

Gender-in-a-box³

What are little boys made of? / “Snips and snails, and puppy dogs tails / That’s what little boys are made of!” / What are little girls made of? / “Sugar and spice and all things nice / That’s what little girls are made of!” 19th c. English rhyme


LEVEL: 2

GROUP: 6-30

TIME: 60-90 MIN.

Complexity Level 2

Group size 6 to 30

Time 60 to 90 minutes

Overview Scholars and trainers alike often refer to ‘gender roles’. This is a concept that is today relatively widely used and discussed in the public sphere. In communication, the existence of rigidly defined gender roles and the damage that these can cause to individuals is most often taken for granted. Nevertheless, participants may come from backgrounds where the difference between gender and sex is not acknowledged and where the different roles accorded to women and men are considered as something ‘natural’ or ‘biological’. This exercise addresses the problematic effects of rigidly defined gender roles in society and aims to raise awareness about them. Participants will discuss the current role of the youth sector in this process and imagine possible change, as necessary.

Objectives To help participants gain insight into

- the socially-constructed nature of gender roles
- the mechanisms and agents of gender socialisation
- their personal history of gender socialisation
- the connections between gender socialisation and gender-based violence

Materials

- Youth magazines
- Advertising clippings
- Flipchart with paper
- Scissors
- Glue sticks
- Red, blue, green and black markers for the flipchart

Preparation Prepare two flipchart posters. Each should have one of the following headings: MEN (written in blue) and WOMEN (written in red).

³ Adapted from Creighton, A. and Kivel, P. (1990). *Helping Teens Stop Violence. A practical guide for educators, counsellors and parents*. Hunter House, Alameda.

Instructions

The first part of this exercise can be conducted in sub-groups or in the whole group. You should decide about this in advance. If you decide to create sub-groups, examine whether it is more appropriate to conduct the first part of the exercise in single-sex sub-groups.

Refer to a common experience the group has had prior to this exercise, whether this was an introductory activity to this exercise or a movie they all know or pop-stars acting out extreme gender roles. Explain to participants that there is / was a strong message of gender socialisation in that experience, and that the following activity will be about examining gender socialisation in a very practical way.

When working with one large group

Form small groups of threes. Give out magazines or clippings and ask the small groups to leaf through them and discuss with each other the messages that young people receive from these magazines about what men and women are supposed to be like. While they are talking, prepare two empty flipchart papers on the wall or on two stands and write MEN in blue at the top of one of them and WOMEN in red at the top of the other. After about 15 minutes, ask participants to come back into one circle and to brainstorm on the qualities of 'real men' and 'real women' as presented through the magazines they have been looking at, and other sources where such images are present. Encourage participants to disclose examples of what they were taught to understand as a 'real man' or 'real woman' during childhood or in school. Make notes of qualities, preferably using key words or short phrases, on the two flipcharts, using the red and blue markers for women and men, respectively. In a multicultural or multiethnic group take note of differences that arise, including all the different gender roles that arise, for example, in some cultures thin women are considered more beautiful (usually places / groups where there is no food shortage), whereas in others (usually in places / groups where poverty and hunger are the norm) having more fat tissue is idealised as beautiful.

Once the lists are complete, ask the group to cut out a few image examples from the magazines and stick them next to the keywords listed on the flipcharts.

When using sub-groups

Form sub-groups. Present the magazines or clippings and the flipchart papers with MEN and WOMEN as headings. Introduce the exercise by asking the whole group to give a few examples about messages that young people receive about how 'real men' and 'real women' are supposed to be like from the video / role-play / experience they have in common. After receiving a few answers, explain that the group will now work in two sub-groups, one brainstorming on men, the other on women. If you have decided to use single-sex sub-groups, the male group works on the male roles and the female group should work on the female roles. They should look through the magazines and clippings and use them as illustrations wherever possible. Also tell participants that they should not limit themselves

to what they have found in the magazines, but think of their own childhood, school years or adolescence and contribute with the messages they have received about what men and women should be like. Sub-groups should preferably work in separate locations. The facilitator should monitor the process.

When the sub-groups are ready, bring them back into one group, review the results and ask members of the other sub-group to add (some of) their own thoughts.

The result should look something like this:

MEN

faithful (can be) polygamous muscular heterosexual
 brave sporty father had many girlfriends hairy chest
 strong potent creative winner rich successful
 daring manager protects the weak, esp. women active
 hits back competent breadwinner intelligent tall
 clever tough does not show emotions (apart from anger)

WOMEN

(good) mother pretty married sexy monogamous
 virgin(-like) passive (good) housekeeper fertile cheerful
 has big breasts long hair graceful takes care of her body
 thin less clever than boyfriend no body hair patient
 sexually experienced non-violent keeps traditions dresses well
 obedient family-orientated silent seductive caretaker

Debriefing and evaluation

Explain to the group that despite some possible arguments on one word or another, very different groups of people usually manage to put together lists of these characteristics in a short period of time. Explain that the reason for this is that we all learn about how women and men should be from common sources. The collective name for these lists is 'gender roles'. These roles are presented to us as 'boxes' into which women and men are expected to fit. As you say this, draw a blue and a red rectangle around the words on the flipcharts.

Explain that what differentiates gender from sex is that, whereas the list of sexual characteristics is very short and has not changed in the last hundred thousand years, lists of gender roles are long, and vary both geographically and historically, often within a short distance or period of time.

Begin a discussion around the main issues raised by the exercise. You can use the following questions as a guide:

Gender socialisation

- Is it easy to stay in the boxes? Why?

Sometimes people do not *want* to stay in the box, but many times it is very difficult, or impossible to do otherwise.

Suggest to the group that they look for potential contradictions *within* the boxes, circle the pairs with green marker and connect them, for example:

- thin body - big breasts
- not hairy - long hair
- uses violence to resolve conflicts - kind to girlfriend

Some of these potential contradictions are biological: fat tissue on women does not (normally) grow only in one place; strong and long hair also means more hair on other body parts. Others expect different types of personalities in different situations.

Look for qualities that cannot be obtained by will, and box them in green, for example, physical qualities such as muscular, tall or thin are largely a matter of genetics and they can be influenced only to a certain degree. Becoming rich or being fertile are also qualities over which the individual has only limited influence.

- In what ways are we motivated to stay in, or try to get into the boxes?

Socialisation involves rewards and punishments as a way to reinforce or ban activities, habits and values. Ask participants to look at the contents of the boxes and to brainstorm how society punishes girls and boys, women and men, who do not want to or cannot belong to the box to which they are ascribed by society, in one respect or another.

- What is said to such people? What is done to them?

Note down the answers on a new sheet of flipchart headed 'Punishments' and list the brainstormed words in groupings for verbal, psychological, physical, sexual and social / economic forms of punishment. When the brainstorming is over, name the five forms of violence and give headings to the groups of words.

Conclude this part of the debriefing by explaining that these are some examples of the types of violence used to punish us and others, when we or they do not fit in. It is important to stress that there are many other causes and excuses for violence; the point of this exercise was to show the negative motivation which is responsible for so many of us actually trying to be who we are expected to be, but it is not an explanation of the causes of violence!

- *Gender roles and inequality between women and men*
- Gender roles equally limit men and women at the individual level. However, if we compare the two boxes, we find, first of all, that there are some important differences between them:
 - 1. There are fewer contradictions in the male box.
 - 2. Expressions in the male box often start with 'can be', whereas the women's box has much more of the obligatory type of qualities.
- Furthermore, there are several opposites in the two boxes, which give more freedom and more power to men as a group, creating certain group privileges which are accessible to men as opposed to women, whether they ask for them or not.
- Ask the group to find matching opposites in the men's and women's boxes, and then circle and connect them in black, for example:
 - • active - passive
 - • uses violence to resolve conflicts - non-violent
 - • earns well - family-centred
- This exercise demonstrates that inherited gender roles and socialisation are partly responsible for the fact that men are encouraged to participate in the public sphere and in the political and economic life of the country. It is not surprising, therefore, that these systems are more representative of men's realities and needs. Women, on the other hand, are often encouraged to stay in the family sphere and to engage in care-taking, resulting in their disproportionate under-representation in decision making and their financial dependence on men. These severely limit the life options, choices and freedom of women.
- *Gender roles and gender-based violence*
 - • Looking at the boxes now, what kind of connections do you think exist between gender socialisation and gender-based violence?
 - • Where do we learn the gender roles?
- During the initial brainstorming and during the brainstorming on punishments, it is common for several sources to be raised. Make a new flipchart with the heading 'Sources of gender socialisation', and list the names of people and institutions that come up. Usually this list includes parents both before and after birth, kindergarten, school, peers, friends, the media (press, magazines, TV, commercials, music, movies, books, literature, science, fairy tales), religion, holy scripts, history books, popular psychology, the military, and so on.
- *Role and responsibility of the youth sector*
 - • How does gender socialisation appear in the youth sector?
 - • Have there been or are there any changes in this field?
 - • Should the youth sector address this issue differently from current practices? If, yes then how?
 - • Can you give some examples of good practice?

Summary and conclusion

The existence of gender roles is often denied, with gender roles being considered 'natural'. How can something be natural and part of our biological set-up if it changes within ten years or a hundred kilometres? Here you can refer to cultural and geographical differences raised by participants during the brainstorming. Many individual boys and girls, women and men, suffer from the demands put on them to conform to specified gender roles. A rigid definition of gender roles contributes significantly to the inequality between women and men and to gender-based violence.

Tips for facilitators

The strength of this activity is that it brings the issue of gender roles and gender socialisation close to participants. Usually these issues are dealt with only in theoretical discussions. Therefore, it is important to introduce this exercise with some sort of real-life experience participants have. If you are working with a heterogeneous group coming together for a one-off training activity, it is best to create the experience right there in the room in the form of a role-play (e.g. boy and girl playing in a kindergarten or playground, and an adult instructing them to act like a boy and a girl), or a video showing boys and girls or women and men in typical or atypical gender roles, such as interviews with people having jobs that usually people of the other sex do. If the group meets often over a longer period of time, you can think of some recent or typical common experience, for example, that in camp, boys are usually called upon to look for wood and build the fire, whereas girls do the kitchen duties.

Suggestions for follow-up

Gender socialisation is part of almost every aspect of our life. The kind of examples that one finds in advertising or youth magazines can be found in many other areas of life, as well. As an add-on to the discussion on 'Where do we learn gender roles from?', the group could examine other sources of gender socialisation, such as first-grade schoolbooks, the policies and planned activities of their own organisation, and so on.

Ideas for action

The group can look for any pre-existing campaigns that address issues of gender socialisation and gender stereotyping and find ways to contribute to these campaigns through activities or creating publications or materials. Where the group can not find any pre-existing campaigns in which to take part in, they may like to think about how they can start their own campaign or produce information material to give to their organisation or other organisations.