

## Gender

*Sophie Bollen, teacher trainer and diversity coach in University College Karel de Grotehogeschool, Antwerp.*

*Karen De Wilde, pedagogue and sexologist, trainer Sex and Relationships Education Sensoa, Antwerp*

### **Definitions and descriptions**

**Sex** refers to the physical anatomy. The biological sex is determined at birth. We think there are two options: male or female. That is not correct! Scientific research shows biological sex to be more varied. Because it is determined by multiple factors such as hormones, anatomy and chromosomes, different combinations of biological sex are possible. Those variations are referred to as “intersexuality”.

**Gender** is usually used to refer to the social, cultural and psychological meaning of being a man and/or a woman. The concept of gender changes in culture and time.

**Gender identity** refers to the inner feeling of being a man, a woman, both or neither. Usually this identity corresponds to the biological sex: for example, someone who is born with the body of a woman also feels like a woman. The psychological sex (gender identity) and the biological sex (the body) will be compatible.

But it also happens that these two aspects are more or less in conflict with each other. Someone with a female body can feel like a man (and vice versa). Or one can feel like a man and a woman at the same time. A big variety is possible.

**Gender role** refers to the way in which someone expresses and practises his/her gender feelings: clothing, hairstyle, body language, manners, speech, behaviour etc. Most people have a touch of female and male characteristics in their gender expressions. These expressions can also change according to the social context (e.g. at school vs at a party).

Gender expression is what the outside world sees, as opposed to gender identity which is invisible and lives in the inner world.

**Sexual orientation** refers to the romantic feelings or the sexual attraction to people of a particular sex. We know the difference between homosexual and heterosexual people. But people can be bisexual or asexual too.

Sexual orientation and gender identity are different parts of our sexual identity. Young children may not yet be aware of their sexual orientation, but they usually do have strong feelings about their gender identity.

Most people are clearly man or woman, and heterosexual. But it is important not to forget that these classifications don't fit for everyone.

### **Stereotypes?**

Roles, tasks and expectations that people have to meet as a man or a woman in a certain context are not fixed, but culturally defined.

“Cleaning is for women”, “a surgeon is a man’s profession”, “only women wear skirts”, “cars are toys for boys”, there is no male alternative for “slut” and “blonds are silly”. From the distribution of household tasks to professions, from clothes to toys, from language to humor: gender stereotypes are everywhere. Often, we are not aware of how society (all of us!) fills in roles, tasks and expectations for men and women, and how dependent this all is of the social and cultural context.

Sometimes this gender is innocent (the pink lady shave and the dark blue shaver) but often there is a negative consequence for men, women or both. Think about sexism in the work-environment and the wrong conviction that man are always the culprit and never the victim of violence between partners.

There seems to be no escape: from a very young age, gender stereotypes are introduced. Children are socialized to boys or girls, not only at home, but also at school. Of course there is nothing wrong with girls playing with dolls and boys playing with cars. But it is a pity if the expectations of society limit them in their choice of toys, use of language, choice of study.

## **Role of education**

Because these expectations, roles and tasks are socially and culturally defined, they are variable. Individuals should have the choice to deviate from the dominant gender model. Education plays a crucial, twofold role in this.

First of all, teachers can make children and youngsters aware of the existence of social-cultural and biological differences between women and men.

Secondly, teachers can motivate girls and boys to doubt or leave behind the dominant gender thinking and show them that alternative choices are possible.

### Sources

- Frans, E. & Keygnaert, I., Make it work! Prevention of Sexual and Gender-based Violence in the European Reception and Asylum Sector. Gent, 2010. Downloadable on [http://www.seksuelevorming.be/sites/default/files/digitaal\\_materiaal/makeitwork.pdf](http://www.seksuelevorming.be/sites/default/files/digitaal_materiaal/makeitwork.pdf)