

CHANGING WOMANHOOD ACROSS TWO GENERATIONS: EVIDENCES FROM KOLKATA

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Abstract: *An ideal woman is viewed as a spirit of submission, sacrifice and obedience who is believed to look after households. With the modernizing world the concept of womanhood has started to change gradually. The new generation is more prone to new ideas and adopts the rapidly changing society. The main objective of my study is to analyse how the perception and role of womanhood has changed across two generations in Kolkata and identify the factors behind the change. It is found that though the ideology of womanhood has changed but still the traditional values are deep rooted in the society.*

Key Words: *true womanhood, transition, identity, young generation, old generation.*

1. BACKGROUND:

Womanhood is an ever-changing conceptualization, a fluid idea defined by society and culture. The term 'womanhood' is difficult to articulate as it is not tangible and is considered to be concerned with the personal or individual characteristic features of a woman, which are conferred on her in almost every society that is pervasively patriarchal--male-centered and controlled. These features are said to be biological, intellectual and cultural. A woman, thus, is viewed as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional and conventional. This concept has been affirmed by writers like Simone de Beauvoir, who in her *The Second Sex* (1949) says that a woman is not born, but rather becomes a woman and that it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature.

A woman's identity is the essence or fundamental nature of who she is, of how she is, of how she presents herself and lives in the world. Who she is shapes her interactions, her experiences, and the meanings she makes in her life.

Identity connects the individual to a broader social category, in which the individual associates himself or herself with. Frable (1997) while defining identity has said that the concept of identity has always been a strictly structured label that has left little room for individuality. The process of identity is a long run process and an individual usually gain their identity only after adolescence. However, it becomes rather difficult for a woman to achieve their own identity as from that crucial stage of their development the traditional concept of womanhood has been implanted deep within them which they cannot overcome throughout their life cycle. Thus, the transition from childhood to adulthood in the context of gender roles is already a problematic rite of passage for females. The traditional concept of womanhood describes woman as "domesticated", i.e. who will perform all household chores, take care of her family, husband and produce child.

Evolving throughout the nineteenth century, the Woman Movement developed in response to women's dependent situation. It promoted a series of new images for women: True Womanhood, Real Womanhood, Public Womanhood, and New Womanhood. Irrespective of religion, the concept of womanhood has been imposed by the society on the women from the very dawn of the civilization. As Cogan (1989) has observed that for the working women along with their jobs they were demanded to perform their regular housekeeping tasks. The increasing attainment in education also made a woman better equipped "to manage a household and raise children satisfactorily," and "to help transmit culture, gentleness, and morality to future generations, the immediate family".

It has become important to come out of this traditional idea of womanhood instilled within them and create a new identity for the women. The definition of womanhood should be created not by the males but the women themselves. While the previous generation was prohibited from getting higher studies, to express their needs and feelings, participate in the job market, the younger generation having more exposure

to educational opportunities and modern technologies have changed the traditional way of thinking and this is where the gap between two generations of women has emerged. The younger generation is more prone to new ideas, adopt and accept the rapidly changing society. This generation now believes in equal decision-making capacities, educational attainment, health care and more over work participation. This has resulted in empowering women by boosting self-esteem and individuality.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURES:

There have been lots of discussions and literary works on the concept of womanhood. The most studied is the “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” by Barbara Welter where she states that “The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues - piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.” Gilman’s book, *The Yellow Wallpaper: A Story*, was also much of discussion regarded as an important early work of illustrating attitudes in the 19th century toward women's health, both physical and mental. Women were cast as emotional servants whose lives were dedicated to the welfare of home and family in the perservice of social stability (Papke, 1995).

Matthews (1992) in her ‘The Rise of the Public Woman: Woman's Power and Woman's Place in the United States, 1630-1970’, pointed out that it was at the end of 18th century, when the women were more seen in the public space and were able to participate in various roles and were more engaged in the moral and cultural betterment of the society.

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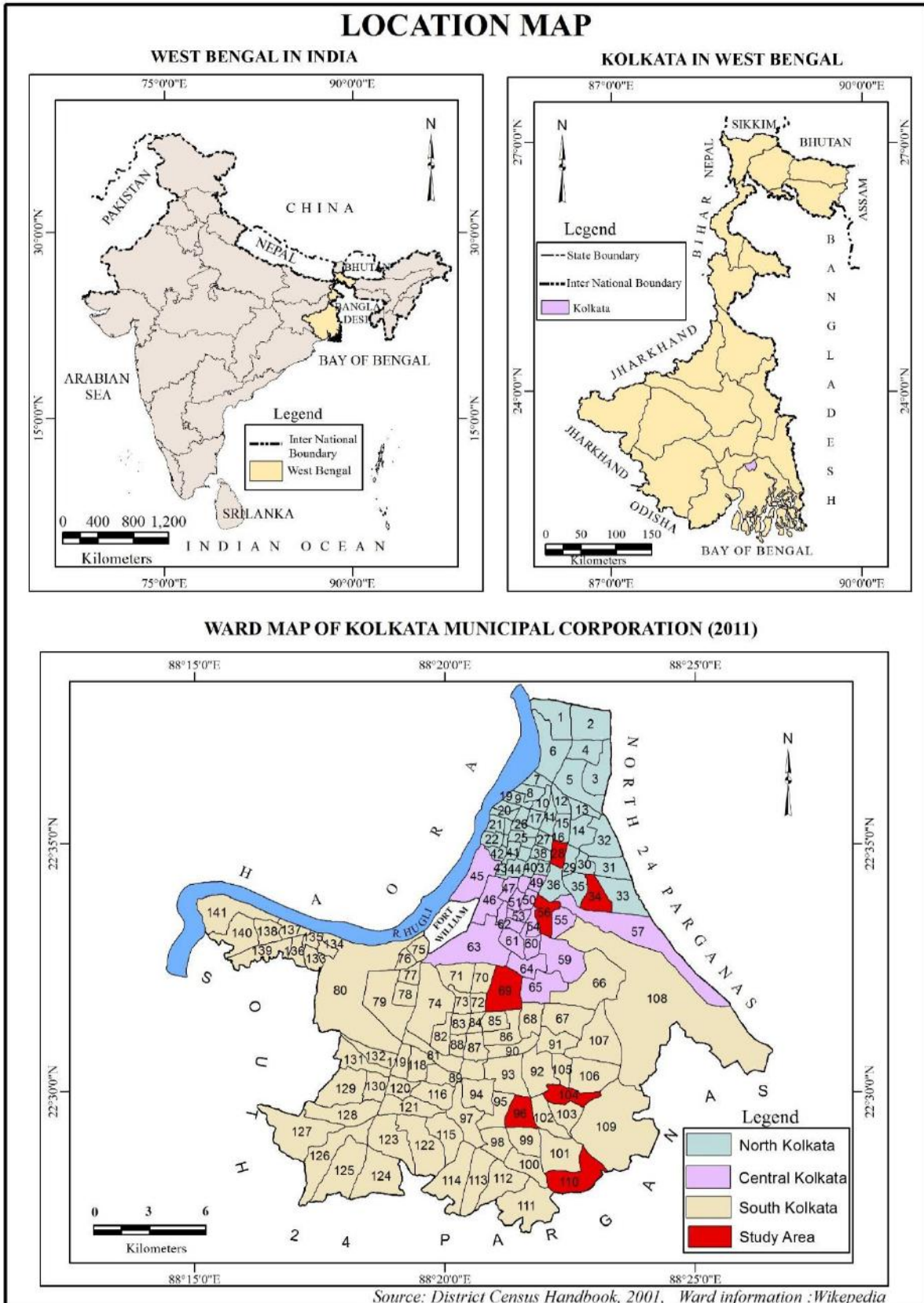
While discussing about generation, Pilcher (1994), described the word generation as “people within a delineated population who experience the same significant events within a given period of time”. Gangrade (1969), nowadays the generation gap has become more prominent because today’s society is moving in a much faster pace than before. Again, Allport (1968), suggested that, in terms of rapidly advanced technology, an ever-increasing domination of life by science, the young generation has to learn to cope up with the changing complex society as the older generation has to learn to handle the present generation.

3. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY:

However, when there are lots of works on womanhood there is little or no discussion about the changing perception of womanhood among two generations of women in Kolkata which dates back to the British colonial period. The city has always nurtured and encouraged women empowerment since the colonial raj. Kolkata has produced women from different background who are out of the traditional concept of womanhood though mere in number. In Kolkata also, an ideal woman is always viewed as conventional and as a spirit of submission, sacrifice and obedience whose only work is to look after the households. With the rapidly modernising world the concept and definition of womanhood started to change gradually. My objective of the study is to find out analyse how does the perception and the role of womanhood has changed across two generations of women and identify the factors behind the change.

4. THE STUDY AREA:

Calcutta, now known as Kolkata among various other metropolises is very unique in its character in the manner that unlike many older cities the precise year of its birth can be identified. It charts the milestones in its journey from a small village of Bengal towards the capital of British India which was established by traders of the English East India Company to tap the rich natural resources of the Gangetic Valley of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa (Kidwai, 1987). The Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) has been selected as the study area. The KMC is located on latitude 22°34’ N and 88°24’ E. KMC has population of 4,486,679 (2011) and has a density of 24,306 persons /sq km (2011) with 144 wards. Kolkata is regarded as one of the most important cities in eastern India in terms of concentration of commercial interests and cultural aspirations offer hospitality to members of all communities, religions, and language groups since its inception.



5. METHODOLOGY:

Total 1644 women respondents were selected from different educational levels, occupational categories, religious beliefs which include both working and non-working women aging between 18 to 60 years. The minimum age of 18 is chosen because the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1989, Article 1, clearly states a child means every human being below the age of 18 years and hence 18 years is the cut off age of being an adult who are eligible to enter the labour market. The maximum age of 60 has been chosen because in India the Maintenance and

Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 has identified the age of 60 as the age at the which a person is classified a senior citizen and also the age of retirement from work. The age group then is divided into two; 18-40 as the young generation and 41-60 as the old generation. As the religious status, both Hindu and Muslim women were considered in this study to make a socio-cultural comparison. I have randomly selected seven wards from all over Kolkata under KMC so that the heterogeneity of socio-economic characteristics of the city reveal from the study. The paper uses structured primary survey data from the selected study areas. The parameters that are taken for identifying the changing womanhood are decision making capacities, protest, household chores, work life balance and health. The factors behind the change are education, employment and technology.

6. ANALYSIS:

Over the history of time the perception and roles of woman has changed considerably. The ideas and attitudes of women towards the family as well as the society have also changed. Sinha, 1979 in this context believes that the younger generation have different feelings, way of thinking, different ideas and have their own values. This gap is more intense in the urban context due to more exposure to media of communication and educational opportunities which have change their attitudes and approaches.

Kolkata today has come a long way from the days of yore. It has shown significant improvement in female literacy rate as well as female work participation over the decades though there exists a huge gap between female literacy and WWPR that persists still today.

**Table 1:
 Female Literacy and Work Participation Rate**

	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Female literacy Rate (%)	60.34	63.1	72.1	77.3	84.06
Female Work Participation Rate (%)	5.70	5.80	6.91	12.0	14.8

Source: District Census Handbook, 1981, 1991, 2001, 2011

6.1. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE CONCEPT OF WOMANHOOD:

6.1.1. Education:

Education has always played a very important role in creating self-identity of a person and to reveal the inner truth. According to Welter (1978), education is beneficial “to widen [her] horizons and enrich [herself] as a person”. From the primary survey, it has been found that the educational attainment is high among young generation specially the higher degree of education. The reason for this differential attainment for two different generations is mainly the ‘motto’. In most of the cases the old generation of women used to get education because it was believed that, an educated woman better equipped “to manage a household and raise children satisfactorily” and “attracts the right kind of man and . . . fulfill the duties of wife and companion” (Welter, 1978). Hence it was not necessary become highly educated as it was believed that the highly educated women are not good wife and are not capable of managing the households. So, it was necessary to be just literate rather than highly educated. On the other hand, the young generation of women are far more focused and are keener to have higher education not only to support their family but to support and secure herself.

**Table 2
 Level of Education**

	Read and Write	Up to class VIII	Up to class X	Up to class XII	graduate	Post Graduate	M.phil	Phd
18-40	0.6%	0.6%	3.5%	20.6%	47.6%	25.3%	1.2%	1.9%
41-60	16.7%	13.5%	17.3%	19.2%	33.7%	6.7%	1.0%	0.5%

Source: Primary Survey, 2016

6.1.2. Employment:

Jamwal et.al (2010) has observed that now a day, due to the change in the outlook and approaches towards life and the changing socio-economic conditions and social values and norms, the participation of women in the job market has become essential mainly for the additional income. The more exposure in educational opportunities has caused awareness and raised aspirations of personal growth for the women. This exposure along with the increasing economic pressure to maintain an upscale living standard have together initiated the women of today to enter the job

market. Reflecting the above observation the young generation of women of Kolkata is more employed than the old generation resulting in increasing female work participation rate.

Table 3
Employment Status

	Employed	Unemployed
18-40	41.2%	58.2%
41-60	57.0%	43%

Source: Primary Survey, 2016

6.1.3. Exposure to Media and Technology:

Today’s generation is moving towards a more technology-driven way of life which not only changes them socially but also economically and culturally. The access to technology has opened up new vistas for the young women as they can gain information about the happenings world around. This has helped the young generation of women to think differently, to gain greater public access and claim public roles for themselves. More exposures to media and technology has enabled the young women to become more aware of the previously unknown subjects to learn, various career oriented courses and about various job openings both nationally and internationally which in turn have driven the women of today to be more self-aware and career oriented.

Table 4
Exposure to Media and Technology

	Aware of Technology	Use of Different Media
18-40	68.90%	57.7%
41-60	37.20	48.5%

Source: Primary Survey, 2016

6.2. CHANGING WOMANHOOD:

It is the above-mentioned factors which have played major role in bringing a change in the so called traditional concept of womanhood among the women of Kolkata. The globalization and industrialization has made the women to participate in education and labour force more than before. The changing trends that emerged are described as below:

6.2.1. Independence:

Being independent mean being self-assured, self-confident, strong minded and willed. Education and employment are the key factors for becoming independent. This independence is not only in respect of economic independence but also psychological independence which enables a woman to take decision correctly and individually. It is found that the young women are sounder about their way of thinking and decision-making capacity as they are more exposed to educational and occupational opportunities. The economic independence and freedom of thinking entailed the young women to protest against the wrong which the old generation couldn’t.

Table 5
Degree of Independence

	Freedom of taking Decision	Freedom to protest
18-40	30.9%	69.1%
41-60	9%	48%

Source: Primary Survey, 2016

6.2.2. Work- Life Balance:

Today the working woman are playing dual role, one in their household and another in their workplace. According to the norms of patriarchal society the women have to perform all the household responsibilities as well as they have to work perfectly in their workspace. According to Nagashetty (2016), there is a clear conflict between the socially approved status of women, as housewife and mother of children on the one hand, and their status as more productive worker on the other. A career was not encouraged before because it would distract from domestic responsibilities and the women of old generation who entered the labour force was mostly out of necessity. The women of young generation though work outside because of their own choice, at the same time they perform all the household duties including child bearing and child rearing. Being economically independent, they can also afford to recruit maid servants more than before for their daily necessities. It has become a challenge for the young women to maintain work life balance.

Table 6
Work Life Balance

	Perform Regular Household Duties
18-40	62%
41-60	87%

Source: Primary Survey, 2016

6.2.3. Questioning the Socially Defined Gender Roles:

The most important change that has occurred to the young generation is questioning the predefined gender roles of the society. According to Welter (1978), the girls are trained to be obedient and exhibit great self-control and learn the skills necessary to manage household and rear children from their very childhood. The present study reveals that a percentage of present generation of women has shaded off the traditional way of thinking and strongly believes that the age-old rules of gender-based division of labour should be removed from the society and that the males should equally participate in the household responsibilities. According to them, if the women can manage both work and family, why not the males?

Historically and traditionally women's social roles and the constructions of femininity have been 'contextualised' around the practices and symbolism surrounding motherhood" (Gillespie, 2000). While motherhood is essential for the old generation, the young generation thinks differently. The present generation of women believes that motherhood is important but not necessary and that only giving birth to a child cannot alone bring the essence of motherhood. Today's women are open to child adaptation and also believes that while child bearing can only performed by the women but it is necessary that the fathers take equal responsibilities while rearing the children.

Table 7
Questioning the defined Gender Roles

	Perform of males in household chores	Motherhood is Essential	Equal Responsibility in Child Rearing
18-40	56%	12%	74.8%
41-60	37.50%	90%	36%

Source : Primary Survey 2016

6.2.4. Health Wellbeing:

Young women today live in an environment with much recent technological advancement, they are not still aware of their wellness. The survey has found that women of young generation suffer from depression and stress much more than the old generation because of the work life conflict. The common health problems like anemia, calcium deficiency, are still prevalent in both the generations mainly because of the negligence towards health (Table 9). Both the generations of women are equally reluctant to visit the doctors until the situation becomes worse and dependent on over the counter (OTC) medicines though the condition is worse for the old generation of women who still believes in family wellbeing rather than self-wellbeing.

However, the awareness about sexual and reproductive health has improved a lot in young women. They are well aware about the contraceptive measures and the problems associated with pregnancy for which they prefer for having pre-conceiving health check-up though the percentage is still not satisfactory (Table 8).

Table 8
Health Wellbeing

	Psychological Stress	Use of Contraceptives	Health Check-up Before Conceiving	OTC Medicines	Reluctance to Visit Doctor
18-40	55%	87%	47%	58.92%	58.1%
41-60	37%	58.%	0.60%	77.7%	87.74%

Source: Primary Survey 2016

Table 9
General Health Problems

	Heart Disease	Sugar	Thyroid	Anemia	Calcium Deficiency
18-40	5.3%	9.4%	23.5%	43.4%	38.8%
41-60	35.3%	40%	20%	41.1%	42.2%

Source: Primary Survey 2016

This awareness has caused a decreasing number of children among young generation not exceeding two in most of the cases. Few women of young generation are even have decided not to have children because of their career aspiration or have decided to have late child. Due to stress and other physiological problems, more young women are suffering from childlessness (Table 10).

Table10
Number of Children

Number of Children*	No Children	1	2	>2
18-40	11.5%	36.4%	46.1%	6%
41-60	2.8%	12%	37.7%	46.5%

Source: Primary Survey 2016, * only married women have been taken into consideration

The preference of boy child still hovers over the women of Kolkata among both the generations due to the societal pressure of continue the blood line. In some cases, though the young women personally don't believe in having boy child but often succumb to the demand of family.

Table 11
Preference for Boy Child

	Preference for Boy Child
18-40	48%
41-60	72%

Source : Primary Survey 2016

6.2.5. Negotiating the Social Taboos:

The patriarchal society allows a boy manifold freedom like hanging out with friends, smoking, returning late night etc. which are regarded as social taboo for women. Today's women are against all such social prohibitions imposed by the male dominated society. A percentage of this young generation indulges them in all those freedoms which are initially meant only for boys. The present generation of women believes in the tag line of a famous advertisement aired in television "why should boys have all the fun?"

Table 12
Negotiating Social Taboos

	Smoking	Hanging Out with Friends	Support Remarriage
18-40	43.1%	87.5%	80%
41-60	2.5%	32.8%	55%

Source : Primary Survey 2016

7. CONCLUSION:

The women of Kolkata today have come a longer way pledging themselves to justice, liberty and equality of status and opportunity. The education has performed its role in enlightening women and changes the traditional concept of womanhood. The true womanhood implemented by the patriarchal society is now experiencing a transformation to real womanhood where they view themselves as heroine rather than victim. The study suggests that there is a divergence from the traditional and orthodox way of life; the women today are still not apathetic towards certain values and norms that they inherit from their childhood. Though they have become more career minded still they give weighted importance to family and motherhood. From the domestic prisoners the young women have become an important contributor to not only her family but also the society as a whole. Though the transformation is slow in all phases but the young generation women has shown the city the promise of a future where, someday, the woman will be an individual, without any validation from anyone.

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