



The Theoretical Overview of Gender Role Development in Children of Working and Non-Working Mothers

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Abstract

Gender role development is a foundational aspect of a child's socialization process, shaping their attitudes, behaviors, and identity in accordance with societal norms and expectations. This research paper presents a theoretical exploration of how maternal employment status—whether a mother is working or non-working—affects the development of gender roles in children. Drawing on established theories such as Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Bem's Gender Schema Theory, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the paper analyzes the ways in which children internalize gendered behaviors through observation, reinforcement, and cultural context.

The paper examines how working mothers often serve as role models of non-traditional gender roles, promoting egalitarian views and greater acceptance of diverse gender identities and responsibilities. In contrast, non-working mothers may reinforce traditional caregiving roles and domestic responsibilities, shaping more conventional gender schemas in their children. However, the paper argues that the impact is not merely binary; the transmission of gender roles is mediated by parenting style, family communication patterns, cultural background, and socio-economic conditions.

This theoretical overview highlights the dynamic interaction between maternal behavior, family structure, and external influences such as media, peers, and educational institutions in shaping gender role attitudes. It also discusses how gender role flexibility or rigidity can influence children's career aspirations, interpersonal relationships, and self-perception. The paper emphasizes the importance of intentional parenting, inclusive educational practices, and supportive social environments to foster healthy gender role development.

The paper suggests that both working and non-working mothers contribute to gender role formation in unique ways, and it is the context, quality of interaction, and value systems within the family that determine long-term developmental outcomes.

Keywords: Gender role development, working mothers, non-working mothers, social learning theory, gender schema, parenting style, child socialization, role modeling, maternal influence, cultural norms.

Introduction

Gender roles refer to the socially constructed expectations, behaviors, and attitudes that a society considers appropriate for individuals based on their perceived sex. From early



childhood, individuals begin to internalize these roles through observation, reinforcement, and imitation. These roles influence multiple facets of an individual's life including their identity, social behavior, career aspirations, and interpersonal relationships.ⁱ In the early years, the family-especially parents-serves as the primary agent of gender role socialization. Through their actions, language, and division of responsibilities, parents create and reinforce a framework through which children begin to understand what it means to be male or female in a given culture.ⁱⁱ

Among the most significant influencers in this context is the mother. Traditionally, mothers have been positioned as primary caregivers and nurturers, tasked with managing domestic responsibilities and guiding the emotional and moral development of children. However, the role of mothers in contemporary society has evolved significantly, particularly due to increased educational attainment, career aspirations, and economic demands. The participation of women in the workforce has grown substantially across the world. In India, for instance, although female labor force participation has seen fluctuations, urban and educated women are increasingly engaged in professional roles.ⁱⁱⁱ This transformation from domestic caregivers to dual-role participants has reshaped family dynamics and challenged traditional gender norms within households.

The visibility of mothers in roles outside the home not only redefines maternal identity but also offers children alternate models of gender roles-particularly emphasizing traits such as independence, ambition, and equality. Conversely, non-working mothers often continue to model more traditional caregiving roles, which also carry significant cultural value and stability. This divergence in maternal roles creates distinct environments for children to observe and internalize gender expectations. As such, a theoretical exploration of how children of working and non-working mothers form their gender identities is essential to understanding broader patterns of gender socialization in modern societies.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding how children develop gender roles under the influence of working and non-working mothers requires an exploration of established psychological and sociological theories. Four foundational perspectives-Social Learning Theory, Gender Schema Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Role Theory with Symbolic Interactionism-offer a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms that contribute to the gender role development in children.

Albert Bandura's Social Learning theory provides a robust foundation for understanding how children internalize gender roles through observation and imitation. According to Bandura, learning is not merely the result of direct reinforcement but also occurs vicariously, as individuals observe the behaviors of others and the consequences that follow.^{iv} In the context of gender roles, children watch how their parents perform and respond to gendered tasks-whether in caregiving, career decisions, or household chores-and begin to imitate those behaviors. A working mother, who balances professional and domestic responsibilities, presents a more egalitarian model, which can lead children to adopt flexible views on gender roles. Conversely, a non-working mother who adheres to traditional



caregiving roles may reinforce more conventional gender expectations. Importantly, reinforcement-both verbal and non-verbal-plays a key role. For example, when a parent praises a girl for helping in the kitchen or discourages a boy from crying, it conveys messages about what is acceptable behavior for each gender.^v Therefore, parental modeling and reinforcement directly contribute to the internalization of gender norms in children.

Sandra Bem's Gender Schema theory offers a cognitive-developmental perspective, focusing on how children mentally organize gender-related information. According to Bem, children develop schemas-mental frameworks-that guide their perception, interpretation, and behavior concerning gender from a young age.^{vi} These schemas are shaped by their environment, including parental roles, societal expectations, and media messages. Working mothers often disrupt traditional schemas by presenting non-stereotypical gender behaviors, encouraging their children to integrate more expansive and egalitarian gender roles into their schemas. For instance, a child observing a mother excelling in a corporate job may associate strength, leadership, and intelligence with femininity, thus expanding the schema beyond caregiving and emotional support. In contrast, children raised primarily by non-working mothers may develop a schema that reinforces a binary view of gender roles-females as caregivers and males as providers-especially when this division is reinforced by cultural narratives or paternal modeling. The gender schema becomes a cognitive filter through which all gender-related experiences are processed, thereby influencing long-term attitudes and identity formation.

Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory situates gender role development within the nested contexts of a child's environment. At the core is the microsystem, which includes the family setting, where children have direct interactions with parents. Here, the division of responsibilities and communication patterns within the home become primary sources of gender socialization.^{vii} A working mother who shares tasks with the father and includes children in discussions about work and equality may instill balanced gender values. The mesosystem, involving the interconnections between family, school, and peers, also contributes. Schools that reinforce gender-neutral roles and peer groups that support diversity can amplify the positive effects of a working mother's modeling. Conversely, rigid school environments or peer pressure in the opposite direction may counterbalance progressive influences. The macrosystem, composed of broader societal and cultural ideologies, deeply impacts the legitimacy of gender roles. In cultures that celebrate domesticity and discourage female professional ambition, the modeling of a working mother may even be challenged by societal disapproval. Bronfenbrenner's theory emphasizes that gender role development is not isolated but emerges from continuous interaction between personal experience and environmental forces.

Finally, Role Theory and Symbolic Interactionism add a sociological lens, emphasizing the societal construction of roles and the meanings assigned to them through daily interaction. Role Theory suggests that individuals learn to fulfill the expectations associated with specific positions-such as "mother" or "woman"-through observation and performance.^{viii} Symbolic Interactionism, introduced by George Herbert Mead, argues that



self-concept and social roles are shaped through interaction, interpretation, and the use of shared symbols.^{ix} In this context, children learn what it means to be “male” or “female” by observing how their mothers perform their roles and how society reacts to those performances. A working mother may be seen negotiating roles at work, using professional language, managing time, and exercising authority-interactions that children decode and integrate into their understanding of gender. Conversely, children of non-working mothers may observe nurturing, caregiving, and deference as central aspects of the female role. These symbolic interactions become internalized and help form the child's gender identity and expectations about others.

Together, these theoretical perspectives offer a multidimensional understanding of gender role development in children. Bandura emphasizes learning through observation and reinforcement; Bem focuses on the internal cognitive organization of gender information; Bronfenbrenner explores the influence of social and environmental systems; and symbolic interactionism highlights the dynamic role of social meaning in everyday interactions. The convergence of these frameworks provides a strong foundation for analyzing how maternal employment status and associated parenting behaviors influence children's evolving gender roles.

Gender Role Socialization in the Home

The home is the primary and most influential environment for early gender role socialization. Within the family setting, children observe, interact with, and imitate their parents' behaviors, gradually forming their own understanding of what it means to be male or female. Among these familial influences, the maternal role serves as a powerful model through which gendered behaviors are transmitted, whether consciously or subconsciously. Working mothers often represent a departure from traditional gender roles. Their active participation in the workforce exposes children to egalitarian values such as independence, financial responsibility, and balanced domestic roles. When a mother occupies leadership roles or contributes significantly to household income, children are more likely to associate women with ambition, competence, and autonomy.^x This exposure can broaden gender expectations and reduce stereotypical beliefs, particularly in daughters who may internalize higher educational and career aspirations.

In contrast, non-working mothers typically model more traditional caregiving roles, emphasizing nurturing, homemaking, and emotional support. These roles, while equally valuable, may reinforce conventional gender expectations-especially if the division of labor within the home follows rigid patterns. Children of non-working mothers may be more likely to perceive women as homemakers and men as breadwinners, thereby internalizing a more binary understanding of gender.^{xi} The impact of this modeling, however, can vary depending on how actively the mother communicates gender messages and whether traditional roles are portrayed as choices rather than obligations.

The influence of the father and extended family also significantly shapes gender attitudes. Fathers who share domestic tasks, express emotions, or support their wives' careers present a progressive model of masculinity that can challenge stereotypical norms.^{xii} In



extended family settings, particularly in collectivist cultures like India, grandparents and relatives often reinforce or challenge gender roles based on generational beliefs. For instance, a maternal grandmother encouraging a girl to learn cooking while discouraging sports may unintentionally transmit restrictive gender messages. Conversely, inclusive and supportive extended families can serve as additional models of gender diversity and flexibility.

Parenting styles also influence how gender messages are delivered and received. Authoritative parents—those who are responsive, communicative, and supportive—tend to foster open discussions about roles, identity, and equality. These children are more likely to question rigid gender norms and develop a balanced understanding of social roles.^{xiii} On the other hand, authoritarian or traditional parents may enforce gender roles through rigid discipline and expectations, potentially limiting the child's capacity for critical thinking regarding gender identity. Permissive and neglectful styles may either reinforce stereotypes through lack of guidance or leave children vulnerable to adopting externally imposed norms without parental context.^{xiv}

The division of household labor, observable on a daily basis, acts as a consistent, silent teacher of gender roles. Children learn by watching who cooks, cleans, earns, and makes decisions. Studies have shown that in households where both parents share domestic duties equitably, children—especially boys—are more likely to develop egalitarian attitudes toward gender.^{xv} Working mothers who return from work and still bear the brunt of domestic responsibilities may unintentionally model gender inequality, unless the father is actively involved. Conversely, in homes with non-working mothers, the perception of gender roles may become more skewed if mothers perform all caregiving tasks while fathers remain emotionally or practically disengaged.

Thus, gender role socialization within the home is a complex process shaped by maternal modeling, paternal involvement, family structure, parenting approach, and everyday practices. Whether the mother works outside or remains within the domestic sphere, the messages children receive about gender roles depend significantly on the context, consistency, and communication within the family environment.

Comparative Analysis : Working vs. Non-Working Mothers

The role of a mother, whether she is employed outside the home or not, significantly shapes her children's understanding of gender roles. A comparative analysis of children raised by working versus non-working mothers reveals considerable differences in gender role attitudes and aspirations. Children of working mothers are often exposed to more egalitarian models where gender roles are not confined to traditional domestic boundaries. These children observe their mothers managing both professional and household responsibilities; often challenging the societal norm that caregiving is solely a female obligation. This dual exposure fosters a more flexible approach to gender, allowing children—especially daughters—to aspire toward higher education and diverse career options.^{xvi} Sons of working mothers also tend to develop respect for female competence and are more open to sharing domestic roles.^{xvii} On the other hand, children of non-working mothers may internalize more conventional attitudes, viewing caregiving and homemaking as inherently feminine roles.



While this provides a sense of structure and emotional security, it may limit their perception of role diversity unless consciously challenged within the household.

A major point of divergence between these two groups lies in the flexibility versus rigidity of gender roles. Working mothers often promote adaptability, independence, and assertiveness-traits that are valued across gender lines. Their children learn to navigate changing schedules, shared responsibilities, and diverse social interactions, resulting in more nuanced views of gender.^{xviii} Conversely, in homes where mothers do not engage in professional work, children may observe a more rigid, compartmentalized model of family roles, where mothers are caregivers and fathers are providers. Without exposure to role flexibility, children may adopt gender norms as fixed and prescriptive, leading to more stereotypical thinking.

The impact of maternal employment also varies by the gender of the child. For girls, having a working mother can be particularly empowering. It models competence, ambition, and self-reliance, broadening their perception of what women can achieve in society. Empirical studies have found that daughters of employed mothers tend to score higher on measures of educational aspiration and occupational ambition.^{xix} For boys, however, the impact can be complex. While some boys of working mothers internalize equitable gender values, others may experience confusion or even conflict if external societal norms emphasize traditional masculinity. In contrast, boys raised by non-working mothers may more readily accept traditional male roles but may also be less prepared to adjust in egalitarian or dual-income households later in life.

Cultural variations and societal norms further mediate these outcomes. In collectivist societies like India, maternal employment can be viewed through a moral or economic lens. Working mothers may be respected for contributing financially but may also be subtly criticized for not conforming to the ideal of full-time caregiving.^{xx} These cultural narratives significantly influence how children interpret their mother's role. In more individualistic or egalitarian societies, working mothers are often celebrated for achieving balance, and children raised in such environments may receive more institutional and peer support for flexible gender roles. On the contrary, in traditional cultural settings, even if a mother works, her efforts to align with conventional expectations at home may inadvertently reinforce dual-role stereotypes rather than disrupt them.

Overall, while maternal employment status influences children's gender role development, its impact is shaped by broader variables such as parenting style, paternal involvement, cultural context, and educational exposure. Working mothers tend to facilitate flexible, egalitarian perspectives, while non-working mothers may reinforce traditional but stable gender constructs. The developmental outcomes for children, therefore, depend not only on what role the mother plays but also on how that role is interpreted within the home and the wider social environment.

Implications of Gender Role Development

The development of gender roles in childhood has long-lasting implications for identity formation and self-esteem. Children internalize gendered expectations early on,



which shape their self-perception and behavior throughout life. When children are exposed to rigid gender roles-often reinforced through traditional family structures-they may experience internal conflict if their personal identity diverges from societal norms. For example, a girl who is interested in leadership or engineering may feel inadequate or self-doubting if she has been socialized to prioritize domesticity and caregiving. Conversely, exposure to diverse gender roles-such as those modeled by working mothers-allows children to form more flexible and inclusive identities, fostering a stronger sense of self-worth and emotional confidence.^{xxi}

Gender role development also significantly affects career choices and future roles. Children who observe women in active professional roles are more likely to aspire toward careers that are traditionally male-dominated, and vice versa. This exposure can be especially critical for breaking occupational stereotypes and encouraging both girls and boys to pursue vocations aligned with their interests and talents rather than societal expectations.^{xxii} In contrast, children raised in strictly gendered environments may self-select into limited roles, believing that certain professions or life paths are inappropriate for their gender. These beliefs can limit their potential and economic independence in the long term.

Furthermore, gender role development shapes interpersonal relationships and role expectations in adulthood. Individuals raised in egalitarian households are more likely to engage in equitable partnerships, communicate effectively, and share responsibilities in family and work life. Those from traditional households, however, may carry forward expectations of male dominance and female submission, potentially leading to imbalance and conflict in romantic or workplace relationships.^{xxiii} This has implications not only for personal well-being but also for social equity and institutional diversity.

Lastly, children who are socialized within rigid gender frameworks may face the challenges of gender stereotyping. These stereotypes can lead to bullying, exclusion, and internalized shame for children who do not conform to traditional roles. For example, boys who express emotions or girls who prefer physical activities may be labeled negatively, leading to mental health issues or suppressed self-expression.^{xxiv} The reinforcement of these stereotypes not only restricts individual growth but perpetuates societal inequalities across generations.

Policy and Social Recommendations

To mitigate the negative consequences of rigid gender socialization and promote healthy gender role development, several policy and social strategies must be implemented. First, it is essential to encourage balanced role models in schools and media. Curriculum content, children's literature, television shows, and advertisements should reflect both men and women in diverse roles-scientists, caregivers, athletes, artists-to counteract stereotypes and provide children with a broader sense of possibilities.^{xxv} Educators and media creators must be trained to understand and challenge gender bias in the content they produce and deliver.

Second, parent education programs on gender sensitivity should be widely promoted. These programs can help both working and non-working parents understand the impact of



their own behavior and language on children's gender identity. Workshops, community forums, and school-based seminars can provide guidance on equitable parenting practices, the importance of role modeling, and how to discuss gender issues openly with children.^{xxvi} Such initiatives should also include fathers and extended family members to create a cohesive approach to gender socialization.

Finally, policies that support working parents in fostering positive family dynamics are crucial. These may include flexible work hours, paid parental leave, subsidized childcare, and family counseling services. When working parents-especially mothers-receive institutional support, they are better able to balance professional and personal responsibilities, creating emotionally stable environments that positively influence their children's development.^{xxvii} Governmental and corporate policies must recognize the dual roles of modern parents and invest in family-friendly practices that promote equality at home and in the workplace.

Conclusion

This research paper has explored the complex and multi-dimensional process of gender role development in children, focusing on the differing influences of working and non-working mothers. Drawing from major theoretical perspectives such as Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Bem's Gender Schema Theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism, the paper has shown that children acquire gender roles not only through direct instruction but more significantly through observation, imitation, environmental interactions, and symbolic cues. Mothers, whether employed or not, serve as primary agents in shaping children's early understanding of gender norms and expectations.

The theoretical insights suggest that the modelling of behavior by parents-especially mothers-plays a foundational role in shaping children's cognitive and social understanding of gender. Bandura (1977) emphasized observational learning as a core process, showing that children mimic gendered behaviors and attitudes observed in parents. Bem (1981) demonstrated how internal gender schemas are formed and refined through repeated exposure to consistent gender cues. Bronfenbrenner (1979) added depth to this view by highlighting how a child's broader ecological context-including schools, peer groups, and cultural norms-interacts with family roles to reinforce or challenge gender learning. These frameworks together illuminate that gender role development is not shaped by maternal employment alone, but by a constellation of environmental, cognitive, and behavioral factors.

working mothers contribute meaningfully to their children's gender socialization, albeit in different ways. Working mothers tend to model egalitarian, independent, and flexible gender roles, often encouraging broader aspirations and diverse career interests in both daughters and sons. Non-working mothers, while typically reinforcing traditional caregiving roles, also provide critical emotional stability and value-based teaching. The impact of either model depends on how the role is communicated, supported, and balanced within the family and cultural setting. Ultimately, the goal is not to idealize one over the other but to promote conscious, reflective parenting that supports a child's capacity to question stereotypes,



embrace equality, and grow into an individual with a healthy and self-directed gender identity.

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