

# Gender Issues

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Gender refers to socially constructed differences between men and women and is about how they in a given situation relate to and with one another.

Sex, on the other hand, is biologically determined differences between men and women and they are universal.

Therefore, the biological differences between men and women do not necessarily determine their social role in society, rather these are determined by society based on cultural norms, values and traditions.

Gender is a learnt trait as when babies are born, they are unaware of their 'sex' or 'gender'. They learn these concepts from adults around them as they socialised in the family and at school. Hence a baby boy will gladly play with a Barbie doll, while a baby girl will comfortably play with a toy-gun, until an adult intervenes telling the boy that 'dolls are for girls' and the girl that 'little girls don't play with guns'.

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## Gender & Culture

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**Gender will vary from culture to culture as illustrated by the examples below:**

### 1. Defence

In pre-colonial West Africa, menopausal women called the Amazon Warriors were responsible for defence and security of the community; and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi had a security team consisting entirely of female guards who went through rigorous defence training. This is contrary to popular notions that defence is best carried out by men.

### 2. Bride Wealth:

In many societies it is men who pay bride wealth (lobola) to the bride's family, but in India, it is women who bring a dowry payment to the groom's family. In Western societies, a couple just announces their intention to marry and they have a wedding and move in together. No-one pays anything.

### 3. Family Breadwinner:

In traditional hunting and gathering communities, both men and women were expected to contribute to household food security, whereas in capitalist societies the male is considered the breadwinner and is expected to fend for the family. Nowadays, both men and women can be secularly employed contributing to a dual-income household.

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## Influences on Gender

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### 1. Societal culture:

The culture within which we grow up teaches us how to regard each other as males and females. As we are socialised we learn what kind of behaviour is expected of us, what kind of jobs we are expected to seek, based on our sex.

However, culture is dynamic and societies' views change over time including the learned concept of Gender. The roles of men and women have changed over time depending on the society in which you live – Today men are employed as chefs, cleaners, and child minders; they are also now expected to be well groomed and well dressed. The late 90s saw the birth of the term “Metrosexual” referring to heterosexual men who are meticulous about grooming - getting facials, manicures and hair treatments. This demonstrates the dynamism of gender. In addition, Women are now taking up professions such as engineering and joining the military, which were formally viewed as men's professions.

### 2. Religion:

People from different religions and even different churches in one religion hold different beliefs about how men and women have to relate.

### 3. Globalization and High mobility of society:

With Globalization, we have access to the cultures of many societies worldwide through various forms of media and increased movement across the globe. As people travel from one place to another they have the opportunity to see different gender roles and identities that may influence and change their own beliefs.

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## Gender & HIV

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Gender roles and inequalities in power, have a huge impact on the different HIV risks that women and men face. However, other factors are important too, such as age, wealth, poverty and location (urban or rural). All these can have a big influence on the risks of HIV that people face.

### HIV Risks for Women:

#### Women face more risks of HIV than men because of their bodies.

- Semen remains in the vagina for a long time after penetrative sex. This increases the chances of infection from any single sexual act.
- There are more viruses in men's semen than in women's vaginal fluid.
- The inside of the vagina is thin and has a wider surface area. This means it is more vulnerable than ordinary skin to cuts or tears that can easily allow HIV into the body.
- The penis is less vulnerable because it is protected by harder skin and the major opening is the urethra.

**Very young women are even more vulnerable** because the lining of their vagina has not fully developed.

**In some settings, women face more risks of HIV than men because they lack power and control in their sexual lives.**

- Women are not expected to discuss or make decisions about sexuality. The imbalance of power between men and women means that women cannot ask for or insist on using a condom or other forms of protection.
- Women may rely on a male partner for their livelihood which makes them unable to ask their partners or husbands to use condoms. It also makes it difficult to refuse sex even when they know that they risk becoming pregnant or infected with an STI including HIV.

**Women who have to trade sex for money or other kinds of support are more vulnerable.**

This includes women who work as sex workers. But it also includes women and girls who exchange sex for payment of school fees, rent, food or other forms of status and protection.

**Violence against women increases women's risk of HIV infection.**

- Rape as a crime is linked to men's power over women. Forced sex increases the risk of HIV transmission because of the bruising and cuts it creates.
- Many women will not ask their male partners to use condoms for fear of men's violent reaction.
- Women who tell their partners about their HIV status or STIs may experience physical, mental or emotional abuse or even divorce.

**Men are seeking younger partners in order to avoid infection.** This is based on the mythical belief that sex with a virgin cures AIDS and other diseases. On the other hand women are more likely to have sexual relations with or marry older men, who are more likely to be infected.

**Inequality before the law**

Unequal property, custody and support laws in some countries mean that women's rights are often determined by their father and/or husband. Widows are in a particularly weak position: after losing her husband to AIDS, a woman may also lose her home and land, and even be blamed for her husband's death. This can force widows to resort to "sex for money". This means that widows and women who are living in poverty give sex for money.

**Women as carers**

While a woman may not contract HIV, she is still greatly affected by HIV in the family as the burden of caring for sick family members and neighbours falls more often on women and girls than men and boys.

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## HIV Risks & Men's Behaviors

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**Men take more risks with HIV because of the way they have been raised.**

Men are encouraged to begin to have sex early to prove themselves as men. A sign of manhood and success is to have as many sexual female partners as possible. For married and unmarried men, multiple partners are culturally/socially accepted. Men can be ridiculed (laughed at) if they do not show that they take advantage of all and any sexual opportunities

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## Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

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Sexual Harassment refers to unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. It is a form of gender discrimination and a violation of human rights. Sexual harassment at work can happen to any worker at any workplace—offices, factories, plantations and farms, small and large enterprises.

If you are unclear about whether or not what was said or done was sexual harassment, ask yourself “Would this same person make the same unwelcome sexual remark to his/her superior? Mother/Father? Daughter/Son? Uncle/Aunt? Grandmother?”

“Harassment is not a random act that occurs at the spur of the moment. Harassers choose their targets carefully. Perpetrators will only harass those they perceive themselves to have POWER over...”

### How to handle Sexual Harassment

- ▶ The minute a man/woman acts offensively, speak up (if possible, where others can hear). Try deflecting obscene sexual remarks with one of these questions in a voice that makes it painfully obvious that you are not encouraging his/her behavior. You could ask, Would you repeat that? Why do you ask?
- ▶ Pay attention to your body language whenever you speak to this person. Look at him/her directly in a confident manner (don't hunch your shoulders or wring your hands or look away). Stand at a distance that is neither too close to be intimate nor so far to express intimidation or fear.
- ▶ Buy a small notebook and keep a written record of all harassing behavior. Jot down what happened, how you responded, if you had witnesses, and who you told. Keep the notebook at home, away from the office or where the perpetrator can get it.
- ▶ Tell friends and co-workers. If other women/men are being harassed too, it will be easier to confront the perpetrator.
- ▶ Write the harasser a memo or letter saying, “Dear..., this is what you did and why it bothers me. Please don't do it anymore.” Keep a copy in your files at home.
- ▶ If a problem persists, photocopy records of our work/school performance for evidence in court or another job interview. This is useful if the perpetrator is a supervisor and you fear losing your job or getting bad reviews due to your resistance. If need, provoke the **company/institution grievance procedure**. Document every step by writing memos, describing precisely what happened, with dates, times, names of witnesses.
- ▶ **As a last resort**, file a complaint with the relevant authorities.

**It is always best to confront the individual first before taking further action, as sexual harassment is defined as an ‘unwelcome’ act, and this may not be clear to the offender. Therefore, make your feelings clear and if his/her conduct persists you can then take further steps based on your grievance procedures and sexual harassment policy.**

**\* Information sourced from the SWABCHA Workplace Peer Education Manual**

**Additional Resources:**

**What is Sexual Harassment (UN)**

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/pdf/whatissh.pdf>

**Factsheet on sexual harassment (ILO)**

[http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms\\_decl\\_fs\\_96\\_en.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_decl_fs_96_en.pdf)

**Press Release: Preventing Sexual Harassment (ILO)**

[http://www.ilo.org/jakarta/info/public/pr/WCMS\\_149648/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/jakarta/info/public/pr/WCMS_149648/lang--en/index.htm)

## Suggestions for the Facilitator:

This is a good opportunity to sensitise employees on your company's **grievance procedures** and **sexual harassment policy** (if available). This will assist victims as well as deter potential perpetrators. You may consider liaising with the Human Resources department to assist with the presentation.

The discussion on Gender as learned and how it changes over time will get your peers thinking differently about gender roles.

### **Activity (illustrates that the main difference between men and women is biological and promotes new ways of considering the opposite sex as equals)**

1. On a flip chart create two lists. (Men & Women)
2. Ask your peers to list the traits of men and women, including physical traits (ie. Reproductive system).

Male	Female
Beards	Long hair
Breadwinners in family	Breasts
Physical strength	Emotional
Muscular	Talkative/gossip

3. After completing both lists, consider each trait and discuss whether it is solely a characteristic of one sex or if it can be manifested in both male and female.

#### ***For instance***

- *Physical strength may be listed under male, however women join body building competitions and are stronger than some men.*
- *Some men are more talkative than women – you'll find your peers actually mentioning these by name or saying that they know of men who behave like women.*

4. Once these have been discussed and it is agreed that both men and women have this trait, cross the trait off the list (*see illustration above*).

By the end of the activity you will notice that only the biological differences remain, that is reproductive organs/ genitalia. This illustrates that men and women are biologically different, however they may be treated equally as they are able to carry out the same tasks and play the same roles, as mentioned in the section on “gender and culture and how gender roles change over time”