



# Resisting gender norms: A qualitative phenomenological study on the reflections of male nursing students about nursing in the context of the pandemic

Priya Baby <sup>1</sup>, Ramya Kundayi Ravi <sup>2\*</sup>, Shreedevi AU <sup>3</sup>, Kathyayani B V <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> College of Nursing, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, Bangalore, India

<sup>2</sup> RAK College of Nursing, RAK Medical and Health Sciences University, Ras Al Khaimah, UAE

<sup>3</sup> Department of Psychiatric Social work, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, Bangalore, India

\* **Corresponding author:** Ramya Kundayi Ravi, Assistant Professor, RAK College of Nursing, RAK Medical and Health Sciences University, Ras Al Khaimah, UAE. **Email:** ramya@rakmhsu.ac.ae

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## Abstract

**Background:** The recent public health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the professional identity of nurses as well as nursing students globally. Gender and its intersections are critical moderators of professional identities.

**Objectives:** The study aimed to elaborate on the reflections of male nursing students in India, about nursing and gendering in nursing, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Methods:** A qualitative phenomenological exploration was conducted using semi-structured interviews during the March 2021 among seven male nursing students who were purposively selected from a nursing college, Bangalore, South India. Thematic manual analysis as described by Braune and Clarke were used to transcribe the interviews and derive themes and subthemes.

**Results:** The major themes that emerged were; enhanced visibility and professional identity, resisting gender norms in nursing, and reaffirming the decision of choosing nursing.

**Conclusion:** Based on the interviews, we conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic has catalyzed negotiations in the perceived gender positions of male nursing students. We contribute to the existing literature by illuminating how critical situations like the COVID-19 pandemic are contributing to resisting gender norms in professional nursing.

**Keywords:** Male; Students; Nursing; Pandemics.

## Introduction

The healthcare system was historically subjected to gendered divisions in its workforce. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the distribution of the global health workforce is skewed based on gender, with female dominion in 'caring' staff like nursing, midwifery, and community health sector.<sup>[1]</sup> This is largely attributed to the social and cultural context in which the health systems operate.<sup>[1,2]</sup> The latest reports suggests that male nurses are proportionately low globally including in the Southeast Asian regions.<sup>[3]</sup>

The gender stereotype in nursing is partly a consequence of the historical development of the profession. Even though men used to be nurses in the medieval period, the virtual demise of men in nursing started during the 'dark

ages of nursing' when the protestant reformation upheavals forced down several hospitals.<sup>[4]</sup> The men in religious orders devoted to nursing declined. Adding to the situation, men flocked for higher-paid jobs with new employment opportunities facilitated by the 'Industrial Revolution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>[5]</sup> It was at this time of history that Florence Nightingale, sparked reforms in nursing and gained social prominence. Nightingale advocated nursing as a female profession. This conjoined with the changing perceptions of gender roles in Victorian England and later slowly coalesced with the new social order, where more females were trained to become nurses.<sup>[6]</sup> This historical background has inscribed gender meanings and has attributed gendered characteristics for professional nursing to declining masculine identity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a huge social influence in recent times impacting healthcare professionals and creating changes in the social perception about the profession.<sup>[7]</sup> The pandemic had imbrications on nursing education as well. The perceptions of nursing students about the profession, their professional position, and their identity were affected by the pandemic. Gender differences are observed in the way male and female students perceive the change in their identity during the pandemic.<sup>[8]</sup> It has set a stage to leverage inclusivity and examine gender gaps. Hitherto, these discussions mostly occupied dialogues about improving the participation of women in the workforce and leadership positions over the course of the pandemic, with few discourses in the opposite direction.<sup>[9]</sup> Gender inclusivity involves challenging binary conceptualizations and gender roles. Therefore, empirical explorations of the experiences of men who crossed the gendered work boundaries are essential and can illuminate ways by which gender segregation can be reduced.

There are sparse current empirical accounts of perceptions of male nursing students about nursing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Little is known about how they construct masculinity around the roles of nurses.

## Objectives

The purpose of our study is to examine how male students who are undergoing *baccalaureate* nursing training in India perceive nursing in the context of COVID-19, their gendered experiences in the profession, and how they construct masculinity around the role of nurses in the context of the pandemic.

## Methods

### Study design and participants

A qualitative phenomenological inquiry was conducted for a deeper understanding of the experiences of male nursing students. The participants were identified by the purposive sampling method with maximum diversity in terms of year of study, domicile, and academic performance. The male students in their third and fourth years of study were recruited as they were 'experience rich' and had exposure to pre-pandemic and pandemic periods of nursing education.

### Data collection

The first author approached the participants individually during face-to-face interaction and explained the study. Initially, five students were interviewed and data analysis was done concurrently. Later two more students were

interviewed and it was found that themes were repeated and no new themes or codes were emerging. Hence, data saturation was confirmed. The characteristics of the participants are mentioned in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of participants

Variable	Frequency
<b>Number of participants</b>	7
<b>Year of study</b>	
Third year	3
Fourth year	4
<b>Domicile</b>	
Rural	4
Urban	3
<b>Grade in the previous year</b>	
Distinction	2
First class	4
Second class	1
<b>Choice to join nursing</b>	
Self-inspired	4
Inspired by parents, relatives or friends	3
<b>Parent or sibling working as nurse</b>	
Yes	2
No	5
<b>Preferred place work as a registered nurse</b>	
India	1
European countries	5
Middle Eastern countries	1
<b>Age (Mean±SD)</b>	21.71± 1.25

After explaining the purpose of the study, the face-to-face semi-structured interviews were planned and conducted at a mutually convenient time, in the college counselling room by the first author, and interviews lasted 30 to 50 minutes. Data collection was done in March 2021. The interviews were conducted in English and were audio-recorded. The interview guide was prepared around three major areas: perceptions about nursing during COVID-19, experiences as a male student in nursing, and reflections on the choice of nursing. The prompt questions used for guiding the interview are given in Table 2.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance (No. NIMH/CON/PB (3)/21-22, dated 20 January 2021) was obtained from the Institute sub-ethics committee before the study. A written informed consent was obtained from the participants before the interview, which also included permission to audio-record the interview. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the study anytime during or after the interview. All the

verbatim texts were de-identified and the audio-recorded interviews were later permanently deleted after data analysis.

**Table 2.** Interview guide showing the questions for each area of discussion

Questions
What was your experience during COVID-19 as a nursing student?
What were your observations about nurses' role in COVID-19 management? How pertinent is the gender of the nurse in this role?
How has COVID-19 influenced your outlook toward nursing?
How do you reflect on your choice of profession in the context of COVID?
What were your experiences as a male student in Nursing?
What is your view on gender equality in nursing?

### Data analysis

An interpretive descriptive approach which uses a non-categorical description of the experiences of the participants was used to provide a philosophic rationale for the qualitative inquiry. An analytical framework constructed based on existing knowledge was used for the study as it makes the theoretical assumptions and preconceptions rather explicit. Analysis was done in line with the seven-step thematic analysis described by Braun and Clark.<sup>[10]</sup> The transcribed interviews were several times read back and forth, and the meaning units were identified. The data was analysed using manual coding. After initial coding, patterns were identified and subthemes were searched for within the codes. The mapping of provisional themes was done by identifying relationships among the subthemes. The final themes were then defined with the consensus of both authors.

### Data trustworthiness

Following the framework of Lincoln and Guba, data trustworthiness was ensured.<sup>[11]</sup> At the beginning of the interview, the topic of gender was explicitly mentioned, which allowed the participants to reflect on their experiences in the background of their gender. The first author has been involved in the curricular activities of the students from the first year of study and hence had continuous engagement with them enhancing data credibility. As the interviewer has a long-standing relationship with the participants, the pre-conceived assumptions about the participants, their personal experiences with them, and their own biases were reflected

and written down as a personal diary so that the interviewer was aware of them during the research process. Thus, bracketing was done during the study to ensure rigor and reduce reflexivity. Discussions were held with participants during the analysis for member checking of the emerging themes. This has ensured the dependability of the findings. The thick description of the context of the study, participants, and the procedure involved in the study helps readers understand the context to which the findings can be applicable, thereby ensuring transferability.

### Results

The major themes that emerged during analysis include; enhanced visibility and professional identity, resisting gender norms in nursing, and reaffirming the decision of choosing nursing [Figure 1]. The six subthemes under 'enhanced visibility and professional identity' were displaying bravery, social acceptance, focus on work rather than gender, valor involved in COVID-19 care, organizational acceptance, and recognition of the work. The subthemes under the theme of 'resisting gender norms in nursing' were breaking the stereotype of a female nurse, creating trust in the competency of men in nursing, and deterring gender-based roles. The theme, 'reaffirming the decision of choosing nursing' was derived from the subthemes including 'an opportune time to join nursing', the influence of the pandemic on views about men in nursing, the importance of nursing in health care, and perception of nursing as a rewarding profession.

#### Enhanced visibility and professional identity

The pandemic has laid bare the importance of nursing jobs and healthcare workers in general. It has exposed the complexities involved in nursing care and the valor and grit needed to work on the frontline. One of the participants said, *"People should realize the hardships involved in the job. I see that is slowly happening because of the pandemic. They see the inevitable role of the nurse. All nurses give their 100% during the pandemic. They have become heroes."*

The participants also emphasized the difficulties involved in care. One of them said, *"After the second wave was over we were posted in various hospitals for clinical learning. The nurses talked about how they worked during the pandemic, day and night in those PPEs without even using washrooms for long hours. They resuscitated patients and they explained those incidents in detail. It's always a heroic job and is so satisfying. I feel proud and it's an honor to be a nurse."*

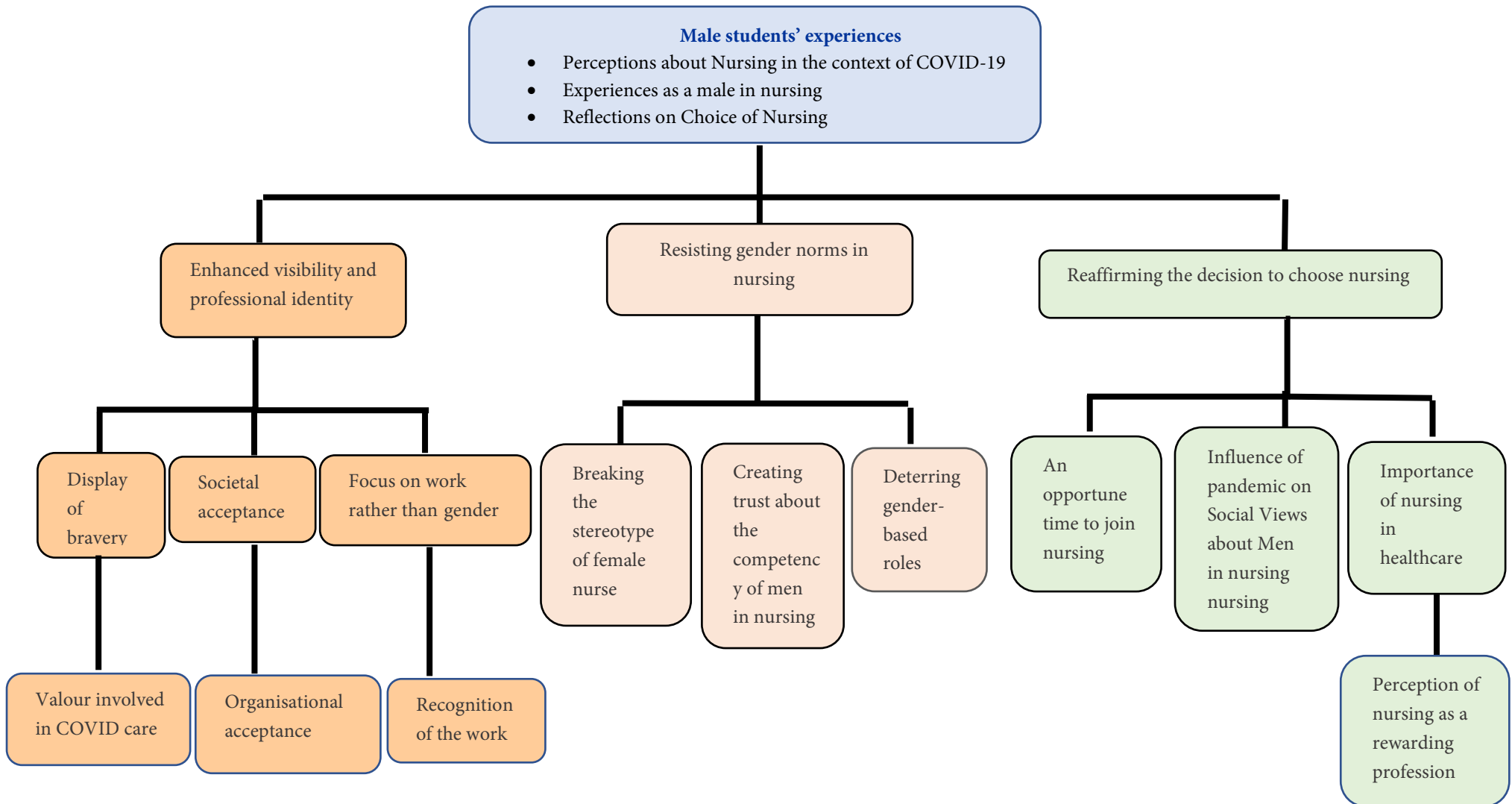


Figure 1. Thematic map for the male students' themes generated through qualitative analysis

The valor involved in COVID-19 care is also explicitly mentioned by some of the participants. One of them said, *“Even though there was a fear of getting infected, I wanted to go to the clinicals. I always wanted to be there and be a part of the work. It is truly now that people recognize what we do. People don't ask if you are a male nurse or female nurse, rather it's about our work now.”*

Participant acknowledged the insecurities associated with the pandemic. Despite the risk of being infected, they wanted to be involved in COVID-19 care. The importance of nursing jobs and the reduced significance of gendering care is also reflected. The participants were refuting the existing cultural norms and dismissing the importance of gender in nursing. One of the participants expressed, *“Some of my seniors who are boys easily got jobs during the pandemic. Earlier they used to wait till they cleared their exams to go abroad. I think.... the pandemic has made us more in demand... all of them got the jobs... we could easily get a private job here itself with decent pay.”*

The gender-based role of nurses became less pronounced and receded by the pandemic. Rather than the gender of the nurse, the work gained general appreciation.

### **Resisting gender norms in nursing**

Men who work in traditionally feminine fields lessen the significance of gendered norms and structures in businesses and society at large. Men, by engaging in historically feminized jobs de-emphasize the gendered structures and norms that exist in organizations and society as a whole. With the sheer choice of entering into the nursing profession, male students have resisted the traditional norms of gender roles. They continue to do the same by challenging these gender norms during the pandemic as well. When probed about the acceptance of men in nursing, one of the participants recounted, *“People talk of it as a woman's work. Even some patients have asked me, why did you choose this nursing job? Will you get a job after this? I think it is difficult for them to see a man as a nurse. Then I have to clarify it to them and make them understand what is nursing and why men can also become nurses.”*

As most of the nurses are females, the presence of males in the nursing crowd invokes some curiosity among the patients. By explaining the nature of the job and the insignificance of gender in performing nursing, the participant ascertains the need for gender neutrality. Experiences of gender segregation are not just limited to casual surprise to see male nurses. On prodding to share the experiences, one of the participants remembered, *“When we do a procedure... sometimes patients or their*

*bystanders think we do not know enough to do the procedure. I was preparing to give an intramuscular injection to a patient. The patient's relative asked me ... do you know it exactly? (laughs). If the girls are doing it, they won't ask such questions. Because we are boys they doubt if we know nursing.”*

The competence of the student is doubted in performing a common procedure. Such reflections resonate well with the deeply rooted beliefs in the public that only females can be nurses. Acceptance of men in nursing thus becomes a major area of concern for the students.

### **Reaffirming the decision to choose nursing**

A person's decision to become a nurse is frequently influenced by a number of factors, and it may also be the result of reflective thought during one's studies and professional experience. A variety of environmental elements can stimulate introspective thinking.

On prompting the students to reflect on their choice of profession they recounted: *“Earlier I used to think... why did I choose nursing as my career? I used to be flooded with questions from my friends and relatives. They don't ask the same questions again now as they hear a lot of stories of our hard work and importance. The pandemic has changed it all.”*

The students express their experiences of the past when they had to defy the odds of joining nursing studies. One of them said, *“Initially, I had some apprehensions....after my +2, none of my friends (boys) applied for nursing. But now they are saying it is a good profession. A few have joined nursing. I am very happy to see the change. It's all after the pandemic.”*

The pandemic cleared their ambiguities and provided them lucidity about their choice. The changes in the social environment have led to acceptance of the profession by more youngsters. One of them explained: *“We are always needed. As a hospital is a necessity, so is a nurse. Especially at this time. Being a male nurse is an advantage, there are only a few males in the profession as far as I know we have lots of opportunities. I have friends (males) who are working as nurses. They all have spoken positively about the profession. They say it is a rewarding career.”*

Quoting other men in the profession, the students draw a clearer picture of their identity and reaffirm their choice. Even if nursing is a profession where power structures are reversed, being a minority, keeps men in an advantageous position. They reflect on this and reaffirm their identity within the profession.

## Discussion

The present study illustrates the gendering experiences of male students in nursing and how the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped their perceptions of nursing. Two major observations can be made from the study. First, the participants have experienced the gender role stereotype about nurses that exists in society and they make efforts to undo such gendering experiences. Further, the changes observed around them because of the pandemic have influenced the way they draw interpretations about nursing and invoke masculine identities.

Our participants perceived that nursing has received heightened visibility due to the pandemic. There was a general appreciation for the work of nurses and the grossly underestimated significance of the nursing profession was converted into a heroic space of public applause during the pandemic.<sup>[7,12]</sup> The participants linked this to their reflections on nursing to be gender-neutral.

The students explicitly critiqued the cultural norms about gender roles in nursing and resisted them. The social location of nursing as a profession intersects with gender and this makes the male students have intersecting identities within the profession. Hence, they had unique experiences in the context of the pandemic. Nursing students are usually educated to perform in a societal context where equality is a major challenge and they are trained to respond to such issues at individual and collective levels. Despite their intersecting identities, the students have resisted gendering and have demonstrated values of inclusivity that underpin nursing practice.

Gender is often considered a "product of social doings". The resistance of the male students to gender roles, challenges the binary distinctions based on gender category, thereby breaking the need for gender essentialism. This can be better understood as the softening of the inevitability of the gender binary with the 'undoing gender' framework given by Deutsch.<sup>[13]</sup> The present study draws on the phenomenological perspective of undoing gender, where the instability of the gender is the posteriori product of social interactions.<sup>[14]</sup> The perceptual and interactional activities as illustrated in the findings, demonstrate the phenomenological process of undoing gender. The ubiquitous significance of gender is challenged here in the context of nursing education and practice. However, with a greater focus on gender fluidity, gender performances are not entirely divided into masculine or feminine.<sup>[15]</sup> Hence we would rather imply that the male students might dis-identify with particular male positions that exist in the general worldview and local

culture thereby undoing gender.

The binary gender roles and socio-culturally accepted masculine behaviors define the ethos of a patriarchal Indian society. The stereotype about masculinity, sedimented in popular Indian culture is grounded in the ideology of power.<sup>[15,16]</sup> The patriarchal culture in the Indian subcontinent mostly represents the traditional archetype of hegemonic identity. Boys who choose to join nursing courses contribute to a broader gender culture and defy gender roles imposed by society.

The pandemic has showcased the toil involved in nursing. It portrayed the picture of a nurse where they have to brave several physical difficulties, work long hours wearing uncomfortable personnel protective equipment, and extended periods of separation from families.<sup>[17]</sup> These characteristics conform to the hegemonic attributes of masculinity.<sup>[18]</sup> There is a corpus of empirical evidence that suggests the association between physical toughness and masculinity.<sup>[19,20]</sup> The participants reflect such hegemonic norms in roles played by nurses during the pandemic and demonstrate adherence to such norms by considering those norms as valued, praiseworthy, and meeting the exigencies of the situation. The urge that the participant demonstrated to be involved in work during the pandemic is an example of this.

Further, the participants also expressed compassion and empathy in their reflections. They adopt characteristics in their expressions that are antithetical to the hegemonic identity. Contemporary social scientists theorize caring masculinity as a new facet of masculinity that is emerging.<sup>[21]</sup> In the context of COVID-19, such non-hegemonic forms of masculine expressions that promote gender equality are gaining importance. During COVID times, with the increased involvement of men in caring activities (taking care of children at home) caring masculinity is gathering more importance. It should be argued that such a form of non-hegemonic masculinity was long practiced by men in professions like nursing<sup>[22]</sup> and this has promoted men's engagement in gender equality. Thus, we could recognize the pandemic as an opportunity to surpass the margins that differentiate hegemonic and non-hegemonic expressions of masculinity. Not only among nurses but among other professionals involved in public service, the pandemic has allowed males to break the binary and perform various expressions of masculinity.<sup>[22]</sup>

Masculine identities evolve as they are constantly constructed, negotiated, and re-constructed based on social interactions.<sup>[23]</sup> It assumes different meanings based

on the individual interactions with others and the social environment. Male students were adopting varying masculine identities in the context of social events and practices. COVID-19 has proven a way for males in nursing to manifest and embody various hegemonic and non-hegemonic manifestations of masculinity in crisis and stressful situations. This admits the plurality of masculinity which emerges at the intersection of multiple social constructs including gender.<sup>[24]</sup>

The participants were vocal about the ambiguities they had during the initial period of the training as well as the apprehensions of their peers about the choice of nursing as their profession, which could be due to several situational and contextual conceptions around gender.<sup>[20]</sup> Hence the findings of the study pointed towards the need for being gender inclusive and encouraging students to choose nursing as a career irrespective of their gender. It is suggested to create a broad space for male students and train them appropriately to induct them into the nursing profession.

Researchers emphasize the situational relevance of gender, arguing that socially constructed beliefs about competence are shared by individuals and groups; and these can influence their decisions.<sup>[25]</sup> Moreover, the pandemic acts as a catalyst in bringing about changes in gender perceptions in the social landscape.<sup>[26]</sup> It can disrupt the confines of gender roles and welcome more young males to choose the profession.<sup>[27]</sup> Dismantling gender binary and degendering nursing can promote the admittance of males into the profession. The findings of the study emphasize the newer role identities developed by male students in light of the pandemic. Male students in nursing should be given a safe space for discussing their concerns around gendered experiences. Individual mentoring and adequate role-modelling; especially in clinical scenarios, can be helpful for the male students to navigate these experiences. Recruiters and hospital administrators should take enough steps to ensure the retention of males in nursing and allow more youngsters to choose the profession for practice.

The study has certain limitations. Although this study does not seek to generalize the findings, it attempts to provide male nursing students' understanding of the COVID-19 situation. The students were not involved in direct caregiving of confirmed COVID-19 patients as it was not the policy of the training facility. The experiences and perceptions while caring for COVID-19 patients may be different from being an outside spectator. The subjective nature of the analysis is to be acknowledged; however, a thick description given will allow the reader to

appraise the relevance of the interpretations. The strength of the study is that it is the first one to explore male nursing students' perceptions of nursing in the light of the pandemic. The detailed and in-depth exploration of the experiences helps to dive into the subjective interpretations of the situation. Moreover, the measures to ensure data trustworthiness ensure the rigor of the study.

## Conclusions

Gender structure is not static in societies and professional contexts. The study opens up understandings about critical situations softening the existing gender structures within the nursing profession. The reflections of male students in nursing highlighted the fact that gender roles in nursing get blurred as critical situations take tide and the work of nurses is gaining more attention than gender itself. Despite nursing's contribution and investment in equity, well-being, gender equality, and fairness, we need to understand more about the existing gender gaps within the discipline and mitigate differences by drawing on empirical studies and established social theories.

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## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## Abbreviations

Coronavirus disease 2019: COVID-19;  
World Health Organization: WHO

## Authors' contributions

All authors read and approved the final manuscript. All authors take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

## Availability of data and materials

The data used in this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

## Funding/ Role of the funding source

None.

## Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Scientific and ethical committee clearance (No. NIMH/CON/PB (3)/21-22) from the College of Nursing, NIMHANS, and administrative permission was obtained before the initiation of the study. Written Informed consent was obtained from all the participants.

## Consent for publication

By submitting this document, the authors declare their consent for the final accepted version of the manuscript to be considered for publication.

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