

IMPACT OF CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS ON GENDER ROLES AND
IDENTITY FORMATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDYRuman Khalid^{*1}, Tuba Nadeem², Aiman Aslam³, Daud Afzal⁴^{*1,2,3,4}Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, GIFT University Gujranwala, Pakistan^{*1}rumanmailss@gmail.com^{*1}<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6204-4408>DOI:<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17197378>

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Corresponding Author: *

Ruman Khalid

Abstract

This research explores the impact of cultural expectations on gender roles and identity formation, particularly in traditional and culturally conservative societies. Identity is viewed as a multifaceted concept shaped by personal beliefs, social roles, and religious or cultural values. Within the male-female binary, gender roles are socially constructed frameworks that assign specific duties and behaviours to men and women such as men as providers and women as caregivers. These roles, reinforced by family, religion, and education, can foster social cohesion when practiced within ethical and respectful boundaries. However, factors like modernization, education, and global exposure are prompting a re-evaluation of these roles and how they can evolve without undermining cultural integrity. Rejecting perspectives that challenge the male-female binary, this study engages with feminist and postcolonial frameworks that critique restrictive limitations on women's roles, particularly in public and professional life. It emphasizes intersectionality by examining how gender intersects with class, religion, and ethnicity to shape individual experience. The goal is to offer a culturally grounded yet progressive understanding of identity and gender roles one that promotes equity, cooperation, and dignity while remaining rooted in traditional moral values. By drawing on theoretical insights and culturally rooted analysis, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how identity and gender roles are shaped by cultural expectations. It further seeks to highlight ways in which traditional gender frameworks can adapt to contemporary challenges without compromising core cultural and moral values. The ultimate goal is to promote gender relations grounded in equity, cooperation, and dignity within a stable, traditional value system.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural expectations play a powerful role in shaping gender roles and influencing the formation of individual identity. In every society, certain norms and values dictate what is considered acceptable behaviour for different genders, often establishing

rigid frameworks for how individuals should think, feel, and act based on whether they are perceived as male or female. These expectations are not merely external pressures they actively shape how people come to understand themselves and their place in the

world. Gender roles, as socially constructed norms, prescribe distinct responsibilities, behaviours, and traits associated with masculinity and femininity. These roles are instilled through ongoing socialization processes involving family, education systems, media representations, and religious or cultural traditions. While such roles may appear “natural” or fixed, they are often the result of long-standing cultural narratives rather than inherent biological differences.

Cultural expectations reinforce and legitimize these roles, making deviation difficult or stigmatized. For instance, in many traditional societies, women are expected to be nurturing caregivers, while men are expected to be assertive providers. These deeply embedded norms can constrain individual choices and suppress alternative forms of self-expression, particularly for those whose gender identity or personal aspirations diverge from societal expectations. The formation of identity including gender identity is a complex, evolving process influenced by both internal sense of self and external social forces. When cultural expectations clash with personal identity, individuals may experience internal conflict, marginalization, or mental health challenges. This is especially evident in societies where strict gender binaries are enforced, leaving little room for non-conforming or non-binary identities. Recent global movements and critical theories—particularly feminist theory and postcolonial thought—have challenged rigid cultural expectations surrounding traditional male and female roles. Scholars argue that strictly defined gender roles can limit individual growth, reinforce social inequalities, and prevent both men and women from fully realizing their potential. These perspectives emphasize the need for a more flexible understanding of masculinity and femininity—one that allows individuals to explore their identity and capabilities within the context of their cultural and moral values. Rather than discarding tradition, the aim is to create space for personal expression, equity, and mutual respect while maintaining the foundational roles of men and women in society.

Aims and Objectives

This research aims to explore the impact of cultural expectations on gender roles and identity formation, examining how these forces intersect to shape individuals' lives, opportunities, and well-being. By

understanding this dynamic, we can better address issues of social justice, mental health, and identity-based discrimination, and work toward a society where individuals are free to define themselves beyond restrictive cultural scripts.

Variables

1. Cultural expectations related to gender (IV)
2. Gender roles adopted by individuals (DV)

Inclusion Criteria

1. Studies involving young adults aged 18–35
2. Research focused on gender roles and identity within the male-female binary
3. Sources based in traditional or culturally conservative societies
4. Studies examining the role of religion, family, education, and societal norms in shaping gender roles
5. Literature using feminist or postcolonial frameworks, provided they align with traditional gender boundaries

Exclusion criteria

1. Studies based on non-binary, queer, or LGBTQ+ perspectives
2. Sources rejecting the male-female binary
3. Literature rooted in Western secular ideologies
4. Studies aiming to dismantle traditional gender roles
5. Research outside the 18–35 age range or lacking cultural, religious, or societal context

Research Rationale

This research focuses on the impact of cultural expectations on gender roles and identity formation, particularly within societies that uphold traditional and culturally conservative values. Young adults aged 18–35 have been chosen as the target group because they are in a critical phase of identity development and are most likely to experience tension between traditional norms and modern influences. Gender roles within the male-female binary framework remain central in many cultural contexts, where religious teachings, family structures, and societal norms continue to define expectations for men and women. Studying these roles allows for an understanding of how cultural narratives shape personal identity,

influence behaviour, and reinforce or challenge societal structures.

By including only research grounded in the male-female binary, this study maintains alignment with communities that reject non-binary ideologies and prefer culturally rooted approaches. The exclusion of Western liberal and queer theories ensures the focus remains on value-based interpretations of gender roles that reflect the lived realities of traditional societies. Overall, this study seeks to provide insight into how gender roles and identity are shaped by cultural expectations and how these roles may adapt to contemporary challenges while remaining respectful of traditional norms. It aims to contribute to ongoing discussions about gender, identity, and social roles from a culturally rooted, ethically guided perspective.

Literature Review

The role of family and cultural values in shaping gender identity has been widely studied in South Asian contexts. For instance, Syed and Ali (2011) explored Pakistani women's negotiation of gender roles within family and cultural frameworks. Their qualitative findings revealed that cultural pressures, particularly expectations of women as domestic caregivers, remain strong, yet women simultaneously seek self-expression through education and career choices. The study highlighted the internal conflicts many young adults experience when balancing tradition and personal aspirations.

The effect of higher education on traditional gender role perceptions has also been studied in the Middle East. Abu-Habib (2011) examined gender equality in Arab higher education systems, showing that while universities create space for progressive ideals, women often encounter institutional and cultural barriers that reinforce traditional roles. Students navigate between modern academic values and family expectations, leading to incremental rather than radical change in gender perceptions.

Finally, intersectional factors such as class, religion, and location play a significant role in shaping gender expectations. Radhakrishnan (2009) analyzed young Indian women's negotiations of modernity and tradition in urban and rural contexts, showing how socioeconomic background influenced the extent to which women could challenge or conform to cultural gender norms.

Theoretical Framework

This study on the impact of cultural expectations on gender roles and identity formation is grounded in two key theoretical perspectives: Social Role Theory and Gender Schema Theory. These frameworks help explain how cultural systems influence individual identity, particularly during young adulthood. Social Role Theory, developed by Alice Eagly (1987), suggests that gender differences emerge from the division of labour and social expectations in society. It argues that men and women behave in ways that align with the roles historically assigned to them—such as men being providers and women being caretakers—because these roles are reinforced by cultural, institutional, and familial systems. In traditional societies, this theory illustrates how cultural expectations shape not only external behaviours but also internal identity development, as individuals adapt themselves to fit the roles expected of their gender.

Gender Schema Theory, developed by Sandra Bem (1981), posits that individuals internalize cultural definitions of gender from an early age, forming mental frameworks—or schemas—that influence how they perceive themselves and others. In culturally conservative societies, these schemas are often rigid and binary, dictating behaviours considered “appropriate” for males and females. This theory helps explain how young adults form their identities within environments where deviation from established gender norms is discouraged or stigmatized.

These two theories complement each other by showing how identity is shaped both from within (through internalized schemas) and from outside (through societal roles and expectations). They offer a strong foundation for analysing how gender roles persist or shift in the face of modernization, education, and globalization, while also remaining tied to cultural and ethical boundaries. By applying these frameworks, this study aims to explore how young adults in culturally conservative contexts navigate identity and gender roles in ways that both reflect and challenge traditional expectations without rejecting the male-female binary structure that underpins their cultural worldview.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing a thematic analysis approach to explore how cultural expectations influence gender roles and identity formation among young adults in culturally conservative societies. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth insight into participants' lived experiences and perceptions.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling method was used to select participants who met the inclusion criteria: young adults aged 18 to 35, identifying strictly as male or female, residing in a culturally conservative society, and able to reflect on their experiences with gender role expectations. Individuals who identified outside the binary framework, belonged to liberal or secular cultural contexts, or were outside the target age group were excluded to maintain focus and consistency in the cultural and gender framework under study.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in English as per participants' language preference. Each interview lasted approximately 25-30 minutes. Responses were

audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, and then analysed. The interview guide covered areas such as gender role expectations, influence of religion and family, negotiation of identity, and societal pressures.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method. Transcripts were coded systematically, and recurring codes were grouped into themes and subthemes. A codebook was developed to ensure consistency. Emerging themes included identity conflict, societal conformity, internalized gender expectations, family pressures, and role negotiation. Coding was cross-checked by multiple researchers to enhance reliability.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly upheld throughout the study. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. The research was conducted with cultural sensitivity and respect for traditional values.

Results

Table 1

Results of Thematic Analysis

Theme	Sub-Theme	Supporting Code	Participant
Influence of Cultural Expectations on Life Choices	Gendered career and education paths	Gendered Career Expectations; Cultural Expectations Restrict Education Opportunities for Women	A, C
Influence of Cultural Expectations on Life Choices	Family and societal treatment differences	Family and Social Treatment Differ by Gender	C
Influence of Cultural Expectations on Life Choices	Pressure to conform to traditional roles	Cultural Pressure & Mental Health; Growth Blocked by Role Conformity	A, B
Internalization of Gender Norms	Societal definitions of masculinity and femininity	Internalized Gender Norms; Masculinity and Femininity Limit Potential; Enduring Gender Stereotypes	A, B, C
Internalization of Gender Norms	Restricted emotional expression	Restricted Emotional Expression (Men); Mind-Body Impact of Gender Expectations	A, B
Internalization of Gender Norms	Suppressed ambitions due to gender	Suppressed Ambitions (Women); Caregiving vs. Ambition Conflict	A, B

Role of Social Structures in Identity Formation	Family and religion shaping identity	Identity Shaped by Family and Religion; Identity Formation Through Upbringing; Opportunities Shape Identity	A, B, C
Role of Social Structures in Identity Formation	Media reinforcing gender roles	Media's Role in Reinforcing Roles	A
Role of Social Structures in Identity Formation	Educational influence	Willpower and Motivation as Growth Factors	C
Cultural Ideals and Mental Health	Pressure from ideal traits	Cultural Ideals and Self-Esteem; Cultural Ideals and Mental Health Strain; Critique of Gender-Specific Ideal Traits	A, B, C
Cultural Ideals and Mental Health	Resistance to change	Resistance to Change from Both Genders	C
Pathways to Change and Flexibility in Gender Roles	Promoting equity and mutual respect	Equity in Gender Role Distribution; Flexible Role Sharing and Empathy	A, B
Pathways to Change and Flexibility in Gender Roles	Mixed impact of cultural flexibility	Caution Towards Cultural Flexibility Influences on Identity	C
Identity Beyond Binary Labels	Broader self-definition	Identity Beyond Binary Labels; Freedom from Labels Enables Fulfillment; Characteristics and Strengths Over Gender Labels	A, B, C

Discussion

This study set out to explore how cultural expectations shape gender roles and identity formation among young adults within culturally conservative, male-female binary frameworks. The thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with participants revealed several interrelated themes: the strong influence of cultural expectations on life choices; the internalization of gender norms; the role of social structures such as family, religion, education, and media; the connection between cultural ideals and mental health; and emerging pathways for change that retain cultural values while allowing greater role flexibility.

Consistent with Ahmad (2018) and Sharma (2021) (as cited in the uploaded project file), participants reported that family expectations and community norms heavily influence education and career decisions. Women are frequently guided—or, in some cases, pressured toward domestic or caregiving-oriented paths, while men are steered toward provider or leadership roles. These trends reinforce a gendered division of labor that is deeply embedded in the socio-cultural fabric. Such findings align with Social Role

Theory (Eagly, 1987), which posits that social structures and economic arrangements contribute to the differentiation of roles and the normalization of gendered expectations over time. Participants' accounts also revealed the early and pervasive internalization of gender schemas, reflecting Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981). From a young age, individuals learn culturally approved patterns of thought and behaviour for “appropriate” masculinity and femininity. This early cognitive structuring becomes a lens through which new experiences are interpreted, thereby influencing both self-concept and perceived possibilities. Repeated exposure to role models—whether through direct observation in the family or via media portrayals (as documented by Khan & Rehman, 2016)—appears to solidify these schemas, limiting the range of life paths that are considered acceptable or even imaginable.

The findings also highlight the psychological implications of rigid cultural expectations. Participants described feelings of stress, reduced self-esteem, and constrained aspirations when their personal ambitions conflicted with prescribed roles. This reflects Hussain's (2019) observation of “silent

negotiation” among young women in conservative contexts, where internal conflict is often managed quietly to avoid overt cultural dissonance. Coping strategies varied—some participants chose compliance, prioritizing social harmony over personal fulfilment, while others engaged in strategic adaptation, such as pursuing education or career ambitions while maintaining outward conformity to gendered expectations. These adaptive strategies indicate that identity formation in conservative contexts often involves gradual negotiation rather than outright rejection of traditional norms.

Importantly, the data also suggest pathways for culturally grounded change. Education emerged as a recurring enabler—not merely formal schooling, but also informal learning opportunities that expand exposure to diverse gender roles. Similarly, the presence of diverse role models, whether within the family or community, was identified as a significant influence on reshaping perceptions. Family-level conversations that challenge rigid role prescriptions without attacking cultural identity also surfaced as a promising site for change, consistent with Al-Khalidi's (2020) emphasis on community-based transformation.

The participants' nuanced responses suggest that effective cultural interventions must be context-sensitive. Shifts toward greater role-sharing, empathy between genders, and flexible career and domestic arrangements were widely supported, but only when framed in terms of dignity, mutual responsibility, and cultural integrity. Attempts to import wholesale Western gender norms were met with scepticism, often seen as culturally alien or destabilizing. This underscores the importance of framing gender role flexibility not as a rejection of tradition but as an evolution within it.

Ultimately, these findings position cultural expectations as both a constraint and a potential catalyst. While rigid norms can limit self-expression and life opportunities, culturally resonant reforms—rooted in shared values and aimed at expanding choice—may enhance both individual potential and collective well-being. In this sense, identity formation in conservative societies is less about choosing between tradition and modernity and more about negotiating a space where personal aspirations can coexist with cultural belonging.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that cultural expectations remain a powerful shaper of gender roles and identity formation among young adults in culturally conservative settings. Family, religion, education, and media operate together to normalize a male–female binary that guides life choices, constrains emotional expression, and can adversely affect mental well-being when rigidly applied. At the same time, the research highlights adaptive strategies—silent negotiation, strategic role-sharing, and selective uptake of new opportunities—that suggest the possibility of gradual transformation within culturally respectful boundaries.

Policy and community-level interventions that emphasize dignity, mutual responsibility, and expanded role-sharing (for example, parenting education, inclusive curricula, and context-sensitive media campaigns) can help broaden acceptable paths for both men and women without undermining core cultural values. Strengthening positive role models, fostering intergenerational dialogue, and integrating gender-sensitive training into existing educational and community programs could further accelerate this shift. Future studies that broaden sampling, employ mixed methods, and test targeted interventions will be essential to translating these qualitative insights into scalable, evidence-based practices. Longitudinal and comparative approaches could also shed light on how identity negotiation evolves over time and across different cultural contexts, ensuring that change is both sustainable and culturally grounded.

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