> "Gender roles are so deeply conditioned in us that we will often follow them even when they chafe against our true desires, our needs, our happiness.
>
> *Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*

Gender-in-a-box

Level 3

6 to 30

60 to 90 minutes

Complexity: Level 3

Group size: 6 to 30

Time: 60 to 90 minutes

Overview: This activity raises awareness about gender and addresses problems associated with rigidly defined gender roles. It is based on the analysis of images of men and women in media.

Objectives:
- To understand the socially-constructed nature of gender roles and the mechanisms and agents of gender socialisation
- To explore and reflect on personal experiences of gender socialisation
- To discuss the connections between gender socialisation and gender-based violence

Materials:
- Magazines and advertising clippings, which show people in different life situations or electronic devices with Internet access
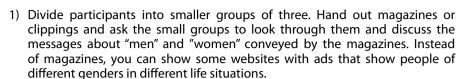- Flipchart with paper, scissors, glue sticks, marker pens (red, blue, green and black)

Preparation:
- Prepare several flipchart posters. Each poster should have one of the following headings: MEN, WOMEN , preferably each in a different colour
- If you decide to use web sites, instead of magazines, prepare some links to web sites with ads that show men and women in different life situations

Instructions

1) Divide participants into smaller groups of three. Hand out magazines or clippings and ask the small groups to look through them and discuss the messages about "men" and "women" conveyed by the magazines. Instead of magazines, you can show some websites with ads that show people of different genders in different life situations.

2) While participants are talking, hang up the two flipcharts that you prepared before the activity.

3) After about 15 minutes, ask participants to come back into the circle and feed back on the qualities of 'men' and 'women', as presented through the magazines or web sites. Make notes of qualities they list on the two flipcharts. Try to use key words or short phrases.

4) Once the lists are complete, ask the group to cut out a few images from the magazines, if you use them, to illustrate some of the ideas. Stick them next to the keywords listed on the flipcharts. Give them five minutes for this task. Bring the group together and look again at the posters:

   · Ask participants to look at the lists and identify possible contradictions among characteristics listed under MEN and under WOMEN (e.g. under WOMEN: not hairy; long hair) Connect any such contradictions using a marker.
   · Ask participants to look for qualities that seem to be independent of "will" – for example, physical qualities, such as height, are largely a matter of genetics and can be influenced only to a certain degree. Put a box around these qualities.
   · Ask the group to find matching opposites in the men's and women's lists, and then circle and connect them using a marker of a different colour, e.g. submissive – dominant.

5) Proceed to the debriefing and evaluation to explore further the process of gender socialisation, and to make connections with gender-based violence.

Debriefing and evaluation

Explain to the group that despite arguments about certain words, different groups of people usually manage to agree on lists of characteristics normally attributed to men and women in a very short period of time. Explain that the reason for this is that we all learn about what women and men "should be" from common sources. The term used to describe these common perceptions is "gender roles". Gender roles tend to be presented to us as binary 'boxes' into which women and men are expected to fit.

Use the following questions to debrief the activity:

- How did you feel during the activity? Did you find out anything surprising?
- Where do we learn gender roles from?
- Are the roles or characteristics that you have listed the same for men and women all over the world? If they are not, what are some of the differences?
- How does society punish people who do not conform to society's expectations about their gender? How are people who do conform rewarded?
- "A rigid definition of gender roles contributes significantly to gender-based violence" - Do you agree with this statement? Why, or why not?
- Can you think of people who do not fit into the gender roles ascribed by society? Have you ever heard of non-binary people? How does gender-based violence affect them? How does such violence affect society as a whole?
- What can we do to challenge stereotypes about fixed and non-changeable gender roles? How can gender-based violence against people who do not fit into "gender norms" be prevented? How can we all act against it?

Tips for facilitators

The strength of this activity is that it brings the issue of gender roles and gender socialisation closer to participants. These issues are often dealt with only in theoretical discussions. If you have enough time, you can start this activity with an illustration of a real-life experience that participants are likely to have encountered. If you have come together for a one-off activity, you could create the experience in the form of a role-play (e.g. a boy and girl playing in a kindergarten or playground, and an adult instructing them to act like a boy and a girl), or using a video showing boys and girls or women and men in typical or atypical gender roles - for example, someone interviewing for a job atypical for their gender. If the group meets regularly, try to use a recent or typical experience, for example, that boys are usually called on to take out the trash or move the chairs, while girls might do the washing up or make the teas and coffees.

The first part of this activity could also be conducted in sub-groups. Each group would be given a selection of magazines or clippings (or web sites) and their own flipchart papers with MEN and WOMEN as headings. Introduce the activity by asking the group to give a few examples about messages that young people receive about how 'men' and 'women' are supposed to be, based on the video / role-play / experience they have in common. Take a few answers, then explain that the group will now work in two smaller groups, one on men, the other on women. If you have a bigger group, you can decide to create several groups that will work on gender roles ascribed to men and some that will work on women's gender roles. Each group should look through the magazines and clippings (or web sites) and use them as illustrations wherever possible. Tell participants that they should not limit themselves to what they have found in the magazines

or web sites, but should also think of their own childhood, school years or adolescence, and add messages which they have received about gender roles to the list. The groups should work in separate locations, if possible. The facilitator should monitor the process.

Suggestions for follow–up

If you think it would be useful to continue the discussion and explore the concept of identity, try the activity "Who are I?" from *Compass*. You could also explore further how gender differences are related to the issue of violence, for example using the activity "Safety in my life".

Ideas for action

Gender socialisation can be seen in almost every aspect of life. The kind of examples that can be found in advertising or youth magazines can also be seen in many other areas of life. To supplement the discussion on 'Where do we learn gender roles from?', the group could examine different influences on gender socialisation, such as primary school text books, or the policies and activities in the youth group or other organisations.

The group could look into campaigns – including on the Internet - which address issues of gender socialisation and gender stereotyping, and could try to contribute to these campaigns by taking part in activities or creating publications or materials. If there are no appropriate campaigns already existing, they could think about starting their own campaign, or producing resources for other members of their school or youth group.

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