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Gender Stereotypes and the Socialization Process

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

1. Introduction

Gender equality – what does it really mean?

The term gender does not exist still in many languages through the world and it is not easy to make understand even to educated people what is the subtle difference between gender and sex and why we are talking now about gender and not about sex.

Gender equality has been and still is perceived in many societies as something concerning only women, invented for women and implemented by women. Women are struggling for gender equality, what about men? Do they need it? Will they allow it? Will they accept it? The stereotypes concerning both genders are so deeply enshrined in our minds that sometimes even the strongest advocates for gender equality are stepping back unconsciously and are paying tribute to their stereotypical thinking. This is maybe the reason why the gender equality cause was perceived only as a “women’s” cause and men were more or less isolated from this process.

There are some major events that paved the way to gender equality and gave more arguments to the movement that supported it. Starting with the Vienna Conference in 1993 and the UN International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994 we came to Beijing in 1995, whose Platform of Action and Declaration became major program documents that fueled the struggle for women’s rights and gender equality for many years on.

In the Beijing Declaration, adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, governments expressed their determination to encourage men to participate fully in all actions towards gender equality. The Declaration emphasized that equal sharing of responsibilities and a harmonious partnership between women and men were critical to their well-being and that of their families as well as to the consolidation of democracy. The Platform for Action emphasized the principle of shared power and responsibility between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities. It stressed that gender equality could only be achieved when men and women worked together in partnerships, and that **the principle of equality of women and men had to be integral to the socialization process**. Specific actions aim in particular at promoting harmonization of work and family responsibilities for men and women; at encouraging men to share equally in child care and household work; and at promoting programmes to educate and enable men to assume their responsibilities to prevent HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

2. When and where starts the socialization process?

2.1 General comments

It starts with the opening of the eyes of the small baby. She or he understands very quickly the difference to be female or male, to be poor or to be wealthy. Although in different cultures in the world the attitudes toward boys and girls show some nuances, girls are taught since the very early age that they have to obey, and boys – that they have to be strong and to be leaders.

Girls are playing with dolls, they are learning to prepare food and clothes and everything that is associated with “women’s duties” and boys are playing with small cars, weapons, are encouraged to practice different sports and are taught to be the “masters of the world”. What is sad is that, these first lessons, children are receiving from their mothers, who are usually “contaminated” by the same stereotypical thinking and it is really difficult to get out of this vicious circle.

Too often it seems that boys learn early on that their interests are opposed to those of girls and women. This is based partly on a defensive insecurity, but it is also based on the fact that material relations (access to resources) actually have been structured in a way that benefits men and harms women. So, when women organize for equality, often men react defensively.

2.2 The school

The next environment that children are entering is the school, where a conscious socialization is happening. Again, looking through the school books from the very beginning gender stereotypes are present and reinforced. The images that small kids receive from these books are women with babies in their hands, or women preparing food, or women working in the field, or, at the high end – women nurses, women teachers. In the same time men are usually soldiers, playing some prestigious sport, executing some heavy job, and, of course, leaders. Somehow the perception that being a soldier and carrying weapons is more important than giving birth and taking care of life is induced in the minds since the very beginning of the conscious life of children. And this leads to further divisions, stereotyping and to the perception that women have to give and to accept and men have to take and to impose. Looking again at school manuals we will find images or small texts, where boys are those, who are good in mathematics: they are “helping” their little sisters in solving the problems and girls – they are good in reading, singing etc. When teaching practical skills boys will be the ones learning to operate machines or computers and girls will be taught to be dactylos or similar.

The process of socialization starts even before school – with tales and toys. It was strange to discover during and literature exercise with boys that tales for the smallest were full of violence and gender stereotypes. And if stereotyping was more or less understandable, the discovery of violence was shocking. Somehow children become familiar with violence and the tales since the early childhood help them to accept as something normal the coercion, the harassment, the cruelty and the violence. When [within the exercise] the students had to think and discuss this theme, they themselves discovered, that the society unconsciously was imposing a way of thinking, leading to easier acceptance of violence and gender division.

The patriarchal society is a violent one. But violence is something that is learnt. And to combat it we need another learning and a space for discussing it openly. This space is missing both to boys and girls.

In order to change these patterns, it is necessary a complete rethinking of the process of socialization and initial education and much more attention to be paid to teaching equal values both to boys and girls. **Boys also can cry, and girls need to be strong.**

Therefore the engagement of men and boys in achieving gender equality requires much greater attention to gender stereotypes and expectations about men's roles and responsibilities, and how these expectations influence male behavior. Such stereotypes continue to place greater emphasis, as well as greater value, on the role of men and boys in public life and in the work place, as opposed to women's role in unpaid family labor, care giving and community work.

2.3 The world of work and the family

The growing interest in the role of men and boys is due as well to the shift in the work for gender equality from a focus on advancing women's status to a focus on gender relations, i.e. the relations between women and men. The gender approach allows for clarification of the roles commonly associated with being male or female in public and in private life, and provides a basis for identifying differences and inequalities between women and men in responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources as well as decision-making opportunities. A better understanding of gender roles and related structural inequalities increases opportunities for policy measures and other actions aimed at overcoming such inequalities.

Changing patterns of production and reproduction are also indicative of changes in gender relations which challenge traditional images and expectations associated with men's – as well as women's – roles, such as those of breadwinner, care giver, or head of household. Therefore there is a need for a re-assessment of the roles and responsibilities of women and men, of stereotypical and traditional gender roles, and of existing power relations between women and men.

The question of unequal power relations between men and women as an obstacle to gender equality is crucial, especially with regard to violence against women. Another crucial point is the role of men in preventing HIV infection among women and girls, especially having in mind the asymmetric power relations between men and women and women's subordination and vulnerability to discrimination.

Peer pressure, socialization processes and belief systems influence adherence to gender-specific stereotypes. Ideas of the inferiority or superiority of either of the sexes, and of stereotyped roles for men and women not only limit progress in achieving gender equality, but also perpetuate inequalities and can constitute obstacles to men's abilities and opportunities for redressing gender inequalities. There is the deep stereotypical thinking that only women can take care of children. Therefore when talking about equality in the family life, men usually cannot take advantage of paid leave for rearing a child. Almost nothing is done to make men choose to stay at home and take care of children. The state policy is failing to create interest towards this issue and help in achieving equality. There are a lot of men willing to do so, but peer pressure and stereotypical thinking stop them from being equal.

We need to reinvent the roles of both genders and make men and boys play a substantial role in promoting and achieving gender equality. This is a responsibility of the entire society that concerns and engages equally women and men. There is a need to combat persistent gender stereotyping, which had led to insufficient sharing of tasks and

responsibilities by men for care giving within families, households and communities, and unequal power relationships between women and men.

In the contemporary world the percentage of single parent female-headed households is higher than that of male-headed. The percentage of female-headed families with two parents is also increasing. High levels of underemployment and unemployment for both women and men, especially in the countries of transition mean that men often cannot play the role of breadwinner sufficiently. In this context the household as a workplace is very typical example for gender inequality. Unpaid workers, overwhelmingly women through their caring work support education of children and the paid employment of men.

There is a strong belief that power is associated with physical strength. The deep stereotyping concerning this belief makes difficult to change the mentality of men and boys. But they have a number of reasons for not wanting change in gender arrangements, and sometimes face difficulties if they do want, or support change: they are brought up with the expectations of being cared for, they lack of skills in domestic work and practice in caring work; the public policies and practices make it cheaper or easier for families to maintain old breadwinner/housewife patterns, which means that still in many countries the “family friendly” measures are available only to mothers. However this is gradually changing with the new legislation being adopted in the EU and with the obligation for the accessing countries to comply and implement the *acquis communautaire*. But the fear of social stigma, or loss of dignity is still existing if men depend on women’s earnings.

It happens that men resist women’s involvement in paid work with the arguments how would they feel insulted if the wife earns. It is not exactly the case in Eastern Europe, where women have long lasting tradition in sharing the responsibility of bread winning of the family. However the stereotype exists here as well in a more subtle level: there is a division between women’s jobs and men’s jobs, where women are usually employed in low paid positions or are encouraged to enter professions that have lost their prestige because of the big number of women exercising them.

In the same time, a shift in men’s perception of masculinity could be noticed and there are many reasons why men and boys would like to move towards equality as well. One of them is the negative impact on men’s life and health of the ‘breadwinner’ model. Men have more and more difficulties in meeting the expectations to be the only breadwinners and this impacts negatively their self-confidence and the family climate. This is especially true in the countries of transition, where social values have dramatically changed. In this part of the world women have been caring the burden of bread winning on equal footing with men during long years. However the political changes impacted both women and man – women becoming progressively the poor of the society and men carrying the psychological burden of not being able to meet the expectations of the family to be the only bread winner. Therefore the younger generation should be motivated to change. The European legislation provides for a compulsory parental leave for at least 15 days for the father and more on will. Unfortunately the economic motivation is too weak for men and hampers their desire for more active fatherhood.

2.4. The difference in the perception of sexual relations and HIV/AIDS

In the man's world there are certain things that men don't question: the bravado, the lust for experiment and adventure, the way men pursue their sexual desires. This and other male icons are closely connected to "the right to be a man". In the man's world there are also certain things you do not talk about: the mistakes, love, hesitations, social failures, weaknesses that are often associated with femininity. Sexuality and love have deep roots in the creation of an experience of personal identity. For young men the teenage years are an age of denial of weaknesses which is connected to what is considered feminine. There is also the wrong perception of socialization: socialization doesn't necessarily mean sexual relationship or sexual activity.

Men are differently positioned in relation to the HIV/AIDS pandemic and these differences need to be recognized when developing strategies.

The specific customs and ideas about sexuality are also relevant. Asymmetrical ideas of men's and women's sexuality encourage unsafe sex among young people. There is evidence of a strong belief in men's sexual initiative among youth. The very way sexual relationships are constructed may be important.

There is a general need for educational action towards gender equality and a specific need for HIV and safe sex education directed towards heterosexual men.

To the extent men control sexuality, they have the capacity to change sexual practices. Men can take a more active role in reproductive health generally, and research is needed and policy support for this.

Providing services to men and boys are an important venue for work around gender equality principles and practice, including:

- Sexual and reproductive health services and programmes, especially those that deal with issues about sexuality and fatherhood;
- general health services;
- education programmes by NGOs which address men;
- Develop further strategies for combating HIV/AIDS pandemic and male involvement in achieving girls' and women's sexual and reproductive rights.

3. Combating the status quo

3.1. What can men do?

First, they need to learn to listen to women. They need to learn more about women's problems and find the way to use their existing power and authority, to change the culture in a more equal direction, for instance changing gender stereotypes in educational materials, and change workplace cultures.

Labor, child rearing and family-care have to be addressed. This will necessitate further rethinking of men's roles in the child- and family-care arenas. Until a truly "family friendly" world of work emerges there seems little hope that gender equity can be accomplished.

A more gender equal society would be one that would leave boys and men with more options in terms of careers, life styles and general ways of being. This could not but be good for their emotional, physical and mental health. At the individual level they would not have to 'prove' their masculinity by dominating other men and women, by adopting a hyper-masculine façade and in consequence engaging in life-threatening life-style activities.

Research on attitudes toward gender roles and gender equality reveals that the majority of men, especially of young men support gender equality. Most egalitarian attitudes are found among men from the educated middle classes...But there is a huge gap between egalitarian attitudes and social practice. More and more men express the wish to be involved actively in parenthood, not limiting fatherhood to being the economic provider.

But only two percent of fathers make use of the possibilities of parental leave. More detailed qualitative research shows that especially the men from the educated classes, who strictly vote for gender equality and for wife-husband relations that are freed from a typical gender division of labor, live in quite traditional gender arrangements.

Men do not appear to be taking up necessary and crucial critical interrogation of masculinities in schools which is conducive to supporting gender equality. The kind of work in which many men do engage and are willing to embrace in schools is that driven by a recuperative masculinity politics, committed to reinscribing dominant masculinity, not challenging it...Usually men who are committed to interrogating hegemonic masculinity have experienced the costs of it at the hands of other men. Patriarchal culture is a reality, but cultures are rarely monolithic, and strongly egalitarian ideas may coexist with appallingly sexist stereotypes.

Men and boys must be included in the search for gender equality by creating a large-scale and broad social consensus on a range of issues that previously have been marginalized as issues only of importance to women when in fact they are often also issues for men; by developing effective partnerships not only between women and men, but between a range of institutions and organizations; increasingly and patiently isolate and marginalize those men working to preserve men's power and privilege; raise the next generation of boys and girls in a framework of gender equity and equality; changing the attitudes and behavior of men and boys, improve the lives of women and girls in the home, workplace and community.

3.2. What can be done together:

Men and boys have to be encouraged to contribute to gender equality by:

- informal educational work in intimate setting, such as the family
- specific programmes for men&boys within public sector institutions such as health and education, including reproductive health
- gender equality movement among men, such as anti-violence movement (men-profeminists)

Programs for sexual and gender education, directed towards elementary and high school students from the public school system are needed. The programs have to include workshops with students (boys and girls), weekly workshops directed exclusively

towards boys, interactive activities on school playground, meetings with teachers, focusing on the integration of issues of gender and sexuality in the classroom curriculum.

- expanding research on men's and boys' beliefs about gender equality and support for gender equality
- changed public policy regimes to support employment equality and create pressure against gendered violence
- developing partnership and cooperation between men's and women's groups and movements.

A vital principle is that men are shaped by patriarchy but are not entirely limited by it. Men cannot build or develop a world alone, they have to do it in equality with women.

4. Strategic opportunities

There is a gradual shift of opinion towards gender equality, especially among younger men. This arises from a broad commitment to social justice and human rights, which are acknowledged by men and boys. There are elements in most men's consciousness that a program for equality can address.

Men are not a homogenous group. There are divisions of interest among men, which align some groups of men or some issues with women, or specific groups of women. For many men, the gain from patriarchy is more symbolic than material, may even be illusory. A more gender equal society will not be to the advantage of all men compared with the world we now live in, but it may be to the advantage of a majority of men.

However, there are sometimes alliances between women and men – fighting for health care, government support for families, equal access to education etc. But the group of men who are working in the alliance for gender equity, equal health care and education, equity at work or in decision-making is too small in number. Something more: they are marginalized in their own community and often intimidated as though they are feminine in kind. These sorts of intimidation result in a kind of silence among men that lets the access of gender discrimination in a subtle way.

Though the developed world often prides itself on achieving gender equality, there is more gender inequality than most people believe, and gains of the past are not secure for the future. The content of mass media in the developed world still presents to young people exploitative images of women, violent images of men and reactionary ideas about gender equality. There has been a movement in Bulgaria initiated by women's NGOs to stop discriminatory advertisements. Phone cards have been advertised using the size of women's breast. Other media images have been attacked as well showing women only as objects of sexual desire or as stupid females whose only taught goes to washing products or similar. This stereotypical representation is acting unconsciously on the attitudes and perceptions of young people – both boys and girls. These images provoke unrealistic beliefs concerning the roles of genders in the family and in the social life.

Men's partnerships with anti-violence women's groups are critical. They enable men to learn from existing efforts rather than reinventing the wheel (*BGRF programmes*). They lessen the risk that men will collude in, or be complicit with dominant and oppressive

forms of masculinity. They are a powerful and practical demonstration of men's and women's shared interest in stopping violence. Men's partnerships with women are an inspiring example of cross-gender collaboration, a form of activism which reaches across and transforms gender inequalities.

It is also a matter of experience that men (as well as women) attempting to change gender relations and definitions of masculinity can be subject to ridicule, harassment or intimidation from other men defending the status quo. Possible benefits to men and boys are not necessarily at the expense of women and girls. The belief that what one gender gains the other must necessarily lose is both damaging and false. However, to achieve equality there must be a redistribution of income and prestige, certainly, in which men's relative advantage will decline. But there are ways in which men specifically stand to gain, including better work/life balance, better diet and health, less vulnerability to occupational stress and injury. Many of the benefits of gender equality are shared benefits between men and women, especially the reduction of the level of violence.

5. Recommendations

- Developing curricula which allow boys and youth more generally to interrogate masculinity and gender relations;
- Building gender equality perspectives into mainstream educational programmes;
- Youth work activities, camps and workshops, both for young men separately and for young men and women together, in which issues such as sexuality can be explored;
- Teacher education programmes that equip teachers better to deal with gender equality issues;
- Building gender equality into workplace culture, so the workplace ceases to be regarded as a men's realm;
- Disseminating gender equality models and principles among men, especially concerning violence against women;
- Working in partnership with women's groups concerned with issues such as violence against women
- Creating forums for discussion and debate on gender issues among young men;
- Conducting research on men's and boy's beliefs about gender and support for gender equality

The commitment to gender equality in the Beijing Platform for Action and other major international conferences and summits and the existing international legal framework, including CEDAW, some ILO conventions and the framework of the EU (the *acquis communautaire*) encourage and accelerate the efforts in this regard.