



## Gender Socialization and Consequential Implications for Gender Differences in Positive Development of Self-concept among Adolescents in Nigeria

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**Abstract**

*Gender socialization is the learning of behaviours and attitudes considered by a given society or culture as appropriate for a given sex. Gender socialization begins at birth and continues through adolescence, contributing to gender inequalities (differences) in self-concept in terms of education, employment, empowerment, income, and other important outcomes. This paper examines gender socialization and consequential implications for gender differences in positive development of self-concept among adolescents in Nigeria. Social role theoretical perspective was used in analyzing the study. The study analysis showed that gender socialization lowered positive development of self-concept among female adolescents. Gender socialization reinforces inequality and gender-based stereotypes. More so, gender socialization limit women chances in participating in development processes. The study recommends that parents, care providers, social workers and policy makers should foster more flexible gender roles in young adolescent to help them develop positive concept. Moreover, parents and guidance should be mindful of kind of peers with whom their children affiliate with since bad company corrupt minds.*

**Keywords:** Gender Socialization, Consequential Implications, Gender Differences, Positive Development, Self-concept, Adolescent



## **Introduction**

Self-concept refers to how an individual thinks about or perceives his or her behaviors, their abilities in different social varieties of life, and their unique characteristics (Kendral, 2022; Huitt, 2004; Elliot, 2001; Baumeister, 1999). Positive development of one's self-concept is universally considered healthy. Charles et al., 2011; Shavelson, Huber, & Stanton, 1976). Positive self-concept development is a growing belief about oneself that allows them to cope successfully with life events and then have a positive impact on the lives of others (Zaff & Hair, 2003). The development of a child's self-concept begins at birth. It all starts with how adults react. Through warm and caring interactions, parents and caregivers form a positive emotional bond with an infant. This positive emotional bond with parents and caregivers helps children develop a positive self-concept. As the child grows, the ability to interact successfully with the environment nurtures a healthy self-concept. This is critically important in early childhood. Early positive concept development empowers the child to feel competent, try new things, and strive for success. However, Tiedemann (2000) indicated that parents' stereotypes and expectations for their children's understanding of themselves, as well as gender socialization, affect the positive development of an adolescent's or a child's self-concept.

Gender socialization plays a significant (central) role in shaping children's self-concept by internalizing cultural expectations about femininity and masculinity and creating an awareness that each individual has a distinct identity separate from others in every society. Gender socialization focuses on educating and informing males and females about the norms and beliefs associated with group membership as men or women. Most gender differences are thought to be due to socialization differences rather than generic or biological factors (Abanyam & Ahima, 2021).

Gender differences in self-concept exist among young males and females, and male adolescents have a higher self-concept relating to physical appearance (body image) and athletics than their female counterparts, according to studies (Shapka & Kepting, 2005; Erin, 2007). Erin (2007) stressed that females have a higher self-concept in the realm of social and peer competence than their male counterparts. This implies that gender socialization plays a major role among adolescents. Thus, in many societies, young females and women seek beauty and perfection, whereas males are more comfortable with their bodies and confident in their physical abilities than their female counterparts. By implication, gender socialization includes specific messages and practices about the nature of being



female or male in a specific group or society. Families, schools, mass media, and sports tend to reinforce traditional gender roles.

This suggests that there is a strong association between gender socialization and the development of self-concept among adolescents (children). To be accepted in society, children are taught how to live properly as boys or girls, men or women (Stockard, 1999). Consequently, these reactions to and ways of shaping children can strongly influence their self-concept, which is very important in any individual's experience of how others perceive their abilities in a given society and will have a consequential effect on their identity and the development of a positive self-concept (Meece, 2002). In light of the current situation, this study is being conducted to investigate gender socialization and its consequences for the positive development of self-concept among young adolescents in Nigeria.

### **Definition of Terms**

In order to enhance our understanding of this study, some key words will be selected and clarified.

### **Gender Socialization**

Individuals develop, refine, and learn to do gender by internalizing gender norms and rules as they interact with key socialization agents such as their family, social network, and other social institutions (Hoominfar, 2019). Gender socialization is the acquisition of behaviors and attitudes that a society deems appropriate for a specific sex. According to Vinney (2011), gender socialization is the process by which we learn our cultures' gender-related roles, including norms and expectations. This means that gender socialization is the process by which people learn what is acceptable and normal behavior and what is deviant behavior (Kimmel, 2004; Stockard, 1999). "Learning of culturally defined gender roles is an important aspect of gender socialization," writes Henslin (1999). (p. 76). Boys, for example, learn to be boys, while girls learn to be girls. Learning of gender roles occurs through different agents of socialization, with the family reinforcing gender roles, as are one's friends, school, work, and mass media.

Gender socialization is the process of teaching individuals how to behave in accordance with their gender's social expectations, known as "roles." Gender socialization is the teaching of gender stereotypes in its broadest sense. Gender stereotypes are certain behaviors and attitudes that are associated with boys and girls (Eddens & Nowaczyk, 2021). Gender socialization, according to Kimmel (2004), is the process of learning gender-appropriate behaviors, such as which interests, activities, and clothing are appropriate at birth and continue as a



child grows. This suggests that gender socialization begins at birth and continues throughout a child's life.

Gender socialization is the process by which males and females learn about the norms and behaviors associated with their sex, according to all definitions. Gender socialization is the process of teaching people how to behave socially in accordance with their biological gender, which is determined at birth.

### **Agents of Gender Socialization**

Children learn primarily how to behave in various situations and what is considered acceptable through interactions with their environment, including their parents or caregivers and later teachers, peers, and other influential agencies (Zastrow, 2014; Viney, 2019; Stockyard, 1999). The following are the primary socialization agents:

1. **Parents:** Girls and boys spend the majority of their early childhood at home with their families, looking to their parents and older siblings for guidance. Parents teach their children their first lessons about gender. Role modeling and encouraging different behaviors and activities in sons and daughters are two ways that parents can influence their children's gender development (Campbell, 2014). Zastrows (2014) claim that:

Most children are taught that boys are to be aggressive and dominant and that girls are to be nurturing and submissive. Parents often model these attributes in family interactions, in which the father assumes the roles maker, disciplinarian, and decision maker and the mother assumes responsibility for the nurturing roles of caring for the children and the household. Even if parents try to rear their children in nonsexist ways, children are exposed to sexist views in interaction outside their families and via the media (p.92).

Children's gender identity develops into a powerful social identity that shapes their lives. In many parts of developing countries, parents with limited financial resources have a strong preference for sons. This priority, ranging from health care to education, may have implications for females' positive development of self-esteem. Though there have been some dramatic transformations in women's and men's roles inside and outside of the family,

Gender socialization begins in infancy, with parents socializing their children as boys or girls almost immediately after birth, without even

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realizing it (Eliot, 2009). Parents frequently describe their infant daughters as lovely, soft, and delicate, whereas their infant sons are strong, active, and alert. From infancy onward, parents play with their daughters and sons in different ways. They are more rough with their sons, hurling them into the air or gently wresting with them, and more gentle with their daughters. When their infant daughters cry, they warmly comfort them, but when their sons cry, they tend to let them cry longer and comfort them less (Laff & Ruiz, 2021). Fathers act as gender role models for sons, and mother's models gender roles for daughters (Eddens & Nowaczyk, 2021). Parents expect boys and girls to have gender-related differences in abilities as well as personality.

2. **Schools:** Another agent of gender socialization is the school (Klein, 2007). Teachers, curricular materials, and peers are the primary gender socialization agents in schools. To begin, school playgrounds provide an environment for gender-specific play activities. Male teachers are more likely than female teachers to coach school sports teams. This is another way of modelling gender roles. Teachers may also use gender as a way to organize group activities (Eddens & Nowaczyk, 2021). Second, teachers at all levels treat their female and male students differently in subtle ways that they are probably unaware of. They tend to call on boys more frequently in class to answer questions and to praise them more when they do. They are also more likely to give boys more feedback about their assignments and other school work. At all grade levels, many textbooks still portray people in gender-stereotyped ways.
3. **Peers:** Peers influences also encourages gender socialization. In schools, children tend to interact most with their same-sex peers (Eddens & Nowaczyk, 2021). Peers models roles for each other. Children who do not conform to gender stereotypes are more likely to be bullied or excluded. Through interaction with peers, children learn concepts of self, gain social skills, and form values and attitudes. Girls peer group tend to be closely knit and egalitarian whereas, boys peer groups tend to be ore hierarchical, with evident status distinction between members (Eddens & Nowaczyk, 2021). As they reach school age, children begin to play different games based on their gender. Boys prefer sports and other competitive team games with rigid rules and a large number of roles, whereas girls prefer smaller, comparative games with more flexible rules, such as jumping rope.

These gender differences in their play persist and continue to reinforce gender rules in young stars (King, Miles., & Kniska, 1991). Through sports, men and women learn concept of self. Men learn that being competitive in sports is considered appropriate as part of manhood. Women in sports develop a strong sense of bodily competence, which

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is typically defined to them by the prevailing cultural images of women's bodies.

4. **Social Mass Media:** According to Edens & Nowaczyk (2021), the word "medium" refers to a way of doing something. For example, television is a medium of mass communication. So is the internet. "Media" is the plural form of the word medium. All forms of mass communication are referred collectively as media. Media include books, television, movies, advertisements, the internet, music, and video games.

The media develops and internalizes gender stereotypes, it misrepresents women's social life. Media plays a significant role in teaching behaviours and attitudes of specific social categories and has a strong impact on the process of gender socialization (Turner, 2010). According to Dow & Wood (2006), gender socialization occurs through the mass media. On children's television shows, the major characters are males. Women are also portrayed as unintelligent or frivolous individuals who are there more for their looks than for anything else. This image is reinforced by television commercials (Yoder, Christopher., & Holmes, 2008). Cosmetics advertisements abound, implying that not only is looking good a major task for women, but that it also contributes to their sense of self-concept (worth).

Women's and men's magazines reinforces gender images (Milillo, 2008). Most of the magazines intended for teenaged girls and adult women are filled with pictures of thin, beautiful models, advice on dieting, cosmetics ads, and articles on how to win and please your man. While the magazines intended for teenaged boys and men are filled with ads and articles on cars and sports, advice on how to succeed in careers and other endeavours. These magazines images suggest that women's key goals are to look good and to please men and that men's key goals are to succeed, win over women, and live life in the fast lane.

As a result, the media's images and messages have a significant impact on how people perceive the world. Gender stereotypes in the media play an important role in gender socialization beginning in childhood. Thus, women are often portrayed in the media in less dominant or powerful roles than men. While men are portrayed as more aggressive or violent than women. Women are more likely to be depicted as victims or in domestic roles. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to be portrayed as criminals or as businessmen. Such portrayals affect societal perception of gender roles (Eddens & Nowaczyk, 2021).

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5. **Religion:** Religion is yet another factor that contributes to gender stereotypes (Laff & Ruiz, 2021). More generally, women are depicted as the property of men. The sacred book of Islam, the Koran, contains passages describing women's subordination (Mayer, 2009). Many traditional Bible interpretations convey the message that women are subservient to men (Tanenbaum, 2009). This implies that the higher the level of religiosity, the stronger the belief in traditional gender roles.

Parents, schools (teachers, curriculum materials, and peers), mass media, and religion are all elements of one's environment. As a result, biological factors influence gender socialization as well. Men and women have different genes, sex hormones, and brain structures. Thus, both biological and environmental factors influence gender development or socialization.

### **Self-Concept**

Self-concept, also closely associated with other terms such as "self-perspective," "self-awareness, self-construction, self-structure, self-image, self-esteem, self-identity, sense of self," "self-evaluation, "self-definition," "self-verification, self-appraisal, self," "self-worth," etc., is a collection of beliefs about oneself. Self-concept is strongly related to other concepts such as self-esteem, self-image, etc., but it is different in the sense that self-concept is a cognitive or descriptive component of one's self with beliefs. Self-concept is a more overreaching construct. It involves how you think about yourself and how you feel about yourself. While self-esteem is evaluative and opinionated, However, other social scientists still use such terms interchangeably. For example, Charles et al. (2011) pointed out that "self-concept" is "often used interchangeably with such terms as self-image, sense of self, self-esteem, and identity" (p. 178). Be that as it may, Shenoy (2020) stressed that self-concept is the totality of beliefs, preferences, opinions, and attitudes organized in a systemic manner towards one's personal existence. In other words, self-concept is how we evaluate ourselves, which determines how we think, behave, and act out our various life roles.

Cherry (2022) defines "self-concept" as the image we have of ourselves. This hints at how we perceive our own behavior, abilities, and distinguishing characteristics. Self-concept is thus who we believe we are—the image we have of ourselves as well as the image we believe others have of us. Baumeister (1999) defines self-concept as how we think about and evaluate ourselves. Thus, "self-concept" may be defined as the way an individual thinks about their abilities in different social varieties of life. Wehvre & Fasbender (2018) see self-concept as the totality of a complex, organized, and yet dynamic



system of learned attitudes, beliefs, and evaluative judgments that people hold about themselves. This definition emphasized the fact that "self-concept" is a person's perception of himself, self-formed through environmental experiences and significance given by others.

Meece (2002) refers to self-concepts as "the beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, and ideas people have about themselves" (p. 392). while Huitt (2004) used the term "self-concept" to mean an individual's sense of self, including self-definition in the various social roles one enacts, including assessment of one's own status with respect to a single trait or to many human dimensions, using societal or personal norms as criteria. Self-concept can be defined as one's perception of oneself, specifically in relation to their relative confidence with various aspects of the self. Being able to perceive ourselves as competent contributes to the development of self-concept. Perceived competence reflects our beliefs about our ability to succeed at a particular task. White (1959) asserts that feelings of competence result from being able to act effectively and master one's environment when our capacities are stretched to new heights and we feel competent.

Again, Charles et al. (2011) defined self-concept as "the positive and negative thoughts and feelings that one has towards oneself" (p. 178). Here, two fundamental elements are identified: (1) positive self-concept and (2) negative self-concept. Self-concept is important because it affects our motivations, attitudes, and behaviors. It also influences how we feel about the person we believe we are, such as whether we are competent or have self-worth. A healthy self-concept is the foundation for a child's positive development and overall well-being. A healthy self-concept in a child is one in which he sees himself as loved, loving, and valuable (Shenoy, 2020). Charles and colleagues (2011) hinted that "a positive self-concept is very important for social interaction with others and in emotional, social, and intellectual growth" (p. 178). The importance of self-concept in overall wellness cannot be overstated (Kendra, 2022; Elliott, 2001; Cross & Madson, 1997). Self-concept influences how we look at our bodies, how we express ourselves and interact with our friends, and even how we make decisions.

On the other hand, a negative self-concept may lead to decreased motivation as well as greater feelings of helplessness. At its most basic, self-concept is a collection of beliefs one holds about oneself and the responses of others. It embodies the answers to the question, "Who am I?" It is basically how someone sees themselves and the perception that they hold about their abilities. There are basically various factors that can affect one's self-concept; these include age, sexual orientation, gender, and religion. However, gender will be taken into consideration in this study.





## **Theoretical Analysis**

There are so many sociological and psychological theories that offer explanation to gender socialization. Such theories like psychoanalysis, conformity theory, identity theory, socialization or social learning theory, conflict, functionalist and symbolic interactionism, etc. However, Alice Eagly's social role theory of gender differences will be used in analyzing this study. This is because social role theory's explanation holistically encompasses all the central ideas embedded in other approaches.

### **Social Role Theory**

The behaviors and responsibilities that individuals are expected to perform in society are referred to as social roles. The central tenet of social role theory is that an individual's behavior is actually the performance of roles that society has organized into categories. Individuals aim to meet these roles, which encompass certain expectations, responsibilities, and behaviours. The theory was formulated in 1980s (1987) by Alice H. Eagly to explain the behaviour of women and men as well as the stereotypes, attitudes, and ideologies that are relevant to sex and gender.

With regards to gender, social role theory prescribes certain roles for women, including mother, caretaker, and helper. Men's gender roles or social roles for men include breadwinner, protector, and leader. People perform gender roles on a daily basis, meaning their behaviours are shaped by societal expectations for them depending on their gender. Social role theory became a pre-eminent theory of gender in social psychology (Eagly & Wood, 2013).

According to social role theory, widely held gender stereotypes emerge from a society's gender division of labor (Ridgeway, 2001) According to social role theory, boys and girls learn to perform their biologically assigned gender through specific behaviors and attitudes. Gender role theory focuses on the environmental causes of gender roles as well as the impact of socialization, which is the process of teaching group members norms, values, beliefs, and behaviors in order for them to learn how to behave as a male or female. The theory proposes that social structure is the underlying force in gender differentiation, and that gender-differentiated behavior is driven by the division of labor between two sexes within a society. The division of labor creates gender roles, which leads to gendered social behavior. Girls generally look to their mothers or female role models for guidance, whereas boys look to their fathers or male role models for guidance.



Social role theory proposes that socialization, gender stereotypes, gender roles, and physical differences all interact to impact the behaviours of men and women. According to this approach, children learn gender roles and gender stereotypes because of the correspondence bias and that the division of labour is then maintained by people's behaviours, which gender roles designated to women and men are influenced, in turn, by physical difference between the sexes, in particular strength and reproductive capacity, as well as various societal influences. According to Krainic & Schisse (2021), proponents of social role theory identified three (3) primary mechanisms which influence people to behave in accordance to gender roles:

1. People learn that conforming to expectations for their gender prompts positive reactions from others, while not conforming may prompt negative reactions such as social exclusion.
2. People judge themselves in comparison to gender norms they have internalized as standard behaviours.
3. Hormones such as testosterone and oxytocin are activated during the performance of certain activities which are associated with femininity and masculinity.

The social role theory of gender differences emphasizes how physical differences between men and women lead to a division of labor in society. Men are physically larger and stronger than women in general. Females, on the other hand, are physically weaker and smaller than men. According to Eagly's theory, these innate differences play a role in the development of gender roles for men and women.

Historically, women were expected to be primary caregivers for their children, while men were expected to be breadwinners for the family. These expectations arose from natural differences between males and females, according to social role theory. Social and cultural expectations, or gender stereotypes, contribute to the notion that there are male-specific careers and female-specific careers. The theory argues that because men and women are physically different, the work they do in society is different.

In addition, due to reproductive capacity, for example, women have traditionally been responsible for caring of children (a division of labour based on biological differences). Thus, when children see women nurturing babies and children, they may conclude that women are, by nature, nurturing (correspondence bias). This finding supports the widely held belief that all women are inherently nurturing (a gender stereotype). Furthermore, the societal expectation that women should be mothers (a gender role) influences women to

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conform to this behavior and adults to socialize girls to successfully assume this role as adult women.

In general, women are celebrated for being kind, gentle, and loving mothers (positive reactions). Conversely, women are looked down upon when they do not want to be mothers or when they perform motherhood in a way inconsistent with societal definition of femininity and motherhood (negative reactions). Moreover, women may evaluate their own worth (self-concept) according to how much they fit or do not fit the societal ideal for a good (internalized gender standards). Hormonal fluxes during motherhood and the performance of child care may further contribute to a woman's behaviour (biological factors).

### **Gender Socialization and Consequential Implications for Gender Differences in Positive Development of Self-concept among Adolescents in Nigeria**

Gender socialization holds consequences implications on positive development of self-concept of young adolescents. Kimmel & Aronson (2009) claim that:

From the moment babies return from the hospital in pink or blue blankets, or wear their first outfits marked with "Daddy's Little Princess" or "Daddy's Little Slugger" they undergo gender socialization to accept two entirely different sets of social norms. Boys are expected to be tough, aggressive, loud, and athletic, and girls to be sensitive, passive, quiet, and nonathletic (p.147).

The consequential effect here is that gender socialization or socialization in to gender affect the positive development of self-concept in many ways:

1. Gender socialization lowered self-concept of female adolescents. The seeds of low self-concept are usually sown early in life. Low self-concept or inferior role assigned to groups affect their positive development as well as their achievement in life. For example, in an experiment conducted by Golderge (1968) found that in African American culture, women had learned to consider themselves as intellectually inferior to men. In the experiment, Philip Goldberge asked female college students to read scholarly articles and evaluate them in terms of their competence and writing styles. Specific articles were signed by male authors, while for others, the same articles were signed by female authors. The female students rated the articles much higher if they were



attributed to a male author than if the same articles were attributed to a female author. It then means that, these women had learned their place; they regarded the output of other women as inferior to that of men.

2. Gender socialization reinforces inequality and gender-based stereotypes. In other words, negative gender socialization outcomes are a significant driver of gender inequality and have negative consequences for girls, boys, men, and women all over the world. Women almost always appear in advertisements for cooking, cleaning, or childcare products (Meece, 2002; Stockard, 1999). Women are underrepresented in roles or characteristics that influence leadership, intelligence, or a healthy mind (Erin, 2007; Kimmel, 2004; Shapka & Keating, 2005).
3. Because female adolescence prefers a positive self-concept, gender socialization influences female adolescent achievement in areas such as education, employment, income empowerment, and other significant outcomes (Eddens & Nowaczyk, 2021).
4. Gender socialization develops self-concept, the capacity for role-taking, and the tendency for people to act in socially acceptable ways (Laff & Ruize, 2021). This implies that gender socialization makes people cultural bearers.
5. Gender socialization makes it possible for one's value (self-concept) to be affected by significant others. How much value a person sees in oneself is significantly affected by socialization, how you are seen socially (Eddens, 2021). How parents define and treat a child is important to the development of the child's positive self-concept (Zaff & Hair, 2003; Hoominfer, 2019).
6. Increase rate of mental health. We tend to devalue women and not believe in their competence, not believe in their ability, which leads them to have less resources to support, which then result in increased rates of mental health diagnosis (Edden, 2021).
7. Gender socialization into masculinity lead to devastating consequences for women and girls, including increased rates of intimate partner violence, as it continues to participate in an unequal balance in society, where women are perceived as less than men (Kimmel, 2004; Goldberg, 1993). Women are significantly more likely to be killed or hospitalized at the hands of abusive partners (Eddens & Nowaczyk, 2021).
8. Socialized gender behaviours may fuel violence against women. Gender socialization might not be healthy (Giddens, 2010; Erin, 2007; Kimmel, 2004). Problems can develop when men and women are rigid in their conforming to those social expectations, resulting in health issues for individuals or fueling violence against women since women are overwhelmingly victims of sexual violence, and men are overwhelmingly perpetrators (Eddens & Nowaczyk, 2021).



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## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

It is now established that gender socialization is a long process that provides young adolescents (both male and female) with social roles that society has considered based on sex. Every human society has different role expectations for males and females. Through gender socialization, girls and boys learn different values, skills, and behavior patterns and standards. The family, peer groups, schools, religion, and mass media are agents that internalize and reinforce gender roles in different ways. The consequential implications for gender socialization are that it does not only create gender differences or inequality and gender-based stereotypes, but it also lowers the positive development of self-concept in the areas of education, income, employment, and empowerment. There is therefore an urgent need for stakeholders to ensure that policies and programs that aim to influence gender socialization and adolescent self-concept are framed in positive, solution-oriented ways that emphasize the benefits of gender equality to all members of society while preparing young people for the demands of society.

Based on the foregoing, the following recommendations were made:

1. Parents, care providers, teachers, mass media, peer groups, and policy makers should foster more flexible gender roles in children to help them develop positive self-concept.
2. Parents and guidance should be mindful of the kinds of peers with whom their children affiliate. They may be able to promote greater gender-role flexibility by encouraging organized mixed-gender activities in which girls and boys learn to collaborate as equals.
3. Parental efforts should be made to discuss and challenge gender stereotypes with their children.
4. Parents should be mindful of the language they use to describe their children. They should not label them with words such as lazy; naughty; aggressive or mean; instead, look for and point out their child's strength.
5. Parents should provide their children with opportunities for success. Assign them appropriate tasks they can complete on their own. Having done so will give them a sense of pride and help build "I can do" mentality.



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