


Exploring male adolescents' perceptions of gender relations in South India: A project ethnography of the *Parivartan* program

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Funding information

Department for International Development

Abstract

In Northern Karnataka, South India, boys' behaviours and attitudes towards girls are regarded as one of the many important proximate structural barriers impeding girls' access to education and academic performance in rural communities. In response to these barriers, public health practitioners developed an intervention, known as the *Parivartan* program, to confront the wider social and structural influences that shape adolescent boys' perspectives on gender relationships and practices that subjugate adolescent girls. Drawing upon a project ethnography approach, this study presents the findings from two phases of research conducted between 2014 and 2016 among adolescent boys who participated in the *Parivartan* program. First, 20 baseline qualitative interviews were conducted among male participants (between the ages 14 and 18) enrolled in the program. Next, follow-up ethnographic research, which included participant observation and ethnographic field note composition, took place one year after commencement of the intervention to illuminate the effects of the program on participants' perspectives. Transcripts and field notes were coded for key themes and emergent categories focused on representing adolescent boys' views and experiences through their narrative accounts. Within the context of an intervention, our findings portray masculinity among participants as simultaneously socially contingent, shifting and still undergoing negotiation, thereby providing an entry point through which program implementers can further encourage boys to transcend patriarchal expectations. Our findings hold important lessons for the design of future HIV and gender-based interventions with adolescent boys in India.

KEYWORDS

adolescent boys, education, gender inequalities, India

1 | INTRODUCTION

Gender equality has been recognised as an important sustainable development goal by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2016). Although tremendous inroads have been made, gender inequalities persist throughout the world. Within the context of

education, the low participation of girls in school has had negative implications on economic growth. In 2008, it was estimated that the failure to educate girls on par with boys costs low and middle income and transitional countries US\$92 billion each year (Plan, 2008). Just over a third of this cost—\$33 billion—was borne by India alone. Girls who have less education were found to have larger, less healthy families, earn

less than better educated girls, and be more vulnerable to HIV infection (Herz & Sperling, 2004; Warner, Malhotra, & McGonagle, 2012).

In Northern Karnataka, adolescent girls from Bijapur and Bagalkot were found to have the greatest risk of dropping out of school, especially among socially and economically disadvantaged groups referred in state policy discourse as *scheduled castes and scheduled tribes* (SC/ST) in rural communities (Government of Karnataka, 2008; Unified District Information System for Education (U-DISE) 2015). Compared to their male counterparts, females had a significantly lower high school enrolment in Bagalkot and Bijapur (Javalkar & Brooke, 2014). Within these regions, a range of factors have contributed to girls dropping out of school, including societal norms (relating to low prioritisation of girls' education, sexual purity and child marriage), school-level barriers (such as infrastructure, costs of attending school, teacher discrimination of lower caste girls) and poverty-related matters (girls being needed to help with household chores or for income generation) (Bhagavatheeswaran et al., 2016; Herz & Sperling, 2004; Raghavendra & Anderson, 2013; Raj, 2010; UNICEF, 2011; Warner et al., 2012). The threat and fear of sexual harassment by male classmates has also led families to remove girls from school (Bhagavatheeswaran et al., 2016; Leach & Sitaram, 2007). Girls who have their education shortened tend to transition earlier into marriage and sex work (Karnataka Health Promotion Trust, 2012). Importantly, female sex workers under the age of 20 are two to four times more likely to become HIV-infected than older female sex workers (Silverman, 2011).

To understand the high prevalence of girls dropping out of school, it is necessary to examine the social milieu in which gender intersects with other forms of disadvantage. Within the context of economically depressed and rural regions of Northern Karnataka, Dreze and Sen (2002) illustrate how gender norms that endorse patriarchal beliefs about masculinity advantage males. The social phenomenon of 'son preference', characterised by male surplus and female neglect and infanticide, can disadvantage girls throughout their life (Nayar, 2011). Regarded as *parayadhan* (belonging to another family), families view marriage as the 'ultimate' objective of a daughter's upbringing. This temporary membership of a girl in her natal home, which she has to leave once she is married, often makes her education a less beneficial and less relevant option for poor, lower caste families (Azim Premji Foundation, 2004; Jha & Jhingran, 2002).

In response to high rates of girls dropping out of school and high HIV prevalence, Karnataka Health Promotion Trust (KHPT), an NGO engaged in HIV and reproductive health-related projects in India, developed the *Samata* project in the rural areas of Bagalkot and Bijapur district of Northern Karnataka. The main objective of *Samata* was to delay lower caste adolescent girls' age of marriage and entry into sex work by supporting their entry into and retention in secondary education (Beattie et al., 2015). In particular, the project was comprised of a comprehensive, multi-layered intervention that worked with key stakeholders (girls, families, boys, village leaders, school teachers, policy makers) to change social norms regarding gender, child marriage and girls' education, as well as to link lower caste families to government social welfare schemes that provide scholarships,

What is known about this topic?

- Females from lower castes in rural communities have lower high school enrolment than males.
- Girls who have their education shortened following harassment from boys tend to transition earlier into marriage and sex work.
- Attitudes, behaviours and hierarchies of power with regards to gender relations begin to crystallise and become enacted in adolescence.

What this paper adds?

- Any sign of 'moral indecency' elicited teasing from boys and led to early school drop-out of girls by parents.
- Participants' perspectives on the empowerment of girls were fraught with patriarchal and paternalistic conceptions of equality.
- Viewing masculinity as relational, dynamic and multiple provides a critical entry point to disrupt the definition of masculinity and the creation of hierarchal gender relations.

bicycles and other incentives to support retention in school. In particular, boys' behaviours and attitudes towards girls have been regarded by the intervention staff as one of the many important barriers impeding girls' access to education and academic performance (Bhagavatheeswaran et al., 2016; Leach & Sitaram, 2007; Ramesh et al., 2008; Silverman, 2011). This concern led to the development of the *Parivartan* program—a sports-based, life skills and empowerment program for adolescent boys that encourages them to critically reflect on gender norms, including attitudes around violence against women and 'eve' teasing (i.e. the sexual harassment/abuse of girls).

1.1 | Theoretical framework

With respect to understanding adolescent male students' perspectives on gender relations, Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity provides a conceptual lens through which to view the tensions and conflicts involved in the perpetuation of gender inequities that female students face. A substantial body of research has demonstrated that adherence to 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 77)—patterns of practices that promote certain ways of 'being male' through the subordination of alternative masculine and feminine subject positions—underlies a range of negative behaviours for both men and women (Amuchastegui, 1998; Liguori & Lamas, 2003). However, in light of research that complicates the unitary understanding of masculinity (Wetherell & Edley, 1999; Whitehead, 1998), Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) expands the concept of hegemonic masculinity to highlight the complexities that lie beneath

the surface of apparently stable, settled and coherent masculinities. By viewing gender as 'relational', 'dynamic' and 'multiple', Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 37) brings to bear the 'gender politics within masculinity', those that are embedded in the maintenance of gender, power and patriarchal relationships.

Adolescence marks a formative period through which gender identities are increasingly constructed and negotiated through a complex web of social and structural interactions (Ricardo, Barker, Pulerwitz, & Rocha, 2005). Although the family is usually the primary social institution within which gender norms and social behaviours are learned and reinforced, economic marginalisation is an important distal factor of traditional enactments of masculinity (Hunter, 2010; Sommer, Likindikoki, & Kaaya, 2013). Pradhan and Ram (2010) demonstrate what male youth, living in an impoverished rural setting in eastern India, view as being acceptable sexual conduct between men and women in relation to the socialisation process at the family level. According to these youth, young women who deviate from gender norms should not be tolerated and warrant sanctions imposed on them by men. Adolescence, then, is a time not only when a gender divide may intensify (Mensch, Bruce, & Greene, 1998), but also when attitudes, behaviours and hierarchies of power with regards to gender relations begin to crystallise and become enacted (Barker, Nascimento, Segundo, & Pulerwitz, 2004).

Understanding the social marginalisation of girls within larger projects of masculinity, we draw on a 'project ethnography' (Evans & Lambert, 2008) approach to examine gendered power relations among adolescent boys within the context of the *Parivartan* program. According to Evans and Lambert, project ethnography provides a useful methodological framework that understands interventions themselves as 'social arenas made up of different social actors and intersecting ideologies, relationships, interests and resources (2008, p. 469)'. Within the context of our research, the interactions between intervention staff and adolescent boys and the changes that occur over time among adolescent boys as a result of these interactions formed the focus of our study. More specifically, our study explores notions of masculinity within the context of two phases of the intervention: (a) how participants at baseline constructed notions of manhood in relation to girls' education and (b) how the intervention, one year into the program, influenced participants' perspectives on masculinity and gender power relationships.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Social intervention

Through the *Parivartan* program, mentors from the boys' community were selected and provided an honorarium of 2000 rupees (approximately 28 US dollars) every month to facilitate sports activities and classroom discussions to adolescent boys (ranging between the ages 13 and 18) every alternate week. All the adolescent boys' participation in the program and study were voluntary. Activities and discussions encouraged participants to reflect on and engage in more

gender equitable practices in their everyday lives. The intervention ran for one year after school and during weekends. Topics in classroom discussions included the treatment of women and girls and gender norms and expectations. Similarly, sports provided boys with the space and opportunity to practice the lessons they learned in class to challenge harmful ideas of masculinity amongst themselves outside the school setting. In an effort to support the program development, our study was conducted in the rural communities of Bijapur and Bagalkot to explore the attitudes and behaviours of boys that perpetuate the disproportionate secondary school dropout of girls.

2.2 | Study context

Agriculture is the primary source of employment for many rural residents in Northern Karnataka. In Bagalkot and Bijapur, respectively, 65% and 60% of workers are engaged in agriculture-related activities (Karnataka District Census, 2011). Many who depend upon agriculture for their livelihood are landless because ownership of farmland is highly concentrated (Karnataka Agriculture Profile, 2008). Land ownership, which is the main determinant of economic position in rural areas, influences school enrolment, as can be seen by higher enrolment among children from families with larger land holdings (Azim Premji Foundation, 2004; Kanbargi & Kulkarni, 1991). Given the highly uneven distribution of wealth within agricultural communities, agricultural landless labourers and marginal farmers often discontinue their children's schooling in order to have them help the family earn an income (Reddy & Reddy, 1992). Girls especially are commonly deprived of access to higher education and employment (Ritambhara & Acharya, 2003).

2.3 | Ethnographic data collection

In an attempt to understand the impact of the *Parivartan* program on adolescent boys' perceptions on gender relations, our project ethnography involved the collaboration between KHPT and the University of Manitoba's Centre for Global Public Health. The study involved a two-phase process. The first phase, which employed in-depth interviews, provided the baseline for the intervention. The second phase involved participant observation and fieldnote writing with participants who had completed or were currently part of the intervention. The study was conducted in the villages that were previously selected for exploratory qualitative interviews with adolescent girls in Bagalkot and Bijapura district (Bhagavatheeswaran et al., 2016).

For the first phase, we recruited two adolescent boys belonging to the SC/ST community, between the ages of 13 and 18, from each of the 10 villages where the intervention was implemented. The boys were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods. The first respondent from each village was purposively selected for the interview with the help of a local panchayat member (village- or small town-level political leader) or youth leader and the second respondent from the same village was identified and interviewed with the help of the first respondent. This method was adopted in all the

10 villages until a sample of 20 adolescent boys were recruited in the study. The interviews were conducted between February–April 2014.

Two locally-trained male qualitative researchers from KHPT conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews in the local language, Kannada. Based on previous research within the region and feedback from the participants, boys tended to be more comfortable opening up to someone of the same gender. Questions focused on boys' perceptions of gender norms especially relating to education and the marriage of girls in their families and neighbourhoods.

In the second phase of the research, with the daily support of the local interpreter, the first author was involved in participant observation and ethnographic fieldnote writing over a four-month period from October 2015–January 2016 in villages in Bagalkot district. The first author interacted and spoke with ten of the participants who had completed the intervention as well as the participants who were currently in the program. Field immersion took place in the contexts where programs operated, enabling the first author to observe classroom discussions, sport-related activities and community functions.

2.4 | Data analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded, translated and transcribed into English. Transcripts and fieldnotes were coded for key themes and emergent categories focused on representing adolescent boys' views and experiences through their narrative accounts, followed by thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) which drew linkages to theoretical understandings of masculinity. NVivo 9 was used to store, manage and organise the data and create analytical codes (Liamputtong, 2013).

2.5 | Ethics

Given the respondents were below the age of 18, written consent in the local language (Kannada) was required from a parent or guardian followed by the written consent of the respondent. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Manitoba and St. John's Medical College ethics boards. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to protect confidentiality and anonymity.

3 | FINDINGS

3.1 | Participant characteristics

All 20 baseline interview participants came from co-ed schools, SC/ST backgrounds and had never been married. They were all male, with an age range between 14 and 18 years (mean = 16 years). The education boys received ranged from standard 8–12; less than half (N = 8) completed standard 10. With respect to the 10 adolescent boy contacts that the first author interacted and informally spoke with during the ethnographic phase, all contacts were between the ages

13 and 18 and were currently enrolled in school in standard 8–12 grade levels. All contacts participated in the *Parivartan* program.

3.2 | Gendered division of labour

In Northern Karnataka, hierarchical gendered divisions of labour tended to reinforce the social worlds that boys and girls come to inhabit. As noted by some of our participants, the division of labour between boys and girls tended to mirror the responsibilities of their fathers and mothers. The work done by boys was intended to groom them into becoming the head of the household, whereas work for girls served to reproduce domestic duties.

Girls work in the shadows either doing housework or weeding the plants like their mothers, whereas boys help out their fathers with agricultural work, such as supplying water, fertilising the crops or feeding the cattle.
(Raj, age 15)

This is further illustrated during the first author's visits to the villages where boys were often seen playing outside or assisting their fathers on the fields, whereas girls were usually indoors tending to household chores with their mothers. Girls were rarely outside alone without the accompaniment of older family members. Because of the financial hardship most families faced, the hierarchical gendered division of labour only compounded the low value placed on girls' education. Some of the boys noted that girls were expected to stay at home and maintain household duties. Describing the reasons why parents would remove their daughters from school, 14-year-old Kumar explains, 'Some parents are too busy on the farm. They need the help of girls to manage the house so they drop her out of school'.

Not only did participants' view a girl's education as expendable, they also considered her work within the domestic sphere as safeguarding her reputation. As explained by 18-year-old Avinash, 'People will have a cheap opinion of girls who go out to work. This is the reason why we don't send girls in our family to work outside'. In an effort to control their moral presentation, a few of the boys also noted how girls were usually kept under close surveillance of parents and brothers within the house. As such, the patriarchal conceptions of gender, which defined the division of labour within the home, played an integral role not only in the value of a girl's education but also in the type of work deemed socially acceptable.

3.3 | A brother's filial duty

As the future provider, I have to protect my sisters otherwise how will they be safe?
(Prashant, age 17)

Boys often expressed a strong filial responsibility towards their sisters. For most respondents, this not only meant assuming the financial and social responsibilities of their sisters' education and marriage

arrangements but also taking on the role of 'protector'. Given the possible threat to their reputation, boys often expressed feelings of responsibility for their sisters' safety.

According to 17-year-old Aditya, the fear of his parents finding out that his sister was teased and possibly removing her from school motivated him to deal with the matter himself.

It is our duty to protect our sister. If parents come to know she was teased, they might drop her education because they think she is up to no good. This is why we have to solve the problem without telling our parents.

For some of the participants, 'resolving' teasing ranged from confronting the perpetrator or seeking support from adults to more violent actions.

I feel so much anger when anyone teases my sister. Because she's my family, I must protect her and fight anyone who bothers her. (Krishna, age 17)

If warning the boy against teasing doesn't work, we should report him to his parents. [But] if he continues I will have to use force. (Aditya, age 17)

In the process of 'protecting' their sisters, girls were under the surveillance and disciplinary control of their brothers who decided what was socially acceptable. As noted by 15-year-old Ajeet: 'If we don't control them, others will tease them'. These paternalistic sentiments usually meant enforcing boundaries on their sisters' everyday routine in terms of what they wore, how they behaved, where they frequented, and whom they met.

If they wear a vulgar dress, I will tell them not to wear such a dress. A dress should look decent to the people who see us. I will teach them what is correct and what is wrong. (Avinash, age 18)

We need to teach our sisters good behaviours and how to behave in society. We can't let her go outside and wander the streets. (Aditya, age 17)

Based on the above narratives, being well-mannered and well-dressed was frequently used to describe sisters in a positive way—or negatively, if these attributes were believed to be lacking. Controlling a girl's sexuality was seen as crucial in maintaining her 'decency' and protecting her reputation and respectability.

3.4 | Perspectives on girls' education and social status

Although boys saw the merits of higher learning in terms of granting girls prestige and respect, education was also a vehicle through

which women learned to become more domesticated. Based on the following narratives, an educated woman was someone who was able to 'adjust to' and 'behave' in their husband's home.

A girl who marries too young cannot adjust to her husband's family. She will just want to stay with her parents. She will not understand the traditions and thoughts of those family members. (Manjunath, age 15)

After girls finish school, they should get married. They will know how to behave and handle the responsibilities at home. (Arun, age 14)

The skills that women learned in school were not only necessary to run a family but also to cope with domestic violence they might face at home. According to Harish, 'Education will give girls the strength to develop a mature and strong mind. If their husbands beat them they can put up with it. They won't cry or stop doing the household work'. For these boys, education was not only a mechanism to maintain the patriarchal family order but also maintain the subjugation of women.

Conversely, girls who were viewed as overly educated were a threat to boys' sense of manhood. During informal interactions with a group of boys, a couple of them expressed how higher education would not only make boys feel inferior but also make girls 'arrogant' and 'demanding'.

If girls become too educated, boys think that they will have to work under them. They will feel jealous that girls will have a better position than them. Society might insult him because he is dependent on a woman's money. (Vijay, age 17)

Boys feel that girls should not get ahead of them in life. If they support girls' education they may become arrogant. (Ajeet, age 15)

Not only were girls in high-ranking positions viewed as a threat to boys' reputation, they were also viewed as shifting the power and gender dynamics within the family. Women who were financially self-sufficient were seen as less subservient, which, in turn, made them less likely to fulfil domestic obligations. In other words, their independence posed a threat to masculinity and the patriarchal order of familial responsibilities.

If a husband doesn't have a job, he gets upset when his wife has one instead. He will want her to stay home and cook food for him. People will think he's less of a man because his wife is working and leading the family. (Prashant, age 17)

Educated girls will not know how to take care of her husband's family whereas an uneducated girl will stay quiet and do as she is told. (Kunal, age 15)

These narratives portray gender relationships as hinging on female virtue. Some of the boys noted a preference for girls who embodied the 'traditional' values of humility and self-restraint. Fifteen-year-old Suresh states: 'A girl should have self-discipline. They should not speak to or make friends with any boys. People in the society should not speak negatively about them'. In general, there was a striking contradiction that ran across the participant narratives with respect to girls' education. Education was viewed as an important part of producing 'decent' and 'respectable' women who could be viewed as appealing future wives. At the same time, education, and particularly 'over-education', was viewed as potentially threatening men's position of power in the family and in society.

3.5 | Moral fragility of girls in the education system

Aside from disciplining and regulating a girl's already fragile social positioning, boys adopted a moral critique on girls who failed to complete secondary school based on the assumption that they received the same educational support as boys. For Dhruv and Avinash, the removal of girls from school was thus attributed to a character fault.

The character of girls is very important in our community. If girls have good qualities boys will also learn good qualities. [However] If they take the wrong path parents will drop them out of school and perform their marriage. (Dhruv, age 16)

Some girls will not study and only roam around. In that situation, parents will make them drop out of school. (Avinash, age 18)

Predicated on the perception of gender equality within the education system, girls who were not in school were viewed as either lacking 'character' or 'discipline'. The good/bad moral dichotomy was thus commonly evoked among boys to justify and condone the removal of girls from school. In the case of sisters who failed to meet the moral standards of society, a few of the boys expressed a sense of moral authority to insist upon their marriage. Fifteen-year-old Suresh comments: 'If they are disciplined, they can study whatever they want. If they don't heed our words until 12th standard, we will perform their marriage'.

3.6 | Contested masculinities

Countering the patriarchal norms that perpetuate gender difference and inequality, some of the boys also emphasised the need to support the education of girls. In the following interviews, Dhruv and Ajeet expressed the conscious effort of rallying their parents to support the education of their sisters.

We should understand why girls do not show interest in education and what their problem is so we can support them. (Dhruv, age 16)

If they tell us that they want to continue their studies, I will convince my parents to continue her studies [as] it will be good for her future. (Ajeet, age 15)

Similar sentiments were also expressed by other participants who viewed education as a means of helping to liberate girls from patriarchy, by mitigating the power relations in the home.

If a girl gets an education she can lead her life without any restrictions from her husband and others. (Aditya, age 17)

If they get educated, they will get a good job. Even if they have any problem in their husband's house, she can lead her life with her salary. (Arun, age 14)

Perspectives that run counter to hegemonic masculinity are worth noting. The same respondents who regarded female sexuality as needing to be regulated and controlled also believed in raising the autonomy and quality of life of girls, and advancing gender equality within and outside the home. This latter attitude is likely due to the growing discourse on female empowerment and girls' education in the region brought by Samata's HIV prevention programs and other development projects.

3.7 | Intervening in masculinity: the Parivartan program

Turning to the intervention itself, local efforts to unsettle hegemonic masculinities became evident during a classroom discussion that the first author attended in Kaladagi village. Facilitated by a mentor, the space provided boys between the ages of 14–17 with the opportunity to explore the traditional norms of masculinity and simultaneously question the norms that stubbornly stood against efforts to transform local asymmetrical gender relations. Although some boys expressed the desire to mitigate the division of labour at home, such as helping out with household chores, the resistance from mothers and fathers alike posed a significant challenge. According to 15-year-old Ajay, 'They scold me for doing women's work'. While others nodded in solidarity, the mentor would further question the 'roles' expected of men. In one poignant moment, 14-year-old Ramesh indignantly said: 'Boys can help out in the kitchen. Girls were not only born to cook'!

Sports were an integral component of the intervention that engaged boys to adopt the lessons they learned in class. Mentors would intervene when boys demonstrated acts of violence, aggression or sexist behaviours on the field, which was followed up with a discussion. The impact of the intervention became most evident during one of the group's *kho kho* practices, a team-based tag game commonly played in India, as noted in the following vignette:

One by one, a group of boys came to the aid of their fellow player who was in tears after falling down and scraping his knees. Even without the monitoring of adults or mentors, they displayed genuine camaraderie and concern for each other on the field. (First author field note excerpt, December 8, 2015)

As the sessions progressed, more boys expressed challenging social gender norms inside and outside the homes, such as helping out in household duties or confronting their male peers who were seen teasing the neighbourhood girls, as the skills and knowledge boys learned appeared to gain traction within their peer group.

3.7.1 | Implications of the intervention

Despite such supposed changes, informal discussions with adolescent boys revealed the strong patriarchal influence that continued to colour some of the boys' perceptions and expectations of girls. Such ideas reflected 'traditional' views of womanhood under the guise of gender equality.

First Author: What do you think of son preference?

Girls can do whatever boys can do but they are better equipped to take care of us when we are old. Sons don't care about us the same way as daughters. (Vijay, age 17)

While our participants would admonish the idea of gender preference, any redeeming reason to have a daughter was met with the expectation that she would fulfil her filial domestic duties.

Furthermore, the sports-oriented interventions tended to subscribe to dominant ideologies of manhood; particularly that of strong, physically active, able-male bodies. Such manifestations of masculinity became apparent in one of the first author's field visits in Arakeri village:

While preparing for the district level kho kho tournament, the boys would wake up early in the morning and stay up late in the night to practice for the competition. Bruised and covered in dust, they displayed a strength, discipline, and stamina in their training that appeared to be a central process whereby their identities and selves were crafted. (First author field note excerpt, December 16, 2016)

During informal conversations in between practice breaks, boys would often express the importance of a 'pure' mind and body in their training, which are ideals historic of Hindu nationalist discourses of moral, physical and spiritual strength (Banerjee, 2012). Such narratives were common among the boys who often expressed aspirations to serve the nation-state by working in the military or law enforcement (e.g. see: Khan et al., 2019). Despite considerable efforts of the

program managers to engage boys in equitable gender practices and beliefs, to some extent local ideals of masculinity still remained intact and go unchallenged.

4 | DISCUSSION

In relation to *Parivatan's* intervention, findings from our project ethnography illustrate an array of perspectives and practices that underlie forms of social inequities that diminish girls' access to education. Within a context of patriarchal relations and economic marginalisation, parents had a profound influence on the formation of gender relations, particularly the differential treatment of boys and girls, and the gendered division of labour, which often came at the cost of the girls' education (Verma & Mahendra, 2004). As noted elsewhere, economic marginalisation strongly influences the everyday enactments of masculinity and gender relations (Hunter, 2010; Messerschmidt, 2000; Silberschmidt, 2001). For the participants, the high regulation and surveillance of girls' sexuality from their parents was also a practice they came to adopt. Any sign of 'moral indecency' was viewed as a risk to their character, which justified the early marriage, moral policing and school drop-out of girls by parents, as well as teasing from boys. As noted by other scholars (Das, 1988; Dube, 1998; Galambos, Almeida, & Petersen, 1990; Gibson & Lindegaard, 2007; Verma et al., 2006), sexual segregation and internalisation of what constitutes feminine and masculine behaviour appears to begin early in childhood. According to our participants, male dominance was usually inculcated in the home, which translated into the idea of control over females in general, often in the form of regulating and monitoring girl's sexuality, in the name of protecting their honour (see, e.g. Pelto, Joshi, & Verma, 1999; Verma & Mahendra, 2004).

Participants' perspectives on the empowerment of girls were fraught with patriarchal and paternalistic conceptions of equality. On the one hand, boys believed girls could achieve the same level of success and education, and on the other, girls who were too educated were viewed as a threat to the family household dynamic. Instead of disrupting the patriarchal family unit, education served only to reinforce the subservient positions of women within the home. As noted by Govender (2011, p. 898), 'fantasies of hegemonic power relate to the broader context of masculinities feeling threatened...where women are becoming increasingly prominent in the "public" domain, and thus, impinging on a traditionally male space'.

Although the boys in our study often subscribed to dominant conceptions of masculinity, they were also at times critical of the gender inequality they encountered around them. Some of the boys went beyond simply criticising the unfair treatment of girls. During classroom discussions and informal conversations, some openly advocated for gender equity within the education system and household environment. As Ricardo and colleagues (2005) note, adolescence marks a critical period among boys in terms of constructing and negotiating their gender identity. Moreover, they acquire more complex cognitive abilities, including the capacity to reflect on the potential to act in ways counter to prevailing gender

norms (Mensch et al., 1998). Among boys who participated in the program, negotiating gender relationships was often conflictual: their advocacy for greater gender equality often appealed to traditionalist archetypes of femininity. The reality that boys simultaneously support gender equality while reinforcing 'traditional' gender norms has been observed by other scholars (Barker et al., 2004; Morrell, Jewkes, & Lindegger, 2012; Sommer et al., 2013). Moreover, by intervening in masculinity on the level of sports, traditional archetypes of manhood inadvertently remained intact while alienating other subordinated forms of masculinity that are perceived as either feminine or less masculine.

4.1 | Limitation

The first author's reliance on translators for the in-depth interviews was somewhat hindered because he was not able to immediately understand the interview content and spontaneously probe participant narratives. To ensure the quality of the data, we were particularly diligent in double-checking information for methodological thoroughness and systematic crosschecking of interpretations. Given our research focus on the *Parivartan* program for adolescent boys, we were not able to carefully attend to the realities and experiences of adolescent girls. However, within the context of the larger *Samata* project, research on adolescent girls' secondary school dropout and retention have been conducted extensively (Beattie et al., 2015; Bhagavatheeswaran et al., 2016; Prakash et al., 2017; Ramanaiik et al., 2018). While our data provide important information on emerging dynamics of masculinity, some areas may have been underexplored as the short duration of our fieldwork did not allow us to fully describe the diverse experiences and realities of adolescent schoolboys.

5 | CONCLUSION

Within the context of adolescence, understanding masculinity as socially contingent and, therefore, continually shifting provides an entry point through which boys can transcend patriarchal expectations. Such contradictions offer possibilities for theoretical as well as practical interventions with respect to adolescent boys. The boys in our study can be viewed as actively engaged in the construction, undoing, and remaking of hegemonic masculinity. In relation to the *Parivartan's* program context, we have attempted to trace the reigning cultural ideologies and practices that perpetuate the asymmetric gender experiences of boys and girls. At the same time, by attending to the contradictions that arise in local perceptions of manhood when participants critically reflect on emerging discourses of female empowerment, we begin to see possibilities for developing alternative and more egalitarian forms and practices of masculinity.

In terms of future work, any intervention that attempts to address HIV vulnerability and the disproportionate school dropout of girls must expand the range and understanding of masculinity to

include boys who may be negatively affected by hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Viewing masculinity as socially contingent, shifting and still under negotiation provides a critical entry point for program implementers to disrupt the dominating forms of manhood and hierarchal gender relations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The *Samata* project is funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) as part of STRIVE, a 6-year program of research and action devoted to tackling the structural drivers of HIV (<http://STRIVE.lshtm.ac.uk/>). The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of DFID. We are especially grateful to our research participants who generously shared their time and perspectives with our team.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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How to cite this article: Huynh A, Ramanaiik S, Nargarchi D, et al. Exploring male adolescents' perceptions of gender relations in South India: A project ethnography of the Parivartan program. *Health Soc Care Community*. 2019;00: 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12908>