

# I. Approaching gender

## 1.1 Why is it so important to consider gender?

Does your gender determine your sexuality? Do you have to explain your gender to other people? How often do you think about your gender?

Gender is everywhere and nowhere. If we look at some international news stories when we were writing this in the first months of 2005, it seems as if gender is everywhere: a Mexican woman was denied the chance to play professional football for a men's second division club because FIFA (the game's world governing body) insists on 'gender-specific competitions'; in the same week, the international development organisation Action Aid<sup>2</sup> launched a report that demonstrates that violence is preventing girls from attending school in many countries in the world, and noted that "violence that effects girls in or around schools is but one aspect of violence against girls in general"; during the US Presidential election in the United States the Vice-President Dick Cheney constantly mocked the Democratic Party candidate John Kerry for using the word 'sensitive': real leaders don't talk like that; in the music world, organisations campaigning for the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people have instigated a global protest against 'murder music'; specifically dancehall reggae from Jamaica where major stars sing songs calling for gay men and lesbian women to be burned and murdered. These are just one reader's impressions. What do you read about in your newspapers? What do you see when you turn on the TV?

However, we could also read these stories and find that gender is nowhere, especially from the perspective of some of the people featured in the stories. Isn't it better that men and women don't compete, especially since men are more *naturally* competitive? Don't leaders have to be strong in certain ways, as a man or especially as a woman? Shouldn't free speech permit people to say what they think is *normal*?

Gender is everywhere because when people interact socially, the way we view ourselves, our identities and our freedoms, our rights and possibilities all come into direct contact with how others see us and how they act in relation to us. At the same time it could be argued that gender is nowhere because the ways in which we see each other socially tend to be so naturalised that they appear to be normal and natural. This manual begins by arguing that engaging with gender is important because to understand how we live together socially means questioning the things we take for granted in our everyday lives.

As the introduction explains, GENDER MATTERS is a resource for working with others, but it is also a resource that underlines the need for constantly working with oneself. In fact, we would argue that one is not possible without the other. In some ways the reasoning behind this can be expressed very easily: each of us is a person with their own subjectiv-

<sup>2</sup> [www.actionaid.org](http://www.actionaid.org)

ity and experiences of living with others in society, and therefore everybody is personally involved in discussions of gender. It is easy to test this out: have you ever seen somebody walking on the street and wondered, because of their appearance, if they are a woman or a man? Have you subsequently asked yourself, ‘why do I automatically put them in one category or the other?’ Every day, it is possible that we organise the ways we see ourselves and others according to gendered assumptions that we may not think much about. That is why this chapter explores the concept of gender and how it relates to people’s subjective sense of themselves, their social experiences and interactions, privileges and obstacles, freedoms and oppressions. Chapter 2 takes the same approach to violence: the world is not divided into violent and non-violent people, even if some people act with far more violence and far more frequently than others. Nobody is free of violence, and youth workers and youth leaders have a special responsibility to think about their attitudes to gender and violence. You may have heard – in some formulation – of the idea of ‘gender awareness’. As with all of the concepts that we will encounter here, there are many different ways of discussing this. However a basic explanation is that we all need to be aware of, and work on our awareness

- that we are likely to perceive and interpret ourselves in the categories of a woman and / or a man, and that these categories do not do justice to how complex our gender and sexual identities are;
- of how we consciously and unconsciously express our gendered selves and express this in relation to others;
- of how we interpret and evaluate the gender of others and how this affects the ways that we interact with them;
- of the images, associations, assumptions and normative standards that we use to interpret the gender(s) and sexualities of others, and where these influences come from;
- of how gender is a key factor in the power, privilege and possibilities that some people have and some people do not have in our societies, and how this affects progress towards equality in our societies.

This section argues that gender awareness is a *necessary* and *ongoing* process for everybody, and particularly for youth workers and young people who want to work on issues of gender and violence with their peers. It is necessary because nobody can completely ‘step outside’ of the social and cultural processes that impact on our identities, values and perceptions, but that we can develop ways of reflecting and questioning ourselves that are very important for group work and interaction. It is ongoing because gender is a process, and our ways of thinking of ourselves and others as gendered, sexual beings shift over time and in different contexts.

**Reflection**

Think about your current work in a youth context. Why is gender awareness necessary..

(a) for yourself? (b) for the young people you are engaging with? (c) for your organisation? (d) for the social context you work in?

**1.2 What is gender?**

*Yes, what is gender? What is the relationship of gender to sex? What does it mean to understand gender as an ongoing process? What does gender have to do with power?*

These are basic questions, but they are not easy to answer because gender is an idea that has been discussed and analysed from very different perspectives for many years. Gender is both an *analytical category* – a way of thinking about how identities are constructed – and a *political idea* that addresses the distribution of power in society. Because of this, gender is an area of focus that cuts across thinking about society, law, politics and culture, and is frequently discussed in relation to other aspects of identity and social position, such as class, ethnicity, age and physical abilities. It is also important in a range of social and political debates that are conducted differently according to the cultural context. This section does not intend to define gender because understandings of gender differ and are often disputed. More modestly, its intention is to put forward some ideas that will recur throughout the different sections and chapters, and to invite the reader to consider these in his or her own context.

**1.2.1 Ideas of gender**

*What does it mean to be a woman? What does it mean to be a man? Are we born knowing our gender? What influences our concept of our own gender?*

Despite these considerations we can start to build on some straightforward descriptions. Gender can be seen as the ways in which we understand and live as male and female. From birth, our social and cultural contexts offer us meanings, limits and possibilities of being ‘woman’ or ‘man’. The World Health Organisation (WHO) offers a useful summary of this:

*‘Sex’ refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women.*

*‘Gender’ refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that society considers appropriate for men and women.*

*To put it another way: ‘male’ and ‘female’ are sex categories, while ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are gender categories. <sup>(1)</sup>*

**Reflection**

Is this definition different in your language? Do the words ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ exist? Is it possible to translate this? How do categories of masculine and feminine work in your language?

We learn to identify ourselves in particular ways, and in relation to wider images, codes and assumptions about gender. Importantly, these understandings of gender have an influential bearing on how people are viewed in our societies, and what kinds of possibilities are available or unavailable to them. To accept the idea of gender and the kinds of thinking that follow from it is to accept that being a woman or a man is not only a biological category of being with a fixed, shared meaning, but rather that these are categories that - socially and culturally - we give *meaning* to. Kalyani Menon-Sen expresses this very nicely:

*The term 'gender' is used to describe a set of qualities and behaviours expected from men and women by their societies.*

*Gender is not biological; girls and boys are not born knowing how they should look, dress, speak, behave, think or react. (2)*

If we take this line of thinking further, ideas of gender are likely to differ from context to context over time, and to be understood in relation to other aspects and markers of identity, such as age, class, ethnicity, bodily abilities and sexual orientation.

Analysing gender involves looking at the different ways in which socio-cultural codes of being a woman and man are understood and lived, normalised and regulated, negotiated and challenged. It involves examining *femininities* and *masculinities* as sets of ideas, definitions and practices that people inherit and use to make sense of their identities, appearances and behaviours, and in particular to make sense of their bodies' 'sexual and reproductive capacities' (3). Analysing gender examines the ways in which apparently obvious and natural differences between women and men have been constructed socially over time, and further examines the ways in which those supposed differences have been central to relationships of power and inequality.

## Reflection

According to the quote above, 'gender' refers to the *socially constructed* roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that society considers *appropriate* for men and women.

What do you understand by this idea of socially constructed roles? When do you become aware of it, and when not?

Track your understandings of this for a day, for example, when watching television, when do you become conscious of gender roles, and why?

	What?	Who?	(In)Appropriate?	Why?
Role				
Behaviour				
Activity				
Attribute				

### 1.2.2 Gender and sex

*Can people have a different gender to their biological sex? Are there only two types of gender? What is the relationship between our body and our gender – if there is one?*

The definitions discussed in the previous section offer a clear differentiation between the idea of sex as a biological category, and gender as the socially constructed ways in which masculinities and femininities are expressed and organised. Feminist thinking, in particular since the 1970s, has distinguished between gender and sex, and the ways in which differences between male and female have been culturally loaded with natural and essential meanings. Challenging these naturalised meanings has been central to challenging the idea that men and women should play distinct roles in relation to each other, and that ‘all women’ or ‘all men’ should conform to a set of ‘natural’ expectations.

For many analysts, sex is a biological fact: two biologically differentiated types of children can be born - a girl or a boy. Gender can be understood as everything that shapes understandings and practices of ‘being a girl’ and ‘being a boy’ from that moment on. The WHO definitions quoted in the previous section provide the following illustration of this:

*Aspects of sex will not vary substantially between different human societies, while aspects of gender may vary greatly.*

*Some examples of sex characteristics:*

- Women can menstruate while men cannot.
- Men have testicles while women do not.
- Women have developed breasts that are usually capable of lactating (producing milk) while men have not.
- Men generally have bigger bones than women.

*Some examples of gender characteristics:*

- In most countries women earn significantly less than men.
- In Vietnam many more men than women smoke because female smoking has not traditionally been considered appropriate.
- In Saudi Arabia men are allowed to drive cars while women are not.
- In most of the world, women do more housework than men.

#### Reflection

On what issues and in what ways do you experience sex and gender being confused? Why do you think this is? The list of examples provided by WHO has a global scope. Could you add some examples for your own country, or from Europe?

Before we continue to examine the relationship between sex and gender, we should also recognise that it is not as simplistic as it appears. Not all individuals are clearly classifiable as either ‘male’ or ‘female’ even on the strictly biological basis denoted here. ‘Intersexed’ individuals may not be classifiable, as the Eastern Michigan University Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Centre describes:

*Intersex people are born with ‘sex chromosomes’, external genitalia or internal reproductive systems that are not considered ‘standard’ for either male or female. The existence of intersexuals shows that there are not just two sexes and that our ways of thinking about sex (trying to force everybody to fit into either the male box or the female box) is socially constructed.* <sup>(4)</sup>

Despite the existence of intersex individuals, there is never any question of not making a choice, and of organising gender identities into male and female. Therefore many people argue that sex itself is also a gendered idea that assumes that male bodies will always ‘become’ men, and that women’s identities are limited to those that inhabit a female body.

Nevertheless, many discussions of gender proceed on the basis of a biological division into ‘female’ and ‘male’, which over time become gendered identities. For example, in most western countries, if you went to a hospital to visit a newborn girl or boy, and stopped to buy a card, there is a good chance that the congratulations cards for boys and girls are colour coded in a gendered way, that the little girls and boys on the cards are dressed differently, and that they are represented with different kinds of toys. In a wide range of ways – including how the child is dressed, played with, spoken about and to, what they are encouraged and not encouraged to take an interest in – this biologically female or male being is interpreted as and comes to understand themselves as a boy or girl. We all learn to operate within assumptions of how girls and boys ‘should’ be and what they ‘normally’ do.

As John Hartley has pointed out, “Whenever sexual differences are taken as meaningful, we are in the presence not of sex but of gender... gender is a human and a signifying division, its ‘source’ in nature is neither here nor there” <sup>(5)</sup>. The idea of gender, therefore, stands in opposition to ideas of ‘biological determinism’ – the idea that sex has a decisive role in shaping the person and their behaviour – and ‘essentialism’: a range of ideas that contend that *there just are* different essences of woman and man.

The example of babies receiving blue or pink gifts may be an obvious example, but it is the obvious nature of gender that underlines its power. While gender roles and gender-based assumptions have been diversified and widely challenged, it is important to recognise that gender seems natural because many aspects of it are normalised and reinforced in everyday life. In other words, even if gender is the cultural construction of male and female identities around (mainly) biologically different bodies, these gendered identities become *naturalised*. Some ways of behaving become accepted and privileged over others. Nature, as Hartley observes, may not determine what it means to live as female or male, but assumptions

about gender and gender difference are often based on a sense of *what is natural*.

In particular times and places, therefore, gender often involves assumptions that have become normal about what is recognised as being a woman or man. As we shall see, these assumptions are reinforced by patterns of relationships, in social institutions, and in images and information absorbed on a daily basis. Think, for example, of equivalent phrases to these in your language: “He can’t help it, he’s a man”, “boys will be boys”, “She’s all woman”, or generalising phrases such as “women always...”, “all men should...” Some contexts, for example, may include a phrase such as “Be a man about it”. If we follow through this analysis of gender, this suggests that both the speaker and the listener have an idea, in their context, of what is usually associated with correct male behaviour, and what is not. There is a wide range of assumptions behind phrases such as ‘be a man’ and ‘she is all woman’ that the speaker assumes do not need to be spelt out. The phrase is also an order: it suggests that the listener has little control over how their reactions and behaviour will be interpreted if he wants to be interpreted as ‘a man’ or as ‘a woman’.

In the following extract our arguments are very close to the idea that

*[...] qualities that are stereotypically attributed to women and men in contemporary western culture (such as greater emotional expression in women, greater tendencies to violence and aggression in men) are seen as gender, which entails that they could be changed. (6)*

However when we start to analyse gender, and to think about how we invite people to evaluate their behaviour in relation to these reflections, we initially need to recognise that gendered ways of interpreting ourselves and others are very powerful. They are deeply socialised and often appear to be *normal* and *natural*, ‘the way things are and have always been’, and simply *common sense*. This does not mean that people are entirely trapped by strict gender roles, or that individual agency is powerless in the face of social influences. What it does mean is that dominant, normalised codes of masculinity and femininity are established in everyday practice in most societies, and that people need to recognise how their power stems from the ways in which they become natural and unremarkable.

### **1.2.3 Discussing gender**

Before moving on to examining gender and socialisation, it is important to make some remarks about approaching gender and gender issues in your own context and how this relates to working with young people.

- *Gender is a sensitive issue*: Understandings and feelings about gender and gender issues can often be deeply personal, and approaching these issues can trigger memories and feelings about past or current experiences. When we deal with issues of identity, it is not always possible to know ‘who is in the room’. Before engaging in discussions such as these with your youth group, you need to think carefully

#### **Exercise**

Following these sections, it is useful to consider the exercise Gender Boxes.

about how to conduct them sensitively and responsibly. See 3.2.5 for discussions of safety and ethics in training.

- *Gender is a political issue:* Gender and discussions of gender are also often very ‘hot’ and political, and may bring into question different types of ideological, religious and other firmly held beliefs. Facilitating such discussions or related training courses is challenging and involves being acutely aware of our own attitudes and beliefs and knowing what is necessary to allow others to discuss these issues in a meaningful way.
- *Gender is a language issue:* Despite the definitions and differentiations offered above, you may encounter the terms ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ used interchangeably in society. For example, some questionnaires or forms may ask for your ‘gender’ and simply provide the categories ‘male’ and ‘female’ for you to choose from. In many languages, there is not an equivalent division between sex and gender, or gender may have been newly introduced; this is an important point when it comes to national and international youth contexts. This constant shift from one term to another may be an indicator of some of the confusions involved in discussing gender in our societies.
- *Gender is everybody’s issue:* Because widespread awareness of gender is primarily a result of feminist politics (which moved from challenging the position and roles of women in society to addressing the formation of gendered subjects) there is also often a tendency to associate gender with women and women’s issues alone. The absence of an analysis of men and understandings of men in this assumption tells its own story. Gender involves examining how biologically differentiated bodies accrue meanings as woman or man over time, and *in relation to each other*. It also involves looking at the complex ways in which masculinities and femininities may reinforce each other or also overlap.
- *Gender is a power issue:* Committed gender analysis does not examine the production of male and female identities in relation to each other without considering how these relations are produced in and reproduce *differences in power and equality*. In general these micro and macro relationships tend to privilege men and subordinate women. The sections that follow develop some of the ways in which gendered roles and behaviours propagate inequalities between women and men. Furthermore, it is also important to recognise that “...current norms of gender marginalise many men and that cultural constructions of gender exclude and alienate those who do not fit neatly into the categories of male or female”. (7)

### **1.3 Gender and socialisation**

*How is gender 'learnt'? Why is gender 'in process'? What influences our values, perceptions and expectations of gender?*

#### **1.3.1 Living in society**

*Society is mysterious to us because we have lived in it and it now dwells inside us at a level that is not ordinarily visible from the perspective of everyday life. <sup>(8)</sup>*

This quotation suggests that we simultaneously experience and learn about society, while not necessarily being aware of how we learn and what we experience. In other words, we may be highly attuned to signs of gender in the environment around us, while not necessarily reflecting on how these signs have become *gendered* for us. The sociologists Zygmunt Bauman and Tim May argue that, "...many of our choices are habitual and so not subject to deliberate and open choice" <sup>(9)</sup>. As they explain, in considering how we learn to live socially with others, how we see ourselves and act is informed to a significant extent by the contexts we live in and the groups and networks we inhabit. In social life we gather an enormous amount of "...tacit knowledge (that) orients our conduct without us necessarily being able to express how and why it operates in particular ways".<sup>(10)</sup> This everyday knowledge includes a sense of values, norms, roles and ways of evaluating behaviour. For example, without ever consciously learning guidelines about how close we can be to others in public places, we somehow know that there are shared 'rules' about sitting beside others on a metro and not reading the paper over their shoulder.

This kind of knowledge is constantly expanding and being fine-tuned: "although deeply immersed in our daily routines, informed by practical knowledge oriented to the social settings in which we interact, we often do not pause to think about the meaning of what we have gone through; even less frequently do we pause to compare our private experiences with the fate of others..."<sup>(11)</sup> Thinking about how we *learn* about gender involves a challenge: it invites us to take a critical distance from ourselves and our daily modes of seeing and interacting, and to pause and think about the meaning of gender, and how we might be able to acquire such a vast, common sense, seemingly *natural* knowledge of gender roles, values and identities.

#### **1.3.2 Approaches to socialisation**

As humans we are born into socio-cultural arrangements and meanings that pre-date us. 'Socialisation' is the term that is often given to how we learn, from early childhood, to fit into and negotiate the normative expectations for us to be able to behave, in particular in relation to sets of masculine and feminine codes, roles and behaviours. Being born 'he' or 'she' does not merely denote a biological sex category, but marks 'him' and 'her' out as the inheritors of characteristics that women and men should have, preconceptions about how

they should behave, play, be played with, dress, react and express emotions. As Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan explain:

*The concept of socialisation features in explanations of gender difference, where emphasis is given to the process of how individuals learn to become masculine or feminine in their identities, appearance, values and behaviour. The primary stage of socialisation occurs during infancy and childhood, via interaction between adults (especially parents) and children. Socialisation is, though, a life-long process. As individuals grow up and older, they continually encounter new situations and experiences and so learn new aspects of femininity and masculinity throughout their lives. <sup>(12)</sup>*

However, knowing that something called socialisation takes place is different from analysing how socialisation takes place, and this is a particularly challenging discussion given the very many contexts in which a resource such as this one may be read. A key concern for anthropologists who study gender, for example, is that the ways in which women and men relate to each other and interact, and the social senses in which the sexes themselves are conceptualised vary enormously from place to place. With this in mind, we can talk about socialisation in two ways. It is (a) a general idea of processes that to a certain extent shape and orient us over time through our interaction with others, resulting in the acquisition of a gendered identity, and (b) a concept that has a more specific history in sociology.

Generally, ideas of socialisation suggest that we learn about prevalent gender roles, differences and values through interaction with important agents. These include the family, teachers in our educational experience, peer groups and our reception of mediated images and information. This general idea becomes more complicated when we look at the divergence of views that surround how socialisation takes place. Key questions include:

- How much importance should different agents of socialisation be given in our considerations?
- To what extent and in what ways are people able to actively negotiate these influences and to fashion a gender identity more consciously?

*Theories of role-learning*, which were most influential in the 1970s and which have become a form of common sense, argue that children learn and internalise *correct* gender roles and behaviours through interaction with adults, especially their parents. In everyday situations, it is argued, parents often sanction and set boundaries of *appropriate* gendered behaviour for children, such as what games and toys to play with, and also implicitly offer themselves as gendered role models through their own behaviour. Children learn to travel as girls or boys by using maps that reflect the important directions laid down by key adult influencers. Thus, across theories of socialisation that emphasise role-acquisition, recurring ideas include the ways in which boundaries for behaviour – the rigidity of which depend on the context – are reinforced by logics of positive and negative reaction, resulting in norms for feminine and masculine roles and behaviours being *internalised*.

*Agency (personal involvement) in gender construction:* although we are not able to do full justice to the finer points of role-learning theories here, it is nevertheless valid to point out limits to this kind of approach. This kind of approach may be useful for suggesting how 'dominant' or 'hegemonic' gender roles are formed, but it cannot account for the development of women and men that oppose sexism and heterosexism (sexism directed at people on the basis of sexual orientation). Neither does it explain how in many ways gender roles have become more complex and confused. Why do some people seem to accept and live within certain roles, and others reject or subvert them?

For example, a stereotypical gender role constructs a man as a father working outside the home, and associates the male historically with the role of soldier, at the same time, in a few European countries it is becoming increasingly common to see fathers who have both been in the army for national service and taken parental leave to be the primary carer of a child. Similarly, while schools have been identified as associated with stereotyped femininities and masculinities, in many contexts this assertion does not stand up to analysis, given the changes in the ways in which educational materials and curricula now reflect an increased sensitivity to gender.

Perhaps most importantly, over-emphasising socialisation as a force that guarantees conformity is as limiting as denying the influence of society on the *individual*. After all, the educational logic of this resource is based on a belief that our understandings of gender can change, and that people can and do adapt gender norms in their own lives. Therefore, many contemporary theories of gender emphasise the power that people have to *reflect on, shape and construct their own gender identities*. Young people in particular, in their use of style, popular culture and their own networks have, in many contexts, increased autonomy when it comes to how they represent themselves and live in their bodies.

Therefore, many accounts tend to opt for a balance between accounts of socialisation and the autonomy of the individual:

*We adopt different masculinity and femininity practices depending on our situations and beliefs. Our understandings of gender are dynamic, changing over time with maturity, experience and reflection. Thus we are active in constructing our own gender identities, but the options available to us are not unlimited. We are influenced by the collective practices of institutions such as school, church, media and family, which construct and reinforce particular forms of masculinity and femininity.* <sup>(13)</sup>

Also, Fitzsimons and Lennon mention the following three ways in which aspects of gender socialisation interact:

- *Gender as a feature of subjectivity:* “We identify and make sense of ourselves as men and women or boys and girls”. This will depend on the people, institutions and contexts in which we live, and the social expectations to perform and be recognised as gendered in particular ways that we encounter.

- Therefore we can talk about *Gender as the cultural understandings and representations we encounter*. “The belief that girls like sitting and playing with dolls, whereas boys like rough-and-tumble play has traditionally formed part of some cultures’ understanding of gender difference in childhood”.
- Such understandings inform *Gender as a social variable*. Gender “structures the pathways of those so classified within society. In the field of work, for instance, there is still a tendency for men and women to be channelled into doing different jobs and by consequence to earn different rates of pay”. (14)

### 1.3.3 Gendering

If, as we have discussed, gender is a dynamic process, then gender can also be discussed as a verb: to gender. As Pilcher and Whelehan explain,

*The shift to using gender as a verb (to gender, gendered, gendering, engendered) is a reflection of changed understandings of gender as an active ongoing process, rather than as something that is ready-made and fixed. In this sense, then, something is gendered when it is, in and of itself, actively engaged in social processes that produce and reproduce distinctions between men and women.* (15)

With this quotation in mind, read the extract below and reflect on how it presents gendering as a dynamic process. It is taken from the novel *Populärmusik från Vittula* (translated into English as *Popular Music*). The author, Mikael Niemi, describes what it was like for a group of boys to grow up in a small town in northern Sweden on the border with Finland in the 1960s. This short extract discusses how the boys, who have started a rock band, examine whether or not playing this new music is ‘knapsu’:

*In the early days Niila and I often discussed whether our rock music could be regarded as knapsu. The word is Tornedalen Finnish and means something like ‘unmanly’, something that only women do. You could say that in Tornedalen the male role boils down to just one thing: not being knapsu. That sounds simple and obvious, but it is complicated by various special rules that can often take decades to learn, something that the men who come up north from Southern Sweden often come up against. Certain activities are basically knapsu and hence should be avoided by men. Changing curtains, for instance; knitting, weaving carpets, milking by hand, watering the houseplants and that sort of thing. Other occupations are definitely manly, such as tree-felling, elk hunting, building log cabins, floating logs downriver, and fighting on dance floors. The world has been split in two since time immemorial and everybody knew the score.*

*But then came welfare. And suddenly there were lots of new activities and occupations that confused the concepts. As the knapsu concept had developed over many*

hundreds of years, as subconscious processes in the minds of generations, the definitions could no longer keep up. Except in certain areas. Engines, for instance, are manly. Petrol engines are more manly than electric ones. Cars, snowmobiles and power saws are therefore not knapsu. But can a man sew with a sewing machine? Whip cream with an electric mixer? Milk cows with a milking machine? Empty a dishwasher? Can a real man vacuum-clean his car and still retain his dignity? Those are some questions for you to think about. It's even more difficult when it comes to new trends. For instance is it knapsu to eat reduced-fat margarine? To have a heater in your car? To buy hair gel? To meditate? To swim using a snorkel? To use sticking plaster? To put dog poo in a plastic bag? <sup>(16)</sup>

### Reflection

Can you think of ambiguous practices such as the ones in the extract? In your context, what forms of work and other social practices have shifted in how they have been gendered?

Does the nation state you live in have a gender identity? If so where does this come from?

How does the list of questions presented by the author relate to the exercise *Gender Boxes*?

### 1.3.4 Gender and sexuality

'Sexuality' is another complex term in this discussion, as it simultaneously refers to (a) reproduction, (b) erotic desire for another human being, and (c) a central aspect of gender identity.

Because of the relationship between heterosexual sex and reproduction, sexuality is often seen as having a natural relationship with stable male and female roles. However there is much more to sexuality than that: search for a book on sexuality on any internet book shop and you will find titles relating to physiology, psychology, culture, morals and ethics, history, organised religion and spirituality. Sexuality and sexual identities vary across time, and sexuality has always been important in addressing the nature and limits of human freedom.

The debate between 'essentialist ideas' (that argue for definite biological differences between men and women) and 'constructivist ideas' (that emphasise the fundamental influences of society and culture on gendered identities) is also an important one in relation to sexuality. The idea that sexuality is a purely natural state is an ambiguous one: on the one hand, as section 2.2 examines, crimes against women have often been 'explained' in terms of the essential sex drive of men. Similarly fixed ideas of gender and sexuality have been important to the heterosexual norms characteristic of patriarchy: for example, it is only recently in many countries that rape between married people has been seen as a crime (see section 1.4). Most obviously, the idea that biological reproduction fixes 'normal' sexual identities acts as the basis for discrimination against sexual identities that are thus seen to be different and abnormal (see section 1.5.2 on the political response to this of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered activists).

The idea of fixed categories of sexuality, just like the idea of unchanging, essential gender identities, is undermined by histories of sexuality that show changing practices and values attached to forms of sexual behaviour between people. One of the most famous of these is the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault in his three volume *History of Sexuality*. In volume I, for instance, he shows that before ‘homosexuality’ became categorised as a form of sexual identity in the nineteenth century, sexual relations between men were regarded in different contexts as an act that may be celebrated or punished, *but did not define the identities of those involved*.

The main point, perhaps, is not that youth workers and leaders have to solve a long-running debate between biology and culture, but rather to bear in mind that sexuality, as with gender, is something that involves enormous diversity, yet is always disciplined to some extent by social practices and expectations.

### **1.3.5 Gender and inequality**

*What is meant by patriarchy? Are women inferior or superior to men?*

The introduction to GENDER MATTERS argued that it is our view that gender has been a neglected topic in youth work in Europe in recent years. If this is the case, it is a serious neglect that needs to be addressed:

*Marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the UN Committee for CEDAW announced that no country in the world has achieved full equality between men and women in law and in practice. The Deputy Secretary-General Louis Frechette asserted that women are still “significantly under-represented in public life,” and still suffer from violence and sexual harassment in their daily lives, reports UN News Service. (17)*

As the next sections will discuss, this kind of thinking on gender has emerged from different periods of struggle, primarily by women and sexual minorities, for equal rights and possibilities, and also for a proper critique of the way in which power works in most societies. A key aim of gender analysis and politics has been to examine the ways in which masculine power, privileges and dominance have been normalised in public and private spheres, and, as we shall see in chapter two, how this has devastating links to violence.

There have been many different models and theories offered for capturing how men have predominantly placed themselves and been placed in social hierarchy over women. The idea of ‘patriarchy’ is often used as a kind of shorthand for male dominance, and it has also been the subject of more specific theories. In general, patriarchy describes the way in which gender roles and possibilities have tended to subordinate women to men. Patriarchy involves the acceptance of fundamental ideas about the nature and value of women, their roles – including heterosexual norms of wife and mother – and their possibilities, and these

ideas tend to be based on appeals to biological reasoning: women are more naturally suited to be carers, for example. Some discussions of patriarchy argue that it is dependent on the divisions in labour that have tended to dominate in industrial capitalist societies. In other words, the predominance of men at work in the public sphere, and women working in the private to ‘make the home’ has deeply influenced the durability of traditional gender roles. However it is important to recognise that this is not the whole story, as it does not take account of the role of women in the work force of industrial societies, nor of the many changes that have taken place in work-gender roles in societies where heavy industry has been replaced by service and information industries.

## Reflection

### ***The reasonable man...***

In many legal systems an idea of ‘the reasonable man’ has been used as a hypothetical measure to help juries to reach their decisions. They may be asked to imagine, ‘How would a reasonable man act under these circumstances?’ In some instances, the explicit reference to a man has been replaced with a ‘reasonable person’.

Have you come across this idea in your context? Does it exist in some shape or form?  
Does changing the name change the imagination behind it, in your opinion?

Chapter 2 continues this examination by looking at gendered inequality and types of violence.

## ***1.4 Masculinities***

When we examine the ways in which gender relations have privileged men as the centre of rationality and normality, it may come as no surprise that it has taken quite a while for masculinity to be understood as a process of gender construction rather than just a way of describing how men are. Indeed the title of this section – masculinities – acknowledges that there is not just one interpretation for ‘a man’ to demonstrate he is ‘a man’; masculinity varies across socio-cultural contexts and within groups and networks, and different men, with different experiences, relationships and pressures may perform their masculinity differently and inconsistently. As Whitehead and Barrett explain,

*Masculinities are those behaviours, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organisational locations, which are commonly associated with men and thus culturally defined as not feminine.* <sup>(18)</sup>

In using the plural masculinities, this quotation emphasises that there is no one coherent set of expectations surrounding ‘manhood’. Indeed, one of the reasons for the rise of studies of masculinity has been the change in traditional masculine roles in post-industrial societies. Nevertheless, while increasing attention is paid to the ways in which masculinity has

• been pluralized in certain contexts during recent decades, it must be stressed, particularly  
 • in a publication analysing gender-based violence, that the pressure and expectation to be-  
 • have in terms of dominant codes of masculinity remains a prevalent experience for many  
 • men, with consequences for women, children and men in turn.

• Cultural expectations of male behaviour, as the quotation above suggests, often centre on  
 • differentiating masculinity from the realm of femininity, where homosexuality is cast as hav-  
 • ing a particular relationship to femininity. Masculine identities, like all identities, are forged  
 • in difference and association: being a man involves not being something other than man and  
 • being like certain other men. Masculinity, seen in different contexts, involves displaying at-  
 • titudes and behaviours that signify and validate male identities in relation to each other, and  
 • being recognised in particular ways by other men and women.

• R.W Connell, in his book *Masculinities* (1995), argues that masculinity exists and shifts  
 • within networks of gender relationships. He argues against notions of masculinity that ac-  
 • cept normative standards for what men *should* be like, against essentialist accounts of cen-  
 • tral male characteristics, as well as against accounts of masculinity that focus on describing  
 • differences. Instead, he argues, what is important to a meaningful analysis of gender and  
 • masculinity is the “...processes and relationships through which men and women conduct  
 • gendered lives. ‘Masculinity’, to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simul-  
 • taneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage  
 • that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and  
 • culture”. (19)

• He provides the useful idea of multiple masculinities. Notice how in this next quotation  
 • different conceptualisations of ‘masculine sexuality’ are revealed to be historically context  
 • specific:

• *Different cultures, and different periods of history, construct masculinity differently.*  
 • *For instance, some cultures make heroes of soldiers, and regard violence as the ul-*  
 • *timate test of masculinity; others look at soldiering with disdain and regard violence*  
 • *as contemptible. Some cultures regard homosexual sex as incompatible with true*  
 • *masculinity; others think no-one can be a real man without having had homosexual*  
 • *relationships. It follows that in large-scale multicultural societies there are likely to be*  
 • *multiple definitions of masculinity...There are, for instance, differences in the expres-*  
 • *sion of masculinity between Latino and Anglo men in the United States, and between*  
 • *Greek or Lebanese and Anglo boys in Australia. Other recent research looks at the*  
 • *different ways in which majority and minority youth may express their masculinity*  
 • *through popular culture in French, German and Dutch cities. The meaning of mas-*  
 • *culinity in working-class life is different from the meaning in middle-class life, not to*  
 • *mention among the very rich and the very poor. Equally important, more than one*  
 • *kind of masculinity can be found within a given cultural setting. Within any work-*

*place, neighbourhood or peer group, there are likely to be different understandings of masculinity. (20)*

Connell argues that it is important to consider the power relationships between different masculinities as well as their relationships with femininities, and to analyse how this socially reproduces, supports or challenges the distribution of power between women and men. These categories are not rigid types and have been subject to some criticism, so they are best regarded as fluid yet useful indicators:

‘Hegemonic masculinities’: These masculinities are highly visible, respected and in a position of authority in relation to other masculinities in a particular setting. They may not be the most widespread form, but they are likely to be those most admired and represent standards for others. Examples might include decisive business leaders, popular boys in their school peer group and certain sportsmen and what they seem to ‘embody’. Hegemonic masculinities can be seen as dominant in the entire gender order.

‘Complicit masculinities’: To be complicit means to condone or support something without being actively engaged in it. Complicit masculinities are those that benefit in general from the social dominance of men while not actively seeking to oppress women. A complicit action would be, for example, to deny the existence of inequality or other problems, or merely not to question the way in which gender relations are generally ordered. This complicity may not be coherent across a range of issues, and the degree to which most men display some form of complicity is a subject of intense debate.

‘Subordinate masculinities’ are those that are culturally placed as inferior – homosexuality in relation to heterosexuality is an obvious example – or those that have made a conscious effort to protest and ‘exit’ from hegemonic and complicit positions. Other subordinate masculinities may involve those whose physical appearance does not conform to standards set by hegemonic embodiments. In relation to homosexuality, this formulation challenges the normative assumption that homosexuality is close to ‘femininity’.

‘Marginalised masculinities’ are those that are placed as different by issues of class, ethnicity or status. They may display and enjoy masculine power in certain contexts, but are always ultimately related to the hegemonic norms and images.

#### **1.4.1 Case study: The context of young men’s lives in Northern Ireland**

*In the following case study, Ken Harland, who has worked extensively as a youth worker and researcher in Belfast with young men and the issue of masculinities, considers issues young men face in their everyday lives. This case study deals with issues addressed in his book *Young Men Talking* (1997). (21)*

Reflection on any aspect of life in Northern Ireland must be considered within the context of the conflict that has been prevalent for almost 35 years. Since 1969, Northern Ireland has witnessed widespread social, economic and political upheaval through what is com-

only known as ‘the troubles.’ Throughout this period cultural and political identity has been fiercely disputed with young people developing their sense of ethnic identity “in the midst of political crisis and sectarian confrontation”.<sup>(22)</sup> Sectarianism and the effects of the troubles have been shown to have a significant influence upon young people growing up in Northern Ireland. Connolly and Maginn <sup>(23)</sup> found that sectarianism amongst children in Northern Ireland was rooted in their day to day experiences, and that by the age of three, children had not only developed an understanding of the categories of ‘Protestant’ and ‘Catholic,’ but were also able to apply negative characteristics from one to the other. As young men grow up these negative perceptions not only increase but are also exacerbated by other important factors. For example, in my inner city Belfast study, the young men perceived schools and local communities as hostile environments where they increasingly felt apathetic, vulnerable and disillusioned. The young men were wary of other young males within their community whilst fearful of young men from different traditions. Paramilitary violence was a constant threat that resulted in the young men feeling suspicious and confused, particularly regarding issues surrounding law and order.

### **Young Men’s ‘contradictory’ experience of Masculinity**

Issues surrounding masculinity and what it means to be a man are increasingly complex, contradictory and confusing. From childhood males are bombarded with powerful messages about what it means to be a man. Most boys learn to act in a particular way, displaying aggressive forms of masculine behaviour and avoiding behaviours that may be considered effeminate. For many young males, the consequences of failing to live up to accepted standards of masculinity is to risk losing their masculine status, which can have disastrous effects upon male health and self-esteem. Through their association with local interpretations of masculinity and femininity, many young men in working class areas of Northern Ireland learn to exist and survive within a complex and contradictory web of masculine thoughts and beliefs. One outcome of this is that young men believe they must deny, or conceal, important aspects of their personality in order to display their masculinity, believing it is by ‘acting tough’ that men get status and respect. The young men in my study believed men should be powerful, strong, brave, intelligent, healthy, sexy, mature and in control of every aspect of their lives. In reality however, their lives were full of ‘contradictions’ because most young men felt powerless, feared the threat of daily violence, were labelled ‘stupid’ at school, did not pay attention to their health needs and specifically their mental health, did not have much sexual experience, had not been in any type of sexual relationship and felt they were perceived by adults as ‘immature.’ Appreciating these ‘contradictions’ is important to understanding internal pressures that many young males feel in regard to how they construct their masculine identity and what it means to be a man. Contradictions between young men’s perceived power and their sense of powerlessness capture what Connell (1995) calls ‘protest masculinity,’ whereby boys make claims to power when there are no real resources for doing so. In my study, the young men’s perceptions of masculin-

ity resulted in them being dismissive of their pain and separated from their internal world of feelings and emotions, often to the extent that they appeared ‘unemotional.’ Significant socio-economic changes brought about as a result of de-industrialisation, uncertain youth-to-adult transitions, the perceived threat of violence and the changing position of women in society are all contributory factors with regard to young men’s masculine expectations being full of complex contradictions.

### **Young men and risk taking behaviour**

Clinging to stereotypical images of men and masculinity encourages young men to willingly jeopardise their health through engaging in high-risk activities. A key finding in my research with these young men revealed that because they were ambivalent about their masculinity, they felt enormous pressure to *prove* their masculinity to others. Subsequently, they were prepared to take risks as part of the price that young men pay in the pursuit of manhood. The notion of risk is a recurring theme in young men’s health statistics. This is evidenced by male risk-taking behaviours such as driving without a seat belt, eating snack foods, fighting, street violence, not visiting doctors, alcohol abuse, car theft, young men internalising their problems and increased suicide rates. Whilst the young men were aware of the dangers, they perceived risk-taking as a necessary component of male youth culture and as an important way in which males demonstrate their masculinity to others.

### **Public and Private – the ‘two worlds’ of young men**

In contemporary western societies it is becoming more commonplace for men to be criticised rather than praised for their ability to withhold emotions. Increasingly, men who withhold emotions are accused of being ‘out of touch with their emotions’ or ‘out of touch with their feminine side’. Thirty years ago such accusations were not deemed necessary or incorporated into gender analysis. Prior to this, it was generally accepted that women were more emotional than men and therefore when women publicly displayed their feelings this was accepted as evidence of their femininity. It was taken for granted that women were ‘better’ at expressing their emotional needs than men. Conversely, men who could restrain their emotions were perceived as exemplary role models within traditional interpretations of masculinity.

The young men in question experienced ambivalence between their ‘public’ and ‘private’ persona. In ‘public’ the young men felt enormous pressure to appear confident (often to the point of machismo) and evidence their masculinity to others in a forceful way, typically through the use of insults and bravado. In public the young men feared being humiliated by appearing weak (or feminine), which was threatening to their sense of male pride. Subsequently, it was in ‘private’ that these young men faced their anxieties and tried to cope with their fears and inner emotions. They learned that ‘real men’ should be in control and are therefore reluctant to seek support from others. Major difficulties lie in the fact that in traditional masculine cultures there are no realistic mechanisms to encourage young men to seek support or become more skilled at expressing their emotions.

## **1.5 Politics of gender: movements for a more equal society**

### **1.5.1 Women's movements**

The idea of the 'women's movement' seems relatively new: when asked about it most people might say that it started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the fight for the right to vote. Equally, it may be widely felt that women now have equal political, social and even equal human rights as men, so there is not much point to such a movement. Neither of these positions is accurate. Therefore, what is the women's movement, when did it start and why is it still relevant? There have always been outstanding, extraordinary women such as Jeanne D'Arc or Elizabeth I, who played an important role in local or world history, but they were not advocates of women's issues. The women's movement is made up of women and men who work and fight *to improve the lives of women as a social group*. Until recently in most societies women were confined to the home as daughters, wives and mothers, and in a majority of cases we only know about women's lives if they were related to some famous men. That is why the organised women's movement started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even though women's activism was probably always present in human societies.

One of the early pioneers who thought and wrote about women as a group is the Italian writer Christine de Pizan, who published a book about women's situation as early as 1495. She writes about the books she read by famous men who questioned whether women are human beings at all or more similar to animals, and wrote books about the sins and weaknesses of girls and women. She is a great example of the early stage of the struggle for women's equality, but her situation was very special: she could read and write, which was very unusual for a woman at that time. Later, women took part in the activities of the French revolution from the very beginning: the demonstrations that led to the revolution started with a large group of working women marching to Versailles to demand not only food to feed their families but also political change. However, when the revolution was over, women's rights were taken off the agenda, and when Napoleon's rule started women were sent back home, devoid of economic, social and political equality.

The women's movement started to reach more people in North America, mostly because there women were allowed to go to school earlier than in Europe, and women who can read, write and are encouraged to think for themselves usually start to question how society works. The first activists travelled around North America and fought for the end of both slavery and women's oppression. They organised the 'First Women's Rights Convention' in 1848, and continued to campaign to improve the social position of all women. The movement also began in Europe for the same purposes: activists collected signatures demanding that working women should receive their own wages and not their husbands', that women should be able to own a house and have custody of their children.

The fight for women's right to vote in elections is known as the 'suffrage movement'. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it had become a worldwide movement, and the words 'femi-

nism' and 'feminist movement' have also been used since then. This first wave of feminist activism included mass demonstrations, the publishing of newspapers, organised debates and the forming of international women's organisations. Partly as a result, by the 1920s, women had won the right to vote in most of Western Europe and North America. At the same time women became active in socialist and social democratic parties because more and more women started to work outside the home in factories and offices. Women were first allowed to go to university in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, since when more and more women have had a career as well as a family. The feminist movement was banned in countries where fascist parties gained power, and women started organising again after the end of the Second World War. At this time women gained equal political rights in several Eastern European countries, and women's emancipation was an important aim in these societies: most women were allowed to take on full-time jobs, divorce their husbands and go to university. However, as all aspects of life in this part of Europe were controlled by communist parties, women's emancipation was not achieved in reality, and there was not a real women's movement until the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989.

In Western Europe and the USA on the other hand, the feminist women's movement was resurgent by the 1970s. Although this *second wave of feminist activism* aimed to achieve 'women's liberation,' different groups wanted to do it in different ways. *Liberal feminists* wanted better equality laws and reforms of social institutions such as schools, churches and the media. *Radical feminists* argued that the cause of women's inequality is *patriarchy*: men, as a group, oppress women. They also focused on men's violence against women, and started to talk about violence in the family, and rape. *Socialist feminists* say that it is combination of patriarchy and capitalism that causes women's oppression. The second wave of feminism also resulted in new areas of science: women's studies became a discipline which can be studied at university, and books have been published about women's achievements in literature, music, science and women's previously unwritten history. Finally, the women's movement played an important role in the writing of international documents about women's rights such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

### **1.5.2 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) Movements**

*What are the gender issues confronting the LGBT movement and LGBT people, and how have they changed over time?*

Same sex relationships have always existed, but the roots of organised LGBT movements in Europe and the USA can be traced back to the 1920s and 1930s and the development of an urban gay and lesbian subculture.<sup>(24)</sup> For example, Berlin was famous for its gay subculture. Homosexual organisations began to develop after the Second World War. In the Netherlands in 1946 gay men, and later lesbian women, got together under the nickname 'The Shakespeare Club' and later as an organisation called C.O.C. The name meant Centre

for Culture and Leisure, a reminder of the pseudonym the organisation initially adopted after its foundation. C.O.C. is known as the oldest Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender organisation in the world.

In the USA, the first attempts to set up a lesbian and gay organisation can be traced back to 1950 in Los Angeles, when a small group of men set up the Mattachine Society. Mostly male in membership, it was joined in 1955 by a lesbian organization in San Francisco, the Daughters of Bilitis. In the 1950s these organizations remained small, but they established chapters in several cities and published magazines that were a beacon of hope to the readers.

The beginning of a gay political movement is now often traced back to 27<sup>th</sup> June, 1969, and a raid by the New York City police on a Greenwich Village gay bar, The Stonewall Inn. Contrary to expectations, the patrons fought back, provoking three nights of rioting in the area accompanied by the appearance of ‘gay power’ slogans on the buildings. Almost overnight, a massive grassroots gay liberation movement was born. Owing much to the radical protest of African-Americans, women, and anti-war protesters of the 1960s, gays challenged all forms of hostility and punishment meted out by society. Choosing to ‘come out of the closet’ and publicly proclaim their identity, they provided a movement for social change with substantial impetus. In general the same developments can be seen in Western European countries, where the lesbian and gay world is no longer an underground subculture but, in larger cities in particular, is a well-organized community. This often involves gay businesses, political clubs, social service agencies, community centres and religious congregations bringing people together. In a number of places, openly gay candidates run for elections.

During these struggles, homosexual men and lesbian women came to realise that they did not and would not conform to dominant social gender roles. Homosexuals not only challenged the heterosexual norm but also challenged the images of how men and women should behave, what they should look like and what roles they should fulfil in society. These confrontations with repressive social norms have been carried out in spectacular ways that have increased visibility, such as a ‘kiss-in’ of lesbians on a German town square, and sometimes through mainstream political approaches such as lobbying and advocacy. Publicly ‘out’ lesbians and gays in politics and organisations as the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) and the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth and Students Organisation (IGLYO) have and continue to contribute to the inclusion of LGBT issues in discussions on equal opportunities, human rights and general social policy.

*The previous section on feminism, and the following section on men’s groups, point out that other movements have played a role in the LGBT struggle. In particular, the feminist movement’s de-linking of sexuality and procreation, its critique of marriage, and dominant male-female role patterns have contributed to opening a social space for the experiences and identities of gay men and women. However, this does not imply that either struggle has been exhausted: gender politics do not progress in a*

straight line, and rigid gender expectations still cause significant marginalisation on the basis of sexual identity. Moreover, there has been a backlash by social conservatives against both feminism and the LBGT movement. Even a few years ago, when Rosanne kissed a lesbian on the US television show *Rosanne*, there was a huge outcry. The American Family Association (AFA) condemned ABC television for allowing such show of affection on TV. Tim Wildmon, the Vice President of the AFA said, “The television industry continues to push the homosexual agenda with increasing fervency, with regular homosexual characters, same-sex marriages, and now passionate lesbian kissing scenes. And they won’t stop their assault on morality until American society cries ‘Uncle!’ and fully accepts the homosexual lifestyle as legitimate.” (25)

### Reflection

How is homosexuality represented in television programmes in your context? What stereotypes exist? Are there any representations that challenge these stereotypes? Is there a public debate such as the one described above in the USA?

Despite the fact that in several countries in Europe legal changes have resulted in anti-discrimination legislation and same sex partnerships, or ‘civil marriage’, the social acceptance of LGBTs is still far from unconditional and secure. For example, the writers of this manual have observed that LBGT issues remain something of a taboo even among ‘progressives’ in the human rights movement and in European youth work. It should also be pointed out that one cannot speak of *the* LBGT movement. Although lesbians, gays, bisexuals and trans-genders are usually mentioned as one category, there remain many differences between them and within these broad sexual identities. Sometimes LBGTs work closely together, and at other times separate campaigns and strategies are pursued. *Within* the LBGT movement a wide variety of attitudes towards political demands and gender expectations can be found. ‘How homosexuals should behave’ is a constant discussion topic, shifting between approaches which aim for greater mainstream acceptability, and more radical identity politics that play with images of (fe)male identities.

#### 1.5.3 Men’s Groups and Boys’ Groups

*In this section, Jeff Hearn, Professor at the Swedish School of Economics in Helsinki and the University of Huddersfield, discusses anti-sexist men’s groups and activities. He first set up such a group in 1978 and since 1999 he has been part of ‘profeministimiehet’ (pro-feminist men) in Helsinki, Finland.*

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to sit with a group of boys or men, but without a prearranged reason, agenda or diversion? What would you talk about? What would you do?

Boys and men often meet, socialise and organise in groups, and often seem to like doing so very much indeed. Many of these groups are either boys-only or men-only or clearly dominated by boys or men. Such groups can be found in schools and other places of education, at work, in sport, in pubs and clubs or on the street. They are places and spaces for men and boys to meet others of the same gender. But they are often *not* called men's groups or boys' groups, even when they clearly are. Sometimes these groups are specifically organised as such, as for example, with many single-sex sports; sometimes they are coupled with formal or organised attempts to exclude girls and women, such as men-only clubs or rooms; often they are taken-for-granted as "just the way things are" in, for example, some leading management groups or 'expert' panel discussions or street gangs; sometimes they seem, by chance, to "just happen ..."; and of course sometimes they are gay groups.

Most of these groups are not what I would call *explicitly gender-conscious*. They are not usually meeting together to consciously reflect on their gender as boys and / or men, or on their own explicit gender interests in relation to women. However, for some time now, boys and men are gathering, more or less gender-consciously, to talk about and reflect on their own gender. Since the 1970s there have been a number of forms of explicitly gender-conscious groups and politics by men and boys, from anti-feminist to *pro-feminist*<sup>3</sup>. Anti-sexist men's groups in the 1970s and 1980s, influenced by feminist, gay, left, anarchist and green politics, were active in national and regional conferences, gatherings and campaigns.

One list of 'Anti-sexist men's commitments' produced in 1980 ran:

- Commitment to the (anti-sexist) group
- Consciousness-raising done rigorously
- Support for the women's liberation movement
- Support for gay liberation
- Sharing childcare
- Learning from feminist and gay culture
- Action on our own behalf
- Propaganda and outreach programmes (linked to action)
- Link-ups with other men against sexism groups
- Renunciation of violence (physical, emotional and verbal) (26)

By the mid-1980s, in the UK at least, there was a loss of momentum in the anti-sexist men's movement, and many activists either left or tried to bring these issues into more

<sup>3</sup> What is pro-feminism? Pro-feminism describes men's solidarity and support for feminist struggles and issues. Just as there are various feminisms so there are various forms of pro feminism. However, amongst all the different viewpoints, pro-feminists share a conviction to listen to and learn from feminism and women, and to rethink and deconstruct male gender as the dominant and hegemonic gender. This involves actively changing both ourselves and other men – personally, politically, at home, at work, in the media, campaigns, law, and so on. Examples of men's actions and power that need changing include men's violence, sexual harassment, gender discrimination, sexism and patriarchal dominance more generally. Pro-feminist organising can include campaigns, demonstrations, posters, flyers, writing letters, articles and pamphlets, producing T-shirts, postcards etc., as well as more personally orientated activities, including consciousness-raising groups.

mainstream and professional work in teaching, youth work, welfare, journalism, broadcasting, therapy, consultancy, writing and research. This was partly a case of putting these ideas into effect but also sometimes of diluting them. The movement towards mythopoeitic groups followed, groups that tried to ‘reclaim’ authentic, essential masculine identities. More recently, organisations for men’s rights and fathers’ rights have become more visible and active in spectacular ways, even though men and fathers have had privileged gender rights for a very long time.

There are thus many different motivations for meeting in gender-conscious men’s groups or boys’ groups. They can range from being actively in favour of gender equality and feminism to being actively hostile to gender equality and feminism – reinforcing and returning to the old, traditional, patriarchal ways. There is a kind of continuum from those men who are actively supportive of gender equality and feminism towards those who are in favour of this in theory but do not do anything in particular, to those who are ‘not bothered’ and on to those who are actively hostile.

Another way of understanding these groups is in terms of different positions within three points of a triangle: first, recognition of institutionalised privileges; second, recognition of differences / inequalities among men, and, third, recognition of the ‘costs of masculinity’. This model shows the complexity of motivations, especially regarding the different kinds of differences / inequalities amongst men. It highlights how one cannot reduce gender politics to one continuum, but rather opens up some personal and political spaces. These various positions can be occupied by individual men, groups of men, whole organizations and even whole governments; they can operate in gender equality politics, in working life, at home, in personal relationships, or even in bed.

There has recently been a revival of interest in pro-feminist organising, at least in a European and international context. Examples include the European Pro-feminist Network<sup>(27)</sup>, the pro-feminist project *Ending Gender-based Violence*<sup>(28)</sup> (supported by UNICEF and the Swedish development agency, SIDA, the EU Critical Research on Men in Europe which is explicitly (pro)feminist<sup>(29)</sup>, and the International Network for the Radical Critique of Masculinities. There is growing interest from governments, the EU and UN in the contribution of men to gender equality. The UN Division for the Advancement of Women has promoted ‘The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality’.<sup>(30)</sup> This theme is also one of the social priorities of the Finnish government.

Nevertheless, there are still ambiguities in many discussions about men, boys and gender equality: these relate to whether it is gender-conscious groups or more generally, how men can contribute to women’s struggles for gender equality, and about what men can gain from gender equality? Sadly, it tends usually to be the latter. To put this another way: can gender equality be achieved within the context of patriarchy? If not, then patriarchy needs to be abolished, hence the need for boys and men to be anti-patriarchal and pro-feminist, not simply taking part in gender equality debates.

- If you are thinking of starting, or planning to start or facilitate a group, you need firstly to think about what kind of group it is, and what its purpose is. Is it for consciousness-raising, discussion, therapy, writing or activism? Is it a self-help group, or is it to be led or facilitated? Find out and contact those you know who might be interested. Ask if they know others who might be interested. Think also about your and others' personal and political motives for doing this. This is especially important if you advertise a first meeting publicly. If you do, maybe it's good to have at least two people facilitating the meeting, rather than it being 'chaired' by just one. There are many obvious issues for such groups to address: being a boy, growing up, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, women, other men, intimacy, sex and sexuality, violence, sport, fear, your / men's bodies, emotions, work, love, politics or the media, or try something more specific, for example, hair, shoes, shaving, trousers, meat, photos, computer games or fruit.
- Meeting and sitting down together, perhaps without even a fixed reason or excuse (such as drinking or smoking or playing some sport) may seem, at first, very weird, or even very embarrassing. But others are probably feeling the same. You'll get used to it. One of the things to look at is the fair use of time in groups. A simple way is to begin and end with 'rounds' in a circle where everyone can talk uninterrupted in turn, but for no longer than, for example, two minutes.
- A simple, but often very revealing, exercise is for the boys or men in the group, either on their own or in pairs or sub-groups to address three questions:
  - What do you like about being a man / boy?
  - What do you not like?
  - What things would you like to change, and how?
- This often involves recognising dilemmas and ambivalences. Key questions include:
  - How important is changing myself and other men?
  - How much effort should I put into this?
  - Do I want this to be a fundamental part of my life?
  - In what ways do I feel ambivalent about change?
- There are often contradictions in seeking to change:
  - How do I recognise 'being a man' without emphasising that status?
  - How do I recognise 'being a man' whilst stopping being a man?
  - Do I need to depend more on men, on women or on both?
  - How do I learn from feminism? What do I mean by feminism?
  - How do I learn from feminism without taking over women's space?
- There is also a need to act consciously in groups. Common pitfalls in groups include:
  - 'hogging the show'- not giving space to others
  - being the continual problem-solver
  - defensiveness

- task and content focus to the exclusion of nurturing
- negativism
- using formal power positions
- stubbornness and dogmatism
- listening only to oneself
- avoiding feelings
- condescension and paternalism
- using sexuality to manipulate women
- seeking attention and support from women while running the show
- protectively storing key group information for one's own use
- speaking for others <sup>(31)</sup>

It is important to recognise that common forms of control are unacceptable. These include yelling, threatening gestures, verbal threats, defining reality unilaterally, withholding positive attention, persistent criticism, ridiculing, and demeaning women. Responsible action for men and boys involves:

- limiting our talking time to our fair share
- not interrupting who is speaking
- becoming a good listener
- getting and giving support
- not giving answers and solutions
- relaxing
- not speaking on every subject
- not putting others down
- nurturing democratic group processes
- interrupting others' oppressive behaviour <sup>(32)</sup>

A key challenge throughout is to change men's and boys' relations with both women and girls, and with each other. How is it that heterosexual men and boys are often so 'homosocial': preferring, valuing and choosing men, boys and male company over women, girls and female company? Oddly, such heterosexual homosociality can sometimes go together with homophobia. This is an aspect of men's and boys' relations with each other that needs to be strongly challenged.

## • **Endnotes for Chapter I**

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