# GENDER ROLES AND THEIR EFFECTS ON ADOLESCENCE

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Understanding what is male or what is female may depend on the types of gender roles an individual is exposed to as a child. Gender roles can then be defined as the behaviours and attitudes expected of male and female members of a society by that society.

Gender roles vary.

Different cultures impose different expectations upon the men and women who live within that culture. These changes in gender roles affect the home, the workplace, and the school, and they affect everybody.

**Where Do Gender Roles Come From?**

Unlike individual sexuality that we are born with, gender roles are imposed from without, through a variety of social influences. Gender roles are formed during the socialization phases of childhood and adolescence and this does influence people throughout their lives. However, conflicts can arise when someone does not feel at ease with his or her gender role.

The first and one of the strongest influences on a person's perceived gender role is from his or her parents. Parents are the first teachers--not only of such basic skills as talking and walking, but also of attitudes and behaviour. Some parents still hold traditional definitions of maleness and femaleness and what kinds of activities are appropriate for each.

Parents start early in treating their baby boys and baby girls differently. They allow boys to try new things and activities while tending to fear more for the 'safety' of their girls. According to Dr. **Benjamin Spock,** people are likely to appreciate girls' cuteness and boys' achievements.

For example, a girl may receive the comment, "You look so pretty!" for the outfit she is wearing. While this compliment isn't harmful in itself, repeated over and over, the message the girl gets is that she is most appreciated for her looks, not for what she can do. Boys, on the other hand, are praised for what they can do--"Aren't you a big boy, stand up by yourself!"

Many parents encourage and expect boys to be more active, to be more rough-and-tumble in their play than girls. A boy who does not like rough play (and so goes against the gender role he has been assigned) may be labeled a "sissy." A girl who prefers active play to more passive pursuits may be called a "tomboy."

Children look to their parents for examples and role models. If a girl sees her mother taking part in physical activities, for example, she would most probably grow up with the idea that it's okay for girls to play sports. If a boy sees his father helping to take care of the new baby, he would most likely integrate this image of "daddy as care-giver" into his developing definition of masculinity.

But just as parents can provide positive role models, so too can they serve as negative role models. For example, children who grow up with parents who are in an abusive relationship have been found to repeat the same pattern as adults: male children of abusive husbands often grow up

to abuse their own wives, and daughters of abused wives can grow up to be victims of domestic violence, because their parents have shown them that that is "normal."

Children develop their gender identity (knowing whether they are male or female) by the age of three. Reinforcement of gender roles also comes from the toys children play with. During their infancy and toddlerhood, children get most of their toys from parents and other family members; their choice of toys supports their own view of gender roles. For example, parents may give their little girl a doll, while the boy gets a toy truck.   Such gifts set children up early for the roles they are expected to play.

As they get older, children are influenced in their choice of toys by television. Remote-controlled vehicles, although they can be equally enjoyed by males or females, are generally targeted at boys by advertisers. Girls are the advertising targets of the manufacturers of dolls, craft kits, and so on; advertisers are careful not to call boys' toys "dolls"--they're "action figures"!

Again and again, we see toys and toy advertisement reinforcing the traditional gender roles: boys are active and adventurous, while girls are passive and mothering. Parents need to be aware of the messages Television advertisements and toys present to their children. They need to help them understand and reconcile the persons they are, as against the sexual stereotypes they may see on Television and in other media.

Nevertheless, parents can and do reinforce sexual stereotypes, whether deliberately or unwittingly. Not wanting to see a daughter fall and get hurt, a mother may forbid her from climbing trees although her brother is allowed to do so with gleeful abandon, and his bumps and bruises are taken in stride.

Clothing manufacturers produce (and parents buy) clothing in gender-neutral shades such as yellow and green, but the traditional blue for boys and pink for girls are still favourites. Even the cultural habit of assigning pink to girls and blue to boys raises a question. What is to become of the boy who genuinely likes the colour pink? This question leads us to another group that has strong influence over gender roles – peers, again!

Peer pressure is a means of reinforcing a culture's traditional gender roles. It can come in the form of taunting or teasing a child who does not fit the traditional gender roles that other children in the peer group have been exposed to, even to the point of excluding that child from group activities.

Peers react more positively to children who fit traditional gender roles. A story was told of a five-year-old boy whose favourite colour was pink, and as a result, when the time came to buy him his first bicycle, he naturally wanted it to be pink. The parents had no problem with this, and the boy even told the salesman (who tried to tell him that boys should ride blue or red bikes) that colour was just colour. The ones who teased him about his bike were not the other boys, but the girls in the neighbourhood. Not long after, the boy stopped telling other people that pink is his favourite colour.

Gender roles are also reinforced by educational environments.

Teachers and school administrators have great influence as they pass along cultural information and expectations. In school, children are expected to sit still, read, and be quiet. Such

expectations may have been part of the gender role that a child has been learning from the parents, especially if the child is a girl. But for a boy who has been encouraged to be loud and boisterous prior to starting school, these expectations can lead to trouble.

**BOYS AND GENDER ROLES**

Ultimately, a lack of emotional development as a boy grows up, makes it difficult for that boy as an adult male to develop healthy relationships.

Men face a dilemma.

The old model of the "macho man" is less acceptable in today's world and men are struggling to fit in to the new expectations. The image of males as strong is usually confused with the image of males as violent, and males as virile gets, confused with males as promiscuous.

However, today's parents have the opportunity to show their sons that they do not have to be violent to be strong. Rather than taking the attitude of "boys will be boys" if their sons do get into a fight, parents can take the chance to teach their child new ways to resolve conflicts without using fists.

Adolescents accept these prescribed gender roles, which shape their understanding of the 'man-woman relationship' and thus influence their attitude and behaviour towards the opposite sex, and towards all sexual and reproductive health issues. Once such stereotyped gender-role attitudes are formed, it is very difficult to change them.

This is why an urgent need is felt to provide adolescents with a non-stereotyped environment before they mature and begin to adopt rigid notions of stereotyped gender roles. Appropriate gender-role development among adolescents is regarded as essential for ensuring their healthy physical, emotional, and social growth and development. They need to appreciate the importance of equal relationships between men and women in all matters, including sexual relations and reproduction in a civilised society. Gender roles need to be redefined in order to meet the following requirements:

It is important to realise that women do not only have a particular identity as women but that they also have universal identity as human beings. Like men, women have equal self-worth, social worth, and dignity. All human beings are born free, and enjoy equal dignity and rights. A civilised society cannot afford to treat its women as objects. The man–woman relationship must be based on a respectful and harmonious partnership.

It is important to respect the integrity of an individual. This requires mutual respect, mutual consent, and a willingness to accept responsibility for the consequences of sexual behaviour. Mutual respect and equitable relations between the sexes promote responsible sexual behaviour, thus contributing to the improvement of the quality of life of individuals.

Society must take up reproductive health as a human rights issue encompassing women's rights to have control over their bodies and to decide freely and responsibly on matters related to sexual and reproductive health, without coercion, discrimination, and violence.

It is essential to create an environment in which women and girls can assert their wishes and take their own decisions. Sexual and Reproductive Health and gender relations are closely interrelated. These together affect the ability of men and women to achieve and maintain sexual health and manage their reproductive lives.

There is an urgent need to eliminate all forms of discrimination against the girl child and the root cause of son preference, which result in harmful and unethical practices. It is equally important to appreciate the value of the girl child and to strengthen her self-image, self esteem, and status.

The full participation and partnership of both men and women is required in reproductive life, including shared responsibilities for the care and nurturing of children and for the maintenance of the household. Underlying the plea for shared responsibilities is the need for addressing the larger question of unequal power relations between women and men and for questioning socially prescribed gender roles.

Women's empowerment and male involvement in reproductive health are two sides of the same coin. Sensitisation of girls and boys to gender issues during adolescence is crucial in making them appreciate the importance of working together to achieve a healthy relationship. Because discrimination on the basis of sex often starts at the earliest stages of life, greater equality for the girl child and the adolescent girl are necessary first steps to ensuring that women have equal rights later in life.

Disparities in the way girls and boys are raised and treated are at the root of many sexual and reproductive health problems and development challenges. Socially constructed gender roles may give girls little say about their own aspirations and hopes, and restrict them to being wives and mothers.

Negative gender-based norms and practices can be gradually transformed through educational, social, legal and other processes that promote equality of girls and boys. Without such actions, unequal gender relations and power imbalances are likely to persist throughout adult life.

This must not be allowed to continue.