Original Article:
Assertiveness in Indian Context: Perspectives of Women in Coastal Karnataka

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Citation

Open Access Archives
http://cogprints.org/view/subjects/OJHAS.html
http://openmed.nic.in/view/subjects/ojhas.html

Submitted: Jun 18, 2016; Accepted: Jul 16, 2016; Published: Jul 30, 2016

Abstract: Introduction: Assertiveness is considered to be an important communication skill influencing our interpersonal relations. It is known to play a role in stress management, conflict resolution and developing a positive self-concept. However, it is often suggested that Indians may not be as assertive as their Western counterparts. Indian women in particular have an image of being docile and submissive in a patriarchal society bowing down to cultural norms. Method: This study is a qualitative inquiry to explore the views of Indian women about assertiveness. Four focus group discussions were conducted with women from different social strata around Udupi and Mangalore to understand their perspectives on assertiveness. Findings: Three key themes emerged from the analysis of the data. Perceptions of others to one being assertive, sense of freedom after having expressed one’s emotions assertively and consequences of being assertive appeared to be major concerns in being assertive. Conclusion: Exploring the role of assertiveness in women empowerment and social development is recommended.

Key Words: Assertiveness, Culture, Self-concept, Qualitative research, Indian women

Introduction:
Communication skills play an important role in our everyday life as we relate to different people around us. They help us express our views, needs, emotions and support interpersonal relationships at home, work and in the community. The way we communicate can influence the quality of our relationships with people and our life role functioning.(1) Assertiveness is one such communication skill which involves expressing our views and opinions in an honest, straightforward manner without affecting the rights of others.(2,3) It involves standing up for oneself and believing that our opinions and rights are as important as anybody else’s. It basically means respecting oneself as well as others.(4) Assertive behaviour has been considered along a continuum where submissive/passive behaviour is considered at one end and aggressive behaviour at the other extreme end with assertive behaviour between the two. Passive aggressive is another dimension to this behaviour which has a mix of aggressive and submissive strategies. People are usually categorized as assertive, submissive, aggressive and passive aggressive based on their response styles.

Assertiveness is considered as a part of social skills and adds on to the individual’s social competence. In the absence of which, an individual may experience stress, anxiety in some social situations, which in turn, may affect his productivity. On the other hand, an assertive person is assumed to be able to deal with his life situations in a positive manner, which helps boost his self-confidence, self-esteem and in turn, his self-concept.

It is known to play a role in stress management, conflict resolution and helps us develop a positive self-concept. Being assertive in workplace or family situations is known to improve marital relationships and relations with colleagues.(5,6) However, it is often suggested that Indians may not be as assertive as their Western counterparts.(4,7) Indian women in particular have an image of being docile and submissive in a patriarchal society bowing down to cultural norms.(8) It would be interesting to know the assertive behavior of women and perceptions regarding the same. Considering the fact that assertiveness has numerous advantages and may
influence one’s decision making ability and the ability of the person to make choices for oneself, it would be relevant to know how women feel about being assertive. Indian women often find themselves at a disadvantage when it comes to asserting themselves and hence their experiences about being assertive may throw light on the fabric of Indian society.

**Theoretical basis:** Gender studies suggest that historically women have been discriminated against and had to always fight for their rights.(9,10) Men often got their rights to education, livelihood, equality by default while women have had to stand up for themselves to achieve even a fraction of the same.(11,12) Major reforms in Indian society for women have come through them having to demand justice for them. In that sense, some women being aware of their rights and assertive enough to fight for their cause led to the modern woman having the privilege of living in a liberated society. However, even in this modern society today, the question arises if women are truly liberated. A feminist perspective would lead us to believe that a liberated woman is the one who is comfortable making personal choices for herself without guilt. Yet, typically today, it is not uncommon to see women still being hesitant to think for themselves, unsure of their choices and worrying about being judged. The burden of being right and doing right weighs heavily on their shoulders than on men, making her think carefully at every step. Social cognitive theory of gender development (14) suggests that gender conduct or how individuals behave as per their gender is determined by how they have been conditioned to think by their families, people around them and society in general. Their thinking patterns determine how they perceive themselves, what choices they make and what occupations they engage in. In this scenario, it becomes imperative for a woman to be assertive and cognizant of her own rights. India being such a diverse country in terms of socio-economic strata, education, cultural norms, regional differences, it is expected that there will not be any uniformity in women’s beliefs and perceptions about any issue. Understanding their beliefs specific to their context would therefore be necessary to gain a deeper understanding of their actions.

**Literature review:** Assertiveness per se is known to be a culture-specific and situation-specific phenomenon. Various studies have highlighted the role of culture in assertiveness. Numerous studies have reported differences in Indians/ Asians and other cultures in terms of assertiveness. Indian culture being a patriarchal one, encourages power-distance and uncertainty-avoidance in relationships. People tend to be conflict avoiding and submissive towards others rather than stand up for themselves. Therefore, Indians often come across as less assertive in comparison to Westerners.(4,7) Furnham (15) noted that the concept of assertiveness typically is an aspect of North American and European culture and in many other cultures such forms of assertiveness is neither encouraged nor tolerated. Humility, subservience and tolerance are placed above assertiveness, especially so for women. Goyal and Parkash (16) have highlighted being assertive as an important quality in women for being entrepreneurs. They noted that a typical patriarchal social structure and long years being dominated by men can lead to women not being confident about themselves and hence not willing to take risks. However, still very few studies have been conducted to explore the concept of assertiveness as experienced by Indian women. So, this study was undertaken to understand the views of Indian women about assertiveness and specific situations where they feel being assertive is required. This was a part of a larger study which explored the views about assertiveness among Indians in the age group of 25-50 years and included men as well as women from different backgrounds. This paper presents the views of women in coastal Karnataka and their perceptions about being assertive.

**Methods**
Qualitative methods were employed to explore the views of Indian women about assertiveness. Four focus group discussions were conducted with women from different social strata around Udupi and Mangalore to understand their perspectives on assertiveness. Focus group discussions are commonly used to obtain a broad range of views from a varied population on a topic of their relevance. Standard guidelines were used to conduct these focus group discussions.(17,18) Four focus group discussions (FGD) were done as follows: (1) Housewives in the age group of 35-50 years, (2) Housewives in the age group of 25-35 years, (3) Women from a low socio-economic background through a self-help group (SHG) and (4) Educated working women. Participant details are as given in Table 1. A total of 21 participants were recruited through these four focus group interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Manchakal</td>
<td>35-50 years</td>
<td>Four</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mangalore</td>
<td>25-35 years</td>
<td>Six</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Manipal</td>
<td>25-45 years</td>
<td>Five</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Belman</td>
<td>25-50 years</td>
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**Table 1: Details of Participants**

**Procedure:** The participants were contacted through a key contact person at the institution where they were working or from the community. Maximum variation sampling which is a type of purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants. Criteria like age, educational status, working status and socio-economic status were used to comprise the participants in the group. Snowball sampling of convenience was also used wherein the participant was asked to recommend and inform any other similar person who would be interested in participating in the group discussion. Each focus group had about four-six participants. We gave a brief idea about the topic before recruitment but did not disclose details about the questions to be asked. A common neutral place was decided for each interview and the participants were informed about the venue and timing. The investigator reminded the participants or the key informant a day before each interview to confirm their participation. At the venue, they were briefed about the topic and were then encouraged to discuss amongst themselves about the topic. The interview was recorded with a digital voice recorder. Verbal and written consent was taken to participate in the discussion and for recording the interviews. The participants were assured of the confidentiality being maintained for the issues discussed. No incentives were offered for participation in the interview but refreshments were provided as a token of appreciation. The first author was the moderator for all the interviews. A
post graduate student of the first author assisted during the interview as a note-taker. A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate discussion. Interview guide was not made available beforehand to the participants hence they were not aware of the exact questions to be asked. After an introduction about the concept of assertiveness was given along with some examples for a clear illustration, they were asked to relate and think of similar situations requiring assertive responses. Further questions about their perceptions about benefits of being assertive, difficulties in being assertive, people’s reactions to being assertive were asked. Each interview lasted for about forty-five minutes to one hour. The audiotaped interviews were then transcribed and analysed. Thematic analysis (19) was used to code the interviews. Sections of data were coded by using key words and then formed major categories and themes. An inductive approach to analysis was used throughout the process.

**Results**

Three key themes emerged from the analysis of the data.

**Theme 1: Perceptions of others to one being assertive**

Many of the participants reported hesitation in being assertive as they were often unsure if being assertive would be received by others. They often believed doing as expected by others is better, as doing something of your own would earn their disapproval. They said that being assertive by saying your own opinion may just not be taken well.

“I may be saying things nicely, saying ‘No’ nicely or maybe agreeing also nicely whatever, from my side to be assertive... but if the other person is not... uh... even taking my nice ‘No’ well... still may... stop me from being assertive the next time”[Transcript 11]

Others pointed out that those being assertive may be perceived as being arrogant or rude or come across as strong. “When she spoke directly, it was taken very strongly... they said she must be [or] [strong or dominant personality]... there were elders in the family around... and they thought how could she speak so in front of them directly”[Transcript 2]

Some mentioned that they often do not point out someone’s mistakes so as not to offend them or because they do not want to prove others wrong. They try to adjust and accommodate others’ mistakes as people do not take it well when corrected. However, some of the participants were of the opinion that if the person was someone close to you and you share a friendly relation and are comfortable communicating with them, then it is easy to be assertive with them.

**Theme 2: Sense of freedom after having expressed one’s emotions assertively**

In spite of feeling hesitant about being assertive, most reported feeling a sense of relief on occasions when they did make an effort to say things out upfront. They knew that it would be good to say, but did not often say, out of respect or fear. They felt a sense of freedom which they agreed was important as otherwise the negative emotions would affect their health as well as people around them. If they did not say, things would bother them and they would not be able to focus on things relevant to them but once they said it out they felt much relieved.

“...If we do not speak, heart feels heavy... it hurts... but after saying [it]... mind feels lighter” [Transcript 12]

**Theme 3: Consequences of being assertive**

Participants expressed their opinion that they could be assertive if they would be accepted well. But often they did not behave assertively due to fear of the consequences. They reported that they often feared relationships going sour, people getting offended and that stopped them from being assertive or straightforward in their communication. In workplace situations, there was the fear of not getting perks, being out of favour with the senior authorities that dissuaded individuals from voicing out their opinions. As one participant reported, “you become like a submissive kind of a... you cannot show your aggressiveness at that point... even to being assertive to say No... many times... it doesn’t because you know sometimes... it can, you know... your growth... or your career may be at stake or we may think that... you know... very weak or insecurity feeling may come up in you...” [Transcript 11]

Other consequences that were referred to as deterrent to being assertive were threat to life when opposing any miscreants in society or speaking out against injustice, threat to family honour especially when disclosing any incidents about sexual abuse or molestation.

“We have a fear because of that sometimes we submit to situations or not react to situations as assertively as we should have... family honour maybe... sometimes like especially when children are like you know, when relatives come or like you when they touch... these are some of the situations that the child will not report... you won’t tell because you have the fear of that... again... family honour... or fear of even losing your relationship...” [Transcript 11]

When talking about objecting to someone jumping the queue at a railway station ticket counter, another participant commented: “I have seen things can go... can go bad in a second, you know without doing anything... somebody can slap you or stab you also... so... I would like ok, one fellow batted in, forget it... you know I have to wait for another five more minutes, how much difference does it... make?” [Transcript 11]

**Discussion**

The purpose of the study was to explore and understand the views of women about assertiveness in an Indian context. We found that in general, women reported that it was difficult for them to be assertive in Indian situations for a number of reasons. The most common cited reason was that people do not expect them to be assertive. It was generally expected that they accept situations as they were without creating ruffles. This was especially thought so at workplace where speaking out or disagreeing with seniors was often thought of as disrespectful even if they were only trying to express a difference of opinion. Hence, in order to maintain relationships within the family, in social circles with friends, often they would prefer to be submissive. In addition, it was
pointed out by the participants that cultural norms in India expected that elders or people in authority should be respected and followed. In such a scenario, questioning the elders or traditional customs or going against them was unthinkable. There was also the belief that an ‘ideal woman’ is someone who follows or obeys her elders and husband unquestioningly which might further deter women from being assertive so as not to be perceived as arrogant or rude.(20,21)

This aspect of cultural expectations can be a crucial factor which can suppress the woman’s desire to assert herself even in situations relevant to her. With the change in the educational and financial status of women, this could lead to a conflict as they may believe in their ability to take independent decisions and may be better informed in some matters than their spouses, yet because of the cultural expectations, they may prefer not to exercise the right to take decisions. But if women could be encouraged to be more assertive in terms of making choices they would be able to influence their family as well as workplace decisions better. Women may be more sensitive and aware about their children and family needs and being assertive in taking decisions regarding health, education for children, finances may benefit the family as a whole.(22,23)

Fear of negative consequences in the form of being denied opportunities or promotion at workplace, being perceived as an arrogant person, spoiling relationships and in some cases even threat to life and family honour were some of the reasons cited for not being assertive. In spite of the fact that most women believed that it would be good if they could be assertive and express their emotions and views directly and honestly, most felt that the typical Indian society may not be conducive to that. It was perceived that it is not safe to be assertive as our society does not support assertive behavior at various levels. However, in order to reap the benefits of being assertive, it might be necessary to educate society at the family and community level to create awareness about aspects of assertiveness in our daily interactions. Encouraging people to adopt a broad-minded approach may enable them to be supportive and accepting of a difference of opinion without taking offense to it. Inculcating civic sense and teaching to put up an united front against injustice and zero tolerance towards any form of violation of individual rights may encourage more people to be assertive. Implications of assertiveness for women are high as they may benefit the family as a whole. (2)

Although they believed being assertive would be instrumental in experiencing positive emotions, they felt the possibility of being assertive depended on others around them. Most often, they found the conditions not very conducive to it.

**Conclusion:**
This study helped in understanding the perceptions of Indian women from coastal Karnataka about being assertive. Although they believed being assertive would be beneficial, they were not sure whether to exercise the right to take decisions. Exploring the perceptions and beliefs about assertiveness in Indian women so as not to let these conditioned beliefs be barriers to their being assertive in their relationships.

**References**
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