

## ABSTRACT

Gender, Generation And Negotiation: Adolescence And Young Indo-Trinidadian  
Women's Identities In The Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

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This study examines the gender ideals shaping contemporary Indo-Trinidadian girls' perceptions of 'appropriate' womanhood. It focuses on young women 15 to 25 years old who live, work or go to school in a suburban area along the "East-West Corridor" in Northern Trinidad. Using participant observation, focus groups, workshops and individual interviews to supplement survey data, it explores the relationship among religious, family, 'community' and media messages regarding femininity, sexuality and morality. Specifically, it looks at girls' views regarding deportment, reputation and respectability, and the demands of Indo-Trinidadian womanhood. It also examines how young women's aspirations regarding education, careers, marriage, motherhood and equality reflect the contradictions and ambiguities of competing and overlapping ideals. The study concludes that, essentially, Indo-Trinidadian girls feel expected to be feminine, asexual, obedient and respectable. Yet, internally inconsistent messages simultaneously convey ideals of individual decision-making, challenge and independence. Thus, girls appear to want to challenge traditional gender roles in the spheres of work and home at the same time as they regulate these potential contestations according to dualistic ethnic and gender ideologies.

While Indo-Trinidadian imperatives powerfully regulate girls' sense of "insider" femininity and 'acceptable' ethnic identities, notions of 'modernity, individual 'choice' and generational difference underscore a sense that it is legitimate to transgress and subvert these expectations and the demands of representation. Here, other messageways such as family and media provide significant competing ideals.

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I argue that these adolescents' performance of symbolic womanhood enables them to claim belonging to a range of sites, to meet divergent aspirations and to access different sources of approval. Yet, ultimately, the continual process of trying to find an 'appropriate' balance of behaviours and identities creates tensions and ambiguities which mark these girls' experience of adolescence. The findings of this study therefore suggest that Indo-Trinidadian womanhood is popularly and effectively imagined and deployed, yet also considered highly symbolic, performative and only one of several compelling ideals. In the late twentieth century context, this picture of Indo-Trinidadian suburban girlhood highlights how "tribal" boundaries that rely on females' conformity and collusion are highly porous and often contested.

## Keywords:

Adolescence, Femininity, Indo-Trinidadian, Ethnicity, Gender, Generation, Negotiation.