

6. Gender



Objectives

By the end of this session, group members will be able to:

- Explain the difference between sex and gender.
- Describe how gender roles can be harmful.



Background notes

Each person is born with a girl's body or a boy's body. These differences determine a person's sex. Sex is the word to describe a person as a male or a female. The following things determine whether a person is a male or a female:

- Type of sex organs (penis, testicles, vagina, womb).
- Type of hormones in the body.
- Ability to produce sperm or eggs.
- Ability to give birth and breastfeed children.

Gender is not the same as sex. Gender is the ideas and expectations people have about men and women. These include ideas about what is considered feminine and masculine and how men and women should behave. A person's gender is complicated, and is made up of roles, duties, appearance, speech, movement, and more. Ideas about gender are learned from family, friends, teachers, religious leaders, advertisements, the media, and community leaders.

What are gender roles?

Gender roles are the kinds of activities that a community considers appropriate for people because of their sex. Each community expects women and men to think, feel, and act in a certain way, simply because they are women or men. In most communities, for example, women are expected to prepare food, fetch water and fuel, and care for their children and husband. Men are often expected to work outside the home to provide for their families and parents in old age, and to protect their families from harm. Gender roles can make us feel like we have to act a certain way or do certain things because of our sex. Gender roles are not necessarily correct; girls can do the things boys do and boys can do the things girls do. Gender roles are always changing. We do not need to obey gender roles. We can do what we want to do and be who we want to be.

How gender roles are learned

Gender roles are passed down from parents to children, as well as learned from other family members and people in the community. From the time we are very young, parents treat girls and boys differently – sometimes without even knowing it. As we grow up, we often accept these roles because we want to please our parents and community. Gender roles can help us to know who we are and what is expected of us, but gender roles can also limit the choices we have and activities we can participate in. These limitations can make people feel bad and unimportant.





Session guide

1. Facilitate a discussion by asking group members the following questions:
 - What are things that only men are expected to do? Why don't women do them? Are they not able to? Could they do them if they wanted to?
 - What are things that only women are expected to do? Why don't men do them? Are they not able to? Could they do them if they wanted to?
 - How would you define gender?
 - What do we mean by gender roles? What are some examples?
 - How do gender roles affect your life in a good way?
 - How do gender roles affect your life in a bad way?
2. After discussing all of the questions, share the information from the Background Notes section.



Main points

- Gender means the ideas and expectations people have about men and women, including what is considered feminine and masculine and how men and women should behave.
- Gender roles are the ways women and men are expected to think, feel, and act by their families and communities.



Gender activity

Read the three stories below, one at a time.

After each story ask group members to come up with a solution to the problem. Allow several group members to share their ideas about how to solve the problem before reading the next story. For each of the stories, be sure that group members are giving good advice. Allow them to share their ideas as they start discussing the problem, but in the end the group should agree on advice that challenges gender roles but should also be realistic.

1. Julia has been offered a place at the polytechnic to study masonry. She is the only girl in the class and the boys are always teasing her about a girl trying to do a man's job. When she scored higher than the boys in the exams, the boys stopped talking to her. She is feeling sad because she has no friends in the class. What should Julia do?
2. Jesse wants to make a doll for his younger brother, but his friend Joseph says "No way!" Jesse explains that dolls help teach boys to take care of someone, but Joseph argues that they just teach boys to be cowards. Jesse knows he is right but he's worried about what Joseph might say to their friends. What should Jesse do?

3. Owen has been Carole's boyfriend for six months. Both just finished Form 4 and will be going to university in different parts of the country. Owen has told Carole that he wants to show her how much he loves her before they part. Carole has heard about the importance of safe sex. She asks her friend Mary to go with her to the chemist to buy some condoms. Mary tells her that girls shouldn't buy condoms; it's the boy's duty. What should Carole do?

Gender game: An alien has landed!

Group members explain the differences between men and women to a visiting alien.

Materials: Flip-chart paper, markers, and masking tape.

1. Explain to the group that an alien landed at their school. It came to visit Earth and to know its people. It was confused, because it had heard that there were men and women on Earth, but it was not able to tell the difference.
2. Ask the group to list all of the things that men and women have in common and why the alien could be confused.
3. Ask the group to list all of the differences between men and women. Draw a line down the middle of a large piece of paper or a chalkboard. On the right side, write the word man; and on the other side, the word woman. Write all the ideas given by the group members.
4. When the list is finished, tell them that the alien wants to know which of all the ideas won't change through time or place. Underline all ideas that apply.
5. Use the differences that are underlined to define the word sex (physical and biological differences between males and females) as those things that don't change through time or place. Then define gender as the ideas and expectations people have about men and women that are influenced by culture.
6. Lead a talk by asking group members to answer these questions:
 - How would you explain the difference between sex and gender?
 - What items on our gender list do you think are different in other cultures?
 - Was there anything on the list that you were surprised was a part of culture, not nature?
 - Which gender differences are the most harmful to women? To men?
 - Which gender differences are harmless?
 - If you could change one gender difference, what would it be, and why?
 - How could you change people's beliefs about gender? For example, if a father believes his daughter should not go to school because girls should work at home, what would you say to him?
 - What can you do to change gender roles in your family? In your school? In your community?