

## **PARENTS' ROLE IN FIGHTING AGAINST GENDER STEREOTYPES**

Gender is a cross-cutting concept that imbues social relations and has an enormous influence, both on our personal development and on the social and interpersonal relations that we, as individuals, establish in all the contexts where our socialisation process takes place.

One of the first things parents, family and friends wonder before a birth is the baby's sex.

The answer to such a simple question will broadly influence the sex-typing process of the said individual (Maccoby, 1980).

The first stage of socialisation takes place in the family setting. Boys and girls learn what corresponds to each gender role in the family, in the household; this will determine the acquisition of some specific behaviour patterns and expectations in adulthood that differ in a very significant way between men and women (Institute of Women, 2005).

We are all aware that these differences in expectations between men and women place the latter in a weak position, thus perpetuating gender stereotypes. Family and school are the main contexts (but not the only ones) where girls learn to be women. These two agents have an enormous influence in role models and in the expectations about being a woman or a man in our culture. They can therefore help end gender stereotypes in future generations, develop a critical thinking about the traditional roles that society assigns to both men and women and ensure a comprehensive education based on equal opportunities.

Throughout childhood, girls and boys build, from a very early age, gender stereotypes. This is due to the different treatment they receive since they are born, and that will determine their behaviour and differing expectations. From birth, girls are exposed to a series of concepts, models and relations that perpetuate traditional gender roles. They assume the factors intervening in the creation of gender identity and arising from different contexts of child and teenage socialisation, such as family, school, peers or mass media. This fact allows us to take action on these spheres where the development of children takes place.

While this intervention should ideally encompass all spheres, I will only speak about the family context. As I have said before, from the very moment that parents await the birth of their baby, a series of expectations, which will vary depending on whether it will be a boy or a girl, begin to take shape.

Let me remind you of an old but quite revealing experiment.

A group of fathers were asked to describe their 24-hour-old babies. Fathers defined male babies as active, strong and intelligent, whereas the adjectives used to depict baby girls were "loving", "sensitive" and "sociable" (Maccoby, 1980; McFarlane, 1977).

It is therefore clear that the parents' expectations on their sons and daughters' capacities are virtually determined from the moment they are born. This can be appreciated in some aspects such as the bedroom decoration, clothing, toys and the activities they carry out together.

When children start school, these differentiated expectations are also focused on the development of specific learning abilities. During adolescence, parental behaviour contributes to perpetuate stereotypes, as they often follow behaviour patterns linked to the most traditional gender roles. For example, they are stricter with their daughters than with their sons about how much time they spend out of home, for how long and who with.

To sum up, girls learn how to become women thanks to the models and life expectations exhibited by adults in the school and within the family.

It is not only possible, as I have mentioned before, but also vital, to take action so that girls and boys learn, throughout the socialisation process, how to develop capacities linked to a comprehensive personal development that allow them to become independent and autonomous individuals.

We women still remain in a disadvantaged situation that obstructs and often prevents us from participating actively on an equal basis with men, in making significant decisions and taking responsibilities arising from those decisions.

Thus, apart from trying to implement a co-educational model in schools, it is necessary for families to be aware of the female and male role models that they exhibit before the youngest members of the family. The purpose is that families, whatever their type, help grow and develop all their members, taking their needs and capacities into account and preventing role models from being a hindrance that limits their possibilities and determines their future achievements (Ochaíta and Espinosa, 2004). For all these reasons, we should provide parents, in non-school settings, with the necessary knowledge and resources to help build a society which is free of stereotypes.

The good practice that I will briefly explain now originates in the need of addressing gender stereotypes from multiple approaches.

This good practice arises from a problem made evident in the Annual Report of the Spanish Public Prosecutor's Office. Data contained therein showed that during the year 2012, 632 criminal trial proceedings were initiated concerning gender violence committed by minors. In section 6 of this annual report, the prosecutor in charge of children affairs states the following:

*"In these cases, it can often be appreciated how minors reproduce roles that are typical of violence against women in adults: Defendants with a strong controlling behaviour towards their partner, who resort to physical and psychological violence to prevent her from leaving, and strongly stigmatised minor victims".*

To prevent this situation, the Irene Program for Training, Information and Prevention of Sexual Violence in Young People and Teenagers was launched. It was developed by the Institute of Women in collaboration with local entities (City Councils and Provincial Governments). It is intended for young people and teenagers of Secondary Education and Vocational Training centres and young offender institutions. However, it also includes specific action aimed at students' parents associations, neighbourhood associations and more, but also at all the professionals that may get in touch for the first time with a minor victim of sexual abuse, such as State Security Forces and Law Enforcement Bodies, healthcare personnel, social services, teachers and instructors, etc.

The following three activities are conducted in each town in the framework of this programme.

The first one of them is aimed at the students' parents, female neighbourhood associations and adults in general, with a view to increase knowledge and raise awareness on the impact that sexual abuse has on young people and teenagers; on the legal status of these crimes; on the available resources; on the definition of concepts such as abuse, battering and violence and the differences among them, as well as how to identify these situations and react to them; and on new kinds of Internet-based crimes and their psychological consequences.

The second activity consists of prevention workshops for students with the purpose of identifying and preventing sexual abuse in youngsters and teenagers. They deal with respectful relations, reinforce behaviours that prevent abuse, and analyse and shed light on myths about the origin and continuity of sexual violence. They also work on improving communication skills that help express disagreement or voice opinions respecting others' points of view. Finally, they increase knowledge about new ways of sexual violence.

The last activity is intended for professionals that may have a direct contact with the victims of an aggression. These training courses are designed to educate and raise awareness in these kinds of professionals, so that they can provide an adequate response to the victim, react quickly and efficiently, prevent secondary victimisation, provide appropriate referral, facilitate reporting and preserve evidence.

I will refer to the first activity in more detail, since the purpose of this session is the parents' role.

Training outside school settings is vital for the future generations, still girls and boys in the present time, to embrace models based on gender equality, equality for women and men and respect for all human beings. Education plays an essential role in the training process of future generations. For this reason, the parents of children and youngsters are also commissioned with this practice, since they highly influence the way boys and girls embrace cultural patterns, including gender-based stereotypes.

In most cases, parents are not aware of this situation, but they play a paramount role in their upbringing due to the different expectations that parents may have about their children's behaviour, the way they address them and even the relationship between mothers and fathers.

This is why, along with prevention workshops for young people, training courses have been provided for parents of these students, since their influence is vital.

In this case, the training aims at breaking gender-based stereotypes and myths underlying sexual violence. Foster parents have also participated in these courses, since the Programme has been developed in foster homes with young people who, due to their individual circumstances, are under custody. This group was particularly motivated to provide support and educate foster children, since these children and teenagers usually have suffered or been exposed to sexual violence cases more frequently than ordinary teenagers.

The contents included in these training courses firstly aim at clearing up basic concepts such as:

- Gender-based violence and types of violence.
- Sexual violence (aggressions, abuse, harassment, sexual exploitation, cyber stalking, grooming, sexting).

In many occasions, we have realised that parents are not aware of the existence of specific concepts and that myths about sexual aggressions, couples, aggressors, etc. are usually perpetuated.

An attempt has also been made to help parents realise that this type of violence is real through statistics, so they stop looking at gender-based violence as something that has nothing to do with their daily life and their family.

It was also noticed that young people and teenagers have embraced certain myths about couples, and said myths are often endorsed by parents (concepts about the need to find Mr. or Ms. Right, soul mates, the boy is stronger and the girl is supportive and affectionate, etc.)

During these courses, attendees also worked on challenging widely accepted myths about sexual aggressions suffered by women (the woman provokes the aggression with her behaviour, her looks, so she is guilty for what is happening to her; a woman who suffered a sexual aggressions does never recover; women make up sexual aggression complaints,...)

Many parents also believed that certain myths were real as regards the circumstances of aggressions: these aggressions only happen on the streets, late at night in isolated places; the victim has never met the aggressor before, or that suffering a sexual aggression in the house of somebody you know is rare. The existence of false beliefs about the aggressor was also detected. For example, it is believed that aggressors have a low social and cultural status, that they cannot help themselves, or that all of the men who suffered sexual abuse as children grow up to be sexual offenders.

We have also worked on the symptoms and consequences for the victims so that they can be identified and detected. These indicators may show that a minor is suffering an aggression (low self-esteem, worse academic performance, increasingly short-tempered, does not hang out with friends any more or meets them less frequently than he/she used to, focuses on her/his partner, does not get along with his/her parents, does not trust as easily as he/she used to, has changed her/his looks and clothes, focuses too much on her/his phone or social networks,...).

Parents have also worked to differentiate and avoid the most frequent reactions displayed by family and friends, such as disbelief, surprise, lack of determination about the need to intervene or not, anxiety, fearing that the daughter will no longer trust her parents, the tendency to control the girl more closely.

Finally, parents were given some basic guidelines on how to act in these situations (creating a trustful and understanding environment, asking simple non-intimidating questions, helping the victim talk freely, listening carefully, making the victim feel calm and safe, telling the victim that he/she is not guilty and not alone) and the procedures and protocols to be followed when reporting the aggression.

The methods applied were quite varied, since this programme was conducted in different towns and cities. The programme is currently in progress in 41 towns and cities, but the contents are always explained through examples and audio-visual materials. Parents are also encouraged to actively participate and reflect on myths and beliefs about sexual violence and romantic love, questions and discussions.

At the end of each training session, the parents attending the course filled out assessment questionnaires about the session. They assessed the contents, the people imparting the training, the activities and methods used the usefulness of contents and the duration. Assessments were positive in all cases (over 50% of satisfaction).

Also, improvement suggestions were made:

As for the contents, they suggested that it would be interesting to delve in the concepts explained.

As regards the methods, an increased, more dynamic participation was encouraged so that contents are more easily exchanged and understood

As for the duration, they all suggested that the amount of sessions was increased

The programme is currently under development and ends on 30 October this year. In this 2014 edition, all the improvement suggestions were borne in mind for this specific activity, but also for those activities for young people and professionals, thus extending the duration of the training programme, the amount of workshops, the amount of activities and dynamics and the audio-visual resources.

A huge volume of materials has been generated after implementing the project, such as guides on sexual assault prevention for girls, videos about prevention, campaigns, teaching materials, etc. The funds allocated to implement the project are shared by Women's Institute and local entities (City Councils and Provincial Governments).

Such programmes, like Irene, try to answer two needs. On one hand, the expressed need for parents to increase their training and knowledge about gender stereotypes. On the other hand, we cannot eliminate these stereotypes only intervening with children at schools, it is also necessary to work with families.