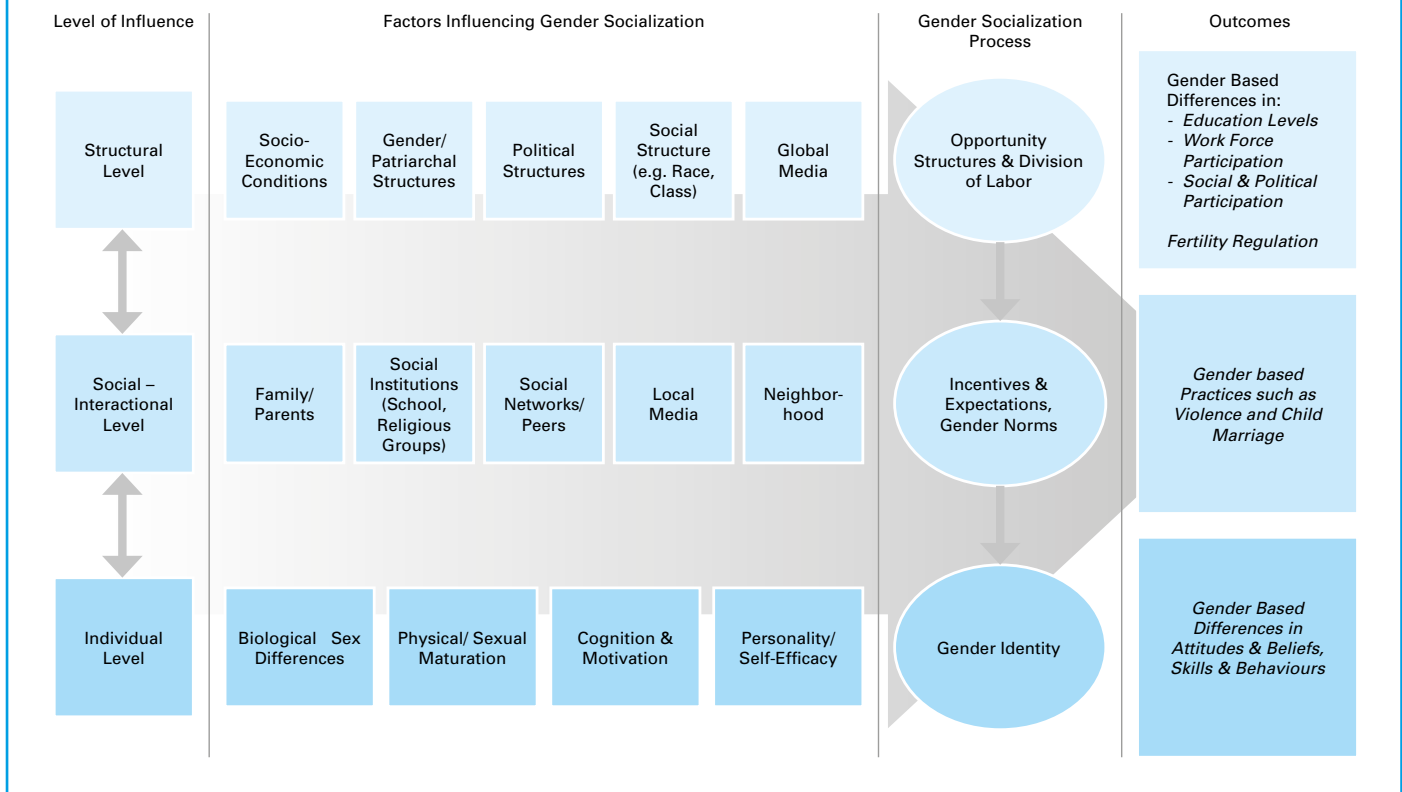

Box 1: Summary of key findings

- Gender socialization is a process by which individuals develop, refine and learn to 'do' gender through internalizing gender norms and roles as they interact with key agents of socialization, such as their family, peers, social networks and other social institutions.

- This dynamic and multi-level process intensifies during adolescence and may differ across the life course and context.

- Gender, race, class, cultural expectations and beliefs, sexual identity and other factors interact in myriad ways and influence the experience and everyday practice of gender.

- At the structural level, the core influences include patriarchal structures and level of socio-economic development. These factors interact with other socio-cultural and political factors to influence gender socialization and determine the opportunities and livelihoods of particular groups and individuals.

- A literature review of gender socialization interventions targeting adolescents in LMICs identified three overarching strategies used in programming: 1) Empowering young people through information, skills and social support; 2) Fostering an enabling environment in which to challenge gender norms; 3) Working with men and boys to challenge norms of masculinity and femininity.

- The interventions often resulted in changes in attitudes, but effects on behaviour tended to be smaller.

- Interventions need to adopt a holistic approach to account for the multi-level influences on gender-socialization and employ a longer-term perspective.

FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING GENDER SOCIALIZATION IN ADOLESCENCE

Drawing on a literature review from the fields of psychology, sociology and biology, Figure 1 presents a framework of key factors that influence the gender socialization process at the macro, meso and micro levels and its related outcomes, with a focus on the period of adolescence. The framework captures the ways in which gender socialization produces and reproduces gender norms, roles and identities and contributes to gender differences in certain outcomes (See Box 2 for details).

Figure 1: Multi-Level Framework of Influences Impacting Gender Socialization Processes During Adolescence

Level of Influence	Factors Influencing Gender Socialization					Gender Socialization Process	Outcomes
Structural Level	Socio-Economic Conditions	Gender/ Patriarchal Structures	Political Structures	Social Structure (e.g. Race, Class)	Global Media	Opportunity Structures & Division of Labor	Gender Based Differences in: - *Education Levels* - *Work Force Participation* - *Social & Political Participation* *Fertility Regulation*
Social – Interactional Level	Family/ Parents	Social Institutions (School, Religious Groups)	Social Networks/ Peers	Local Media	Neighbor-hood	Incentives & Expectations, Gender Norms	*Gender based Practices such as Violence and Child Marriage*
Individual Level	Biological Sex Differences	Physical/ Sexual Maturation	Cognition & Motivation	Personality/ Self-Efficacy		Gender Identity	*Gender Based Differences in Attitudes & Beliefs, Skills & Behaviours*

Box 2: Examples of factors that influence gender socialization during adolescence:

A narrative to Figure 1

The **structural level** refers to the different societal values and practises, political and gendered structures, socio-economic conditions, and the global media and information sources that exert influence at the societal level. For example, changes in political economy can contribute to women's increased participation in paid employment. Shifts in women's roles outside the home, particularly to take on jobs traditionally performed by men, can alter the division of roles and responsibilities inside the domestic sphere and have powerful inter-generational influences on gender socialization and its outcomes.

The **social-interactional level** is where individuals live their daily lives and learn the gender norms, practices and roles of their community through interactions with 'agents' of socialization. During adolescence, these agents include the family and parents; social institutions such as schools and religious organizations; social networks such as the peer group; local media and the community/neighbourhood. For example, in schools gender socialization may occur through a student's interaction with the school curriculum, teachers and peers, all of which can either perpetuate or challenge existing gender norms.

Box 2: Examples of factors that influence gender socialization during adolescence:

A narrative to Figure 1 (cont.)

At the **individual level**, an adolescent's reception of information and cues about gendered behaviours from the environment, internalization of gender norms and formation of a gender identity varies based on circumstances as well as individual factors like sex, ethnicity, cognitive and motivational processes, physical and sexual maturation, personality, etc. Through gender socialization, adolescents generally internalize and self-enforce prevalent notions of masculinity and femininity. They begin seeking environments and information that reinforce their gender identity, beliefs and behaviours. Over time, boys' and girls' behaviours come to be regulated by internal standards, values and perceived consequences.

Interaction across levels: Figure 1 shows that gender socialization is a dynamic process. The factors that influence the process and its outcomes also influence each other, both horizontally and vertically. For example, greater exposure to global media representations (structural level) of non-traditional gender roles has introduced new ideas about men and women's expectations in interpersonal relationships (social-interactional level). However, the direction of influence can also go from bottom up, with individual deviations from norms and expectations impacting community and society to produce new norms and identities. An example of this may be migrant workers returning to their home community with newly adopted values about gender roles.

Outcomes of the gender socialization process include: gender-based differences at the structural level including education/workforce/socio-political participation and fertility regulation; gender-based practices such as violence and child marriage at the social-interactional level; and gender-based differences in individual attitudes, beliefs, skills, behaviours etc. Many of these outcomes are harmful and prevent the achievement of gender equality. Understanding the influences that lead to them is an important step is developing effective policies and programmes that have the ability to change them.

HOW TO INFLUENCE GENDER NORMS AND GENDER SOCIALIZATION

Influencing gender socialization at the structural level

Structural factors play a critical role in the gender socialization process as they influence core institutions and agents of socialization and shape opportunities available to different social groups. Three broad and interrelated areas of structural change that have been particularly influential in shifting gender norms, both historically and in contemporary settings, and which present opportunities for policies and programmes to enhance gender equality are outlined below.

Economic change has proven to be a particularly powerful driver of change, but evidence regarding its influence on gender equality is mixed (Duflo, 2012; Kabeer, 2015). Greater global connectedness and industrialization may challenge gender norms by changing incentives around women's formal paid employment, increasing the 'payoff' for formal education, and encouraging international and internal migration. This has led to changes in women's – and to a lesser extent - men's economic roles within families and communities. Exposure to different normative contexts, particularly in urban areas where norms are often less traditional, has at times diminished the socialization role played by families and communities.

Global media and the globalization of norms continue to play an important role in challenging existing norms around gender and reframing them in ways that encourage greater equality. Adolescents throughout the world are exposed to information from a variety of sources, including western/western-influenced media that portray gender roles and norms in more egalitarian ways. As a result, media itself can become a socializing agent, providing the social 'space' within which to explore and discuss alternative normative frameworks and behaviours, for both boys and girls.

Population change also has the potential to be a driver of gender norms primarily through two broad mechanisms: migration and reduced fertility. Migration influences the gender socialization process by reducing the influence of family and community on behaviour and exposing individuals to different normative environments. Change in reproductive behaviour, particularly greater reproductive control, enables women's lives to be less defined by household roles and more by participation in the formal labour force, continued education, etc.

Influencing gender socialization at the individual and social-interactional levels: Results from a rapid literature review of programme interventions

To assess the current state of adolescent programming around gender norms, attitudes, and beliefs, a rapid literature review was conducted. The review focused on interventions aimed at changing adolescent gender attitudes at the individual level and used the following criteria to identify relevant programmes:

1) The intervention must have a stated intention of changing gender attitudes, beliefs, expectations, or roles;
2) The intervention must target young people aged 10-24; and
3) The evaluation of the intervention must measure change at the individual level (as opposed to more aggregate levels such as communities).

Interventions that involved 'agents of socialization' and those focused on the social-interactional level were also included if they measured changes in gender attitudes and beliefs at the individual level.

31 evaluated interventions from LMICs met the inclusion criteria and three broad strategies used in this type of programming were identified.

Strategy 1: Empowering young people through information, skills and social support.
All of the reviewed programmes included at least some component that directly aimed to change young people's beliefs and attitudes and focused on empowering them to challenge established gender norms, through training on gender as a concept and social construct, building skills, developing supportive social networks, and creating safe spaces within which to explore alternative gender behaviours. Approaches typically included:
a) Group-based gender-education activities in 'safe-spaces' where gender socialization is questioned and alternative norms are explored;
b) Life skills training enabling young people to effectively explore and communicate new approaches and gender attitudes, including financial and communication skills; and
c) Sexual and reproductive health training integrating normative change, focusing on power within relationships.

Strategy 2: Fostering an enabling environment in which to challenge gender norms.
Based on an understanding that adolescents, particularly girls, have relatively low levels of power in their families and communities, these approaches tried to build support for young people to explore alternatives to standard norms. Their approaches included:
a) Working directly with spouses, parents and community members to generate support for challenges to existing normative frameworks;

b) Community or group-based education sessions where key actors in the socialization process gather to interrogate gender norms at a broader level; and
c) Information, education, communication (IEC) campaigns designed to raise awareness of gender issues, model different behaviour, and stimulate discussion.

Strategy 3: Working with men and boys to challenge norms of masculinity and femininity.
While most programmes relating to gender norms focus predominantly on girls and young women, a number also engage boys and men. They used the following approaches:
a) Group-based programming introducing concepts of gender norms, the role of masculinity in shaping behaviour, and the consequences of this for both men and the women in their lives;
b) Gender-synchronized approaches that explicitly address the relational aspects of gender through working with men/boys and women/girls in a coordinated way; and
c) Community engagement through communal events or male 'gatekeepers' – a similar approach to community outreach, but focused specifically on the role that boys and men can play in enabling gender equality.

The effect of these interventions on the process of gender socialization is mixed. While most resulted in significant changes in attitudes, behavioural changes were generally smaller. Longer-term effects and the influence of larger structural factors were usually not measured. Current programme efforts have been shown to change gender attitudes and influence norms, but they rarely take a holistic view and consider factors at the individual, social-interactional, and structural levels (see Figure 1). Programmes and policies need to be carefully positioned within this bigger picture and effectively coordinate interventions in ways that complement one another.

Recommendations for Policy and Programmes

Reflecting on the reviewed literature, the discussion paper concludes with three overarching recommendations for aligning policy and programming efforts with ongoing structural changes in ways that amplify their potential benefits to promote more equitable gender norms. These include:

Recommendation 1: Advocate for a legal and policy environment that complements and takes advantage of elements of structural changes, which enable broader shifts towards gender equity and equality. For example, the growth of non-agricultural or care-based employment opportunities for women may generate social 'space' to institute legal minimum requirements for formal education or prohibit child marriage through creating a tangible 'payoff' for building the human capital of girls. Laws and policies which improve the balance between demands of work and other commitments - such as parental leave, effective and affordable access to reproductive health services, or employment protection laws - may not only facilitate

engagement in paid employment for all, but also encourage a reconsideration of traditional gender roles within households. Laws and policies must acknowledge the inherently disruptive effects of social change and seek to mitigate them where possible – for example, increases in migration must be accompanied by more effective provision of social services in sending destinations to cater for returning migrants whose needs and preferences may have changed. Care also needs to be taken to mitigate the potential increases in intimate partner violence that sometimes accompanies changes in the economic roles of women within households.

Recommendation 2: Structuring and designing gender transformative interventions in ways that directly relate to structural changes.
Changes in structural factors create an opportunity for policies and programmes to fill a gap created by these changes in a way that challenges gender norms. Programmes which include components that focus on livelihoods are likely to be more successful if the skills they developed are clearly related to the needs of the 'new' economic structure. Programmes which deliver gender transformative messaging and information on sexual and reproductive health are likely to be more effective in environments where sexual and reproductive health (including control over reproduction) is increasingly seen as an important success factor due to economic and/or demographic shifts, and where other media messaging has made it possible for these issues to be safely explored.

Recommendation 3: Develop life course approaches that account for the biological and social changes that take place during the gender socialization process in adolescence.
The key agents of influence in the gender socialization process vary over the life course, stage of social and biological development, and with exposure to alternative messages. As a result, effective programmes or policies need to understand and cater for these changes in ways that clearly identify key points of intervention. For example, as individuals transition between life course stages and are exposed to different influences through migration or mass media, the relative influence of family members fluctuates, making interventions focused on the family more or less effective in producing social change.

Policies and programmes that aim to influence gender socialization should be framed in positive, solution-oriented ways that emphasize the benefits of gender equality to all members of society, while clearly preparing young people for the demands of a changing society.

For details, see the discussion paper:

John, N. A., Stoebenau, K., Ritter, S., Edmeades, J., and Balvin, N. (2017). Gender Socialization during Adolescence in Low- and Middle-income Countries: Conceptualization, Influences and Outcomes. *Innocenti Discussion Paper* 2017-01, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence.

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