



The Dynamics of Good Girl Syndrome: Investigating the Role of Conformity and Assertiveness on Self-Esteem in Young Women

Shreya Agrahari ; Tanya Sachdeva ; Himanshi

Sheetal Sharma ; Manya Khanna

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis was to examine the interrelationship between Good Girl Syndrome, assertiveness and self-esteem for young women aged 18 – 30 in India. The study included 100 females using methods with a quantitative design. The subsequent statistical analyses involved the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient, and multi-linear Regression. The study revealed that conformity and assertiveness didn't statistically significantly predict self-esteem, as hypothesized (Mahalik et al., 2005; Tylka & Hill, 2004). The findings of this study present intriguing evidence that the dynamics of Good Girl Syndrome may be more complicated than initially believed, also proposing further study into the region of young women in India culturally, socially. Finally, these findings evidence the continued conversation as to the consequences of feminine conformity on women's mental health and well-being (Simmons, 2007; Parent & Moradi, 2010).

Keywords : Good girl syndrome, Self esteem, Conformity, Assertiveness.

Introduction

The concept of "Good Girl Syndrome" refers to the societal expectations placed on women to conform to traditional feminine norms, prioritizing others' needs over their own desires and well-being (Simmons, 2007). These expectations can present themselves in many different ways, including being overly nice, modest, and selfless. Women in many cultures, including India, are socialized to fulfill these expectations, often sacrificing mental health and identity. Research shows that conforming to feminine norms is associated with both positive and negative effects on mental health and well-being (Parent & Moradi, 2010). For example, conforming to feminine norms can foster social approval and belonging (Mahalik et al., 2005), but it can also lead to decreased self-assertiveness, low self-esteem, and even loss of autonomy (Tylka & Hill, 2004; Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007).

The Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory (CFNI) can be used to evaluate women's conformity to feminine norms and their associated traits (i.e., Nice in Relationships, Thinness, Modesty, and Domesticity; (Mahalik et al., 2005). Women in India are often expected to conform to traditional feminine roles that prioritize family and social relationships over personal goals and aspirations (Chakraborty & Das, 2016). Young women in particular may feel pressure to conform to the social norms of behavior to maintain social approval and avoid criticism. Rachel Simmons' book The Curse of the Good Girl illustrates the challenges women routinely face as they learn that they should not be too sweet, agreeable, or modest, but that they should be smarter and sassier. Conformity to feminine norms has been associated with a variety of outcomes such as body image and eating disorders, low self-esteem, and low assertiveness (Tylka & Hill, 2004; Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007).

Assertiveness, in particular, is an important factor in terms of women's mental health, because it allows to be able to communicate their needs to others and when something is unacceptable or causes strain (Jakubowski & Lange, 1978). Moreover, self-esteem is also associated with women's mental health more generally, as self-esteem affects women's ability to pursue their life goals and aspirations (Branden, 1994). Although the relationship between conformity to feminine norms and women's mental health have been studied, there is a lack of research on the dynamics of Good Girl Syndrome with young women in India. Also, an exploratory study on conformity's association with assertiveness and self-esteem would benefit from the absence of a formal Good Girl scale.



This study, therefore, aims to examine Good Girl Syndrome, assertiveness and self-esteem in young women in India ages 18-30. We hypothesize that :

- Higher levels of conformity to feminine norms will be associated with decreased assertiveness and self-esteem (Mahalik et al., 2005; Tylka & Hill, 2004).
- Women who report higher levels of Good Girl Syndrome traits will experience more negative outcomes in terms of mental health and well-being (Simmons, 2007).
- Assertiveness will mediate the relationship between conformity to feminine norms and self-esteem (Jakubowski & Lange, 1978).

By exploring these dynamics, we can gain a better understanding of the impact of Good Girl Syndrome on young women's mental health and develop targeted interventions to promote their empowerment and well-being.

Problem Statement

Across the world, especially in collectivistic countries and cultures, the idea of an ideal woman is very restricted. A girl exists in the bounds of family and society, bearing the weight of society's moral code, this takes away their individuality. Women are discouraged from participating in outdoor activities, and indulging in the say of their heart. Women are kept away from artistic expression, their works are ridiculed and the right to expression curtailed, but they are taught and encouraged to perform for family and close ones.

Girls are always taught to keep their voices low, not to contradict their male counterparts, and be welcoming. The reward for this self sacrifice is recognition from family and close ones. While this reward system works well in the patriarchal society, it may lead to internal conflicts in women. This phenomenon is called the "good girl syndrome". It remains an under researched topic especially in the Indian context. There are multiple Indian studies on gender divide but clinical observation and empirical data on how it affects the lives of young women remains limited.

Research Objective

The objective of this study is to examine the effect of good girl syndrome on the young women population in urban India, by finding correlation between assertiveness, conformity and self esteem. The study also aims to explore the role of family expectations and cultural norms in reinforcing these behaviors.

Thematic Literature Review

SELF ESTEEM

The concept of good girl syndrome characterises a person as someone kind, selfless, and always accommodating. When we look in the literature, it shows that internalizing these norms has a considerable impact on women's self-esteem. Mahalik et al. (2005) asserted that women who are trying to conform to conventional ideas of femininity frequently experience feelings of esteem that come into conflict with their behaviours, and the expectations often reduce women's self-worth and authenticity. Kapoor et al. (2022) found that many women feel pressured to adhere to certain unrealistic beauty standards, and very often women seem to compare themselves to their social group, which can lead to lower self-esteem. Afreen et al. (2023) concluded how young women were dealing with social anxiety and low resilience due to suppressing their true feelings to be accepted by the society; A behaviour that echoes the good girls script and often leads to emotional disconnection.

Similarly, Sharma and Kumari (2022) found that women are often influenced by family and media, and are conflicted between being agreeable and being themselves, which results in low self-esteem. Though the evidence is clear. Most studies used self-reports as a tool for analysis and lack cultural context to deeply understand this concept. Future research should explore backgrounds in real-life scenarios.

CONFORMITY

Conformity, the process whereby people change their beliefs, attitudes, actions, or perceptions to more closely match those held by groups to which they belong or want to belong or by groups whose approval they desire (Levine, n.d.). When we reflect on collectivist society where opinions of everyone matters and focus is on collective development of everyone in the culture, we find that the premise means men. Taking men's opinions and moving ahead with men's future, women are often left behind and told to take a back seat. Women are supposed to follow rules, listen to elders, be polite, and avoid conflicts.



(Desai, 2001). These behaviors are usually praised and seen as signs of being a “good girl”. In many cultures, including India, this idea is deeply rooted in society. Families, schools, and media all play a role in shaping how girls are expected to behave (Payne, 2025).

In a study, Carol Gilligan (1982) found that many girls learn to hide their real opinions just to appease others or to seem nice. This puts pressure on girls, from all ages, to always act in ways that others wish from you, even if it's uncomfortable. On the other hand, Niaz, 2003 showed that girls might use conformity as a way to stay safe from violence and harm, or avoid judgment and found that some girls follow rules on the outside, but still have strong opinions and dreams. This shows that conformity doesn't always weaken a person's self esteem. Chaudhuri 2016 believes that forcing girls to always be “good” can lead to problems like low self-esteem or stress. Sen et al. 2007 suggests that many girls feel pressure to be “good” all the time, and this can harm their well-being.

ASSERTIVENESS

Good Girl Syndrome has been linked to decreased assertiveness in women, with studies suggesting that conformity to traditional feminine norms can lead to reduced assertiveness (Mahalik et al., 2005; Parent & Moradi, 2010). Assertiveness is being able to advocate for your needs and wants and express your feelings openly and appropriately, all while keeping your boundaries intact and honoring the rights of others (Alberti & Emmons, 2008). Being “nice” and accommodating can create major barriers for women in articulating their own needs and desires, which in turn creates an inability to be assertive (Simmons, 2007). Studies have generally demonstrated a relationship between the support of traditional feminine norms and lower levels of assertiveness (Tylka & Hill, 2004; Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007).

However, other studies maintain that Good Girl Syndrome and assertiveness have a more nuanced relationship, and women are capable of being assertive in some situations and still complying with feminine expectations (Burns & Leonard, 2014). In summary, literature indicates the connection between Good Girl Syndrome and a lack of assertiveness in women, but questions remain regarding this relationship and the impact Good Girl Syndrome has on women being empowered. Thoughtfully assessing the literature, it can be concluded that while there is much written on Good Girl Syndrome and assertiveness, there is also a need for research to be more contextualized, complex, and nuanced. Most studies use self-report, which may overlook the subtleties of the assertiveness constructed in. Additionally, research has highlighted the importance of promoting women's empowerment and autonomy in order to enhance their assertiveness and overall well-being (Simmons, 2007).

Methodology

Design

A quantitative design was used in the present study. In this case, the research aimed to explore the correlation between self esteem, conformity and assertiveness using data collected at a single point in time. The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was the statistical approach that was utilized to assess the data we collected. The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient examines the strength and directionality of the linear relationship between two continuous variables.

Sample

The sample for the study consisted of 100 female participants aged 18 to 30 years, citizens of India. We used the convenience sampling method. We chose this method because it is practical. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all the individuals before the administration of the survey.

Instruments

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- **The Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale-** The RSES questionnaire comprises 10 items. The items were scored by totalling the individual 4 point items after reverse-scoring the negatively worded items which were 2, 5, 6, 8 and 9 (Rosenberg, 1979).



- **The Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory-** CNFI is scored in a Likert scale where Strongly Disagree =0; Disagree= 1; Agree = 2; and Strongly Agree = 3. Higher scores indicate strong conformity, while lower ones indicate moderate conformity, moderate nonconformity, or strong nonconformity (0), in that order (Mahalik et al., 2005).
- **The Rathus Assertiveness Schedule-** The RAS is a 30 item self report questionnaire. Scores are obtained by summing responses to each item, which are rated on a 6 point likert scale from very much like me, given 6 point to very much unlike me, given 1 point (McCormick, 1984).

Procedure

The questionnaire for the study was created using Google Forms. A link to the form was shared with the participants through digital platforms. An informed consent was presented to the participants before starting the questionnaire. The entire process took approximately 10–15 minutes per participant. After collection, the data were compiled and analysed statistically with the help of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences to examine the correlation between Self Esteem, Conformity And Assertiveness to understand the levels of good girl syndrome within the Indian population.

Data Analysis

A multiple linear regression was performed to examine whether conformity and assertiveness were predictors of self-esteem. In total, 100 women participated, but the model was not statistically significant: $F(2, 97) = 1.654, p = .197, R^2 = .033$. However, neither variable was significant: assertiveness, $\beta = -0.090, p = .371$ and conformity: $\beta = 0.165, p = .103$. All of the data were analyzed using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation using SPSS. All correlations were weak and non-significant.

Result and Core Findings

A multiple linear regression analysis was performed to find out whether conformity and assertiveness had an effect on self-esteem amongst women.

Descriptive Statistics

There were 100 participants included in the study. The mean and standard deviation for each variable is listed below.

Conformity: $M = 34.72, SD = 5.37$

Assertiveness: $M = 24.91, SD = 6.99$

Self-Esteem: $M = 24.02, SD = 4.40$

Regression Analysis

The regression model (which included conformity and assertiveness as predictors) was not statistically significant: $F(2, 97) = 1.654, p = .197; R^2 = .033$ means the model accounted for 3.3% of the variance in self-esteem scores. Regarding each individual variable, the results were as follows, assertiveness: $\beta = -0.090, p = .371$ and conformity: $\beta = 0.165, p = .103$. These results conclude conformity and assertiveness were not statistically significant predictors of self-esteem amongst women.

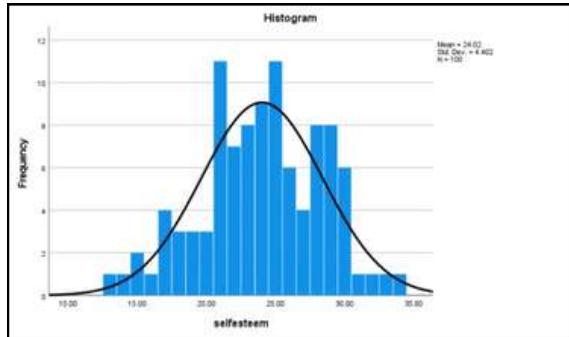


Figure 1: Frequency histogram and normal probability curve for self esteem central measures

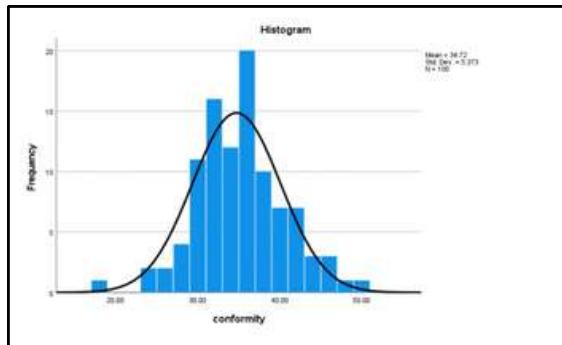


Figure 2: Frequency histogram and normal probability curve for conformity central measures

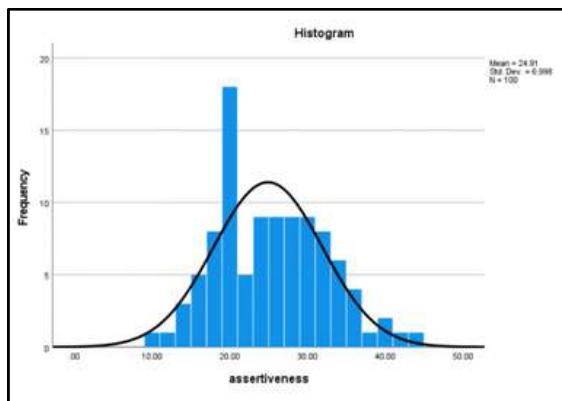


Figure 3: Frequency histogram and normal probability curve for assertiveness central measures



▶ Correlations

		Correlations	
		conformity	selfesteem
conformity	Pearson Correlation	1	.158
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.117
	N	100	100
selfesteem	Pearson Correlation	.158	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.117	.446
	N	100	100
assertiveness	Pearson Correlation	.079	-.077
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.432	.446
	N	100	100

Figure 4: Correlation table for conformity, self-esteem and assertiveness

▶ Correlations

		Correlations	
		conformity	assertiveness
conformity	Pearson Correlation	1	.079
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.432
	N	100	100
assertiveness	Pearson Correlation	.079	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.432	
	N	100	100

Figure 5: Correlation table for conformity and assertiveness

		Correlations	
		conformity	selfesteem
conformity	Pearson Correlation	1	.158
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.117
	N	100	100
selfesteem	Pearson Correlation	.158	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.117	
	N	100	100

Figure 6: Correlation table for conformity and self-esteem



Model Summary ^b								
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2
1	.192 ^a	.033	.013	4.37272	.033	1.654	2	87
a. Predictors: (Constant), conformity, assertiveness								
b. Dependent Variable: selfesteem								
ANOVA ^b								
Model	Sum of Squares		df	Mean Square	F	Sig.		
1	Regression:	63.257	2	31.629	1.654	.192 ^b		
	Residual:	1854.703	87	19.121				
	Total:	1917.960	89					
a. Dependent Variable: selfesteem								
b. Predictors: (Constant), conformity, assertiveness								
Coefficients ^a								
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients			Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.		Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	20.739	3.172	6.539	<.001			
	assertiveness	-.057	.063	-.090	.900	.371	.994	1.006
	conformity	.135	.082	.165	1.647	.103	.994	1.006
a. Dependent Variable: selfesteem								

Figure 7: ANOVA and Coefficients Model summary

Coefficients ^a								
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients			Standardized Coefficients		Collinearity Statistics		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF	
1	(Constant)	20.739	3.172	6.539	<.001			
	assertiveness	-.057	.063	-.090	.900	.371	.994	1.006
	conformity	.135	.082	.165	1.647	.103	.994	1.006
a. Dependent Variable: selfesteem								
Collinearity Diagnostics ^a								
Model	Dimension	Eigenvalue	Condition Index		Variance Proportions			
			(Constant)		assertiveness	conformity		
1	1	2.938	1.000	.00	.01	.00		
	2	.051	7.581	.04	.93	.11		
	3	.011	16.265	.96	.06	.89		
a. Dependent Variable: selfesteem								
Residuals Statistics ^b								
	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	N			
Predicted Value	21.5459	26.0801	24.0200	7.9935	100			
Residual	-10.53671	10.14786	.00000	4.32832	100			
Std. Predicted Value	-3.095	2.577	.000	1.000	100			
Std. Residual	-2.410	2.321	.000	.990	100			
a. Dependent Variable: selfesteem								

Figure 8: Coefficients, Collinearity Diagnostics and Residuals Statistics



Interpretation of Findings

The original hypothesis was that higher conformity and lower assertiveness would lead to lower self-esteem. However, the data did not support this assumption. Still, the direction of the relationships gives some insight: Assertiveness had a small negative relationship with self-esteem (as expected). Conformity, on the other hand, showed a positive trend, which was opposite to what was predicted. While these findings are not statistically significant, the trends observed could be interesting and may show potential for future research, especially with larger or more diverse samples from different backgrounds or sectors.

Discussion and Analysis

These results add to the literature about the complex relationship among congruity, assertiveness, and self-esteem for women. Contrary to our original hypothesis, the results did not find statistically significant relationships between assertiveness or conformity in predicting self-esteem. This builds on previous research that indicates the nature of concern as psychosocial phenomena might be complex, beyond the scope of study (Kashima, Y., and e al., 1995). The positive trend between congruity and self-esteem, although not statistically significant, was contrary to earlier studies that found congruity negatively impacted self-esteem (see for example, Maslow, 1943). We speculate the differences in results may have to do with sample characteristics or the respective measures. That said, the negative relationship between assertiveness and self-esteem, while consistent with our hypothesis, supports some earlier research and seems to indicate women did not indicate relationships that would indicate assertive behavior was beneficial to acceptance (Hollandsworth & Wall, 1977). The positive trend between congruity and self-esteem was surprising. Women, in certain situations, may conform, and in doing so, still think positively of themselves. We would suggest further research on these findings, in alternate cultural or social contexts.

There are several limitations of the present study. The sample size of 100 likely constrained the statistical power of finding relationships as significant. In addition, self-report measures allow for the potential of bias to be introduced. Future research might focus on larger, more diverse samples or to include additional variables that may covary with self-esteem. Additional studies could also look at how conformity, assertiveness, and self-esteem may relate to each other in different populations or contexts. In addition, longitudinal designs could provide some information about how the relations may change over time. Since self-esteem is multi-faceted, if future research takes a multi-predictor and multi-outcome approach, it may assist our understanding of self-esteem. Overall, while the present study did not find significant predictive relationships between conformity, assertiveness, and self-esteem, it adds to the discussion around the multi-faceted and complex nature of this particular interplay. To fully appreciate these dynamics more research is warranted.

Policy Recommendations

Ultimately, based on our research, we offer the following policies and practice recommendations:

Recommendation 1

Mental health interventions through education, counselling and community development:

- Recognize the importance of community based programs that promote healthy relationships and challenge gender norms.
- Collaborate with NGOs & government organisations to develop policies that enhance awareness of women and girls decision making skills.
- Implement a family support system that encourages positive reinforcement to promote the empowerment of young women.

Recommendation 2

Promoting Gender Equality (SDG 5) through Legal Awareness, Media Representation and Gender Sensitization :

- Encourage media representation that challenges gender norms and promotes different female characters that are empowered.
- Legislate and enforce laws that guarantee one will be equal pay for equal work, regardless of gender, to promote transparency.
- Conduct Workshops, seminars and online campaigns that educate women about their legal rights and how to assert them effectively



Conclusion

The data analysis showed no evidence of any relationship between feminine norms, assertiveness, and self-esteem in the sample population. In our multiple regression analyses, the overall model achieved statistical insignificance, $F(2, 97) = 1.654$, $p = .197$, with our R^2 number indicating that the predictors only explained a small amount of variance in self-esteem ($R^2 = .033$). Furthermore, neither assertiveness ($\beta = -0.090$, $p = .371$) nor conformity ($\beta = 0.165$, $p = .103$) had individual effects. These outcomes suggest that little evidence exists that the two variables meaningfully influence each other in this sample. It is most likely other psychosocial, cultural, or contextual determinants are playing a larger role. Future research should explore further variables and utilize larger and more diverse samples to understand the nuanced determinants of self-esteem in young women, specifically in the Indian cultural context.



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Appendix

Section A: Conformity to Femininity Norms Inventory (Selected Items)

Below are the items selected from the CFNI (Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory) that were used in the study:

1. I would be happier if I was thinner.
2. I would feel extremely ashamed if I had many sexual partners.
3. I don't tend to worry about gaining weight.
4. I tell everyone about my accomplishments.
5. Whether I'm in one or not, romantic relationships are often on my mind.
6. I feel attractive without makeup.
7. I find children annoying.
8. I feel good about myself when others know that I care about them.
9. I would feel guilty if I had a one-night stand.
10. Being nice to others is extremely important.
11. I regularly wear makeup.
12. I tend to watch what I eat in order to stay thin.
13. I always downplay my achievements.
14. I always try to make people feel special.
15. My life plans do not rely on my having a romantic relationship.
16. I do all of the cleaning, cooking and decorating where I live.
17. It is important to look physically attractive in public.
18. I try to be sweet and nice.
19. I am not afraid to hurt people's feelings to get what I want.
20. I enjoy being in the spotlight.
21. I would only have sex if I was in a committed relationship like marriage.
22. I would be ashamed if someone thought I was mean.

Section B: Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (All Items)

All ten items from the RSES were used in the study:

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
2. At times I think I am no good at all.
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
6. I certainly feel useless at times.
7. I feel that I'm a person of worth.
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
9. All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure.
10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.



Section C: Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (Selected Items)

Selected questions used from the assertiveness questionnaire are:

1. Most people stand up for themselves more than I do.
2. When I am eating out and the food I am served is not cooked the way I like it, I complain to the person serving it.
3. I am careful not to hurt other people's feelings, even when I feel hurt.
4. When I am asked to do something, I always want to know why.
5. If a close relative that I liked were upsetting me, I would hide my feelings rather than say that I was upset.
6. I have sometimes not asked questions for fear of sounding stupid.
7. I often have a hard time saying "No."
8. I tend not to show my feelings rather than upsetting others.