

# Beyond Blue and Pink: Parental Reflection on Gender Stereotyping in Childhood

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## ABSTRACT

There is a clear gap in understanding how parents' beliefs about gender roles keep stereotypes strong in child-rearing, especially in rural areas like La Union, Philippines, where old norms limit children's fair growth. This study filled that gap by looking at the repeating cycle of stereotype reinforcement through parents' views and actions. The researcher used a qualitative multiple case study design, doing semi-structured interviews with ten parents from different communities in La Union. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method, with strict ethical rules followed. Five experts in child development and gender fairness checked the findings using a special rating form for thematic strength, a checklist for educational value, and spoken feedback on useful insights. The results showed an overall Very Satisfactory level for thematic depth, clear presentation, and good structure, along with high educational soundness, seen as a Recommended Quality Evaluated resource for gender fairness education. Comments from experts and parent thoughts highlighted themes like clear analysis of societal effects, practical parenting examples, and different ways to challenge norms, proving the study's value as a helpful tool for promoting fair child-rearing and breaking stereotype cycles in rural Philippine settings.

**Keywords:** gender stereotypes, parental child-rearing, gender roles, child development, equitable parenting

## INTRODUCTION

Globally, children learn what is expected of them as boys or girls very early on. Based on the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's 2022 report, by the time children are five years old, they already have ideas about how boys and girls should act. This is because of what they see and hear from the people around them and the culture they live in. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development found that children as young as five years old are influenced by what society thinks is okay for boys and girls to do. These early socialization patterns often encourage girls to be nurturing, quiet, and artistic, while boys are socialized to be assertive, independent, and interested in science and technology (Bian, Leslie, & Cimpian, 2017; Saewyc, 2017). Such gendered expectations shape children's interests, self-esteem, and future opportunities, potentially limiting their full development and expression.

All over the world, people are studying ways to help very young children use all of their senses in their search for knowledge, such as with the use of pop-up books and augmented reality e-books, which can specifically dismantle gender-coded play or learning by presenting interactive, inclusive scenarios that encourage all children regardless of gender to explore diverse roles, activities, and interests without reinforcing stereotypes. For example, in 2025, Estacio and other researchers are exploring ways to help children with all their various forms of intelligence, and Amelia and her colleagues are developing e-books that use augmented reality to promote equitable exploration. Meanwhile, other researchers investigating early childhood education issues, such as

Usman et al. (2025), are exploring the role of multimedia in improving or easing children's cognitive development and meaning-making in 2025. Other researchers, like Usman et al. (2025), are investigating how children's thinking levels and understanding of symbols can be improved through various media. Such research is important because early childhood education is vital for all children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, people such as Estacio, Amelia, and Usman are working on projects to try and combat this and improve early years education. Although these do not challenge gender roles, they show how inclusive resources can be created to allow the same types of exploration for all children, not just those who conform to the norm (Paechter, 2018). Research on language disorder interventions (Fazary et al., 2025) and inclusive spaces for children with autism (Syarifudin et al., 2025) also suggests culturally responsive adaptations across diverse settings, such as rural communities like La Union, where traditional norms are deeply rooted and require tailored approaches to promote fairness without alienating local values.

Families, schools, and the media are just a few of the social institutions that contribute significantly to the global reinforcement of these stereotypes. Gendered career expectations are perpetuated and children's perceptions of what is possible for their gender are limited by media portrayals that often show men in leadership or technical roles and women in caregiving or domestic roles (Flores & Arandaque, 2022; Kim & Park, 2020). Gender-typical behaviors, such as boys participating more in math and science activities and girls in the arts and humanities, may also be subtly encouraged by educational materials and classroom interactions (Lampthey & Gaidzanwa, 2015).

STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields are still commonly associated with men. While boys are usually encouraged or expected to succeed in these areas, girls are frequently discouraged or lack encouragement to pursue them (Thompson & Garcia, 2024). According to Bian et al. (2017), these gendered patterns are influenced by stereotypes about intellectual capacity, which have an early impact on children's academic choices and self-concept.

Broader educational policies and programs in some countries have also worked to question these traditions, such as programs which encourage all children to participate in such activities equally, and break the boundaries of customary gendered roles. Education has also been recognized as a means to increase gender visibility and combat gender stereotypes to promote equal participation and performance (Paechter, 2018). The green and digital transition represents new opportunities for promoting gender equality, including at a global level (OECD, 2024). In some parts of the world, however, gender stereotypes remain secured and require active attention and action.

Gendered parenting roles exist in the Philippines, but they may vary by region, socio-economic class, and community. Existing research indicates that Filipino parents use different parenting strategies to raise boys and girls, including raising sons to be independent, competitive, and active, and raising daughters to be cooperative, affectionate, and supportive with household chores (Aryal, 2024; Lee & Kim, 2024). A variety of factors may affect the level of expectations, including exposure to different gender norms, urban or rural environment, and parental education levels.

Gender norms are either reinforced or challenged by parental attitudes. Children's gender socialization and development are greatly impacted by parents' involvement and awareness of gender stereotypes. Children may encounter criticism or discouragement if their interests deviate from culturally expected roles. For instance, girls who pursue sports, technical courses, or leadership roles may encounter skepticism or lack of support, whereas boys who demonstrate an interest in cooking, caregiving, or artistic endeavors may face social stigma. Children who experience such resistance may experience internal conflicts that may have an impact on their academic motivation, self-esteem, and mental health (Thompson & Garcia, 2024; Lee & Kim, 2024; Morawska, Baker, & Johnston, 2021). Teachers may unintentionally reinforce gendered expectations through their language and behavior, and textbooks and classroom interactions frequently reflect traditional gender roles (Flores & Arandaque, 2022; Kim & Park, 2020). Nevertheless, educators and policymakers are becoming more conscious of the need to promote gender equality and inclusivity in schools, with some efforts underway to revise curricula and train teachers in gender-responsive pedagogy (Lampthey & Gaidzanwa, 2015).

In places like La Union that are far from cities, people still think a lot about how men and women should act. They have strong ideas about this. Also, in cities, people are more open to new ideas about men and women being equal. In towns, people do not have as much access to schools or information about treating men and women fairly. This makes it hard to change the way people think about men and women. Silva and Costa say that it is very important to respect the way of life when we try to make things more fair for men and women. They wrote about this in 2023 and 2025. We should try to do things in a way that makes sense for the people and also promotes fairness for men and women, like Silva and Costa said. They argue that programs should be designed to fit the specific culture and way of life in rural areas, involving local leaders, parents, and teachers in discussions and training that encourage critical reflection on gender roles. Culturally responsive adaptations are vital for success in rural communities like La Union, where traditional norms are deeply rooted, ensuring interventions align with local values while promoting equity.

In La Union, national trends and distinct local culture come together, and expectations of families and the towns determine whether children conform to or break gender norms. Girls are expected to help with caring and household tasks while boys are expected to take part in a wide variety of sports and outdoor games and take on leadership roles.

La Union has conducted gender sensitivity trainings and awareness-raising activities in schools and community-based organizations to expand the children's and youth's outlook of gender issues (Kim & Park, 2020). Among the gender-sensitive activities offered are training for teachers in gender-responsive teaching, gender-focused activities for boys and girls, and discussions with the children's parents and community leaders. However, gender stereotypes and gender role differentiation may be stronger in some families than in others. Multiple factors may also limit people's ability to avoid giving in to gender role differentiation: lack of information to support alternative ideas and the unavailability of desired resources. Parents may also resist gender equality programs. This will require more community-based, culturally sensitive approaches with the engagement of parents and teachers.

Despite the increased awareness of the role that gender stereotypes play during childhood, research and practice tend to be centered on urban/developed areas and have neglected rural areas and minority/diverse cultural contexts, though the same phenomenon occurs in Philippine research, which has focused on urban areas to the neglect of the provinces (*mga probinsya*). There is a lack of understanding of how parents and educators in the local context negotiate gender roles in their lives.

## METHODOLOGY

The Methodology of this research paper employs an interpretative phenomenological research design, a qualitative approach that delves into the lived experiences and subjective meanings parents ascribe to gender stereotypes in childhood, enabling a deep exploration of complex social realities through non-numerical data like personal stories and reflections (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Grounded in phenomenological philosophy, emphasizing Husserl's focus on lived experience and Heidegger's interpretive lens, this design is particularly suited for uncovering how parents in La Union, Philippines—a province blending Ilocano, Spanish, and globalized cultural influences—interpret and navigate gender roles amid tensions between traditional norms (e.g., boys as breadwinners, girls as homemakers) and egalitarian values from urban migration and media. Conducted in La Union, the study recruited ten parents or guardians of children aged 3-10 years via criterion sampling, ensuring participants have lived in the area for at least five years, actively engage in child-rearing, and meet eligibility through community networks, screening questionnaires, and snowball sampling to achieve thematic saturation and diverse perspectives. Data were gathered primarily through semi-structured interviews, audio-recorded with consent and lasting 20-40 minutes, allowing participants to choose languages (Ilocano, Tagalog, or English) and private settings for comfort; the interview guide, validated by expert review from five experienced teachers and pilot-tested with five non-participants, explored beliefs, teaching experiences, challenges, and strategies related to gender socialization. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-step thematic process, involving repeated reading of transcripts, initial coding, theme searching, reviewing, defining, and reporting, with validity ensured through manual coding, software assistance, member checking, and intercoder reliability. Ethical considerations, approved by the DMMMSU Research Ethics Committee,

prioritized informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality via secure storage and anonymization, and transparency, ensuring the study respects cultural sensitivities and provides contextually relevant insights for gender-sensitive interventions in La Union.

## RESULTS

The Results section presents the thematic findings derived from semi-structured interviews with ten parents in La Union, Philippines, analyzed through Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach, highlighting how parental beliefs about gender roles influence child-rearing practices, often reinforcing stereotypes like emotional repression in boys while allowing gradual shifts toward equality through shared discipline and non-gendered toy selection. Parents perceive societal gender norms as constraining children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, prompting efforts to foster emotional intelligence by encouraging vulnerability in boys and assertiveness in girls, supported by theories like Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Theory. Strategies for promoting gender equality include selecting inclusive educational materials and activities, such as gender-neutral books and toys, to enhance cognitive and social growth, though challenges persist, including societal pressures, media stereotypes, family resistance, and resource limitations, as summarized in Table 1 outlining approaches like shared chores and gradual dialogues. For instance, parents like Parent 2 used gradual dialogues by starting small conversations about chores, such as explaining, "Boys can help in the kitchen too, just like girls do outside," to slowly shift family norms without immediate resistance, while Parent 8 engaged in ongoing talks about emotions, saying, "We discuss feelings every night, showing how both boys and girls can be open," to build understanding over time. A cyclical framework model is introduced, illustrating inputs (beliefs/norms), processes (modeling in domains), outputs (constrained development), and feedback (adaptation), emphasizing the interplay of traditional and modern influences in rural parenting contexts to support equitable child development.

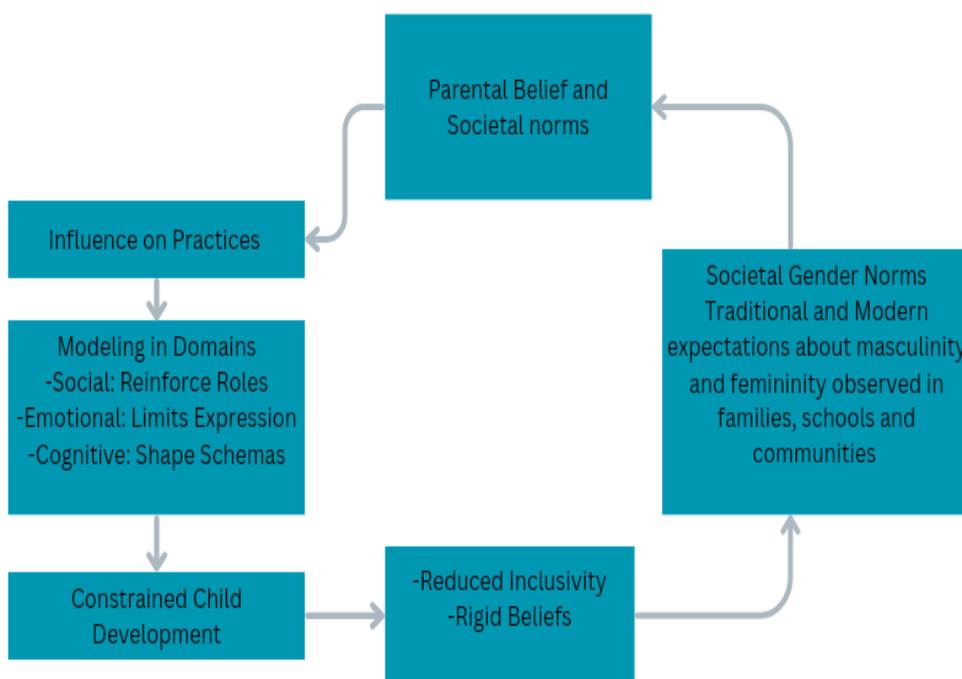


Fig 2. Gender Stereotype Reinforcement in Parental Child-Rearing: A Cyclical Framework

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, this research paper draws from the thematic analysis of interviews with ten parents in La Union, Philippines, revealing that parental beliefs profoundly influence child-rearing practices, often perpetuating gender stereotypes such as emotional repression in boys and domestic roles for girls, yet enabling gradual shifts toward equitable approaches like shared responsibilities and inclusive toy selection amid

traditional cultural norms. Perceptions of societal gender norms underscore their constraining effects on children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, highlighting the necessity for interventions that promote emotional intelligence and challenge biases through modeling and education. Strategies for fostering gender equality, including the use of gender-neutral materials and activities, support holistic child growth by countering stereotype reinforcement in rural settings, though challenges like media influences and family resistance persist. The cyclical framework model illustrates the dynamic interplay of beliefs, practices, and adaptations, emphasizing the potential for culturally sensitive parenting to foster balanced development. Overall, the study advocates for collaborative efforts among parents, educators, and communities to dismantle restrictive norms, with recommendations for longitudinal research to track long-term impacts and expanded urban-rural comparisons for broader insights into equitable child socialization. Specifically, following the study's own recommendation, future longitudinal research should track the children of these parents into adolescence to assess whether equitable strategies, such as gradual dialogues and inclusive modeling, lead to different developmental outcomes, including improved self-esteem, reduced gender bias, and greater career flexibility, providing evidence for sustained change in rural contexts.

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