

Pink or Blue: The Gender Profiling of Toys and Consequent Social and Cultural Connotations

Kali Rawat, Pearl Academy Mumbai, India, kali.rawat@pearlacademy.com

Abstract

Perhaps the greatest tool of early childhood learning is play - and toys, as tools of play, are the integral building blocks upon which childhood is built. Sadly, modern day toys perpetuate outdated concepts of gender identity; while boys' toys promote growth in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math areas), girls' toys focus more on beauty, linguistic development and nurturing qualities. Institution of Engineering and Technology U.K.'s "analysis of leading search engines and toy retailers' websites found that of the STEM toys on offer online, 31% were listed for boys compared with just 11% for girls." (Weale, 2016). Such profiling and segmentation of toys has far reaching influences that greatly impact a child's self-identity and educational choices, and, potentially, their future career choices as well. This segmentation is then oft reflected in statistics on gender gaps in fields like education, leadership and pay equality.

- According to World Bank Gender Statistics, fewer than 4 of every 10 STEM graduates are girls in 107 of 114 economies. (World Bank Blogs, 2019).
- In India, skilled women get paid 20% less than their male counterparts as per a survey conducted by Monster.com. (Monster India, 2019).

It is ironic that in a time and age where the tolerance of gender diversity and equity are the underpinning principles of social consciousness, gendered marketing of toys still endures, and is readily accepted if not reinforced by manufacturers, marketers and consumers alike. While in the West, there has been some progress toward gender neutrality of toys with campaigns like "Let Toys Be Toys" changing the narrative, there is very little information on the Indian perspective. Although there is an emerging awareness of the far reaching social, emotional and cognitive repercussions of the gendering of toys, very little action is being taken to ameliorate their influence. This is because of an apparent 'vicious circle' - toy retailers cite customer demand to justify design and marketing that propagates segmentation, and consumers 'take it because it is there' due to lack of awareness or because of fear of social embarrassment.

The author uses this study to:

- a) Understand and research drivers of gendered marketing from the (i) toy design and marketing and (ii) social and cultural perspectives
- b) Research and document the Indian perspective through primary research amongst mothers and educators to understand the patterns, drivers and levels of mindfulness of gender profiling and marketing.

Thus, this paper strives to study the Indian perspective on gender profiling of toys and highlight points of change that, when addressed, can potentially help dilute the inherent gender conditioning of children, by encouraging more empathetic and balanced toy selection and purchasing patterns.

Keywords: gender, gender profiling, toys, gendered toy marketing, gendering of toys, gender identity, STEM toys, play and learn, childhood learning, girls in STEM careers

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1.Literature Review

While childhood is arguably the best time of a human being's life, it is also a crucial period in a child's socialization and identity development. Toys play a vital role in children's gender socialization and educational pathways, both by stimulating pretend play and social play along with developing the cognitive skills of the child. (Kollmayer, 2018). Recent years have shown an ongoing debate on the social and cultural implications of gendered marketing of toys, wherein they are no longer innocuous sources of entertainment in the toy chest but carefully projected products of gender based marketing that capitalize on and reinforce gender stereotypes.

While many argue that gender preferences are biologically “pre-programmed” as famously quoted by Rich Cronin, Fox Family Channels' President and CEO "Boys and girls are different, and it's great to celebrate what's special about each." (Bannon, 2000); gender is in fact a social construct (Mcneil, 2017). Sex roles that are reinforced in everyday life, for example through children's toys, are therefore also socially constructed. Because the occupational choices made by emerging adults have their roots in earlier interactions and experiences (Messersmith & Garrett, 2008), these gender stereotyped toys negatively impact children's life and career choices, particularly in STEM areas.

Gender-typed toy play leads to the promotion of different skills in boys and girls, with girls' toys focusing more on beauty, linguistic development and nurturing qualities while boys' toys afford more inventive possibilities, foster manipulation and are likely to be more violent, competitive, exciting, and somewhat dangerous. Furthermore, research suggests that some “masculine toys, particularly blocks and building materials, develop skills that enhance abilities in dealing with spatial relationships and mathematics. Conversely, research suggests that toys and play activities of girls may be particularly valuable for verbal development”. (Kollmayer, Schultes, Speil, Hodosi, & Schober, 2018).

The argument that gender driven marketing of toys can be detrimental to perceived and actualized career choices in women is not a new one. Beginning as early as the 1970's, the under representation of women in STEM areas has been a cause for concern worldwide. Today, a common theme of consumer led campaigns against gender marketing, such as Pink Stinks, Let Toys be Toys and Play Unlimited is that gendered toy marketing contributes to an unnecessary source of children's interests and burgeoning self-conception. (Fine & Rush, 2016).

Statistics prove that this misbalanced development of skills may be a contributory factor to the current under representation of women in STEM related workforce.

- The IET UK's latest figures from the 2016 Skills and Demand in Industry survey show that women account for just 9 per cent of engineers in the UK. (IET, 2016).
- The National Science Foundation USA in their 2016 study reported that the share of women receiving bachelor's and doctorate degrees has declined over time. At the bachelor's level, only 19% of the computer science degrees in 2016 were awarded to women, down from 27% in 1997. (National Science Foundation, 2016).
- In India, statistics are not that different. The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Sciences Report's comparison of data from various sources reports that the enrolment of women in Engineering in India is far below what it should be. (Goel, 2007). The

percentage of enrolment of women in Engineering/Technology fields in a Bachelors program is 21.8%; Masters is 15.8% and Doctorate is 16.5%. In comparison, enrolment in Arts disciplines is 44.2, 44.7 and 36.6 per cent respectively at Bachelors, Masters and Doctorate levels.

2. Drivers of Gendered Marketing

Gendered marketing in the West was at its peak from the 1950's to the late 1960's, followed by a more gender neutral approach from the early 1970's to the 1980's. However, today's toys are highly segmented; presented exclusively as 'for boys' or 'for girls', either through explicit labelling or implicitly via the sex of the model shown playing with the toy, or the color of the product and/or packaging (Fine & Rush, 2016). Kinder Joy's pink and blue Surprise eggs featuring a motorcycle in the blue egg and a mermaid in the pink egg, are an apt instance of the above.

2.1 Marketing and manufacturing drivers of gender segmentation

1. Logical adjacencies

Visual marketing strategies in toy stores often display a very clear distinction between girls' and boys' aisles, each seeming "out of bounds" to the opposite sex. Boys' toys dominate the toy section with a predominantly aggressive vibe in bold blue, red and black colors while girls' toys occupy largely pink and purple hued aisles. While this may appear intimidating to consumers, marketers justify it as a matter of "logical adjacencies", where products likely to be purchased by the same type of consumer are placed in close proximity for ease of access (Bannon, 2000).

2. Acknowledgement of girls' market

Toy manufacturers and marketers offer that gender segmentation pays long overdue attention to the girls' market, a demographic which was hitherto largely ignored (Bannon, 2000). LEGO's 2012 "Friends" line is one such pink and purple example, with girls featured in domestic and social roles.

3. Gender essentialism

Gender essentialism states that preferences are intrinsic and that children's sex stereotyped play preferences are a function of biology, rather than socialization. Because these (male and female) characteristics are "essential", the gendering of toys merely reflects and responds to them (Fine & Rush, 2016).

2.2 Social and cultural drivers of gender segmentation

1. Parental choices

Marketers and toy makers often place the onus on parents as being the driving force behind gendered segmentation; “Mothers are as reluctant to buy their daughters a boy toy as they are reluctant to dress their sons in pink.” Richard Sallies, President Playmates Toys Inc. (Pereria, 1994). Also, parents make purchases based on the perceived “fun potential” of the toy and are nostalgia driven, which drives them to purchase those toys which they played with in their own childhood. (Sweet, 2012) (Inman & Cardella, 2015)

2. Fear of ridicule

Deeply entrenched gender norms and fear of ridicule from society deters cross gender toy purchases. An interesting insight is that society allows girls more freedom to play with boys’ toys, whereas boys are not afforded the same safe space; as “parents tend to stick with gender-typed toys for boys, either because they understand that the social costs for boys who transgress into the “pink” zone are especially high in a homophobic culture or because of their own desire for gender conformity” (Sweet, 2012).

3. Primary Research

3.1 Methodology

Three of the principal factors of a child’s development are the child’s learning environment, family life and socio economic status (RCH.org, 2004). After consulting a focus group of Indian toy designers, manufacturers and social activists to understand the design and manufacturing aspects of Indian toys, the author interviewed 133 mothers and 94 educators of children in the 2-15 age group across India. In order to address the wide socio economic distinctions prevalent in India, the author interviewed 133 mothers from varied economic backgrounds. They were divided into two groups (i) lower income group and (ii) High and middle income group based on total monthly household income, where the middle class is defined as households having a minimum monthly income of Rs.61,480 per month (Credit Suisse, 2015).
(i) Lower income group-mothers consisting of house maids, cleaners, security guards, seamstresses, cooks and farmers with monthly household income below Rs. 61,480 per month
(ii) High and middle income group- mothers consisting of professionals, entrepreneurs and housewives with monthly household income above Rs.61, 480 per month
In order to understand children’s learning environment, 94 teachers across India were interviewed.

3.2 Research Findings

3.21 Interviews with teachers

Q1. Do you notice a clear preference of children for toys/activities targeted at their own gender?

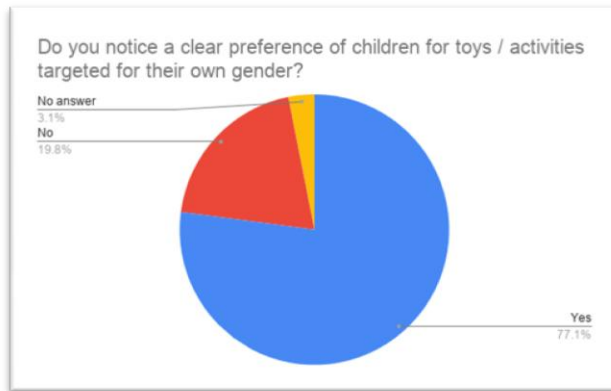


Figure.1 Teachers' perception of preference for same gender toys/activities

77.1% of teachers observed that children prefer toys and activities targeted at their own gender.

Q2. Do you feel that toys/games influence children's interests and career choices?

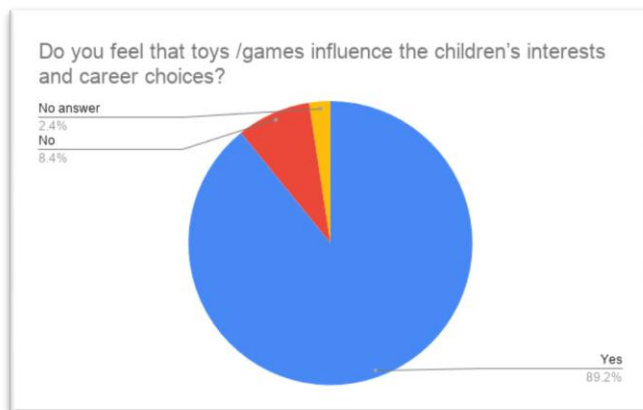


Figure.2 Teachers' Perception of toy/game influence on career choices

An overwhelming 89.2% of teachers felt that toys influenced a child's interests and career choices. The teachers' responses allowed the author to establish that gender stereotypes do get enforced when gender segmentation is made available, and these stereotypes, in turn, go on to influence a child's interests and career choices

3.2 Interviews with mothers

Q1. Do you buy toys for children based on the gender of the child?

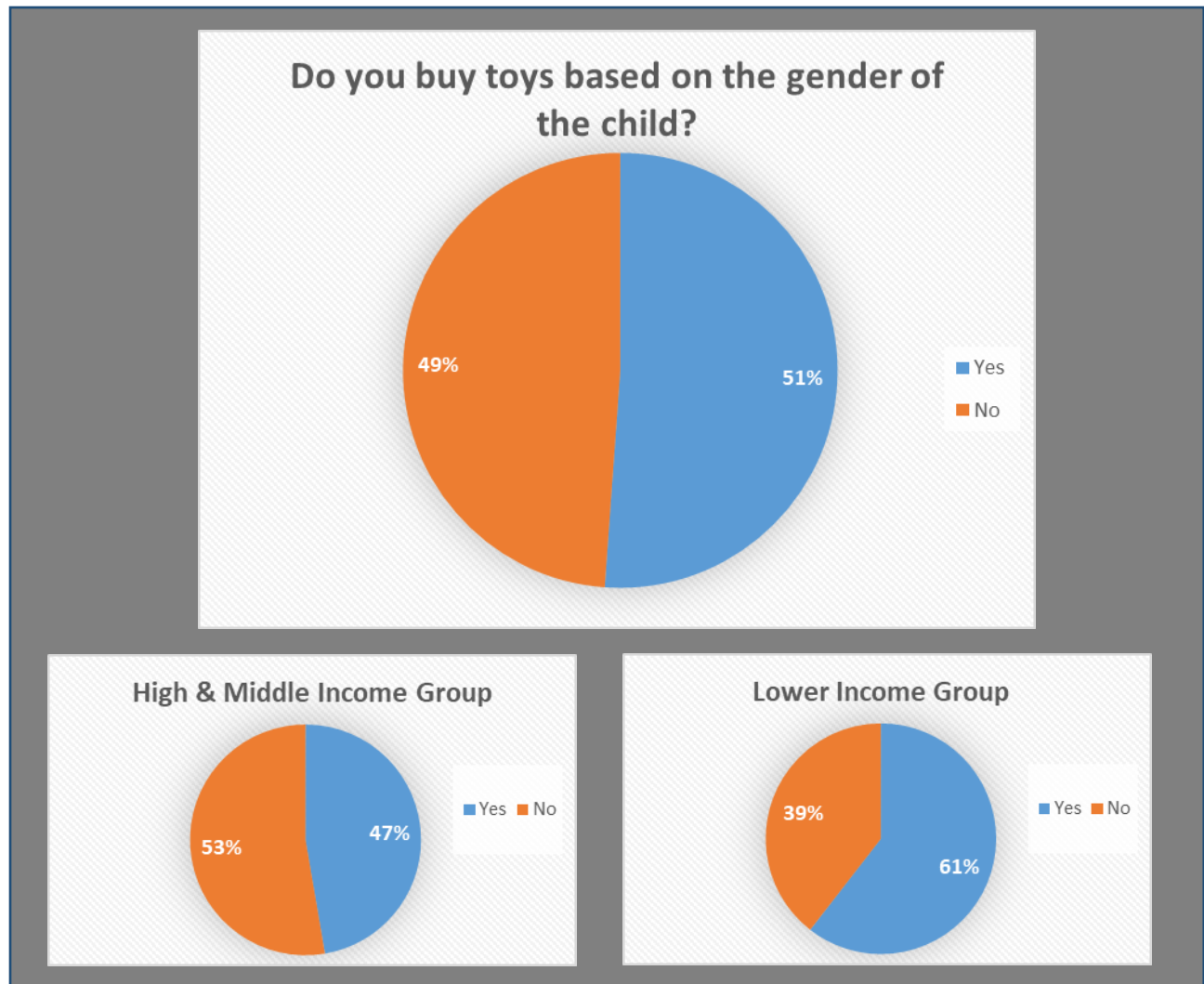


Figure.3 Gender based purchasing patterns

A significant 51% of the mothers admitted to buying toys based on gender segmentation. Amongst the two income groups, the lower income group shows more incidence of gender based purchasing, with 61% of mothers stating they follow “gender prescribed” purchasing patterns.

Q2. Do you feel a child will enjoy a toy less if its perceived as being for the opposite gender?

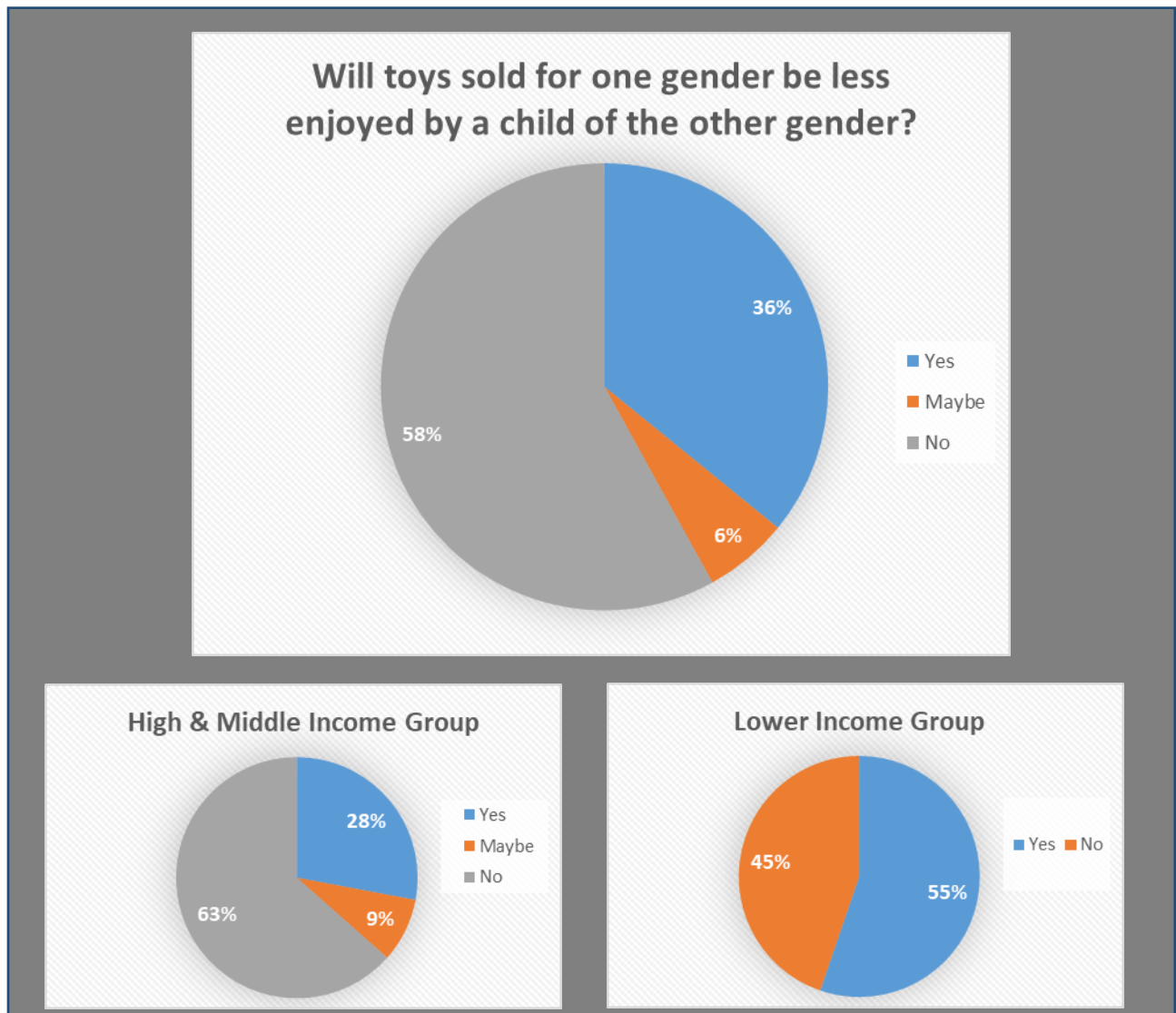


Figure.4 Perception of a child's enjoyment of a cross gender toy

A majority of 58% of mothers that children would enjoy a toy even if it were perceived as being for the opposite gender. In the high and middle income group, 63% mothers endorsed this opinion while in the lower income group, only 45% mothers felt that their child would enjoy a cross gender toy. This indicates more acceptance of cross gender play in the high and middle income group.

Q3. Do you feel that your child will be made fun of by their peers if they play with a toy meant for the opposite gender?

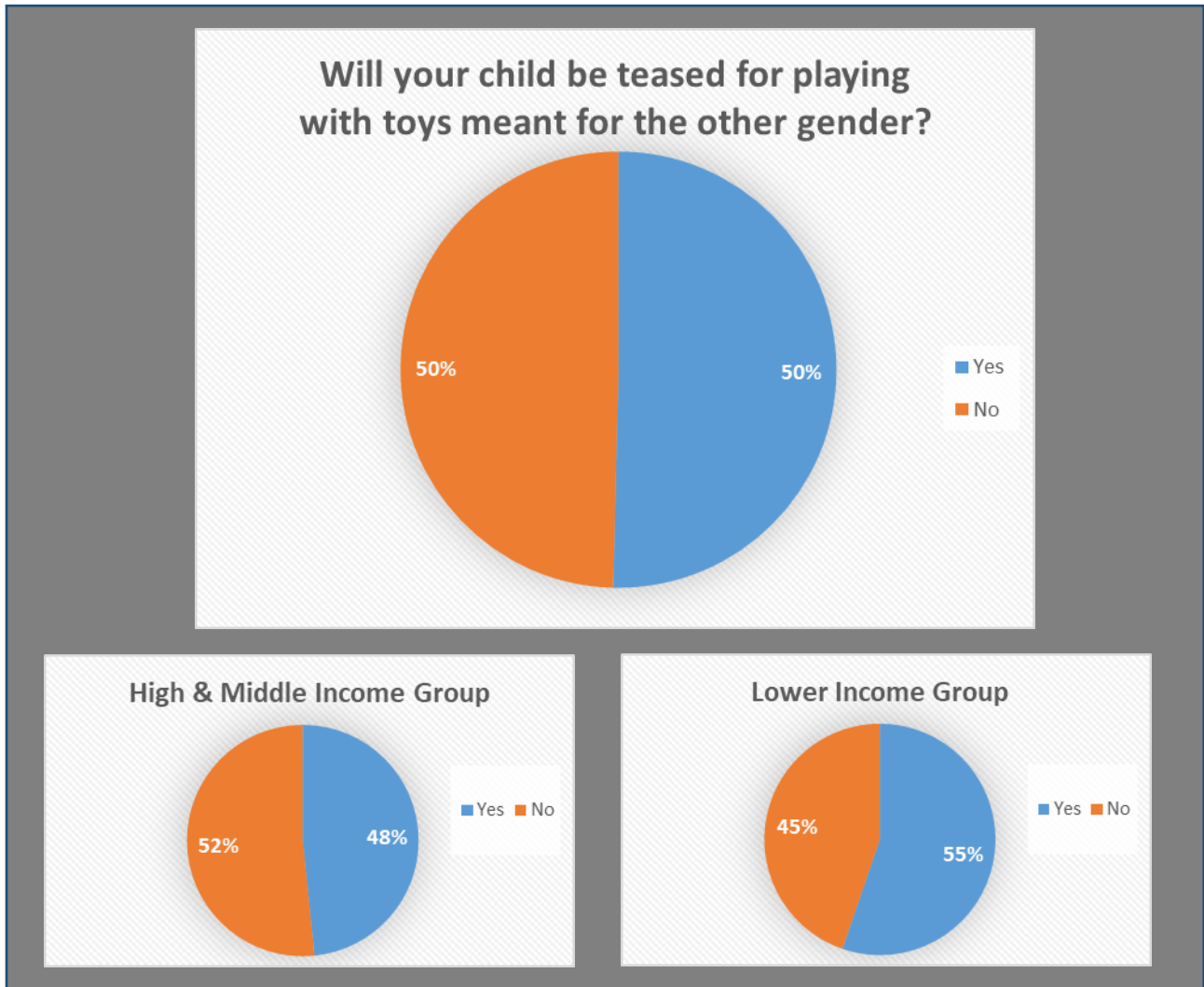


Figure.5 Perceived reaction to a child playing with a cross gender toy

Within the high and middle income group, 52% felt that a child will not be ridiculed if they played with a cross gender toy, while in the lower income group the majority of 55% of mothers felt that the child will face ridicule. The author observed that mothers across both groups stated that the boys will face more ridicule than a girl may, indicating a stronger societal bias against boys playing with girl's toys, reflecting a greater desire to conform to societal male gender stereotypes.

Another key insight is that despite mothers preferring to buy gender neutral toys, they are afraid of social ridicule of their children, highlighting peer ridicule as a key driver of social and cultural toy segmentation.

Q4. Do you feel that there is a requirement for gender neutral toys?

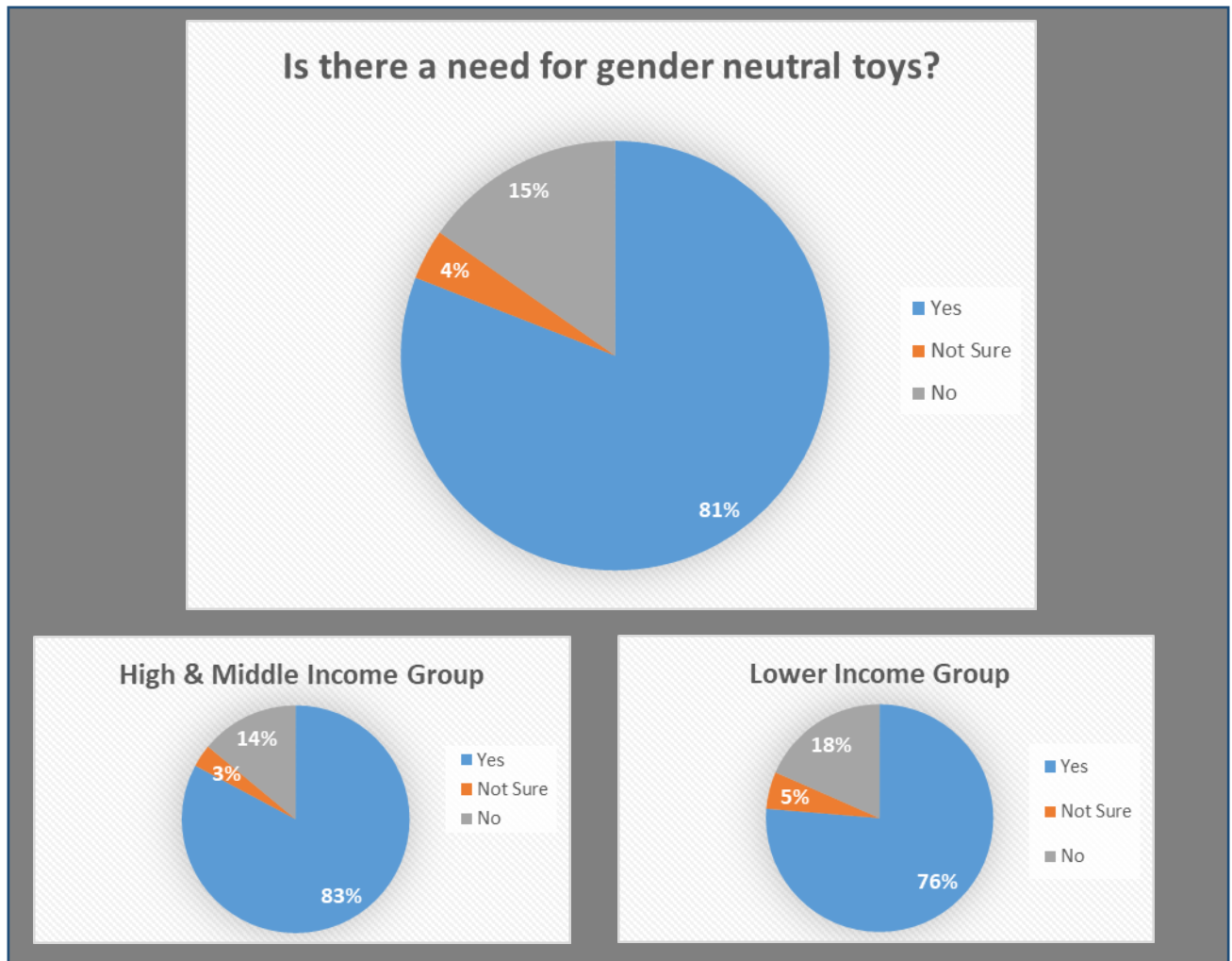


Figure.6 Perceived need for gender neutral toys

The majority 81% of mothers in both groups agreed on the requirement for more gender neutral toys. The author observed that while the high and middle income class group felt that gender neutral toys were needed to challenge perceived gender inequities and biases in society, the lower income group endorsed financial viability, thereby avoiding the increased expenditure of buying separate toys for either gender. Within the high and middle income group, a small percentage of mothers observed that most toys are usually gender neutral, and that their gender segmentation is “a sad marketing gimmick”.

Q5. Do toys impact the career choices a child makes in the future?

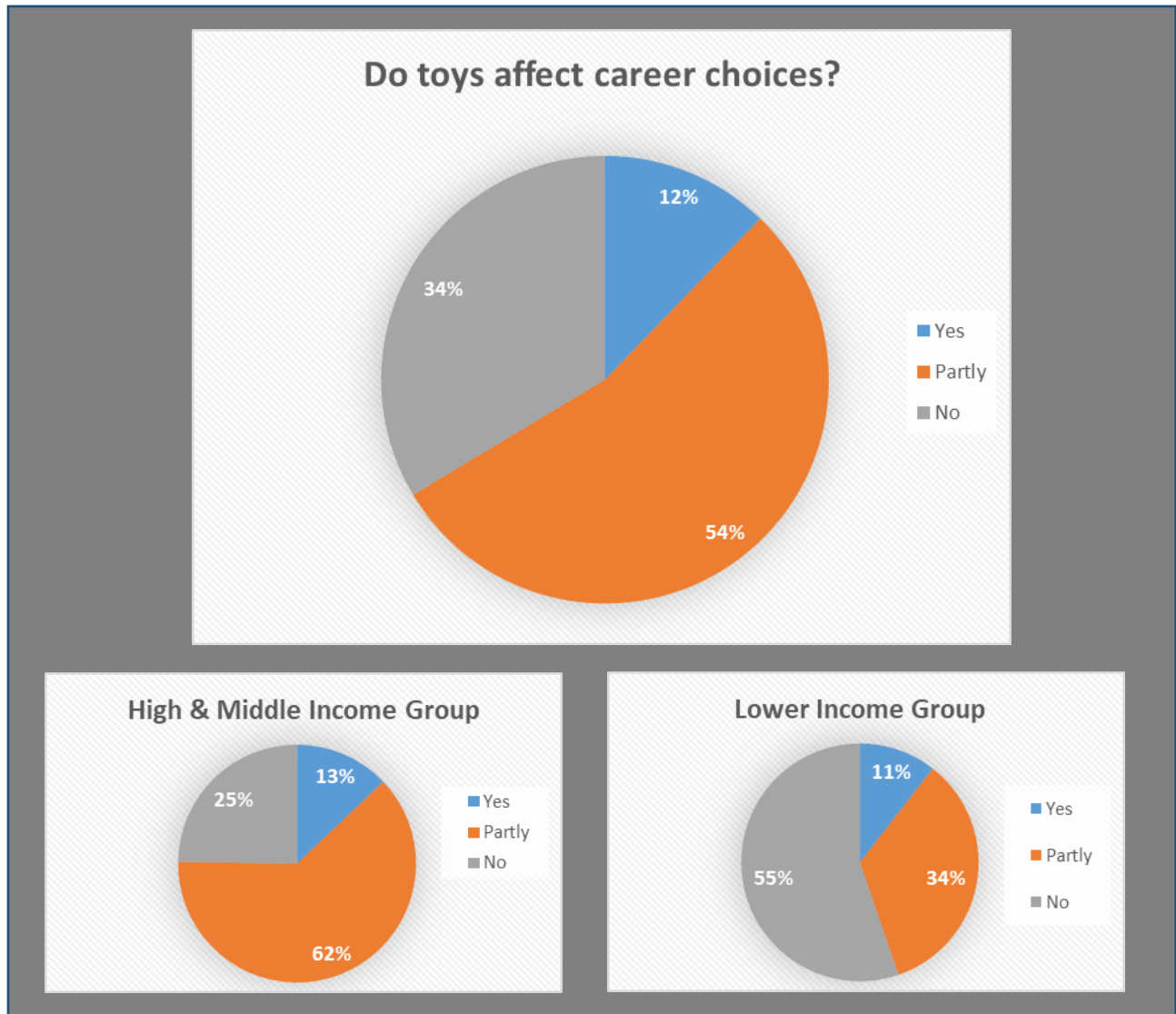


Figure.7 Perceived impact of toys on career choices

Within the high and middle income group, 62% felt that while toys did not completely govern a child's career choices, they did have a large impact on the skills developed and consequent career preferences. 25% mothers felt that children outgrow the influence of toys as academic pressures increase and hence had no influence; a comparatively small 13% felt that they did impact career choices in a big way.

In the lower income group, 11% mothers felt that toys impact career decisions, whereas 34% felt toys have a partial influence. A majority of 55% felt that toys hold no influence on career choices. The reasons for this were (i) lack of awareness of development of skill sets with toy usage and (ii) belief that parental/societal influence will guide the child's career decisions.

3.3 Conclusions

1. Fairly strong influence of gender segmentation

Gender segmentation of toys is fairly well entrenched in all strata of Indian society, and has a significant impact on purchasing decisions.

2. Fear of ridicule

While many mothers do not endorse the concept of gendered toys, they do succumb to gender stereotypes at the point of toy selection due to the fear that their child may face ridicule from their peers and society at large.

3. Emerging awareness

The author found that the high and middle income group had greater awareness of the repercussions of gender profiling and is moving towards acceptance of gender neutrality both conceptually and in purchasing decisions; preferring “educational” toys which stimulate the child’s creative and logic based skills.

4. Need for an engaged dialogue

The author found that Indian mothers, irrespective of social demographics and their own education, are unsure of the impact of toys on career choices in contrast to teachers who are absolutely certain of the same. It is then of utmost importance that the stakeholders in a child’s development have an engaged dialogue to create an environment of awareness and sensitization to end gender biases. It is imperative that children have a safe space to play outside gender stereotypes, be allowed to develop diverse skill sets and eventually select vocations based on interest rather than those dictated by societal typecasts.

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