

# Sex Typing of Children's Tasks A Study among the Garos of Assam

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## Abstract

*It is universally agreed that socialization of children takes place right from the moment they are born. This process of learning continues till they become adults and later. This paper is an attempt to look at whether gender-stereotyping takes place at the child-rearing period, especially at the pre-adolescence stage, when children are still young. The data for the study has been drawn from the Garos of Gohalkona village, Assam state, India.*

## Introduction

Socialization is a process in which children are taught the ways of behaviour and roles they are to adhere to as adults. This process starts from the moment a baby is born and continues till the day he/she dies. Much socialization takes place during childhood either through overt instructions from parents and elders or through other covert means such as rewards for good behaviour, praise for good conduct etc. Socialization is a term used by anthropologists and psychologists to describe the development, through influence of parents and others, of patterns of behaviour in children that conform to cultural expectations.

In many societies, as a process of socialization, children as young as three or four years are given certain tasks related to the household activities or even outside. In many cases such tasks may involve baby-sitting, carrying firewood and water as well as cleaning the house. A child between five and eight years old may even be given the responsibility of caring for an infant or toddler for much of the day while the mother works in the fields (Whiting and Whiting 1975).

In many cases, in these assignments of tasks by parents, a gender stereotyping occurs, especially after adolescence. This gender stereotyping is referred to as sex typing in this paper. The issue of parental sex typing of children's tasks is important in terms of

sex-role socialization (Brody and Steelman 1985). Thrall (1978) opines that children's exposure to the gendered division of labour practiced by their parents affects the subsequent division of labour chosen by them in adulthood. In the present paper an attempt is made to see the ways such gender stereotyping occurs among the matrilineal Garos at the pre-adolescence stage, i.e., children who are yet to achieve puberty. Usually the age of attaining adolescence is variable and depends on individual to individual. Generally, 10-13 years is assumed to be the beginning of adolescence while for some it might be later. For the purview of this paper, children from ages 0 to 14 years have been considered.

The Garos are a tribe inhabiting some parts of North-East India and Bangladesh. In India they are found to inhabit the Garos Hills region of Meghalaya, different districts of Assam (such as Kamrup, Nagaon, Goalpara, Darrang and Sibsagar), and even some pockets in the states of Nagaland, Tripura and North Bengal. They are a matrilineal group of people following matriliney at all three levels - lineage, inheritance and succession, and residence. They were traditionally animists worshipping different supernatural deities; at present majority of them are adherents of different denominations of Christianity while only a few are still traditional believers. Their economy is based on agriculture, both shifting-cultivation and wet-paddy cultivation. They speak the Tibeto-Burman tongue and show affinity to the Mongoloids in physical appearance.

Being matrilineal, at birth, a child is accepted into the folds of the mother's clan (*mahari*) or cluster of clans (*machong*). Since he/she is brought up in the mother's (and therefore the grandmother's) house, the child grows up with his/her matrilineal kins - cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents. During the growing-up years of the child, therefore, both overt and covert instructions of behaviour are given by the parents as well as the extended family members. Marak (2006) has listed a series of measures by parents and elder guardians as a means of disciplinary action in the child-rearing process among the Garos. At times these instructions are forced upon the child through threats, beatings etc., even though a girl-child is rarely beaten by the father. On other occasions, for "good behaviour" a child is either praised or a reward given. However, in everyday life, Garo children are seen to go about their daily routine and complete the tasks allocated to them.

The present study has been conducted among the Garos of Gohalkona, a village situated in Kamrup district of Assam. This village is predominantly inhabited by the Garos, even though a handful of non-Garo people live in the village. The village is peculiarly situated amidst non-Garo villages populated by communities such as the caste Assamese, Rabha and Bodo living nearby. The inhabitants of Gohalkona are agriculturists with majority of them engaged in wet paddy cultivation, while a

few are engaged in slash-and-burn cultivation (cultivating in the same plot over years) and cash crop cultivation. In socio-cultural aspects, they are different from their Hindu patrilineal neighbours, since they follow matriliney like all Garos elsewhere, and are mainly Christians belonging to the American Baptist denomination. In terms of amenities, the village has no electricity and motorable road, while they are all dependant on wells and streams for water supply. There are government-aided schools in the village, viz., Gohalkona High School, Gohalkona M. E. School and Gohalkona L.P School, however, the high school lacks sufficient teachers, and those appointed are in a medium (Assamese) in which the students are not familiar with.

In all, Gohalkona has 258 Garo households, with a total population of 1367, males numbering 632 and females 735. The data for the study has been collected from 59 children, both male and female. For data collection, tools used included an open-ended interview schedule, and in situations when it was seen to be pertinent, case studies. Besides, 19 parents have also been interviewed for the same purpose.

### **Assignment of Children's Tasks**

Normally parents and elders assign different tasks to children throughout the day and year. These tasks may range from "simple" ones like looking after oneself (toiletry, bathing, dressing etc.) to tasks involving others such as younger siblings, or even connected to household or agricultural activities. Parents may set these tasks in order to distribute work load, however, in the long run leading to socialization of children.

Different tasks were seen to have been assigned by parents to children in Gohalkona. For the purpose of the study a total of 59 children were studied from different age groups. For proper understanding of tasks assigned to children, both boys and girls, the following number and type of respondents were studied. Since the study aimed to look at pre-adolescent stage, children below 14 years were considered (even though age at puberty varies and is commonly assumed to occur between 10-13 years).

<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>
(0-4) years = 9	(0-4) years = 8
(5-9) years = 10	(5-9) years = 10
(10-14) years = 11	(10-14) years = 11

For many children, it was difficult to conduct interviews. In such cases (as in the case of very young children) observation was liberally used as a tool. There were

innumerable tasks assigned to children, although for this paper, only a selective few have been considered.

Table 1  
Tasks assigned to Children

Tasks	Number of Boys			Number of Girls		
	(0-4)yrs	(5-9)yrs	(10-14)yrs	(0-4)yrs	(5-9)yrs	(10-14)yrs
Babysitting younger siblings	-	4	5	1	6	6
Playing with younger siblings	4	3	1	7	6	2
Helping a younger sibling in toilet/bathing/dressing	-	3	4	2	5	10
Fetching water from well	-	-	-	-	8	10
Fetching stool/glass of Water/cut betel nut/ Stored firewood	6	5	2	5	5	2
Serving tea/betel nut	-	2	2	2	8	10
Small errands from Shops/neighbours	6	8	8	4	3	1
Looking after pets	4	5	3	4	6	5
Feeding chicken/goats	8	7	2	4	5	1
Feeding cows and grazing	-	1	8	-	2	2
Feeding pigs	-	-	1	1	2	9
Laying plates and serving salt/chillies	2	3	-	3	2	10
Washing clothes	-	1	6	-	9	10
Cleaning house	-	-	3	1	7	10
Help in agriculture	1	8	11	1	3	6
Help in fetching produce from field	-	2	11	-	2	8
Fetching firewood from jungle	-	2	11	-	-	8
Cooking	-	-	2	-	7	10

Source: Fieldwork

Analysis of the table shows that there are certain aspects such as age groups and sex related to tasks assigned. Some of these aspects are discussed below:

**Tasks and Age-Groups:** The above table shows that very young children (0-4 years) are very rarely given "responsible tasks". Rather they are left to tend to younger siblings by playing with them for some time, and not made fully responsible for younger siblings. Many times they are asked to fetch things like a wooden stool for a guest or to fetch the bowl of betelnut and leaf for a guest. They are seen to be sent to the neighbours' houses with small errands, either carrying an unimportant message or a letter. A large number of them are also involved in looking after pets and occasionally feeding chicken and goats.

The next age group (5-9 years) is allocated comparatively more tasks. Even though they are still asked to fetch items of use (such as a wooden stool, a glass of water or firewood), they are also sent to shops on errands and asked to look after pets. They are also given slightly more jobs in the household and agricultural activities. Babysitting or looking after younger siblings are commonly undertaken. They are also seen to be serving tea and water to guests, and laying plates and serving salt etc during lunch and dinner. Many of the girls also start undertaking cleaning of the house and washing of clothes while boys start accompanying parents to the agricultural fields and helping them out.

In the last age group (10-14 years), some of the children would have already attained puberty, and this is when boys begin to be referred to as *pante* (bachelors) and girls as *metra* (damsels). This is the stage when children are allotted more "responsible tasks" like looking after younger siblings, whether babysitting or helping them with their toilet/bathing/dressing. This is also the stage when girls are given more tasks connected with the home, such as helping in cooking and washing clothes while boys are sent to the agricultural fields more often.

**Tasks and Sex:** Interestingly an analysis of the above tasks shows certain gender biasness towards its allocation. Based on a preliminary analysis, three specific tasks can be highlighted:

**Neutral Tasks:** Certain tasks are seen to be gender-neutral. These are tasks which are usually assigned to very young children around the age of 3 to 8 years irrespective of gender. Such tasks include:

- a. Babysitting younger siblings: This usually entails watching over younger siblings while they play or roll on the mat; or even carrying them along when they (the older sibling) go out to play with friends.

- b. Playing with younger siblings: At times some children play with their younger siblings who may be babies or toddlers and thus keep them busy.
- c. Fetching wooden stool/glass of water/ betel nut: This usually takes place when guests visit and the children are asked to fetch the above.
- d. Running errands to shops/neighbours: These are allocated to both boys and girls and usually entails going to the neighbour's house to fetch/give some item or to the village shops.
- e. Looking after pets: These entail looking after cats and dogs and feeding them leftovers.
- f. Feeding chicken/goat: These entails feeding grains to chicken regularly and collecting and feeding fodder for goats.
- g. Laying plates for lunch/dinner and serving salt/chillies: These are tasks that are achieved just before lunch and dinner.

*Girl-Tasks:* Even though some tasks are neutral, in the later stages certain tasks are seen to be allocated to girls rather than boys. These tasks include:

- a. Helping a younger sibling in toilet/bath/dress: These entail helping a younger sibling or nieces and nephews in their daily toilet, helping them bathe and dress, if the mother is busy cooking or away in the fields.
- b. Fetching water from well: This task is always given to girls who regularly fetch water from the well. The mother carries out this task only when a daughter is unavailable or away.
- c. Serving tea/betel nut: Usually the daughters, who remain at home, while parents are away in the fields, prepare the afternoon tea. Again, when visitors drop in it is older girls who prepare and serve them.
- d. Feeding pigs: Usually girls are seen feeding pigs with the fodder which the mother has collected usually comprising of arum stalks. At times, an older girl goes along with her friends to collect pig-fodder from the swamps and marshes.
- e. Washing clothes: Besides washing her own clothes, an older girl also starts washing some clothes of the family.
- f. Cleaning house: This usually entails sweeping of the house and courtyard.
- g. Cooking: An older girl also starts helping the mother in cooking rice and curries.

*Boy-Tasks:* Similarly, a few tasks are seen to be allocated to boys only. These include the following:

- a. Feeding cows: Generally older boys collect cow-fodder from the fields left fallow. They are also the ones who graze the cows or bring them home after grazing.
- b. Help in agriculture: This is also the period when boys start accompanying their parents to the fields and take part in agricultural activities like digging, sowing, weeding and harvesting.
- c. Help in fetching produce from field: They also help their fathers in transporting rice-stalks from the fields to their homes.
- d. Fetching firewood: Usually along with friends, they go to the jungles to collect firewood.

*Tasks and Attitudes:* In such task-assignments it is also pertinent to note the attitudes of parents, self and peer-groups. This is important in order to understand when sex-typing of children's tasks appear and whether it is culture-specific.

*Parents' Attitudes:* It is seen that the household tasks are generally allocated by the mother while agricultural tasks (such as digging, weeding etc) are allocated by the father. From observation and interview it is seen that at home mothers allot tasks to whoever is free and nearby irrespective of whether it is a boy or girl child. Two mothers were seen advising their sons of 11 and 13 years respectively, to serve the tea they (the mothers) had prepared. It is noticed that only when a child reaches puberty, some distinction is made by the mother in task allocation.

On the other hand, it is observed that fathers normally allocate tasks based on gender. On two occasions, even though there were older boys in the family, younger girls were asked to prepare tea for guests. On one occasion, a father enquired from his wife, when he saw his daughter tagging along with her older brother, "Why is she going to fetch cows? Tell her not to go. Tell her brother to go. Tell her to sweep the courtyard." Clearly, for him, a girl's job was sweeping the courtyard while a boy's job was fetching cows.

*Peer-Group Attitudes:* Given a choice, children irrespective of gender preferred to play with friends rather than perform tasks or do chores. It is also seen that the opinion of peer-groups mattered in their day to day behaviour. On many occasions it was observed that children have a clear-cut distinction in their minds about boy's jobs and girl's jobs. For instance, on enquiry which jobs were meant for boys and girls, a group of 12 boys were very clear. They listed sweeping the house, cooking, cutting vegetables and babysitting as girl-tasks while listing cow-grazing, working in the agricultural fields and running errands as boy-tasks.

*Self-Attitudes:* It is observed that at the family level, all children complete the tasks they are given. The question of boy-task and girl-task did not crop up. In some families where there was a dearth of an older sister, young boys were seen baby-sitting younger siblings and helping them out in dressing and bathing. Similarly, on one occasion where there were no brothers, a girl took cows out for grazing. In fact, it was observed that when a "responsible" task was given to a child for the first few times, the child would be very proud during the duration and completion of the task.

### Conclusion

On the basis of the above, it appears that Garo children are differentially allocated chores by sex both in terms of, the amount of and the kinds of work they do. This sex-typing of tasks begins during the pre-adolescence stage and continues in later life. The amounts of work allocated increases as the children became older. At the age of 2, for instance, a child is too young and given no task. However as the child progresses from age 3 to 14, the number of tasks increases manifold. This also shows the gradual delegation of responsibility that parents start giving their children with the increase in age.

The sex-segregated pattern seen in the above also corresponds closely to the division of responsibilities commonly observed between parents at the household level and outside. According to Whiting and Edwards (1973) and White and Brinkerhoff (1981), boys are generally given outdoor jobs such as taking out the trash, whereas girls are typically assigned in-door activities such as washing the dishes. In Gohalkona too, even though there are certain gender-neutral tasks, it is seen that boys are normally given outdoor tasks like running errands, working in the fields and grazing and feeding cows. On the other hand, girls are assigned household tasks like cooking, washing, cleaning and fetching water. These are tasks which also get reflected in their parents' division of work. Interestingly again, it is seen that girl-tasks are those that need to be completed on a routine basis, while boy-tasks are those that require less immediate attention.

In a study conducted by White and Brinkerhoff (1981), it was found that while both boys and girls spend a few hours per week performing household chores, girls devote more time to such activities than do boys. In the present study from the inventory of activities listed, it appears as if girls perform more tasks than boys. However, the aspect of time allocation towards completion of the tasks was not studied and therefore no conclusion can be drawn on this aspect. Nevertheless, it is seen that the tasks that girls normally do were daily tasks while boys performed some tasks especially connected to agricultural works during certain seasons. However on such occasions the boys were heavily worked leaving homes early in the morning and returning late in the evenings.

Again, even though all children above 6-7 years were school-going children, it was observed that none of the children stayed away from school to perform assigned tasks

except 8 older boys who stayed away for a week in each agricultural season when work pressure increased. Therefore, the tasks assigned to children were ones which they could complete in their normal course of duty even while attending regular school.

Family size and its composition also played a role in sex typing of allocated tasks. In a large extended family of many children, some of the younger children were literally left with no task and when a task would be allocated, for instance, fetching a wooden stool, there would be a clamour among the children to complete the task. On the other hand, in those families where there is only one child or only children of one gender, then tasks allotted would not be based on gender at all.

Among Garos a differentiation could be seen in parents' attitude, between parents who valued education and others who did not. Those who did value were seen pushing their children to attend school, not giving "heavy" tasks connected to the agricultural fields. Again, wealthier parents could afford to keep a helper in the agricultural fields and at home, so their children were given less time-and-energy consuming tasks to perform. Kohn (1959), Wright and Wright (1976) and Duncan and Duncan (1978) state that parental childrearing goals, including training for independence, responsibility, achievement, obedience, cleanliness, etc., are affected by factors such as education, occupation, religion, sex of parent, and sex-role orientation of parent. These studies suggest that parental background and values are important determinants of differentials in children's work experiences.

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