



Reconceptualizing Gender and Parenting in Contemporary Societies: An Analytical Framework.

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Abstract

This paper examines the ethical dimensions of gender roles, expectations, and identities within the context of parenting in today's world. Qualitative methodology is adopted for the study. Utilizing descriptive and ethical normativism, the paper argues that societal norms influence parental decisions and the ways in which parents navigate issues related to gender socialization, gender equality, and the rights of children to express their authentic selves. The paper emphasizes the importance of respecting children's autonomy and fostering environments that promote gender inclusivity, while also considering potential conflicts between traditional values and evolving social norms. Ethical principles such as autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice serve as foundational frameworks for analyzing contemporary parenting practices related to gender. The paper also explores the responsibilities of parents in guiding their children through gender-related challenges, including societal pressures, stereotypes, and discrimination. Furthermore, it considers the implications of policy and cultural differences across diverse communities, highlighting the need for balanced approaches that uphold individual dignity and promote social equity. Ultimately, this study aims to shed light on the moral responsibilities of parents and society in supporting healthy gender development, advocating for practices that respect diversity and foster inclusive, ethical parenting in an increasingly complex gender landscape.

Keywords: Gender, Parenting, Ethical, Perspective, Contemporary



Introduction

In contemporary society, the intersections of gender and parenting have become focal points of social, cultural, and ethical discourse. Traditional notions of gender roles where men are often viewed as breadwinners and women as primary caregivers are increasingly challenged by evolving perspectives that advocate for equality, diversity, and individual choice. As gender identities and expressions become more fluid and inclusive, the practices and expectations surrounding parenting are also undergoing significant transformation. These developments raise important ethical questions about the responsibilities, rights, and societal norms that shape parenting practices in today's world.

From an ethical standpoint, the discussion extends beyond mere roles to encompass issues of fairness, autonomy, and the well-being of children. How should society support diverse gender expressions among parents? What are the moral implications of parental roles that deviate from traditional expectations? Furthermore, the intersectionality of gender with other social identities such as race, class, and sexuality complicates the landscape, demanding a nuanced understanding of ethical responsibilities and social justice.

This study aims to explore how gender influences parenting practices and perceptions in contemporary society, with a focus on the ethical considerations that arise from these evolving norms. By critically examining societal attitudes, legal frameworks, and personal narratives, the study seeks to contribute to a more inclusive understanding of ethical parenting that respects individual differences and promotes the well-being of children. Ultimately, this inquiry underscores the importance of fostering a society where gender diversity is recognized and valued in the context of nurturing and raising the next generation.

Conceptual Discourse

This section clarifies certain concepts that might pose ambiguity in the course of investigation, thereby limiting readers' comprehension. Towards this, the concept of gender, parenting and ethics shall be defined for enhanced understanding.

The Concept of Gender

Gender is a fundamental aspect of human identity and social organization, encompassing the roles, behaviours, expectations, and norms that societies assign to individuals based on their perceived or assigned sex. Unlike biological sex, which refers to physical and genetic attributes,



gender is a social construct that varies across cultures and historical periods (Lorber, 2019). Understanding gender involves examining how societal norms shape individual identities and interactions, as well as recognizing the fluidity and diversity of gender expressions.

Historically, gender has been understood through a binary lens, dividing people into male and female categories each associated with specific traits and roles. For example, Western societies traditionally linked masculinity with traits such as strength and assertiveness, while femininity was associated with nurturing and submissiveness (Bem, 2017). This binary framework has often reinforced stereotypes and perpetuated inequalities, influencing everything from family dynamics to workplace hierarchies. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly critiques this binary perspective, emphasizing that gender is a spectrum rather than a fixed dichotomy (Butler, 2019).

Butler (2019) argues that gender is performative, meaning that it is enacted through repeated behaviours and social practices rather than being an innate quality. According to Butler, gender identity is constructed through language, actions, and social interactions, which means that individuals have the capacity to challenge and subvert traditional gender norms. This performative view underscores the idea that gender is fluid and subject to change, depending on cultural context and individual agency. Moreover, gender intersects with other social categories such as race, class, sexuality, and ability, shaping individuals' experiences and opportunities in complex ways (Crenshaw, 2015). This intersectionality highlights that gender cannot be fully understood in isolation but must be examined within broader systems of power and inequality. For instance, the experiences of a Black woman may differ significantly from those of a white woman or a Black man, illustrating how multiple identities influence one's social positioning.

In recent decades, the recognition of non-binary, transgender, and genderqueer identities has challenged the traditional binary view of gender. These identities reflect a broader understanding that gender is not solely determined by biological sex but also involves personal identity and social recognition (Elliott, 2017). Legal and social movements advocating for gender rights have sought to normalize diverse gender expressions, promoting inclusivity and reducing stigma. Therefore, gender extends beyond biological differences to encompass a complex array of social, cultural, and psychological factors. It is a dynamic and fluid construct that shapes individual identities and societal structures.

The Concept of Parenting

Parenting involves the behaviours, practices, and responsibilities associated with raising and nurturing children. It is a fundamental social institution that shapes individuals' development, influences societal stability, and reflects cultural values. At its core, parenting encompasses providing emotional support, ensuring physical needs are met, guiding moral development, and fostering social skills (Chao, 2019). However, the understanding and expectations of parenting vary widely across different cultures, historical periods, and social contexts, making it a complex and dynamic concept.

Historically, parenting has been viewed primarily through the lens of biological relatedness, emphasizing the role of parents as primary caregivers responsible for their children's survival and socialization (Belsky, 2018). This traditional perspective underscores the importance of nurturing, discipline, and teaching societal norms. However, contemporary approaches recognize that parenting extends beyond biological ties, emphasizing the roles of social relationships, cultural norms, and individual agency in shaping parenting practices (Bornstein & Lamb, 2021). According to Baumrind (1971) parenting involves a range of dimensions, including emotional warmth, control, communication, and discipline strategies. Baumrind categorized parenting styles into authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful, each with different implications for children's development. Authoritative parenting, characterized by warmth and firm guidance, has been associated with positive developmental outcomes such as self-esteem, social competence, and academic achievement (Maccoby & Martin, 2018). Conversely, authoritarian and neglectful styles are linked to adverse effects, including behavioral problems and poor emotional regulation.

Beyond individual practices, parenting is also shaped by broader societal factors such as socioeconomic status, education, cultural expectations, and gender roles. Socioeconomic resources influence parents' ability to provide for their children's needs, access education, and participate in developmentally beneficial activities (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Cultural norms dictate specific parenting goals and methods; for example, collectivist societies often emphasize community and family cohesion, while individualist cultures prioritize independence and self-expression (Chao, 2019). Gender roles further influence parenting behaviours, with traditional expectations often assigning caregiving and nurturing duties disproportionately to women.

In recent years, there has been increasing recognition of diverse family structures and parenting arrangements, including single parenthood, same-sex parenting, and co-parenting, reflecting a more inclusive understanding of what constitutes effective parenting (Patterson, 2019). Additionally, modern parenting emphasizes the importance of emotional intelligence, attachment, and fostering resilience in children, aligning with contemporary developmental psychology insights (Sroufe, 2005). Parenting is a complex, evolving construct that encompasses a range of behaviours, roles, and cultural norms aimed at promoting children's well-being and development. It is influenced by biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors, making it a key area of interest for researchers, policymakers, and families alike.

The Concept of Ethics

Ethics is concerned with questions about what is right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust. It provides a framework for individuals and societies to evaluate actions, intentions, and policies, guiding behaviour in a manner that promotes fairness, integrity, and respect for others. As a discipline, ethics intersects with various fields including philosophy, religion, law, and social sciences, reflecting its fundamental role in shaping human conduct and societal norms. According to Ross (2002), ethics involves the systematic examination of moral principles that govern human interactions. Ethics seeks to determine the virtues and character traits that constitute a good life. Aristotle's virtue ethics emphasizes the development of moral character and the pursuit of eudaimonia, often translated as human flourishing or well-being. This perspective underscores that ethical behavior is rooted in the cultivation of virtues such as courage, temperance, and justice, which guide individuals toward living ethically.

In the modern context, ethics is often discussed through various normative theories that prescribe how individuals ought to act. Deontological ethics, notably associated with Immanuel Kant, emphasizes duty and adherence to moral rules regardless of consequences. Kant (1993) argued that moral actions are those performed out of duty and guided by the categorical imperative; a universal principle that one should act only according to maxims that can be consistently willed as a universal law. Conversely, consequentialist theories, such as utilitarianism advanced by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, focus on the outcomes of actions, advocating for behaviors that maximize overall happiness or welfare (Mill, 2002).

Another influential perspective is virtue ethics, which centers on moral character rather than rules or consequences. This approach encourages individuals to develop virtues through habitual practice, fostering moral maturity and integrity (Hursthouse, 1999). These diverse frameworks exemplify the multifaceted nature of ethics, highlighting that moral reasoning can be context-dependent and influenced by cultural, religious, and personal values.

Ethics also plays a vital role in contemporary debates surrounding social justice, human rights, and professional conduct. Bioethics, for instance, grapples with moral dilemmas in medicine and healthcare, such as euthanasia, reproductive rights, and resource allocation (Beauchamp & Childress, 2013). Similarly, business ethics addresses issues like corporate responsibility, ethical leadership, and consumer rights, aiming to promote fairness and sustainability in economic activities (Ferrell, Fraedrich, & Ferrell, 2019). These fields demonstrate that ethics is not merely theoretical but has practical implications for policy-making and daily decision-making.

Furthermore, the development of ethics involves critical reflection and dialogue, recognizing that moral beliefs are often shaped by cultural contexts and social influences. As Appiah (2008) notes, ethical pluralism acknowledges that different societies may have conflicting moral standards, necessitating mutual understanding and respect. This perspective encourages an inclusive approach to ethics, fostering intercultural dialogue and ethical tolerance. Ethics constitutes the foundational framework guiding human behavior and societal interactions. Rooted in philosophical inquiry, it encompasses various normative theories and practical applications that address moral challenges in personal, social, and professional spheres.

Gender and Parenting in the 21st Century

The 21st century has heralded profound shifts in societal perceptions of gender and parenting, driven by ongoing social, cultural, and technological changes. These transformations challenge traditional gender roles, promote inclusivity, and reshape parental expectations and practices. Historically, societal norms established rigid gender roles, men as breadwinners and women as caregivers perpetuating stereotypes that limited individual freedoms and developmental opportunities (Oakley, 2017). However, in the 21st century, these norms are increasingly questioned and dismantled. Movements advocating for gender equality, alongside feminist and LGBTQ+ activism, have contributed to a more fluid understanding of gender roles.



Today, many parents actively challenge traditional stereotypes by encouraging their children to explore interests regardless of gender. For example, fathers are more involved in caregiving, and mothers pursue careers with less societal stigma (Cabrera et al., 2014). This shift is exemplified by the rise of stay-at-home dads and working mothers, reflecting a move toward shared parenting responsibilities. Such changes are driven by increased awareness of gender equality and a recognition of the importance of diverse gender expressions for individual well-being (Kane & Buzwell, 2021).

The redefinition of gender roles also influences parental expectations. Many parents now promote gender-neutral play and clothing, aiming to foster authenticity and reduce societal pressures (Gleeson & McNally, 2019). These practices contribute to healthier psychological development by allowing children to develop their identities free from restrictive stereotypes.

The 21st century has seen a significant rise in awareness and acceptance of gender diversity beyond the traditional binary framework. Transgender, non-binary, and genderqueer identities are increasingly recognized, leading to changes in parenting approaches and societal attitudes.

Parents of gender-diverse children face unique ethical and practical challenges. Supporting a child's gender identity involves affirming their self-expression, which sometimes conflict with societal norms or familial beliefs. Research indicates that affirming support enhances mental health outcomes for transgender youth, reducing risks of depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Budge et al., 2013). Conversely, denying or suppressing a child's gender identity can cause psychological harm.

Moreover, parental acceptance of gender diversity is associated with positive developmental outcomes, emphasizing the importance of cultivating inclusive environments (Olson et al., 2015). Schools, healthcare providers, and policymakers are increasingly recognizing these needs, fostering a more supportive landscape for gender-diverse families. The 21st century has witnessed diversification in family structures, including same-sex parent families, single-parent households, blended families, and co-parenting arrangements. These changes challenge traditional notions of family and raise ethical questions about parenting rights and child welfare.

Same-sex parenting, in particular, has gained legal recognition and social acceptance in many parts of the world. Studies demonstrate that children raised by LGBTQ+ parents fare just as well as those raised by heterosexual parents in terms of psychological health, social competence, and

academic achievement (Golombok et al., 2010). This evidence counters stereotypes that non-traditional family structures are inherently disadvantageous, promoting a more inclusive understanding of what constitutes a 'good' family. In addition, modern parenting emphasizes emotional intelligence, active involvement, and fostering independence. Technologies such as smartphones and social media influence parental practices, offering both opportunities and challenges. Parents now navigate issues related to digital safety, cyberbullying, and screen time, balancing technological engagement with healthy development (Livingstone & Helsper, 2010).

While progressive shifts promote inclusivity and equality, they also generate ethical debates. For instance, the question of how much parents should influence or direct a child's gender identity and expression remains contentious. Some argue that overly enforcing gender neutrality may undermine parental authority or cultural values, while others emphasize the child's right to authentic self-expression (Gleeson & McNally, 2019). Furthermore, societal acceptance varies globally, with some cultures maintaining conservative views on gender roles. Parents in such contexts face ethical dilemmas balancing cultural traditions with evolving social norms and children's rights (Nussbaum, 2000). Respect for cultural diversity must be weighed against universal human rights, fostering dialogue that promotes understanding and respect.

Challenges of Gender and Parenting in Today's World

The relationship between gender and parenting is complex and evolving, presenting a multitude of challenges in today's world. Traditional gender roles, while still influential, are increasingly being challenged, leading to new expectations and pressures for both parents. A persistent challenge is the unequal division of labour and childcare responsibilities between parents, often rooted in gender stereotypes. "Women are still disproportionately burdened with household tasks and childcare, even in dual-income households" (UN, 2023). This can lead to stress, burnout, and reduced work opportunities for women, hindering their professional and personal development.

Moreover, societal expectations surrounding parenting often reinforce traditional gender roles. Mothers are frequently expected to be nurturing and emotionally expressive, while fathers are often pressured to be the primary providers and disciplinarians (Lamb, 2004). These stereotypes limit the range of parenting styles and approaches available to both parents, potentially hindering their ability to raise well-rounded and independent children. In addition, gender bias manifests in various ways, including differential treatment of children based on their gender. For example,

boys might be encouraged to pursue careers in STEM fields, while girls are steered towards humanities or caregiving professions (Bem 2017). These biases can limit children's opportunities and hinder their personal development, ultimately impacting their choices and self-esteem.

Also, parents, especially mothers, often feel pressure to conform to specific gender norms in their parenting styles. This pressure can come from society, family, or even from within themselves (Chodorow, 1978). This leads to feelings of inadequacy or guilt if they deviate from the perceived ideal. According to National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) (2023), the challenges associated with gender and parenting also significantly impact the mental and emotional well-being of both parents. The unequal division of labour, societal expectations and gender bias can lead to stress, anxiety, and depression, especially for mothers.

Ethical Issues Associated with Gender and Parenting in today's World

The intersection of gender and parenting in contemporary society presents a complex landscape of ethical considerations. As societal norms evolve and debates surrounding gender identity, roles, and expectations become more prominent, several ethical issues emerge related to the rights of children, parental autonomy, societal influences, and cultural diversity. Traditional gender norms have historically shaped parenting practices, often reinforcing stereotypical roles, mothers as nurturers and caregivers, fathers as breadwinners and authority figures (Oakley, 2017). These norms raise ethical questions about the extent to which parents should impose societal gender expectations on their children versus supporting children's individual gender identities. Imposing rigid gender roles can constrain children's personal development and infringe on their autonomy, raising concerns about respect for children's rights to develop their authentic selves (Ungar, 2004).

The ethical debate centers on balancing cultural or societal norms with respect for children's emerging identities. For instance, some argue that parents have a moral obligation to challenge harmful stereotypes to promote gender equality and personal well-being (Kimmel, 2018). Conversely, others contend that parental authority and cultural traditions should be respected unless they cause significant harm. This tension underscores the importance of valuing children's rights to gender expression and the ethical responsibility of parents to foster an environment that supports individual authenticity.



Furthermore, advances in understanding gender as a spectrum rather than a binary have led to increased recognition of gender-diverse children, including transgender and non-binary individuals. Ethically, raising gender-diverse children raises questions about parental responsibilities and societal obligations. Parents face dilemmas about whether to support their child's gender identity, which conflict with societal expectations or cultural norms (Davis, 2018). Supporting gender-diverse children aligns with principles of respect, autonomy, and non-maleficence. It involves affirming children's identities, which significantly impact their mental health and well-being (Budge et al., 2013). However, critics argue that some cultural or religious frameworks may oppose such support, leading to conflicts between parental beliefs and ethical principles of supporting the child's well-being. This situation highlights the ethical duty of respecting children's autonomy while navigating cultural sensitivities.

Moreso, a core ethical issue in gender and parenting involves balancing parental rights with the best interests of the child. Parents generally have considerable authority over their children's upbringing, but this authority is ethically bounded by the child's rights and welfare (Beauchamp & Childress, 2013). When parents attempt to enforce gender roles or suppress a child's gender identity, questions arise about whether such actions serve the child's best interests or violate their rights to self-determination. For example, some parents may seek medical interventions for transgender youth, such as hormone therapy, raising ethical debates about consent, bodily autonomy, and the long-term implications of such interventions (Liao & Kuperberg, 2020). The ethical principle of beneficence supports actions that promote the child's well-being, but interventions must be carefully scrutinized to avoid harm and respect emerging autonomy.

Also, cultural diversity profoundly influences gender roles and parenting practices. Ethical issues emerge when cultural norms conflict with universal principles of human rights. For instance, in some societies, strict gender roles are deeply embedded, and challenging these norms may be met with social resistance or even persecution (Nussbaum, 2000). Ethical questions include whether it is morally permissible for parents to raise children in accordance with cultural traditions that may restrict gender equality or limit individual freedoms. Respect for cultural diversity must be balanced with the recognition of universal human rights, including gender equality. The ethical challenge lies in respecting cultural differences without endorsing oppressive practices, such as child marriage or gender-based violence, which violate children's

rights and dignity (Merry, 2006). This tension calls for a nuanced ethical approach that upholds universal human rights while being sensitive to cultural contexts.

The rights of LGBTQ+ individuals and families further complicate the ethical landscape of gender and parenting. Same-sex couples and transgender parents often face societal discrimination, which raises questions about equality, recognition, and the best interests of children raised in such families (Golombok, 2015). Ethical concerns include whether children raised by LGBTQ+ parents experience disadvantages or stigma, and whether societal discrimination infringes on their rights to family life. Studies indicate that children raised by LGBTQ+ parents fare comparably to those raised by heterosexual parents in terms of psychological health, social competence, and academic achievement (Golombok et al., 2010). Ethically, this supports the view that parental gender or sexual orientation should not determine the quality of parenting or the rights children enjoy. Discrimination against LGBTQ+ families violates principles of justice and equality and undermines the rights of children and parents to form supportive family units.

Moreover, society bears ethical responsibilities to create policies and social environments that support diverse family structures and promote gender equality. This includes ensuring access to comprehensive sex education, anti-discrimination laws, and healthcare services that respect gender diversity (UNICEF, 2020). Ethical policymaking must prioritize children's rights to safety, education, and self-expression, while respecting cultural differences. However, societal attitudes and policies often lag behind evolving understandings of gender, leading to ethical dilemmas about whether laws should enforce gender norms or protect individual freedoms. The challenge is to develop inclusive policies that uphold human rights, foster gender equality, and respect cultural diversity.

Recommendations

1. The government should formulate and execute policies that promote shared parenting and flexible work arrangements.
2. Media portrayals and cultural norms often perpetuate stereotypical gender roles, influencing expectations of parents.
3. Parents need access to education and support that acknowledges the complexities of gender roles and the diverse experiences of families.



4. Government and communities should make conscious efforts towards addressing economic disparities that often contribute to unequal parental responsibilities.
5. Families should endeavour to create a supportive environment for men to take on caregiving responsibilities.

Conclusion

Gender and parenting in today's world presents a deeply intertwined ethical issues that bothers on autonomy, cultural values, rights, and societal norms. This study submits that balancing respect for cultural traditions with the promotion of gender equality and individual self-determination remains a central challenge. Supporting gender-diverse children, respecting their autonomy, and promoting inclusive family practices are vital for fostering ethical parenting environments. Society and policymakers play crucial roles in ensuring that children's rights are protected while respecting diverse cultural identities. Ultimately, ethical parenting in contemporary society requires a commitment to dignity, respect, and justice for all children, regardless of gender

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