

## **Parental Relationship Of Second-Generation Immigrant Indian Women And Formation Of Their Ideas Of Women's Equality In The Home: A Review Of The Literature**

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### **Abstract**

Second-generation Indian women are raised in exposure to conflicting ideologies regarding women's equality and many factors affect how they acculturate themselves and develop their own definition of equality. One of the main factors is their relationship with their parents. However, after a review of the literature the research conducted thus far does not explore this connection in its entirety and in fact perpetuates negative stereotypes about Indian philosophy and culture. It ignores examples in Indian culture that contradict the arguments they make. By furthering research in this direction, improvements in immigration policy, interpretations of Indians, and in women's rights across ethnic groups are possible.

**Keywords:** Indian women, parental relationship, gender equality

### **1. Introduction:**

I once went out to eat lunch with three of my friends, all of whom happened to be male. As we sat down together, I began to feel slightly uncomfortable as I thought about how an outsider would view our group. A teenage girl, sitting with three teenage boys. I especially began to think about how an Indian might view us, and most importantly, view me. Perhaps they would say that I was characterless, or that my mother hadn't taught me anything. Or maybe they would blame my home situation, citing that since I was raised by a single mother, nothing less could be expected of me. I might be accused of bringing dishonor and shame upon my family and the greater Indian society. As I was imagining all of this, I started to get worried. I would never want to do anything to bring taunts upon my mother or be the cause of any insult to my family. How would they react? My mother would only see what I saw: friends having a good time at college. That's when I realized that I couldn't be the only one experiencing this turmoil. On the one hand was my upbringing in an Indian society, where some members still expect women to be submissive to men and avoid men who are not related to them. On the other hand, were my experiences of being an American, seeing men and women mingling together without some of these concerns. I was able to feel comfortable, even after my moments of panic, because of my relationship with my mother. My mother has never pressured me or raised me in the way that many other Indian parents have raised their daughters, and I knew that she would understand and support me. But what about other second-generation Indian immigrants? How does the relationship they have with their parents affect their views of women's equality?

In Indian culture, women are venerated as *Shakti*, or strength. They are said to be powerful and representative of prosperity and success. Despite this, thousands of Indian women face inequality in their homes every day. Women not only are stripped of their rights and freedoms, but also pass on to their children these gender roles and expectations. However, second generation Indian women are faced with a conflict; they are brought up with two clashing ideologies. This clash is between carrying on their Indian heritage, but being judged for it by American friends, or wanting to do something more Western, like date someone, but having to contend with judgement from Indian relatives. It is imperative to examine the internal clash going on in their minds, because understanding how second-generation Indian women think about their rights as women could significantly reduce cases of domestic

violence by minimizing the inequity in the relationship that perpetuates it, as well as bringing about immigration policy improvements. Since these women subscribe to a blend of ideologies, understanding their thought processes could help improve the equality of women in other ethnic groups in America, as well as the lives of women in India.

Although people are not the same across groups and thus their thinking is not the same, the struggles they face and the reasons for those struggles can be related. Women who face inequality may not have all thought the same way, but they did have similar experiences, and understanding some of the reasons behind why they faced the trials and tribulations they did can lead to prevention of the same happening to other people. Increased awareness would encourage women to speak about what they face in the home and to fight for their rights. Despite the significant research previously done, there are aspects of how these women form their ideologies that have not been explored enough to be able to thoroughly answer this question. Even though the ideologies they are exposed to influence how women form their opinions, the relationship between them and their parents also has a significant impact, because parents are the main socializing force of children during their critical development years. This is especially significant in Indian immigrant culture, because children are exposed to different and sometimes conflicting ideas. The elements that their parents emphasize have a more definite influence on their thinking. For instance, in India, children remain in the home until marriage, but in America, children leave the home at age eighteen. These differing ideas are equally valid and it may be difficult for someone brought up with both to balance them or explain to an outsider their mindset.

This paper will examine how research is being conducted on this topic by doing an analysis of the current literature. After reviewing the literature, the research methodology will be analyzed to determine how well the subject is being addressed in the current atmosphere and what improvements should be made in the research process to accurately address this issue.

## **2. Methodology:**

This review was conducted by searching for terms including: gender, cultural socialization, gender identity, marriage, gender roles, Indian American, etc. First searches were conducted without the Boolean system, and after finding that the resulting sources were general in nature, Boolean search was employed. These were some specific searches: famil\* AND India AND immigra\* AND wom\* AND equal\* AND "second generation," gender and cultural socialization AND second-generation Indian immigrants.

The research found from these searches was often conducted in a quantitative manner rather than qualitative. For instance, Mick Cunningham's 2004 study<sup>1</sup> used heavy statistical analysis, which was useful in establishing correlations, but the value of the study would have been much stronger if he had asked the mothers he interviewed personal questions. The way the study was conducted was too distant from the subject matter. By adding qualitative data, Cunningham would have been able to analyze the correlations found in his quantitative data in a more meaningful way.

The researchers often used questionnaires rather than interviewing women directly or combining both methods. A clear example of what should have been done was Kallivayalil's study in 2004, in which she interviewed Indian-American college students and provided some insightful quotations from the women, which allowed her to put the quantitative correlations she found into perspective.

## **3. Factors That Affect Second-Generation Indian Immigrants' Concept of Gender:**

### **3.1 Parent-Child Relationship:**

Although it is well known that parents influence their children's ideologies, it is difficult to interpret exactly how that happens. Mick Cunningham's 2004 study<sup>1</sup> states that parents impact their children's views mostly through example. His general conclusion was that mothers with liberal views raised children with similar views and that children who thought that fathers should have an equal role in housework grew up in households where the male contributed more in the home. He limited his conclusions based on age, however that may be different for Indians. Indian children traditionally do not leave their parents' home until marriage, and some live with their parents even after, and take care of them in their old age. Therefore, to examine how parental views impact Indian children, it is important to consider the longevity of the relationship. However, with the number of mothers working outside the home, it is important to ascertain how much time children spend with their parents versus with other caretakers<sup>8</sup>. This is especially relevant in Indian culture, because the extended family often lives with the nuclear one. Even in immigrant families, often the grandparents will live within the same house, while aunts and uncles and other family members live in close proximity. Furthermore, the Indian parent-child relationship is different than the

American one, in that there is more respect demanded from children towards parents. Parents are considered to be the “first teachers,” given a higher place than even God, not only because they give life to a child but also because they teach them how to live life. Mothers especially are the driving forces behind acculturation in India, and it is said that a child can never repay the debt that a mother is owed, because what parents do for their children is immeasurable. This deep-held deference and respect for parental figures and their teachings is not present in American culture and must be taken into consideration when examining the beliefs of Indian children.

### 3.2 Selective Acculturation:

Despite strong exposure to almost opposite ideas, Indian immigrant children maintain certain aspects of Indian culture within their ideology. Much of the present literature on Indians focuses on the selective acculturation that they undergo. Dion and Dion’s 2004 study<sup>3</sup> is one such example. They state that parents choose what aspects of the host and immigrant cultures their children will be exposed to. Selective acculturation is attributed to parental fear of loss of Indian culture to the mainstream ideas in the host country, which then leads to an ambivalence in the ideas of their children, especially for girls. This is clearly illustrated by a quotation referenced by Kallivayalil in her 2004 study<sup>4</sup> from a second-generation Indian immigrant woman she interviewed: “...like in one sense, I want to live up my college experience or whatever, or have fun, but you kinda need to still stay focused because I have so much respect for my parents for like they’re still paying for this, I mean, they still own me, you know?” Kallivayalil<sup>4</sup> further expands on this idea, stating that because of the experiences of their mothers (not being financially independent despite being educated professionals) and having to support their daughters in an indirect way because they don’t want to oppose their husbands or go against tradition or family obligations, daughters may also end up ambivalent in their views of their roles. Since women are traditionally the ones to pass on the family values and traditions, they often face more pressure to conform to the ideals of their parents, especially in immigrant culture. However, the present literature appears to conflict in discussing the impact of this familial pressure on women’s acculturation. While Kallivayalil<sup>4</sup> states that women are more likely to carry forward their parents’ teachings, Varghese & Jenkins contend in their 2009 study<sup>9</sup> that second-generation immigrant Indian women are more likely to accept the ideals of the host culture, rather than Indian culture. Clearly more research is needed on this aspect, but it is important to note that the method of analysis also impacts the conclusions of these studies. While Kallivayalil<sup>4</sup> used qualitative methods by personally interviewing the women in her study, Varghese and Jenkins<sup>9</sup> used quantitative questionnaires and utilized numerical scores to examine the views of the women in their sample.

### 3.3 Ideologies of Parents:

To examine the ideas of second-generation Indian immigrants, it is important to look at the ideas of their parents. There is conflict in the present literature on this subject as well. Some sources say that Indian immigrant women have more equality in the host country than in their country of origin. Mehrota & Calasanti<sup>6</sup> claim that because of the hectic nature of immigrant life, women gain more equality in the home, because their husbands help out in the home, and because some leave the home to work. While the power still lies with the male, as he decides what the woman’s role is and to what extent it changes, some Indian immigrant women still have more power than they may have had in India. However, other sources say that immigration results in more oppression, because of legalities like their visas. Shauna Wilton<sup>10</sup> discusses how immigration policies in countries like Canada, Switzerland, and the Netherlands increase inequality for women by forcing them to rely on their husbands to migrate to foreign countries. They must be sponsored by their husbands and husbands are expected to provide financial support for the wives<sup>10</sup>, implying that women are completely dependent on their husbands, and forcing them to bend to their will. The wife would have no existence beyond the husband. However, this also depends on the level of equality that was already present. If the wife was already working in India, she would be able to come under a different classification, the “skilled worker class.”<sup>10</sup> Furthering their limited status, McCord and Raval<sup>5</sup> found that Indian women believe in hiding their negative feelings. These views perpetuate inequity by encouraging women to feel that their feelings are insignificant, or that they do not matter. They also found that they will pass on these values to their children by responding “nonsupportively” to those emotions by punishing or scolding the child. Yet, there were many limitations to this study that should be examined in future studies before applying these conclusions to how second-generation Indian immigrants form their ideals of equality. For instance, McCord & Raval<sup>5</sup> used questionnaires instead of directly interviewing the women in their sample. They didn’t compare immigrant women to Indian women but only to white Americans, and the questionnaires they used were not tailored to represent Indian values or account for concessions in results because of Indian values.

### 3.4 Attribution Of Inequality To Indian Culture:

There may be bias or a misunderstanding of Indian ideology influencing conclusions made after research is conducted and data is collected. Devdas and Rubin's 2007 study<sup>2</sup> on the acceptance of rape myths by South Asian American women compares immigrant South Asians to their European American counterparts. They conclude that first generation south Asian women had higher acceptance of rape myths than second generation south Asian women and European American women, but second generation South Asian women had the same acceptance as European American women. The difference in the first and second-generation women was attributed to the difference in cultures and how American culture is inherently more equal towards women than Asian cultures. However, Devdas and Rubin<sup>2</sup> do not identify which countries the South Asian women were from, much less which regions they were of. Shoba Srinivasan's 2001 study<sup>7</sup> also suggests that Indian values are inherently unequal and that Indian women are more likely to face stress than their European American counterparts. However, she does not identify which region the women in her sample are from. There are 29 states in India, all of which have a different culture and different ideas for women. For instance, in Bengal, the various forms of the goddess Durga are worshiped more than any other region in India, especially her fiercest form, Mahakali. Mahakali is a blue-black colored goddess, who has three eyes, and wears a garland of severed demon heads in her neck. She has eight hands, all of which hold various weapons, and to be the form of Parvati that appears only when she is immensely angered. She calms down only when Lord Shiva lays down in front of her, and she steps on him, which causes her to come back to her calmer form of Parvati, Shiva's wife. However, the rates of crimes against women in Bengal and Kolkata are some of the highest in the country<sup>11</sup>. In spite of the importance of this aggressive goddess in this region, Bengali women face more inequality than other Indian women. This indicates that there is another social factor at play. Therefore, it is essential to note which region of India women are from before determining how immigration impacts their ideologies. This also illuminates the idea that Indian culture does not encourage inequality towards women, but it is actually societal pressures and the thinking of individuals that does. Oppression of women is not an inherent part of Indian culture but has become ingrained in Indian minds because of various historical practices. By not acknowledging these aspects of Indian culture in research, negative stereotypes about Indians are furthered instead of being reduced.

### 4. Conclusion:

Overall the research was impersonal and lacking in a thorough knowledge of Indian culture and background, which is essential to analyzing the results of these studies. There are many aspects to Indian culture and how Indian children are raised that should be taken into account before a meaning is attached to quantitative values. Quantitative data is not meaningless; it is essential to understanding the relationships between multiple variables. However, with this subject matter, quantitative data should be combined with qualitative data for optimal results. Some ideas for incorporating qualitative data include: personal interviews and references to specific aspects or examples of Indian culture relating to correlations found during the studies. The researchers are reaching incorrect conclusions because they are missing a vital piece, the qualitative piece, in their analyses.

There are many aspects to how people socialize themselves and form their identities, especially immigrant populations. However, some important factors to examine like culture, selective acculturation, and parent-child relationships were not examined enough in the present literature to answer the question of how second-generation Indian immigrants form their ideas of women's equality. By examining all these aspects in future research, researchers can make improvements in how Indians and Indian culture are viewed by foreigners, and they can better develop plans on how to attain women's equality across ethnic groups.

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